

This oral history interview was held inside the Old Plover Methodist Church at Heritage Park on November 18, 2025, at 6:30pm. The transcript is put together from 3 video files. The full interview is 65 minutes long. The interviewer is John Harry (JH), executive director of the Portage County Historical Society. The interviewee is Tom Pease (TP), children's musician from Portage County.

Transcriber notes: While the interviewer and interviewee often uses another person's full name, they occasionally do not. When last names are not used, if they are known, they are added after the first name in parenthesis. When Tom mentions teaching the "P. Zuki Method" this is a joke on the Suzuki Method, which is a style of learning music originally brought to Stevens Point by Margery Aber at UW - Stevens Point. When he asks "Where is she?" after mentioning the P. Zuki Method, he is motioning towards Margery Aber's information in the music exhibit. There are also many points in this interview where Tom sings. Those sections are separated into a new paragraph with the identifier "Song (00:00)". Tom occasionally asked questions to the audience. The audience's replies are not added to this document outside of the Q&A section of the interview at the end of this transcript.

Begin video file #1:

JH (00:05): Well hi everybody, how are you doing tonight?

Audience Member (00:06): I'm alright! How are you?

JH (00:08): I'm ok, thanks for reciprocating, I really appreciate that. You must have been to a Tom Pease concert at some point. Before we launch into the interview here can y'all hear me okay? I could turn it up. Good.

(00:27): So just a couple announcements of what else we have going on here. On December 14th, you might have noticed there's some snow on the ground, so Christmas is coming. December 14th from noon to 2 we have our Santa's Christmas Village out here at Heritage Park. If you have kids or grandkids that's a great time to see Santa, and our Santa is the real one! Then a few days later on December 18th in this very space we're gonna pack the place. We have Art Stevenson with an all-star local bluegrass band in this space. It's Art Stevenson and the Lost Reindeer. December 18th at 6:30pm a bluegrass Christmas with Art Stevenson and the Lost Reindeer. It's gonna be a lot of fun in here. And this exhibit, if you want to come back or bring friends back, as well as our General Store gift shop just across the way over here, is open Fridays from noon to 4, Saturdays from 10 to 2. Other than the week of Thanksgiving, we are going to be recovering from all the turkey and family fun.

(01:37): I want to say thank you all for coming out and supporting this Oral History Live series. Often we do these just privately but occasionally we find somebody who we're like "this person likes a crowd." It's great when we can get people out in front of people and you can see some of the process behind what we do as an organization. That said, we are wanting to do this into the future. This is the second that we've done, the one we did over the summer was with Bob Wray. If you don't know who Bob was there's a plaque up there with him on it and that was a lot of fun too. If we want to keep doing these we do need a financial sponsor on that so if this is something that you think you'd like to support specifically as an organization let's chat afterwards so we can keep bringing these really neat stories to the community.

(02:23): Oral histories are different than a regular kind of interview; the goal is not to promote something or somebody, it is to create a historical record for future generations to learn from and to study. For posterity sake, too, it's a record of somebody's life. We started our oral history series as an organization, we have some going way way back that were written back in the 70s, in the 80s, that we're still diving into. We discover things sometimes in our archives as our curator, who's being the staffer on the camera tonight, Cheyenne (Witzeling), she'll find stuff occasionally. We started doing our oral histories more seriously when we did our previous exhibit to this, the We Just Wanted To Play women's athletics history and so we got, I think eight oral histories done specifically around that. Other than just getting the information for the exhibit. That's really important because two of those people have passed away and so now we have those stories, also, watch out. It's a different kind of interview style. The goal is I as the interviewer, the name for me is actually the guide and Tom tonight is the narrator of his story. So you all get to be here and witness that which I think is a really cool thing to be a part of. So without further ado, Tom, yes, give Tom a big round of applause! Tom's a bit of a local institution and indeed statewide and regional institution when it comes to children's music. We had Tom at Heritage Days this last year and as I introduced him he said "Not so fast, you're staying!" Little did I know that Tom songs are like 15 minutes long and I'm up there, I'm up there with, you know, seven-year-olds and I'm me. But it was fun!

TP (04:16): And you were good.

JH (04:17): My wife was entertained.

TP (04:20): Nobody was looking at you, they were looking at the kids.

JH (04:23): Yeah, I know. Yes.

TP (04:24): Looking at the kids.

JH (04:25): Yeah, my dance moves aren't that good compared to theirs. Let's start things off, let's just set the stage. Let's go back to the very beginning of you. So, easy question to start things off; Tom, where and when were you born?

TP (04:38): Burlington, Iowa.

JH (04:41): In, when?

TP (04:45): When? Oh, 1953.

JH (04:48): Okay, and,

TP(04:49): Sorry, I missed that part.

JH (04:50): And then growing up, what were your parents' names and what did they do?

TP (04:55): My mother was Betty Pease. Betty Jane. My father was Don Carroll Pease. My mother, she stayed at home until I went to school and then she became a school secretary. She was secretary at my junior high.

JH (05:17): How was that?

TP (05:20): I didn't get in trouble then. Junior high, I was careful.

JH (05:24): High school different story?

TP (05:26): My uncle, uncle Leroy, was the principal of the high school. I got in lots of trouble then. Yeah, it was, it was something, yeah. My father was a beer distributor.

JH (05:42): Okay.

TP (05:45): And actually, he was really loved in the town. Not because he distributed beer but because he was kind and took care of people. He'd been an athlete and you know, I didn't get his athletic skills but he was a 125 pound quarterback. All state quarterback. He was, he was something.

JH (06:05): Must have had a heck of an offensive line, huh?

TP (06:07): He was a little guy but he was so fast.

JH (06:09): Oh?

TP (06:10): He was something, yeah.

JH (06:11): So growing up, or in school, did you gravitate towards music when you were in your studies in school, or?

TP (06:17): I was in choirs and I always sang. Always sang in schools. In school choirs and in high school choir and everything, so I always did that.

JH (06:26): Was music present in your household?

TP (06:28): You know, there was a lot of played music but there wasn't, you know. My parents loved big band stuff and and in fact, being on the Mississippi River, I see Ron is here, Ron Zimmerman, it's the home of Aldo Leopold, where I grew up. We knew the Leopold family and I still know some of them and I knew his brother, Fred, and he was in our church and so, it was, you know, the Mississippi River, and it was... What was the question?

JH (07:08): Was music present in your home growing up?

TP (07:09): Yes, so we had this big Dixieland jazz festival called Steamboat Days. When I was a child I got to see Louis Armstrong. I was telling John (Harry) the other day that he was supposed to play on

an outdoor stage and the mayflies hatched during the previous band, the band that was the warm-up band, and people were on chairs. mayflies, it's like clouds, and you can't drive on them, your car would just do this, you know, it's worse than ice and mud together. It was amazing but I was standing in the back of the crowd, I was about nine years old, ten years old, and I was on the steps of the auditorium that they moved the concert into. I almost had my chin on the stage watching Louis Armstrong and his band. Those kinds of things made a big difference to me. That was my parents, listening to big band. My brothers and sisters, I was the youngest of four. My brothers and sister, we listened to quite a few show tunes but we also listened to a lot of, like, the Chad Mitchell trio was a big favorite one of mine. But my two biggest influences were probably the Smothers Brothers, no doubt, in fact as a child I memorized their live albums. And then Roger Miller, you know.

Song (08:46): Kansas City star, that's what I are, yod-a-lay-a-lay he ought to see my car, I got a big old Cadillac with wire wheels got rhinestones on the spokes.

JH (08:57): Sounded good! So growing up, that was what was in the home. As you got through high school did you go to college afterwards?

TP (09:06): I went to college for one semester and then I just wanted to do things so out I went. I lived up in Wisconsin with my brother and he was in grad school at Madison and I was tagging along.

JH (09:30): So what got you through your 20s then?

TP (09:34): What got me through my 20s. Well, the big thing for me was that I ended up teaching in environmental education and I did it without a degree. I ended up in California via, my brother helped me, he had been there before through a college program and I ended up out there in the Santa Cruz mountains, in the Redwoods. It was actually the San Francisco Y Camp but all the education programs out there were county education programs, weren't so localized as we have here. The county education programs each had an environmental ed program throughout California and there were two of them situated right in the San Francisco Y Camp called Jones Gulch and it was an incredibly beautiful place. The giant sequoia, not the giant sequoias, the coastal sequoias, that's what we lived in and we also went down to the beach and tide pools with the kids and the marshes, the salt marshes and the brackish marshes. It was an incredible place to be and that's where I really took off singing with kids. I used it on the trails as a naturalist and then I used it in campfires. Campfires are really the core of who I ended up being. In any performances I do it's about all being together and having fun.

JH (11:20): Do you remember the first time you led a campfire song?

TP (11:24): Actually, it wasn't out there. It was at Upham Woods here. My brother had always done a naturalist thing for my sister's elementary school or middle school down in Madison and they would come to Upham Woods and my brother would be the naturalist there. Well a few years later he ended up being the first state 4-h naturalist. It was at Upham Woods which was the state 4-h camp which is in the Dells or just outside the Dells on the river. So I ended up there. He couldn't do it and I said "I've never taught kids" and he said "you know this, you've been in the woods your whole life. You know you can do this." And so I did it and I sang at the campfire and I sang two songs.

JH (12:16): Do you remember what?

TP (12:17): Yeah I do!

JH (12:18): Are we gonna be learning them right now?

TP (12:22): I did songs that I probably never ever did again in front of kids but I did The Cat Came Back and I think I did Tom Paxton's Zoo Zoo Zoo.

Song (12:39): We're going to the zoo zoo zoo how's about you you you you can come too too too we're going to the zoo zoo zoo

TP (12:46): Yeah, something like that. It's been a long time! And then I was hooked. Then I ended up applying to get into this camp out there and they hired me and I ended up working for both programs over about two and a half years, and then I also in the summertime worked at a camp in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I taught climbing and mountaineering and sang with them too.

JH (13:17): So let's real quick, before we continue more, obviously we're in a music exhibit and you know you're featured and all that stuff but let's talk about nature for a second with you. What do you feel when you are out in nature and how does that relate to the rest of your life?

TP (13:31): It's my church. It's my church. So that's where I live. We live in the country and it's my chapel, it's my temple, it's my mosque. It's where I go and I spend a lot of time there and I recreate there. I ski, I mountain bike, I build trails, I maintain trails, I maintain trails, I maintain trails, and every once in a while I get to bike again or ski. It's what I love. I worked in the mountains and I worked different places in California on the coast and I ended up in central Wisconsin you know, and I love it here. I love it here. Yeah I love it here. It's not just the natural world, it's also the human world and the community that we have here. Yeah, that's really why we're here.

JH (14:32): So let's continue the story. So you're working out in California at the camps for a couple years, what brings you back to Wisconsin?

TP (14:41): We were working from eight in the morning until nine at night and even though we were in our early 20s it gets a little exhausting, you know. It was wonderful work and the friendships we have, they're heart friends, those people, they're friends forever, they're life friends. We still go visit them and they come visit us and one of them I introduced to his wife here and got him to move here so that was great. It was incredible being there in your early 20s but I needed a break and I wanted to learn to work with my hands. I wanted to do carpentry and I wanted to do masonry and things like that and I did, I learned to do those things, though it was...

JH (15:36): When you came back to Wisconsin?

TP (15:38): Yes. I moved back. My brother was in the Dells at the time then as the state naturalist and I ended up being with him and his wife Cindy and my niece and nephew and we're still all really close.

JH (15:53): That's great, how fun. When you moved back, that's when you met your wife, correct?

TP (16:00): No, I met my wife, well, you know what, you're right! I had moved back, and then she moved to the camp where I had taught for all those years and I missed all my friends so in the middle of winter I went back out to California because it was my community, you know, it's community. I gravitate to community. So I went back there and on my birthday in January I met the love of my life and 50 years later here we are.

JH (16:36): How wonderful.

TP (16:37): Yeah, she ended up coming back with me eventually, eight months later, that wasn't too bad.

JH (16:46): So what brought you to Stevens Point then from the Dells?

TP (16:48): Environmental ed.

JH (16:49): At UWSP?

TP(16:51): Yeah. He was one of my profs, Ron Zimmerman, and became a dear friend, he and Donna both.

JH (17:01): What lessons did you take away from your time at UWSP?

TP (17:05): The lessons I took away. I loved being there but I was only in school for a year. I came back, you know I was 23 or 24 when I came back, and I was ready then to be in school and I did really well and then I didn't want to be in school anymore. I got a four point and I just didn't want to be there and I wanted to do more stuff. Then I started doing carpentry and masonry and woodworking and things like that and then suddenly I missed being with kids.

JH (17:43): So is that how the children's music thing kind of happened?

TP (17:48): It is how it happened. I knew some people that were doing this and one of them mentored me. In fact I'd say that there's two people that I met that are major benchmarks in my life and one of them was Robbie Clement. An incredible musician, lived down at Madison at the time and then he and his wife moved to Cambridge. I was just outside of Madison and he was doing lots of music all the way around, all age groups, but he was doing kids too. I had met him at some workshops that were music workshops called... What were they called, what were they called? Pickin' and grinnin'? Pickin' and grinnin'! Did anybody ever see those? It was just incredible. They had a couple of them at the camp in the Dells and so I attended them and got to know all these people and musicians and Robbie was one of them. When I felt I wanted to start working with kids again and music was probably my vehicle back in, I called Robbie and I said "would you help me?" And he said "open arms!" He just open armed me and he just said "come on in." He said "the more people doing this that are good at it the better it is for the kids and the better it is for all of us." It was just so generous and

he and I did shows together. He taught me the song Love Grows and I got to know the woman that wrote it too, Carol Johnson. Love Grows, it's a song that just spread throughout the world and Robbie was the one that taught it to me. He was the one that really got me going on jaw harps. He makes the jaw harps that I made.

JH (19:50): Don't you have one right there? Look at that, can't keep him away.

Jaw harp song (19:55):

TP (20:07): There it is, there. Yeah, Robbie made this. He made this jaw harp. There was a guy named Fred Whitlow and a musician who grew up in Wausau, a guy named John McCutcheon, who a lot of you know is also a friend, and he turned me on to these and I got ahold of Fred. He was an old timer down in Florida and he was a character beyond belief. I talked to him on the phone many times and I got his jaw harps from him and then I started telling people about him and Fred, I'd call Fred and he'd go "Tom, you're selling all kinds of these things for me!" He was just an amazing guy, he was really fun to talk to. Well, Fred wanted to sell his business and Robbie bought it from him and Robbie wanted me to go in on it with him and I said "yeah, I think I'll let you do that." He did it and he got it, he made them even better and they're all tuned. He sold chromatic scales of jaw harps all over. Anytime you hear a jaw harp in any recorded music it is most likely one of Robbie's. He still called it Whitlow Harps. Now unfortunately Robbie passed away two years ago, way too young, so nobody's carrying it on.

JH (21:38): I have to imagine if we do even 10 more years of these recordings of these live oral history interviews, I got to imagine that's the only time that's going to happen.

TP (21:49): A jaw harp?

JH (21:50): Yeah. But that was pretty fun. Talk to me more about Robbie and the community that he kind of brought you into, because he had a record label?

TP (22:02): Yeah, he did. He had a record label called Tomorrow River Music. Robbie had grown up in Marshfield and he always knew the name Tomorrow River and he loved it. He just filed it so when he started making records, adult records, beautiful records, he was a great songwriter, he called it Tomorrow River Music. Then he invited, I don't remember exactly what happened, but he invited myself and our friend Stuart Stotts, dear, dear friend, and

Begin video file #2:

TP (00:03): who? Corinne Rakow? Ken? Who is it? Ken Longquist, Robbie, Steven Tietra, Corinne Rakow, Bruce O'Brien, all kinds of us. So we were all on this and we were all children's musicians, mainly, and we were on a label called Tomorrow River Music. And it was just quite lovely that way. He promoted it and distributed our recordings for us. It was quite lovely.

JH (00:38): Is that kind of community, like that through that record label, is that unique in the United States?

TP (00:45): Well, the fact that we all paid for our own recordings, the label wasn't paying for it or anything like that. So that was unique. We all just basically paid for our own stuff and he distributed and it was great because some of us sold better than others and you would be on their shirt tails and people would trust the label because they were good. You know, people were good, so it was good.

JH (01:15): So you mentioned Stuart Stotts.

TP (01:17): Stuart is the other person.

JH (01:18): Because we were just listening before, while everybody's getting seated, we were listening to an album that you had collaborated on.

TP (01:24): Yeah, we've done three albums together. Stuart was the other person, I would say, that are benchmarks in my career. One was Robbie and one was Stuart. And Stuart is one of my very, very closest friends. You know, I would say he and Louise are my, you know, I mean, just, I love him dearly. And we talk a lot but we also did a lot of residencies together. We write songs together. He's a prolific songwriter. He wrote the song, Music In My Mother's House. We wrote

Song (02:07): Eight Hugs A Day, eight hugs a day. Remember what the doctors say, eight hugs a day.

TP (02:15): It's hard to do it without moving. Everything has motions. All my songs have motions because of camp. Because of all the camp songs. We should probably do one right now.

JH (02:30): Hey, you're in charge.

TP (02:31): Everybody like this? Here we go. Ready? First camp song I ever did. Ready?

Song (02:36): Waddle-ee-a-cha, waddle-ee-a-cha, doodly-doo, doodly-doo. Good luck. Waddle-ee-a-cha, waddle-ee-a-cha, doodly-doo, doodly-doo. Simplest song, there isn't much to it. All you gotta do is doodly-do it. I like the rest, but the part I like best goes doodly-doodly-doo. Quack, quack. Saxophone solo!

TP (03:13): Anyway, yeah, I mean, then you get faster. I still did that when I started. I learned that out in California. I learned that out in California and I took it everywhere with me. And for the first four or five years of my career, in the early 80s, I still did that song. I loved it. I just did it for a friend who introduced me to my wife, a dear friend of ours. She passed away this last winter. We were at her bedside. And I sang at her bedside. We thought she was going that night. She always wanted camp songs. She was at camp. She taught environmental ed. She was a dear, dear friend of Ron and Donna's too, we were all there. But the night before Ron and Donna came down, we were there and I sat down and sang by her bedside. I sang a couple of quiet songs. I just slowly went into Wadaliacha, kind of quietly. And I didn't think much of it. I mean, Mark was filming it. He started sending this film, this video out to people. I called him and I said, "that's really nice. Is that comforting?" And he said, "You didn't watch it, did you?" I said, "no, I was there." And he said, "you need to watch it." He said he'd gotten up in the middle of the night to give her morphine and he started watching that video. He

said, it was only a five minute video, probably, and he watched it for two hours or an hour and a half. So I watched it. When I started singing Wadaliacha, Karen smiled as much as she could. She had Parkinson's and it had really eaten her up. But it was really an amazing thing. And it's that power of music. You know, she wanted the camp songs. So at her memorial, which was attended by as many people as we could stuff in that lodge, 300 people, everybody who did that song. It was just that and every camp song she wanted. We did it. And so that's, that's the power of that music, you know. And, for me, it's about singing together. You know, that's what the camps gave me. Sure, there's some ego. I like to think I have it under control. But at the same time it's about everybody singing together and dancing and laughing together. That's become the most important thing to me in all of it, what I do. It was the most important thing, but then even more so as the years go on. People, everybody's singing together.

JH (06:11): What is the anatomy of a good children's song? How do you know when you've written one that you're like, I'm on to something?

TP (6:20): If people can learn it instantly, it's a good children's song. That's my thing. I will record songs that I wouldn't do live because that's a different thing. People listen and they get used to it and they can learn them. But if I can't teach a song right away, I don't do it. In all of my repertoire, I have one song that's not participatory and it's a story song and I proceed it with another story and there's a pin drop and kids are totally glued to it. That's one song out of all the songs I do with people. So if I can't teach it, I don't do it.

JH (07:13): There's a certain simplicity to that, that cuts through kind of the complexity of greater life.

TP (07:19): Right. And if I can't put motions to it, ugh!

JH (07:24): He growls. So you get active as a children's musician. Tell me about some of the first times you had when you were billed as, you know, maybe you're billed as Tom Pease, what was that like? Like getting ready for some of those shows. Or what was it like when you kind of turned professional?

TP (07:46): I think I was hesitant. I remember this now that you ask, I was hesitant to do this for a living because I loved it so much. And I was worried about doing something I love. What a stupid thing to worry about. What a wonderful thing that I've, I just feel like it's such a joy to have done something I love.

JH (08:08): How do you keep that, do you keep that compartmentalized like from your greater life? Or is it just, you're always kind of this person who's doing both things? Asking for a friend.

TP (08:20): Maybe you should ask my wife that one. I'm comfortable on stage and I can entertain. I haven't always, even now I still occasionally will do an adult thing. You know, we're just adults, grownups, I call them, us, grownups. But, tell me again now.

JH (08:51): Yeah, how do you keep this performance part of your life separate? Or is it just kind of part of who you are at all times?

TP (08:58): No, I, I'm not that all the time. But I do sing a lot, you know, I sing a lot.

Song (09:04): Singing every day of life, singing every day of life. Find the joy and lose the strife, singing every day of life. Well, I'm glad you all came, makes me smile, singing every day of life. That was your part. I'm glad you all came, it makes me smile, singing every day of life. I hope we can make it worth your while, singing every day of life. Yeah, there we go. John told me that I should not sing, singing every day of life. But singing is just one of my things, singing every day of life.

TP (09:57): Yeah, so anyway. It's part of me, but people sometimes think that I'm always up. And I got a little tired of people coming up to me and saying, "wow, you must be a great dad." And I had just yelled at my kids right before I left. "Your kids must feel so lucky and your family must," and I remember, I will never forget this, I remember the first time I was feeling bad that I had done something. You know, I yelled at the kids or something like that. And this woman said that to me. And I just went, "you know what? I yelled at my kids before I came!" It was like I hit her in the gut. She was in shock. I felt so horrible, I just went, "I'm real. I'm a person! I have these same things that happened to me!" We tend to do that, if somebody's on stage or they're on a basketball court or a baseball field or something, we tend to put them on pedestals. It is not a good thing. I did it once to one of my heroes and I apologized to him and that was it. We became friends and that was that. I do not put people on a pedestal. I refuse to do it. I think it's not healthy for us as a culture and as people, you know. So things are real sometimes, you know.

JH (11:43): Absolutely.

TP (11:44): But, you know, I've seen performers not know how to handle the adoration. That was one time I didn't handle it very well. But I got some advice at the beginning from a wonderful man by the name of Sai Khan, who was an incredible songwriter and union organizer and just an amazing human being. I said, "Sai, how do you deal with the adoration? How do you deal with that pedestal stuff?" He says, "well, I ask them their name and I ask them what they do and I find out about them." And isn't that just common sense? He said, "but it's not all unselfish. I'm a songwriter. I need their stories." I love that. I never forgot it. And that was 1981 or 82 Sai told me that. I'd recorded, it was 82. I'd recorded one of his songs. Father Bought Me A Rubber Blubber Whale. I called him to ask permission. I'd added a verse and he loved it. He was such a good guy. Really wonderful man.

JH (13:03): So as you started performing and doing this for your living, you found another community through that.

TP (13:12): I did. Yeah. That's a good way to put it. It's one of the perks is all these incredible people I met along the way. People I would stay with became really dear, dear friends. Their families, you know, their kids. One of the kids from the family I stay with in Cedar Rapids to this day, their son just came up and stayed with us a few days and he was about to run his first marathon and he's just starting a brand new job right out of college. It's a wonderful thing. Those are the perks. During COVID I had my grandkids, we got to babysit during COVID. They moved into their house that they built on our land two weeks before COVID started. We were separated for a month until they needed babysitters and they were being careful with us, of course. I had my grandkids to sing with, but I really

missed the people along the way. Not just the people I stayed with but the educators, the teachers, the administrators. I had a lot of principals, some superintendents, and librarians. I mean, those are people that I just; I love those people. A lot of my work now is return work, I go back. One camp, I'll be at 40 years, every year except for COVID, one year in COVID. And then some schools for 25, 30 years. It's kind of amazing, you know, libraries, same way.

JH (15:14): So, as you were going out and playing more and more, and you've stuck mostly regionally, did you ever have a chance to go be a national act?

TP (15:23): I was asked to tour nationally and I was flattered and all that. But I went out for two weeks and I couldn't take it. I didn't like being gone from home. I think one of the other things that I have is, this community here is, I have a strong sense of place where I live, and not just our home but also the surrounding area, the Amherst community, the Stevens Point, Waupaca, all these friends and the sense of community, I need that and I need to be in it and I need to be home a lot. So it wasn't for me. I learned that in that two week trip to Evansville, Indiana, and they got snow when I was there. That's the tip of Indiana, the southern tip of Indiana. They got snow when I was there and I was really cocky because I had the only car in the place that had snow tires and I got cocky. And then I went, "Oh, I'm the only car in the place that has snow tires, bad idea." They did not know how to drive. It was a half inch of snow. It was, it was frightening on those streets, those people. It was scary.

JH (16:53): Just to kind of wind things down and then if you guys have any questions, I'm sure Tom would love to answer them too. What's your big takeaway from your career? First off, I'm not trying to put a capstone on your career. I hope it's not ending anytime too soon, but like, what's your big takeaway if you were to define your career?

TP (17:14): You know, in thinking about this interview, I realized that when I first started, I had all these programs I offered and themes. I took instruments. I took the dulcimer. I took banjos. I had the jaw harps. I had limber jacks, I had all these things, these instruments. I even took a washtub bass and then I realized it's really about the singing and the laughing together. That's really the most important. And the stories, I mean, the stories I have with kids, if you give them the chance, I have so many Art Linkletter moments. It's so good to be in a crowd that understands who Art Linkletter is. Sorry, Mariah, ask your parents. I mean, my friend Miles, I just got a letter, I got an email from his grandfather. Miles came up to me 11 years ago on his third birthday. I was in Hatley at the Hatley Library and Miles came up to me and he says, "Tom Pease, Tom Pease," Young children always use, it's two syllable name, Tom Pease. That's it. And I said, "yeah, what's your name?" And he says, "I'm Miles." He says, "and it's my birthday today." "How old are you?" "I'm three years old and I want you to do two songs for me for my birthday." And I said, "okay, Miles, what is it?" I think the first one was Dog in School, which is a hit with kids. And the other was Belly Button, which I'm kind of known for. I only do when it's requested, but that's 95% of the time. But you know, I respect it. I say, "okay, Miles, but will you come up and do Belly Button with me? Because this is, this is a big day for your belly button." And he looked at me and he kind of went, "okay." I said, "there'll be other kids up there." He says, "okay." So it was time for Belly Button right in the middle, I don't know where in the show. He's up there and he's off to the side and there's all these kids up there with me. I say, "Miles," I turned to him and I said, "Miles, this is it. This is the day we celebrate the day you got your belly button. You got your belly button today!" It was July 15th. I remember the date and it was 2014 because it was, he's

14 now. So anyway, he looks at me and he says, "Tom Pease." And this is where I feel like Art Linkletter, you know, he says, "I know why I have a belly button." These are the moments I live for. These are the moments I live for. He looks at me and the whole crowd is there. There's a hundred people in the room and they can all hear him. I said, "Miles, why do you have a belly button?" And he looks at me and very seriously says, "it holds my butt on." I couldn't go on. I was crying. I was laughing so hard. Nobody ever, the place is up in, and he's looking around going, "well, well, duh." It was so cute. I look at his grandfather and I said, "did you teach him that?" And he says, "no! Probably a cousin or something told him that." But the funny thing for me was that my grandpa, I was three years old when he died. I have these incredible memories of him because he's my earliest memory. He was really a hands-on grandpa. He was incredible. And he used to say to us, "kids, you better behave or I'm going to unscrew your belly button and your butt's going to fall off." Although my mom made him not say butt anymore. I think it became legs or something, I don't know, it wasn't good. I have those moments, those are the things in the end. It's not just the singing together. It's the stories. It's the laughing. It's the community that I try to develop.

(21:51): I try to go with the moment. I make set lists and every once in a while I actually follow it. But it's usually by accident because it's about the moment. As long as I have my edge, which most of the time I do but sometimes you don't, but you try and I know how to do it. But I've had some times too where I was really down and out and just not good, kind of depressed, but still had to go do a show. It's not that I can turn a switch, but it's something I know how to do and it's something that's familiar to me.

Begin video file #3:

TP (00:00): I know how to do it. I know that there's been a number of shows over the years that I've, at the end, thanked people for giving me because it fills me up too. People don't always realize that. It really fills me up. It's not ego. It's soul. It's soul. It's heart. A few years ago we had some tough stuff happen in our family. I had decided to take three months off to see what it was like to not do any shows for three months. We had this tough stuff happen and I didn't have any outlet. And I realized, "oh, this is really real." I needed filling up because at some of those earlier shows, I had stopped at the end and I was in tears. I don't mind crying in front of people, you know. But I was in tears thanking people for giving back to me. And they didn't understand it. But it's emotional for me because when you're down and out and you're not feeling good and people are singing, it comes back at you. It's one of the reasons I love singing with kids is because kids sing. They like to sing. It's really rare that they won't. People say, have kids changed over these years? And I say, maybe. Yeah, I suppose. But not with what I do. I mean, they're fine. They jump right in. And if they don't want to, I don't force them. I don't want to force anybody. But they don't cause any disruptions. I had this principal teach me early on what was the most important thing.

JH (01:49): What's that?

TP (01:50): I was down in Clinton, Iowa. And this woman named Joyce Caprata was the principal. She gave me a compliment. But I really took it to heart. She was really tuned into the children. It was a really high poverty area in Clinton, Iowa. She was greeting the kids when I first saw her and giving them hugs and helping them with their stuff when they came into school. And she said, "I'll be with

you when I can.” When she got done, she came over and she said, “I’m sorry. But some of these kids, that’s the only hug they’re going to get. And that’s my job.” At the end of the first show, which is in one of those old gyms with the stage on the side, you know, old, really tiny gyms. I did two shows. After the first show, she came up to me and she said, “Tom, do you mind if I sit on the edge of the stage?” I didn’t use the stage. I was out in front. But I said, “no, I don’t mind. But why?” Because I don’t have discipline problems. She said, “because I saw kids laughing that I’ve never even seen smile.” It was a compliment, but it was also, oh, this is more important than any theme I’m doing. This is more important than showing them any instruments. It’s more important than all of that stuff. And it’s just that watching those faces light up, it really is something. But kids all singing together, you know, they’re just younger voices, that’s all. There’s still voices coming at you. It’s pretty amazing stuff.

(03:40): You know, the residency stuff is really something, too, because we’re in a school. Stuart and I would do these songwriting residencies together. And we’d be in a school for a week sometimes. One school we were at for 20 years, every year. It was a home away from home. The teachers were dear friends of ours. And the principals are still friends of ours, and teachers are, too, in Manitowoc, you know, kindergarten center. They were all kindergarten teachers in an incredible place. I did some weird things, too.

(04:18): I got a story to tell you. I was at P.J. Jacobs. What was his name, the principal? Gene? Gene LaRose. That’s who it was. Is he still around? No. He did pass away recently. I think I saw it in the last, like, three or four years. He was principal at P.J. Jacobs, and he brought me in because I would do junior highs, too. He said they had a music teacher quit, and they brought in somebody, and she was getting eaten alive by these middle school kids. And she was. I went into their classroom, they started to do that and I stopped it. I brought in jaw harps. For the first time, I taught these seventh and eighth grade kids how to play jaw harp, and I just gave them to them. And I drove away from school. I was there two days in a row. I drove away from school the second day and there were kids on the corner playing their jaw harps. I went, “oh, oh!” So I started teaching jaw harp. I would go into elementary schools mostly and I would do two shows and then I would do four classrooms. I was exhausted and young, young, and I would teach them how to play jaw harp. I called it the P. Zuki method of jaw harp. Where is she? There she is. Right here. She would have loved it. That’s fun. Anyway, not many people got it, you know. The kids certainly didn’t get it. But anyway, then I started selling them. I sold them for what they cost me. They cost me \$1.34. I sold them for \$1.50. Okay. I sold thousands of them over the years. Over these, probably six, seven years, I did this. And one day, I was driving along Highway 54, and I got stopped by a cop. 54, just between Black River Falls and Rapids. It’s such a beautiful section. I saw a wolf there one time. I saw a wolf run, crossed in front of me. It’s a wild section in Wisconsin and they have elk there now, too, and everything. It’s an incredible place. And I’m driving along and he stops me for a headlight. Young guy, and he comes up, and he takes my license, goes back, and he comes back. I have a station wagon and all my equipment’s out. My guitars are in the back. And he says, “are you the Tom Pease that sings with kids?” And I almost said, “well, duh.” But I was smart enough not to. I said, “yeah.” And he goes, “I still got my jaw harp from sixth grade.” He says, “and I still remember the P. Zuki method of jaw harp.” He said this to me. And he said, “get that light fixed.” A few years later I get a call. Well, not a few years. 10 years later I get a call from their class. This class that I’d gone to, Black River Falls, the elementary schools. I’d gone there three or four years. They call me to come and sing for their class reunions. They had a bunch of classes. And I said, “okay.” And I said, “I can’t do it. But can you ask and see if the deputy is

in your class?" Because I told her the story. She said she did. She wrote me back. She said, "we asked, and nobody was there that knew the story." So no deputies. It was too bad. I felt bad I never got his name. I've had all these great things happen like that.

JH (08:21): So what a story, a story of stories, right?

TP (08:25): Story of stories. And there's a lot of them, you know..

JH (08:30): Well, there might be some burning questions.

TP (08:31): Yeah, I'm sure. Maybe. Some of them know me a little too well.

JH (08:35): We got time for one or two questions. Does anybody want to pipe up? Go ahead.

Audience Member #1 (08:40): It's not really a question. Just another story to add to you. Our pastor uses Love Grows as the call to come to the children's message. And the whole congregation has learned the signs and does it. The whole congregation does it when she starts it.

TP (08:54): Isn't it an incredible song? I've never known a song like that. I mean, it spreads all over the world. Carol Johnson grew up in Marshfield, lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Incredible songwriter. Robbie found it in a book and learned it. And then I recorded it and Carol, she'd send me songs all the time because that recording sold quite a few recordings for a children's folk album. And it won big awards and all that kind of stuff for what that's worth. But it sold stuff and it was a good album. The song just goes and Carol would say, "Tom, you should record this one of mine too." I said, "well, Carol, I'm not selling like I used to." But it's an amazing song and so many people do it. It's just people that don't know it.

Song (09:52): Love grows one by one, two by two, and four by four. Love grows round like a circle and comes back knocking at your front door.

TP (10:12): Not all of it is signed, but most of it. Yeah.

JH (10:18): Any other questions for Tom?

Audience Member #2 (10:22): I imagine you've seen a lot of belly buttons. I'm just saying, I remember when you came, I taught at St. Adelbert's in Rosholt, the Sacred Heart, and you were helping perform.

TP (10:35): Oh, for the Grandparents' Day.

Audience Member #2 (10:37): And, I remember you doing the belly button song and the kids pulling up their shirts. It was hilarious.

TP (10:42): Oh, they just, they just. Oh, and I tell you what. There's been some moments. I've seen the faces on some moms. When their daughter has that dress on. And they're just hoping she still has

her undies on. And they go, phew, or they're going, no, no! It's just so funny. But, you know, I've had people do things that are hilarious with it. I had a guy that, I used to play at the Great Pumpkin, the Giant Pumpkin Festival in Nekoosa. This family would come every year. They were just really good, nice people, fun loving. They loved singing when they had all the kids there and everything. And, sure enough, I said something to him about lifting. And he lifts his shirt. He comes up. He comes up in front. He's doing it with me. And he lifts his shirt. And he had painted a great big bullseye all over. I still have the picture of it, you know, he and I with mine up and nothing painted on it. Yeah. Oh, yeah. People send me a lot of belly button paraphernalia. Yeah, no doubt about it. It was a woman named Connie Caldor from Canada who wrote that song. She's an incredible songwriter. And that just is the hit. So, yeah.

JH (12:22): Well, I think one more question from me to wrap up. What's it like to be in a museum exhibit?

TP (12:29): What's it like to be?

JH (12:30): In a museum exhibit, like to be featured in a museum exhibit?

TP (12:33): You know, this exhibit is phenomenal. There's so much. I got to come back and just spend a lot of time. If you haven't, I spent a lot of time the first time I was here and I've got to do it again. How long is it up?

JH (12:47): It's up till next fall. We got a year.

TP (12:48): It's up till next fall. I tell people about it everywhere I go. There's a story about Wenzel Albrecht. He was at, I'm not sure I have the story right. But I've told so many people about this right over here in this cabinet. He came to teach at SPASH. When, in the 30s? 30s? Did I have it right? He was supposed to teach violin. Right? There were no violins. He spent the summer making 30 violins. Ta-da. I love that story. He just made the instruments! He made them! I just think that is, and there's one of them here that he made.

JH (13:31): It's pretty cool.

TP (13:32): It's incredible! And, you know, it's just that there's so many different kinds. I mean, we're known in this area for the polka. We're known for that. But there's jazz. Your grandfather brought jazz into the area. There's Bob Kase right there. His daughter sang on one of my albums. Bob danced in the concert. I remember that. It's just such a variety. Suzuki, the Hmong stuff, the Native American, it's really incredible. And, you know, Otis (McLennon) and Artie (Stevenson), of course, you know, all the bluegrass.

JH (14:15): Who you can see on December 18th.

TP (14:18): In December? I'm coming. Oh, yeah. You better get your tickets because this is a small place. It's going to pack. It's going to pack. Yeah. And Artie is just, he's, I love playing with Artie. At the event.

JH (14:33): We had a big fundraising event to put this whole thing together. Tom played, and that was an adult gig. I think a lot of those adults had, well, they were feeling pretty good. It was an intergenerational exchange that you kind of...

TP (14:47): But Artie played with me the whole time.

JH (14:48): Well, yeah, he did. You had Art Stevenson on harmonica playing.

TP (14:51): I just had him playing with me the whole time. I was like, "oh, Nirvana for me", you know. I love Artie. He's just, he's an amazing human being. And it's just done so much for all the musicians and music and around the place.

JH (15:06): Any closing words before we wrap up?

TP (15:09): Oh, sing. Sing. Whether it be in the shower, sing with people. I am starting with a friend of ours, Laurie Lowe. We want to start group singing. Not performance at all. You know, for me, the group singing is really what it's about. But I also have to do this entertaining part, too. And how to define what I do. I'm a facilitator. But this is a different idea. It's people coming and passing, passing the song around. Somebody leads a song and they're singable songs. Songs that people can join in. Maybe we'd have words at times, but after a while, there'd be just songs that we all know. We just can do the chorus or call and response. Or echo songs, you know. It's something that we're going to get started. And we'll try to do this. There's people doing this all over the country. Singing music, performance, really, in our history, in human history, it's a pretty short little piece. We used to sing all the time. There's groups that I'm in, and Simon is in, and that people just break into a song without thinking about it. It doesn't happen too often anymore in the greater culture like it used to, just a mere 100 or 200 years ago. I think that it's big stuff, that singing together is so powerful. I know what it's done for me when I needed to be fed. It's huge. It's the music, really. It's the music.

JH (17:14): Well, would you like to lead us in one more short song before we end?

TP (17:24): I suppose. Can I do motions with it?

JH (17:31): Well, yeah, it's up to you.

TP (17:35): All right, shall we do, let's do one. Here we go. Okay. Okay. Now, like this.

Song (17:47): We gotta hold everybody. We gotta hold everybody up. We gotta hold everybody. We gotta hold everybody up. Hold everybody up. Up, up, up, hold everybody up. Up, up, up, hold everybody up. Up, up, hold everybody up. You end in, in. Yeah. Like that. No, now you know it. Let's do it. You ready? We gotta hold everybody. We gotta hold everybody up. We gotta hold everybody. We gotta hold everybody up. Hold everybody up, up, up, up. Hold everybody up, up, up. Hold everybody up, up, up. Hold everybody up. Ta-da. There's more, but that's it. Yeah.

JH (18:43): Stay standing and just give Tom a huge round of applause for sharing his story. Thanks. And thank you for your support of the Portage County Historic Society and this exhibit. And thank you, Tom, for being here.

TP (18:55): I thank you so much. It's an honor to have all of you come. And so many of you are familiar to me, of course. And I don't know all the names, but I do know some of you and I hold you dear. So thank you so much. And John, incredible. This is an amazing exhibit.

JH (19:11): I take almost no credit for this. This is all Cheyenne here.

TP (19:17): Cheyenne. Everybody say yay! Thank you, Cheyenne.

JH (19:25): Thank you all. Get home safe. See you again soon.

JH (19:29): Can they look around? Can they look around?

JH (19:31): Oh, yeah, yeah, we'll stay open for a little while. Please look around.