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*“No Flies on Bill”*: The Story of an Uncontrollable Old  
Woman, My Grandmother, Ethel “Billie” Gammon (review)

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# Book Reviews

"NO FLIES ON BILL": THE STORY OF AN UNCONTROLLABLE OLD WOMAN, MY GRANDMOTHER, ETHEL "BILLIE" GAMMON. By Darcy Wakefield. *Northeast Folklore*, Volume 39, 2006. Orono, ME: University of Maine, 2006. 188 pp. Softbound, \$15.00.

The family farm, once the mainstay of the state's economy, was already in decline in 1916 when Edith "Billie" Wilson was born in south-central Maine to a family of Nova Scotian immigrants. Her father, a struggling farmer, encouraged his energetic teenage daughter to strike out on her own: "There may be flies on Ma and Pa, but there ain't no flies on Bill" (17). After working for her education and teaching a few years in one-room schools, Billie married and settled in rural North Livermore, ME.

She never left and she never slowed down. Her husband, Albert Gammon, worked his way into an executive position with one of the state's few remaining paper companies. With his emotional and financial support, Billie, a typically industrious Maine housewife, became an innovative community volunteer who earned a graduate degree in her fifties. She was the driving force behind Washburn-Norlands Living History Center, where children come to learn about nineteenth-century rural Maine and where academic and amateur historians gather for an annual conference on Maine history. "Life calls for a strong constitution and a gutsy approach," she asserts (179). Even though providing a home for aging, difficult relatives put some "pebbles" in her shoe (127) she fulfilled her childhood dreams, mostly on her own terms. Storyteller, educator, and public historian, Gammon is a local legend.

In 1995, her granddaughter, Darcy Whitfield, interviewed Billie for a graduate oral history class. Over the next decade Wakefield recorded her grandmother's stories, asked questions, edited responses, and created with Gammon a rich personal memoir. Because Wakefield describes this process in detail, "No Flies on Bill" is a particularly valuable resource for anyone interested in working with an older relative to document a life story. This well-written book also offers a colorful glimpse of twentieth century rural Maine culture as seen through the eyes of an "uncontrollable old woman."

Wakefield's book is not a work of history. Her historical perspective and excellent bibliography show that she knows her women's history, but there is little critical analysis or context beyond personal experience. There is scant evidence that Wakefield did additional research to verify Billie's version of events; she appears not to have formally interviewed her mother, Gammon's daughter. The author is clearly, and unabashedly, expressing her lifelong admiration for her grandmother.

This is, instead, the story of a developing relationship between two women made possible by the process of oral history. Wakefield used skills learned in her courses to structure a dialogue that enabled her grandmother to sort out her own memories

and move beyond oft-repeated anecdotes. Using the interviews as her source, Wakefield then created an engaging literary portrait. This process forged a close bond between two dedicated, talented teachers and storytellers. Gammon's self-confidence and positive approach to problem solving was an inspiration to Wakefield in her own life and work as an essayist and popular English instructor at Southern Maine Community College. All oral history interviews are collaborations in which authority is shared; in this case the result was a shared past and a promised legacy.

In her manuscript, Wakefield echoed her grandmother's wishes: "I, too, want to die all used up from doing what I was meant to do" (179). While her book was in press, Darcy Wakefield was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) and died in 2005 at the age of thirty-five. The Maine Folklife Center published "No Flies on Bill" posthumously. Billie Gammon, still teaching classes and telling stories in her nineties, retains a Maine woman's gritty optimism, the ability to walk with pebbles in her shoes, talent, and good luck. Her granddaughter, who had many of these same qualities, was not as fortunate.

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