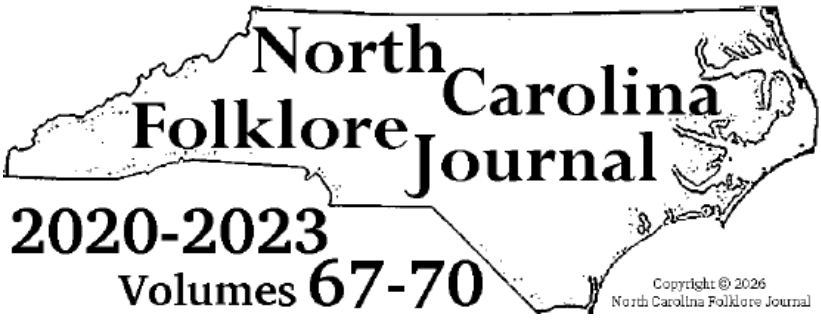
North Carolina Folklore Journal

2020-2023 | 67-70



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Cover image: Bobby McMillon in his youth. Photo: Courtesy of Lori Allison.

Editor's Foreword

Leanne E. Smith

NCFJ 67-70 may be the last issue of the *North Carolina Folklore Journal*. The North Carolina Folklore Society has folded, with its remaining resources sent to the North Carolina Folklife Institute. NCFS had weighed questions for several years about its academic-facing versus public-facing identity, purpose, and relevance. Increasing loss of volunteer capacity to support the NCFS mission and activities led those who remained to discuss merging, with some hope that *NCFJ* could continue in some form with NCFI. Then the Covid pandemic upended our work and social lives. NCFI subsequently had organizational changes, too. For a time, it seemed like there may be a future for *NCFJ*. But having a new support structure still would not solve key external challenges.

Academic writers—from hopeful vita-building students to longtime faculty—often want their work accepted in prestigious publications that build knowledge and understanding in their field, with the added benefit that their volunteer labor translates into research/creative activities and professional service on job applications or annual reports submitted to administrators. In recent years, online database distribution of student theses and dissertations has also made the option of reworking content from those larger projects into shorter journal articles a less attractive publication opportunity when the full-text project is already online. Post-academic, freelance, and other community writers are less focused on publishing in peer-reviewed journals, as they do not have the tradeoff of professional credits that academics must pursue. Instead, they seek to publish in places with funding

Frame Photo: Onward, November 9, 2024. Max Patch, NC. Photo: Leanne E. Smith.

to pay for their labor and multimedia online platforms that make it easy to share their work widely "on the socials." *NCFJ*'s academic infrastructure has been fading for decades, leaving no resources to support a transition to a public model of publication.

The original call for submissions for *NCFJ* 2020 asked writers to address how Covid was impacting their "folk" communities. As someone involved in dance rehearsals on Zoom with friends in Western NC, I knew there were pandemic folklife stories. Some of this issue's content captures that time, and as ever, it includes work from returning and new contributors. In "Appalachian Jack Tales from Ray Hicks in the Early 1980s: Carnival as Resistance Beyond European Märchen Traditions," Maako Shiratori explores how Ray Hicks' Jack Tales step beyond traditional characteristics of märchen." In a world full of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, sometimes we just want to settle into a good story, especially one where we can imagine ourselves overcoming obstacles and carrying on.

In "Two New Letters from the Original Fool Killer, A North Carolina Invention," Bart Ganzert shares more escapades of the Fool Killer character. The style of the letters themselves may be less accessible for contemporary readers, societal norms have changed, and the brashness may be uncomfortable. However, we can still resonate with the desire for a hero(ine) to swoop in when things aren't going as they should for the overall good of humanity—and fix it all. Yet, when change needs to happen in our communities, how often is it us who must make it so?

In "What We Sing About When We Sing About 'Tom Dooley': Murder Ballads and the Performance of Trauma," Madison Helman examines how "Inherent in the fascination with the story of Laura Foster and Tom Dula is the fear that instead of being alive to recount Laura's murder, we might have joined her in a shallow grave." Helman takes readers into the experience of Pauline—a key character in the historical story who escaped being a character in the song—and also explores parallels in her survival story and our perspective as today's singers and listeners.

Carrying on, solving challenges, surviving—all are aided by communities that hold us supportively, and in that context, there's naturally some kind of folklife linking people together. Even just in my social circles, in Fall 2019 in the weeks after

Hurricane Dorian at Ocracoke, I saw how a square dance on the community dock acknowledged that local friends remained, resolute in rebuilding "place." A few months later in Spring 2020, it was fascinating to see how the internet became a survival tether for several folk communities during the Covid pandemic, including one that my old-time music and dance friend group was involved in called Quarantine Happy Hour (Concerts are archived here: https://archive.org/search?query=fbqhh&sort=title). As challenging as it was to maintain connections during those times—including amid the illnesses and ultimate loss of some friends and folk practitioners—the intentional alternative links that folk communities devised online and outdoors helped them stay together through seemingly interminable "unprecedented times."

In "Asheville Mardi Gras 'Turn on Your Love Light' 2021 House Float 'Yardi Gras' Parade," Stefanie Mixon Kompathoum and photographer Paul King give insight into the Asheville Mardi Gras community's solution to canceled in-person celebrations: reverse the parade—decorate houses and yards instead of parade floats, and then people could drive by in their own vehicles. In "Knee to Screen: Appalachian Ballad Singing in a Virtual World," Ian Kirkpatrick captures the experience of trying to continue to learn ballad singing person-to-person and to participate in ballad swaps with other singers during the pandemic. Other folk communities can relate to going online to protect the health of vulnerable members, whether treasured older mentors or otherwise health-conscious practitioners and mentees. What would we have done without Zoom during those years?

The timing of this issue's publication in 2026—at some distance from those most difficult pandemic years—has provided another perspective on the communities represented in the Asheville Mardi Gras and Appalachian ballad singing contributions. Their choices to go online and outside during the worst periods of the pandemic strengthened them then, and those close ties sustained them again when—not long after the world started to feel more normal again in the pandemic's aftermath—the same communities were affected by the damage Hurricane Helene carved through Western North Carolina in Fall 2024. The spot where the ballad singers meet for monthly ballad swaps at the Old Marshall Jail was under feet upon feet of water from the

French Broad River. Resilience meant shoveling mud—and also singing. In the weeks following the storm, the community collaborated to record tracks for the album that became *The Resonance Sessions: A Benefit Album for Western NC, Live From Marshall*. In describing how "Each session was captured live in the recently cleaned out stairwell of the Old Jail," the liner notes read,

> The audio from each performance reverberates through the space in a hauntingly beautiful way. Room mics captured the jail's natural acoustics as well as the ambient sounds of Marshall. The rumble of tractors and passing military convoys layered a heavy sense of place into each track. The project represents a labor of love, grief and resilience, performed, recorded, filmed and produced by Western North Carolina artists.

At the same time, in a different part of the mountains, I too saw juxtaposition of loss and beauty. After so much rain in such a short period of time for the storm, in the following weeks, there was none. The brown creek mud dried into tan dust that rose into the air—higher and higher with each passing gravel truck heading to shore up washed out roads, the machines clearing the remains of a collapsed house and laying a makeshift bridge, and the bucket trucks bringing fresh power poles and line crews from hundreds of miles away to rebuild the infrastructure to restore electricity. Days of keep-this-toss-that. Water-wrinkled *NCFJ* issues? Toss. Stepping away from the consuming tasks for some moments, on the stump of a dead hemlock, I found a stunning reishi mushroom larger than my two hands—a reminder of nature's resilience. Looking around again, when the sunlight hit the brown mica-flecked creek silt-turned-dust just right, it sparkled. All that mica became glitter flittering in the air. And then, two weeks after the storm, the aurora borealis glowed far enough south to pull our eyes away from destruction for a few moments to wonder at the glimmer before returning to the cycle of questions: What do we keep? What do we let go? How? When? And then what?

Our folk material has already shown us that challenging times are not new, but they become more real when drastic experiences from old songs reappear in our present-day world. *NCFJ* contributor William Ritter wrote on Facebook in December 2024 following the recording of the Resonance Sessions:

> Now, some forewarning for the track I recorded. It was written in the aftermath of the devastating and widespread

> 1916 flood that mirrored Helene in many ways. I was aware of the song before Helene. Old Bobby sang it for me over the phone once, but it didn't really "strike" me until—you know—everything happened. And honestly, the experience helped me come to understand part of why folks were singing all these brutal old songs about murder and/or destruction. Sometimes the only way you can process something so terrible is through music.

The singer that William was referring to in his post was his friend and mentor Bobby McMillon. This issue's cover image is a photo of young Bobby. He later appears in the screenshots with Ian Kirkpatrick's article about online ballad swaps. And then this issue of NCFJ closes with William's remembrance note for Bobby. William's reflections on his connections with Bobby resonate with any of us who have found ourselves occupying the dual role of documentarian and friend, particularly when he writes, "I could have tried to record him more, and I know I'll have those little regrets for not learning this or that, but I certainly do not regret choosing first and foremost to be his friend more than his documenter."

If we're concentrating too much on documenting, we can miss out on being a friend, yet inevitably, while concentrating so much on being a friend, our subjects can die before the documentation is done. In those cases, it is some consolation that when we do get around to processing the documentation we've done, under the weight of knowing they won't see the results, our choice of having been a friend is what makes it more possible for the spirits of our absent friends to visit our minds along the way to make sure we're tellin' it the way it was, or at least, the way it could or should have been. When we feel mired in the silt-mud of working through documentation material without them, the memories of what we learned from them as friends is like that sunlight shining off of the mica dust: amid loss, look for the sparkles as glints of insight.

What a strange six (!) years since the previous issue of *NCFJ* was published in mid-2020. After delays from the NCFS dissolution, Covid, and personal adjacence to Hurricane Helene's aftermath—and seeing that the detour into hope for greater sustainability for *NCFJ* would not be viable—this 2020-2023 issue has arrived from the same infrastructure that has underpinned my years as a volunteer editor: a Word document on a laptop, and an

enduring hope that helping the journal reach 70+ years would be a worthwhile milestone in its life.

Most places I go, I still see or hear something that makes me think…Oh, that would be good for *NCFJ*…with labor and time. Having support in an academic job or being otherwise employed as editor would be a positive shift to a real system to sort submissions for review, plan themes, seek more submissions, edit content, compile layout, manage subscriptions, cultivate interest on social media with multimedia content, etc. Maybe? Or not? So, after working across a decade, eking out eight issues totaling 784 pages, I am retiring. Despite not wanting to be the last editor, I now feel rather like an end-of-life companion for the journal. Many thanks to past *NCFJ* editors Tom McGowan and Ted Coyle for giving advice along the way, and to librarian and editor Elizabeth H. Smith for lending another set of reader's eyes.

NCFJ is a casualty of academia's changing economics and the fracturing of folklife-related studies into several higher education disciplines, as well as into public-facing work, and even tourism marketing. Such decentralization helps folk studies continue, although under different names, but it also makes a state folklife journal less of a publication goal for writers—despite North Carolina's richness as a place. Existing between academia and the wider community can, rather than making *NCFJ* fit into both worlds, make it fit in neither. In this web of challenges, there must be many skilled story-seekers and tellers floating out there, lacking places to land. If only…what could be possible?

Even if new audiences may not catch it, folklife like this publication's decades of content still serve as inspiration for writers, better-funded NC-focused publications and television and film productions, and social media content creators. Somehow, it's fitting, since that's how "folk" works. Could *NCFJ* someday find somewhere to re-root and have a new life? Maybe. Regardless, it is a relief that the wealth of NC folklife material from this journal is available for ongoing research and recreation for audiences across the world thanks to the back issue digitization partnership with the State Library of North Carolina. Folklife grounds us and shows us our shared human threads, woven across place and time, even when the world feels off kilter.

Folklife is real life. Best wishes as we go. Onward.

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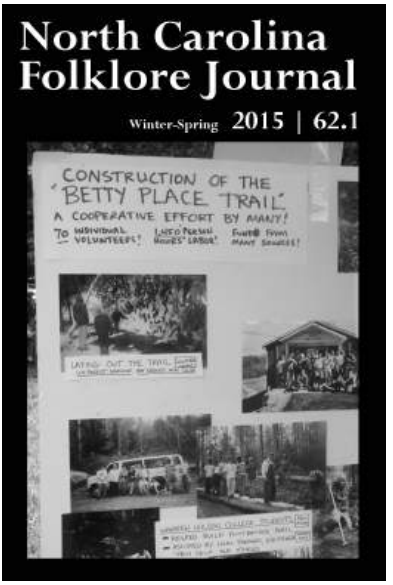
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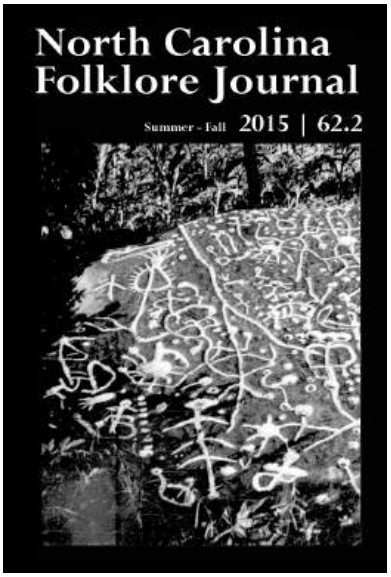
CONSTRUCTION OF THE
'BETTY PLACE TRAIL'
A COOPERATIVE EFFORT BY MANY!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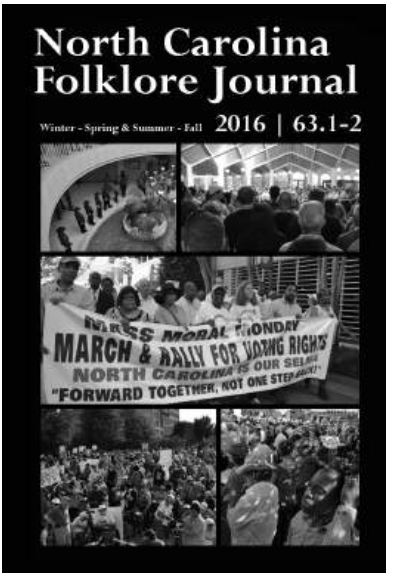
North Carolina
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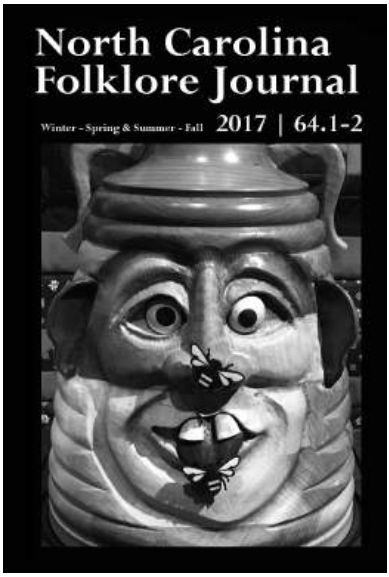
MARCH & RALLY FOR VOTING RIGHTS
NORTH CAROLINA IS OUR SELMA
"FORWARD TOGETHER, NOT ONE STEP BACK!"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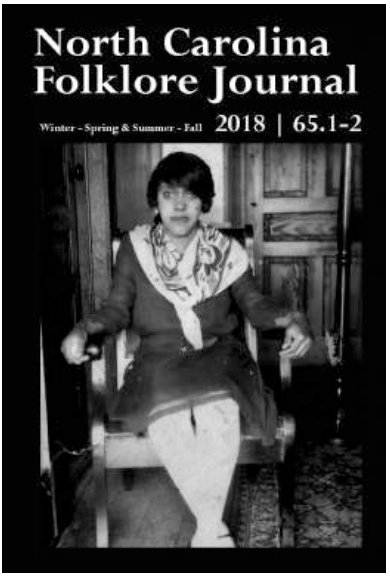
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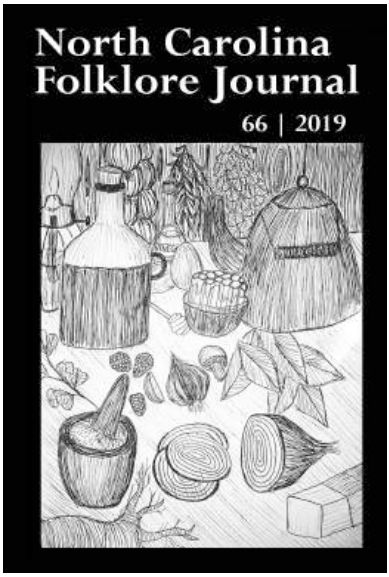
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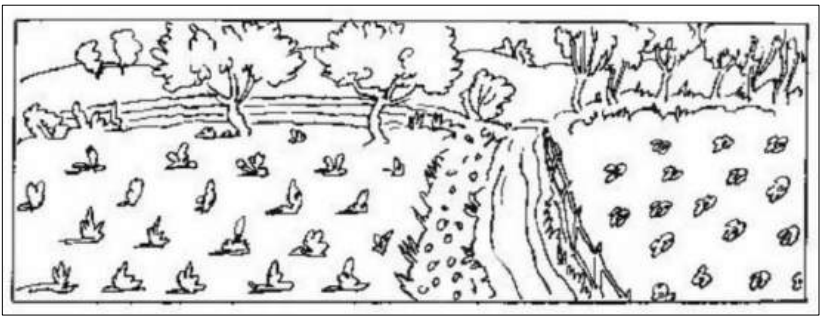

Appalachian Jack Tales from Ray Hicks in the Early 1980s: Carnival as Resistance Beyond European Märchen Traditions

Maako Shiratori

Ray Hicks was a storyteller from Beech Mountain on the border of Avery and Watauga counties in Western North Carolina. He told stories for more than 20 years until 1997 at the Jonesborough National Storytelling Festival, where he had been featured as a lead storyteller at the first festival in 1973. His ancestors came from England and Germany in the late 18th century, and the Hicks family have many active bearers of Appalachian folklife. Ray Hicks also traces his Cherokee heritage to his great-grandmother. This paper analyzes some Jack Tales told by Hicks in the early 1980s. The study attempts to examine how these stories could challenge racial stereotypes.

Previous Studies: Two Problems— Limit of Chronological Perspectives & Invisibility of Native Americans/African Americans

Since the end of the Civil War, previous American folklore studies have long considered Appalachian folktales and ballads as the old cultural heritage of Americans whose ancestors came from Europe. Early folklorists—e.g., Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) and Richard Chase (1904-1988)—excluded Black or Native Americans in their category of "Americans" (Brunvand 229-31, 314-44; Chase xiv-xv, 189-90; Shapiro 248-52; Sharp and

Frame photo: Illustration by Norma Farthing Murphy that appeared with a Ray Hicks Jack Tales feature in NC Folklore Journal *38.2 (Summer-Fall 1991).*

Campbell iv-vii; Whisnant 254). Even around 1970 at the end of the Folk Revival, national popular musicians regarded people in Appalachia as the origins of American "folks" and romanticized the region (Cohen 3-7; Filene 187-8). The stereotypes of Appalachian cultures as the ancient, forgotten white people have survived until now (Harkins 205-26; Harkins and McCarroll 1-15). Scholars have picked up Hicks as "a prototype of the mountain storytellers" or "an Appalachian Icon" who preserves the English of Elizabethan times (Burton, "In Memoriam" 138; McGowan 30-32) and "the pioneer spirits" of white Americans (McDermitt, *A Comparison* 377-79).

On the other hand, to disconnect Appalachia from its stereotypes, Appalachian Studies (interdisciplinary area studies) formed in the late 1970s. These scholars revealed the diversity and contradictions within the mountains (Billings 1-24; Hay 50-62; Obermiller & Scott 141-60). Scholars of the Hicks' folktales came to see their artistic originalities and the supposedly unique cultures of western North Carolina. These scholarly arguments, however, still had two problems. First, the discussions excluded the Hicks' relations with Native Americans and African Americans. Second, they emphasized how the Hicks family transcended or altered their traditions. This emphasis confined them to chronological studies (Isbell 1-4; Lindahl "Sounding a Shy Tradition" 72; Nicolaisen 123-40; Pavesic 75-6; Sobol, "Jack in the Raw" 4-5; Sobol, "The Next Last of the Breed" 212-18). The limited perspectives silenced the participants' experiences (such as Ray and Jack's carnivalesque resistance through their storytelling) and also the voices of Native Americans and African Americans. Among these two problems, this paper focuses on the invisibility of Native/African Americans.

"Ray and Jack Go Hunting" — Beyond European Märchen Traditions

Previous Study: Jack Tales as a Variation of Märchen

Previous studies categorize Jack Tales as an American variation of European märchen (Lindahl, *AFCLC* lii). Märchen means magic tales or fairy tales in folklore studies. Folklorist Carl

Lindahl, points out that Jack Tales usually share characteristics of European märchen as follows:

1. Transformation of a protagonist makes the plot's center. A hero leaves home because he/she lacks something, overcomes obstacles, eventually comes back with satisfaction of his/her needs. (Lindahl liii-liv; Propp 92-9, 119-27)
2. Powerful antagonist(s) appears in the story (Lindahl liii; Propp 28-34, 66-70).
3. Signs such as "Once upon a time…" or "…they lived happily ever after" set the story in a timeless world divided from actual life (Lindahl liv: Lüthi 32, 53). The tale lacks specifications of places or characters. The teller omits detailed portrayals of each scene (Lüthi 49-50).

These features embrace the connection between Jack Tales and European heritage. This paper will examine how Ray Hicks' Jack Tales move beyond the traditional characteristics of märchen.

The Beginning of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting"

As an example of Jack Tales, my research looks at a tale called "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" recorded in 1982. In this story, Ray and Jack go hunting together, encounter miracles and adventures with animals in the forest, and return home with huge hunts. The story begins like this:

> This here is one about <um…[stammering and coughing]> where I went down one fall [[/aʊl/]] it was Indian Summer: I went down to Jack's, and he was a-fixin' to go a-huntin', and I said, "Jack, do you care if I was to go along?" He said, "No, Ray." <So> I had a dinner [/ˈdɛnər/] with me, a can* of pork and beans, and he fixed up a little snack, so we went on and got in the woods. (Hicks 0:00-0:29 [Recorded by Jack Guy, Transcript originally preserved as "Transcript: A Film about Ray Hicks." in Burton-Manning Collection and edited by Shiratori])

This beginning mentions "Jack," which is a key word to signal the story as a Jack Tale. However, it has inconsistencies with the first and third characteristics of märchen. As for the first feature, the transformation of the hero, usually märchen explain that a

protagonist initially lacks something, which motivates him to leave home. For example, in the Jack Tale "Sop Doll!," Jack goes out to find his job as he has no money to live with his mother. However, in "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" Ray eats pork and beans, and Jack fixes a little snack before their departure. Therefore, listeners would not imagine Ray and Jack's emergent needs for hunting. In other words, "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" shows the absence of the protagonist's initial lack or dissatisfaction.

Additionally, about the third characteristics of märchen, which sets the story in an eternal world, "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" has the storyteller himself as one of the protagonists. Ray asks, "Jack, do you care if I was to go along?," and he socializes with Jack. The teller in real life enters the world of the story. The narrator blurs the boundary between the storied world and the reality. Therefore, the appearance of Ray as a character differentiates the tale from the märchen traditions.

Hence, the first part of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" provides exceptional features as a European märchen. Other parts of this tale, in terms of the story's setting, characterizations, and structure, are also exceptional.

Setting: Tale as a Real Experience

In looking at the story's setting, the third characteristic of märchen confirms that the stories usually omit detailed illustrations of each scene, and the tales are set in an eternal world separated from daily life. For example, a variant of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" published by Richard Chase, an early folklorist, goes as follows:

> Back in old times there was plenty of good game back on these mountains here. And one time Jack… (Chase 151)
>
> Now, boys, don't ask me too much about where it was Jack and me went huntin' that day. It was pretty far back when I was a young feller, and I can't remember exactly which way we went nor which part of which mountain that swag was in (160).

Usually, märchen are set in an eternal world that is different from daily life. In this tale, Ray's performance lacks these signs to divide the story from the present. Ray says,"[a]nd about five year

a'ter that we took another little hunt." (7:20-29 [1969]) or "And for the last few years, …I went a-huntin' with Jack" (0:08-00:15), as if he had the adventure recently.

Also, the first hunting episode of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" exemplifies the detailed narratives Ray provides:

> "Ray," he [Jack] said, "By dad, that's honey; that's honey!" I said, " 'is?" He said, "Yeah, that's honey." And so we went on up to the head of that holler, and hit* was a big tree <and> cracked open. The bees had swarmed from one swarm and had got in there at the start, then had kept swarming from limb to limb on up the tree till it was just a whole tree of honey. (0:45-1:26)

Ray reports the scene as if he was actually watching the bees moving from a limb to another limb. In a different episode, Ray portrays the lively motions of ducks as well:

> <And he>, tied his britches legs so he could swim better and swimmed* in under there and tied the legs of the ducks together. When he come out amongst them, they was all tangled up, and sich* a-clankin'*[quackin'] you never heared* [[/hɪərd/]]. He was a-standin' there lookin' at'em, gittin'* ready to git'em out, and they'd give out. I seed* something jumpin' in his britches. I said, "Jack, what's in your britches?" He untied his britches and had thirty-five pound of fish. (5:54-6:14)

When Jack catches ducks at once, Ray says they were "a-clankin'* you never heared*." As this is the only part where Ray directly calls listeners "you," the narration emphasizes the voice of the ducks. Moreover, when Ray says, "He [Jack] was a-standin' there lookin' at'em [ducks], gittin'* ready to git'em out, and they'd give out," audiences would imagine the detailed process of capturing the ducks as if they were listening to the live report at the spot. These examples illustrate that "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" tells details so that listeners can virtually enjoy the supernatural adventures like their own experiences in their daily life. Therefore, the story differs from the traditional märchen, which sets the story in a remote world away from everyday reality.

Characterization: Absence of Antagonist

Next, I will examine characters in "Ray and Jack Go Hunting." Märchen normally feature a strong and often evil antagonist. My analysis focuses on the lack of evil in this tale. Here, only Ray, Jack, and animals appear as characters. The protagonists, Jack and Ray, help each other and fight with the animals. Therefore, audiences might easily fall into the misconception that animals fulfill the role of the antagonist.

For example, folklorist Alan Lomax assumes a snake in a story is evil. He comments that conquering the poisonous native snake represents the frontier spirits of white Appalachian people (*Appalachian Journey* [10:43-11:05]). However, this is actually how the snake appears in the story:

> When I opened my can of beans I reatched* over and stuck my knife in a log: just a second after that I looked at Jack, and it looked like the stump was a-carryin' him off. And I says, "Jack, is that stump a-ridin'* you off?" He said, "No, by dad, Ray, hit* haint* a-movin', I don't think." And about that time it come* a saplin'* a-tween* us and I seed'at* I was the one that was a-movin', and be* doggone if I wasn't a settin*' on a big black snake. When I'd stobbed* my knife in what I thought was a log, it hurt it and put it a-crawlin'. (2:04-2:45)

This narration tells a funny story that Ray stabs his knife into a snake mistaking it for a stump. However, the teller does not say that the snake has poison, nor that the animal attacks Ray. Rather, he mentions the pain of the snake by saying "it hurt it and put it a-crawlin." The narrator explains the reasonability of the snake's action. Thus, listeners should not necessarily take the snake as evil.

Some Cherokee myths share a similar way of depicting snakes. For instance, two Cherokee stories called "Getting Fire" (Duncan 53-54) and "How the Spider Captured Fire" (Galloway 64-5) have "a big black snake," but the serpent has no poison. Another Cherokee tale, "Uktena" (Arneach 117-22) says that a snake-god called Uktena has poison, but that it also brings medicine to cure any kind of disease. Ray Hicks liked visiting his Cherokee

neighbors to listen to their stories (Smith 4-5), and he was proud of his ecological knowledge of animals and plants as a heritage of his Cherokee great-grandmother (Cozzo 286). Both Cherokee tales and "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" avoid representing the snake as merely an evil figure. The other animals in Ray's tale (i.e., bees, deer, turkeys, bears, ducks, and fish) also do not appear as the powerful evil, but just life trying hard to survive. For example, the bear has three cubs, and the teller mentions the mother bear's action to go back to her children (4:45-5:33). Therefore, listeners can say that "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" lacks strong antagonists, which differs from the märchen tradition.

Structure: Partial Transformation of the Hero and Flexible Sequence

In märchen, the transformation of the protagonist, from his lack to satisfaction, makes the center of the plot. Therefore, it is useful to examine how the heroes, Ray and Jack, change through the story.

In terms of the transformation, I have already discussed the absence of the protagonists' initial lack of needs at the story's beginning. Here is the tale's last part:

> He [Jack] loaded them up and took'em on in. <So> I went back down there and eat with him a-while, eatin' up that meat. And about five year a'ter* that we took another little hunt. Got in the woods and was hungry, and there was a peach tree I seed up in the woods, and I said, "Jack, yonder's a peach tree." (omit) (7:11-7:37)

This last part of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" tells that Ray and Jack eat up all the hunts, and they go hunting again about five years later. Protagonists of märchen usually have the imperishable satisfaction by getting a fortune or a wife, which suggests the end of the adventure. On the contrary, in this tale, the satisfaction of Ray and Jack is comparatively short term. Ray continues to go hunting. The tale has a linear change of the hero's situation as he gets the rewards of a number of hunts. However, the story lacks the inherent transformation of the hero from lack to satisfaction.

Moreover, Ray switches the order of each episode for each recording occasion. For instance, the episode of the snake appears

as the third in 1969's recording, but the same scene comes as the last in August 1982's version, and the second from the last in September 1982's version. The narrator also cuts or adds some episodes. This improvisational flexibility makes for tremendous variety in the length of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting," from 8 minutes to 35 minutes. Therefore, rather than the transformation of the hero through the whole story, each small individual comedy would make the center of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting."

From Märchen to Tall Tale

Aarne, Thompson, and Uther's Tale Type Index, which classifies types of folktales in the world, includes some episodes of "Ray and Jack Go Hunting." For example, one of the Aarne and Thompson's story types called "Lucky Shot" (AT 1890) corresponds with Ray catching turkeys at once in "Ray and Jack Go Hunting." Also, the types titled "The Man Carried through the Air" (AT 1881) matches Jack carried away by turkeys. The index's "How the Man Came Out of a Tree Stump" (AT 1900) may contain Ray getting out of a tree, and "A Man Wading in Water Catches Many Fish in His Boots" (AT1895) could count Ray catching fish in his britches in its type. The index has all these tales in its genre of "Jokes and Anecdotes," more specifically "Tales of Lying" or Tall Tales. Hence, this paper re-examines "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" as a Tall Tale.

The Tall Tale is a genre where a teller tells a lie as if it is a real experience (Lindahl, *AFLC* lx). These stories do not avoid the appearance of the narrator as a main character. Also, to make the lie sound more real and funnier, the teller often tells details. And the story sets the real world as the stage as if the narrator actually had the experience (lxii). Tall Tales do not need the transformation of the hero, the antagonist, or the fixed order of episodes, as long as each joke effectively works. These characteristics of Tall Tales demonstrate that "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" has more features in common with Tall Tales than European märchen traditions.

Also, the Tall Tale is a genre which has more variants in America than in England. And tall tales come not only from European descendants, but also from other ethnic groups (lxiv). For instances, *Negro Workaday Songs*, a collection of African

American workaday songs, has a variant of the episode where Ray and Jack find honey and flitter (Odum 239). The scene where Ray catches turkeys with one bullet has variants in *Negro Folktales in Michigan* (Dorson 177) and in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (Hurston 145).

Additionally, folklorist and English professor Lynn Moss Sanders explains that most white tall-tellers' stories are "brief, comic, and told as the truth," while many African American tall-tellers continue to pile up the lies at greater length, even though listeners know the story is a lie (85). Similar to African American Tall Tales, rather than the whites' short comic Tall Tales, Ray sets that the story is an obvious lie at first, because Ray goes out with Jack, an imaginary character. Ray continues to tell more than 10 episodes of lies, pretending to be real stories. "Ray and Jack Go Hunting" has a structure of African American Tall Tales rather than European märchen.

My further study will examine the possibility that Jack Tales, which folklorists consider as part of white Appalachian heritage, may have connections with other ethnic groups.

Photo: Ray & Rosa Hicks, Summer 1982, Watauga County, NC [cover image for NC Folklore Journal *31.1 (Spring-Summer 1983)]. Photo: Barbara McDermitt.*

Abbreviations

AFLC: *American Folktales from the Collections of the Library of Congress*

[BM] =Thomas G. Burton-Ambrose N. Manning Collection, The Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

[WE] =W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Belk Library, Appalachian State University.

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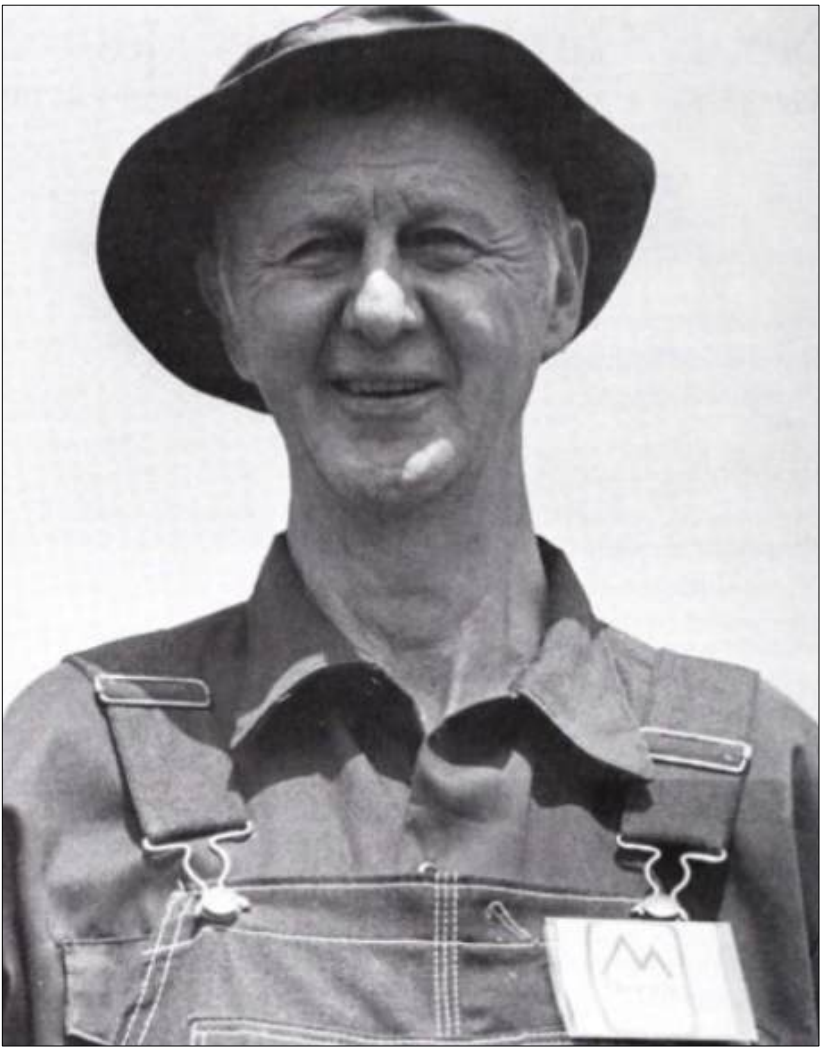

Photo: Ray Hicks [in NC Folklore Journal *38.2 (Summer-Fall 1991)]. Photo: Jon Wilmesherr.*

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Two New Letters from the Original Fool Killer, A North Carolina Invention

Bart Ganzert

Abstract

The Fool-Killer is a legendary character created by Charles Napoleon Bonaparte (CNB) Evans, editor of the Milton, North Carolina, Chronicle in the 1840s. His "Letters from the Fool-Killer" were published for over 40 years and gained such recognition that the character became commonly referenced and famed throughout the middle South. In the 20th century, the concept and character of the Fool-Killer retained its appeal to spawn multiple likenesses of the original character bearing the name. This article brings to light two unknown Fool-Killer letters from its creator, CNB Evans.

A notable character in American folklore that owes its origin to a North Carolina newspaper man is The Fool-Killer, also known by the name Jesse Holmes. He was the creation of Charles Napoleon Bonaparte Evans, the editor of the *Milton Chronicle* in Milton, NC. Evans featured this character in an ongoing series of letters presented in a column called "A Letter from the Fool-Killer." These letters were signed with the name, Jesse Holmes, and discussed the latest travels of the character as he sought out and mauled or clubbed people doing silly things, violating moral sensibilities, or exhibiting brash vanity.

Despite the violent outcomes, the columns were written in a humorous tone, driving home the point of the foolishness of Jesse Holmes' targets. Evans ran his Fool-Killer column for about 40

Frame photo: Fool Killer woodcut used in newspapers. Photo: NC Folklore *8.2 (Dec. 1960): 23. https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p16062coll43/id/462*

years, suspending it occasionally due to disruptions with the paper, most notably during the Civil War, and for some time afterwards. During that time, the character gained immense popularity through North Carolina and the surrounding region. It became a common reference for anything or anyone that was deemed foolish or stupid. References appeared in various newspapers pleading, "Better call Jesse Holmes," or "A job for the Fool-Killer." (See *Wilmington Daily Herald*, March 12, 1856, p. 2; *The Greensboro Times*, June 25, 1857, p. 3, etc. as examples.) Some known references to the Fool-Killer at the time come from as far north as West Virginia and as far south as Mississippi.

That Evans was the literary originator of the specific references to the Fool-Killer is not argued. Ernest Leisy in a 1930 *Texas Folklore Society* compilation cites a period eyewitness saying Evans was the source (153). Period papers link the editor and his paper directly to his creation. The *American Advocate* in Kinston declared in a September 1858 edition, "A way down about Milton, NC, a certain individual, yclept Jesse Holmes, has constituted himself a vigilance committee of one" (p. 2). A column in a January 1862 *Fayetteville Semi-Weekly Observer* edition writes:

> A well known character, long known as 'Jesse Holmes, the Fool-Killer,' announces through the *Milton Chronicle* this morning:
>
> > From there I go to Columbus county to look after Judge Asa Bigg's man Friday, who I hear has "grown so great" by virtue of a small appointment, that whenever he swears a name to his tax list, he imagines himself the whole State of North Carolina, and administers a Test Oath of his own making at the same time (p.3).

After Evans' death in 1883, the references continued to the turn of the century, but it appears that the actual source of the references had faded from memory. George Ade, an Indiana author, featured the character in an 1899 book, *Fables in Slang*. However, it was O. Henry's (William Sydney Porter's) depiction of the Fool-Killer in his 1908 collection, *The Voice of the City*, that propelled the popularity of the character through the first half of the 20th century (Stokes, "Five Letters," 305). Porter was well familiar with Evans and his invention, as he was Evans' cousin.

A current *Google* search of "Fool Killer" brings up over 30 million hits, identifying a range of references to the character, such as the Marvel Comics' *Fool Killer* series, the 1954 Helen Eustis novel and its 1965 movie adaptation, O. Henry and his short story, the name on a sunken submarine, the Stephen Vincent Benet short story, and even the originator of the legend himself—Evans. All of these references bear a link, or at least the breath of inspiration, from Evans and his creation. This character embodies a concept—a judge who weeds out the morally corrupt to the commonly stupid and is able to deal punishment, regardless of the power of the corrupt—that continues to appeal to generations.

The letters of the Fool-Killer bear significance not only because of the endurance of the character over nearly two centuries, but for the historical and cultural aspects the letters bring. The letters reference historical events and contexts of the time. An 1857 letter saw the Fool-Killer "mauling" a slave patrol for causing a community nuisance. These patrols were locally appointed groups with broad powers, of which Evans was no fan. An 1859 letter had the Fool-Killer cornering William Holden, at the time chair of the NC Democratic Party and owner of the *Raleigh Standard*, to "adjourn a worthless Legislature"—Evans' (the editor's) complaint in one of the most heated political times in North Carolina history (Stokes, "Five Letters").

Places named in the letters also have an importance, as many of the neighborhoods and towns no longer exist. The travels of the Fool-Killer focus mostly on areas in Caswell and Person counties in North Carolina; however, frequent mention of places across the state and into Virginia are made. Old neighborhoods that were once the identifying locale of country residents—and have disappeared from modern memory due to consolidation of postal RFD routes and large-scale city annexations—are recorded in these letters.

An additional feature of the letters' popularity was to occasionally identify people who were guilty of foolish deeds. These identifiers could include vague references ("Nearing Ephesus Church a one-armed man, whose track I have been on for some time….") or they may name persons outright. The named most often included political leaders who Evans targeted for

foolishness. However, they might include local residents caught in dimwitted moments.

Whole letters from the Fool-Killer as well as long excerpts have been found in newspapers outside of Evans' own *Milton Chronicle*. At this date, only eleven full letters, including these additional two, have been uncovered. It was usual in the period for newspapers to "pick up" items and use them. Sometimes things could be passed on by the editors of newspapers. It was a kind of informal syndication, and the more an item moved from paper to paper, the more publicity its home paper got. Evans referred to this as "having legs" (Leisy, 153). Other papers where full letters from the Fool-Killer have been found at this time include *The Oxford Torch-Light*, *The Rowan Whig and Advocate*, and *Southern Home*. The papers that make reference to the Fool-Killer or have printed excerpts of letters are too numerous to name.

The letters discovered are both from the weekly publication, *Southern Home,* first published in 1870 by D.H. Hill in Charlotte, NC. It is not known if there was a connection between the publications aside from professional familiarity, since the *Southern Home* carried several of Evans' letters. Each letter is attributed to the *Milton Chronicle* and ends with Evans' signature close, "Yours Foolishly." These letters appeared in 1879 and were late products of Evans' forty-year run with the Fool-Killer.

Southern Home.
Charlotte, N.C., Friday, March 28, 1879.

LETTER FROM THE FOOL KILLER.

_____

Milton Chronicle.

Editor: The old man is almost ready to throw down his club in despair and [fleeing] to his sequestered cave hide his face from mankind. There is so much to disgust—so much to shock—and so much to despise and loathe, that I would to God I had never been born, for this life is one sea of perpetual trouble. In vain do I maul the day lights out of fools, and in vain do I slather (1) rascals and villains in high places and low, for it seems impossible to thin

out the crop of the one or the other. But editor, I've only time to write you a laconic letter, in which I propose to recount a few of my death dealing maulings:

Near Longs' X Roads (2) I met a very handsome young lady mounted on a black charger with a ganky (3), lazy-looking young chap seated on the horse's bare back behind her, and thinking there was something wrong I elevated my death-dealing club and brought the party to a halt. Upon interrogating the young lady I learned that the chap had pitched in to make a crop for her mother on shares, but tiring of work, he had "laid down the shovel and hoe" and gone off sparking to parts unknown—that she had been out to hunt for him, and hearing he was at a cabin four miles off, thither she went, and when within half a mile of the cabin she dismounted, and hitching her horse near the road, she approached the cabin where she found the lark (4) whiling away time, and that she was taking him back to put him to work. Says I, he has the appearance of a lark who doesn't like work a bit, and my young Miss, if you depend on that chap making your bread this year, I fear you'll starve—but, however, I'll give him a turn on the organ and see if I can't cure him of "running about." And lifting him off the horse I dealt him a few jodarters (5) that made the spalpeen (6) howl, and then I shook my club at the young lady and let her pass, as her ma'ma knew she was out.

Shouldering my club and wending my way to Col Cunningham's Store (7), for the purpose of refreshing the inner man with something good to eat and getting the Colonel's views on matters political, I spied a small crowd of both sexes in the front yard of a good brother of the church, and it being Sunday I made sure it was the occasion of a prayer meeting and halted to attend service, and walking in, lo! and behold!! the young folks were playing at a game called "frog in the middle!" When they found out who I was the girls screamed and the boys ran and hid, but it was no go! for I mauled the whole party until they agreed to go to Sunday school. The lark that rode a yellow horse caught "pertikler" fits.

I mauled the goose grease out of a lovesick lark near Concord meeting house (8) who had been kicked and rekicked by a young lady but who wouldn't stay kicked. This time he demanded the

lady's reasons for not marrying him, and she told him candidly she didn't love him.

He ordered his horse to leave, a little after dinner, but he held on until 9 o'clock in the night. At the supper table he lost his appetite and laying down the knife and fork and burying his face in his hands he boo-hooed right out. The old folks wanted to know what was the matter, and my hero said he was heart-broken, that Miss ---- had discarded him. About this time, I took him a jodarter that landed him on the other side of Jordan, where all discarded lovers go.

At Yarborough's mill (9), I lifted a big, fat man who put a mule in the mill pond to cure it of fever and came near to getting the brute drowned. It took the whole neighborhood to pull the mule out.

Farther on the Yanceyville road, I mauled a planter who was trying to fatten his mules on sugar—he issued rations of sugar to the head man of the farm (white) for the mules and finding that they got poorer he telegraphed for me to investigate the matter; I did so and found that the white man eat up the sugar and gave the paper wrappings to the mules!

But I must close. More anon, and believe me yours foolishly,

JESSE HOLMES, The Fool Killer.

* * *

From *The Southern Home*
Friday, June 6, 1879

Letter from Jesse Holmes, the Fool Killer.

Editor.—Wearied and worn, weatherbeaten and despondent, I cast my carcass on the earth's green carpet to make you a running report of my proceedings. I was thinking, Editor, a moment ago how very different parents now-a-days raise their children from the old-time fashion when you and I were boys. The modern urchin jumps into calf-skin knee-deep and is ready to go courting about the time the nurse drops him to paddle his own canoe, and woe unto old folks if they stand in his way, for he thinks it smart to run over them. You meet these trundle bed children at a post

office, for instance, after a mail has just been opened and where they have congregated to await the opening of the post office door, and if you are an old man you will be run over if you do not stand off until they have been first waited on by the postmaster. At Church, upon the dismissal of the congregation, they rush out as if the cry of fire had been sounded, not caring whether they run over old folks or little girls. And in view of this ill-breeding or woeful want of good breeding that characterizes the boy of the period, I suggest a school to teach boys the rudiments of ordinary politeness, in every township.

After my last report, I shouldered my death-dealing maul, and wending my way towards Flat River (10), I overheard a quarrel between two young ladies about a long-legged chap living just over the creek: It seems that he was flying around and both claimed him for a beau; one of the ladies was a school-mistress who boarded at the other's house, and the mother of the latter to stop the fuss proposed to send her girl off until the school ended, but she wouldn't go, for fear of her rival getting the inside track on her. I told the girls there was no use in wrangling over the matter when there are so many men just as good looking and clever wanting to marry, and shaking my club at them, I admonished them to beware.

Changing my course toward Concord meeting house (11), I espied a party of youngsters pulling a buggy over a highway, and halting them I learned that one of the larks wanted to take a young lady to church the next Sunday, and they were carrying the vehicle to a blacksmith five miles off to have it fixed. The lark was acting "boss" (or is it "hoss"?) while half a dozen boys had been employed to shove up the hills on condition that he would ride them down hill. Collaring the "boss" I made him dance Juba. (12)

Nearing Ephesus Church (13) a one-armed man, whose track I have been on for some time, butted his brains out against my club. It seems his girl was visiting a family he had no acquaintance with, and he nearly wore himself out riding up and down the road so as to show off. I made the goose grease fly.

Shooting over into Caswell I descried two very clever men from near Lea's mill on Countryline (14), with coats off, wrestling in the big road, while their unhitched horse and buggy stood still in the road. I clamped them and demanded an

explanation. They said they had started to town together in a buggy and while going along had disputed as to which was the best man, and had stopped merely to test their manhood. Says I, you are two clever fellows and both pretty stout, but your Uncle Jesse can clean you both, and at that, I walked into them to the tune of "Get Up and Git."

I caught an old [man] and a young man with their breeches rolled up above their knees trying to wade across Countryline sooner than go out of the way to cross at Yarborough's mill. It was pretty cold, but they waded in, and soon the old chap got mired, and falling down, he went under the water and rolled over; the young man in rushing to the rescue of the old chap also fell down, and both came out as muddy as pond turtles. But I mauled the mud off them.

Between Leasburg and Yanceyville I met an old unmarried [man] leading a horse ashore attached to a buggy in which were seated two ladies. I asked an explanation and the man said he had hitched the horse, but he wouldn't pull unless he was led, and that he was taking the ladies home from a visit. I ran an eye over the harness and perceiving the hames were put on upside down, I mauled the old [man] beyond kingdom-come.

In Greensboro, I slathered a youngster who runs a family grocery and who bought up all the chickens for ten miles around to send to New York to speculate on, but they sold for less than he paid for them. As I owed this youngster a good one, I everlastingly split him from chin to shin.

Near Brandon's mill I descried a man in the field plowing on a very cold day with his only child—a babe fastened to the plow handles, riding it up and down the rows. He was so proud of it that he had to take it with him in the field, and while I like to see men fond of little children (it is a good sign, Editor,) I shook my club at him and made him take it home out of the cold.

A young man in your town (15) who had on about half a gallon of corn juice, took a ham of meat to his girl's house after 2 o'clock at night and had it cooked and delivered to him in the Milton bridge, where I caught him and mauled benzine enough out of him to float a canal boat.

I also mauled the goose grease out of a young man whom I caught boat riding on the waters of Countryline on the Sabbath day.

I caught a lark in Danville selling his dead wife's gold-plated teeth to invest in the purchase of a suit of clothes to get married in, and reminding him of the dying request of his poor wife that her teeth should be buried with her, I mauled him from Halifax to Boston (16), (though he does not reside in that township.)

JESSE HOLMES, the Fool Killer.

--*Milton Chronicle*

Notes

1. Variation of slaughter
2. Current Day Roseville in Person County, NC
3. Sloppy or disgusting
4. Carefree person
5. Punches
6. Scamp or rascal
7. Neighborhood in Northwest Person County, NC, named for John Cunningham, state senator and legislator
8. Between present-day Williamsville and Olive Hill in Person County, NC
9. Near Blanch in Caswell County, NC
10. In Southern Person County, NC
11. Near present Milesville in Caswell County, NC
12. A dance of Southern plantation blacks accompanied by complexly rhythmic hand clapping and slapping of the knees and thighs (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
13. In Northwest Person County, NC, on the Virginia state line
14. Country Line Creek in Caswell County, NC
15. Milton, NC
16. Probably a reference to South Boston, VA, in Halifax County, VA

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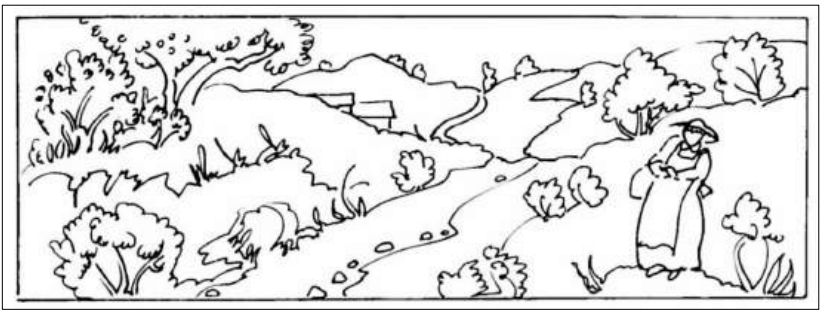

What We Sing About When We Sing About "Tom Dooley": Murder Ballads and the Performance of Trauma

Madison Helman

I want to talk
about what happened
without mentioning
how much it hurt.

There has to be a way.

To care for the wounds
without re-opening them.
To name the pain
without inviting it back into me.

"If There's a Way Out, I'll Take It," Lora Mathis (1)

After ten years, I reconnect with an old friend. As is so often the case, I end up trying to explain my research. I'm lucky this time—he's recently finished a stint in graduate school, studying music composition. When I say murder ballads, he says "Tom Dooley," and so the more cumbersome work of explaining a technical generic history is blessedly absent. Instead, I talk about the intersections of trauma and tragedy, communal mourning and memory, the push-pull of remembering and forgetting.

Frame photo: Illustration by Norma Farthing Murphy that appeared with the 1990 Brown-Hudson Award citation for Anne Warner (who documented "Tom Dooley" from Frank Proffitt in 1938). NC Folklore Journal *37.2 (Summer-Fall 1990).*

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He responds cordially, making all the right noises of affirmation and understanding. He asks where I got the idea to look at these songs in these ways. I want to tell the truth. *After we lost touch, bad things happened to me. And then bad things kept happening.* I want to tell that truth, but I don't. Instead, I tell a different truth, sanitized and intellectual.

When we write about folk ballads, we often divide them into three processes: history, divergence, and reification. We could—and I briefly will—talk about the divergence of factual history from performance history, how the repetition of a certain story can change communal memory. We can talk about a song becoming its own entity, outside of its community. But perhaps we don't talk enough about the performance of trauma, over and over again, with each reprisal of the song. Because Tom Dula murdered Laura Foster over a hundred years ago, we assert, perhaps unknowingly, an understandable disconnect between her life/death and our own. Dula and Foster are often reduced to characters caught up in our fictionalized mythology of them. Yet, we're still pulled to the song, and the story behind it.

The core of that story is eerily timeless: a girl falls for the wrong man and ends up dead. We could take the time to list dozens of stories that begin and end the same way Laura's tale does. Statistically, we probably know at least one victim personally. Many of us might have almost become one ourselves. There is one absolute fact: if we're singing about Laura Foster, then we aren't Laura Foster, because outside of fairy tales and ghost stories, corpses keep quiet. If we're singing about Laura Foster, then we've survived becoming her. If we're performing "Tom Dooley" or writing about it, we're alive—at least for the time being. For many women, though, I think we're singing about what happened *and* what could have happened. Inherent in the fascination with the story of Laura Foster and Tom Dula is the fear that instead of being alive to recount Laura's murder, we might have joined her in a shallow grave.

That performance of trauma—how it impacts communities, individuals, and wider narratives—is primarily what I hope to write about in this article. To further explore the conceptualizations of "Tom Dooley" as a way to perform and process trauma, I intend to use Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed*

Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, and Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. Both monographs discuss, through different means, what it means to live after trauma, and how the Western world has endeavored to reflect these coping strategies. Additionally, I lean heavily on John Foster West's transcriptions of the court documents as transcribed in *Lift Up Your Head, Tom Dooley* (2), though he and I come to different conclusions about Laura's death, and Dula's guilt. I take as my primary supposition for this essay Caruth's idea that trauma is not the actual event itself, but rather, the repetition of it (3). Thomas Dula's murder of Laura Foster occurred once, but the repetition the narrative surrounding her death acts, I believe, as invocation and ward (4), spell and catharsis.

A slight detour to discuss my use of the word "ward." The term "ward" has widely fallen out of use from its original meaning, which is derived from the Old English *weard* or Middle German *warde*. As a noun, it was often used to describe the function of a sentinel, to "keep ward," linking it to the contemporary *warden*. As a verb, it means to stand watch over or protect, and it has similar origins to the term *beware* (5). In many spiritual traditions, warding is a protective magic used to prevent harm or damage. Think, a salt circle in wiccan traditions, the evil eye in Mediterranean traditions, or gargoyles in medieval Europe. While exact rituals vary by culture and individual practice, some throughlines exist—among them is the recitation of a repeated and repeatable phrase or grouping of phrases, be that scripture or something more akin to a spell. In my use of ward, I am less interested in the physical objects (the circle, the blue blown glass eye, the carved grotesque) than I am the consecration of them through language, and the repetition of those words in times of perceived danger.

A Bit of Background

If we're going to talk about murder ballads, "Tom Dooley" (6) is an easy place to start. One of the more popular and well-known murder ballads in the folk music catalogue, the story of Thomas Dula's murder of Laura Foster has been sung in packed concert halls, elementary school assemblies, and everywhere in between. Though reasonable minds may differ, most scholars agree that the

poet Thomas C. Land penned the first version of what would later become "Tom Dooley." Alan Lomax, patron saint of folk recordings, recorded Frank Proffitt playing the ballad in the form most of us know it today (7). Lomax credited Proffitt as "the original source" of the song, wrongly implying that it was written by Proffitt, rather than Proffitt acting as a performer of a longer tradition that he preserved. In reality, Proffitt had learned the song from his aunt, who had learned it from her mother, who knew both Foster and Dula. (8) In 1958, The Kingston Trio's recording for Capitol Records achieved massive commercial success, reaching number one on the Billboard Hot Singles chart, and selling over six million copies (9).

With this commercial success, The Kingston Trio's version of "Tom Dooley" became the national, rather than regional, narrative surrounding Laura Foster's death. As with many folk processes, the details of the actual event become increasingly blurry as they leave their originating community. Further complicating this, the majority of the information we have comes from extant court records, including witness testimonies and affidavits. While the court may have found Dula guilty, many in the town had differing opinions, as people often do. As time went on, these opinions melded with facts in a way that makes determining what actually happened a bit dodgy. Currently, it seems there are as many opinions about Foster's death as people you ask: Ann Melton, Dula's lover, actually committed the murder; Dula acted alone; Pauline Foster was the mastermind behind the whole event; Melton and Dula committed the murder together. It goes on.

In an effort to streamline the history as much as possible, here's my summary, which I don't claim to be free from bias or bluster. Tom went off to war, and Ann, believing him dead, married James Melton. But Tom wasn't dead, and he returned to town, apparently irresistible to women. He took Laura Foster as a lover, and seemingly intended to marry her, while keeping Ann as a lover on the side. Or perhaps, if we were to ask Ann, those roles were reversed: Ann was his true love, and Laura was a convenient wife, a side piece with a promise ring. We'll never know, for sure. At the trial, there's some hubbub about venereal diseases—James got one from Ann who got it from Tom who got

it from Laura—but that order of operations always seemed off, and I have a suspicion that Tom was in more than two beds. Regardless, Tom got Laura pregnant. She took her father's mare, a bundle of clothes, and rode off to meet Tom. We assume, and she does, too, to be wed and live happily ever after. Tom, or some people argue Ann, stabs Laura in the chest, inflicting "one mortal wound, the breadth of 1" and the depth of 6"" (10). Laura died, we all hope quickly, and Tom, or again, maybe Ann, drug her body "more than one half mile" (11) away and dumped her in a shallow grave, along with her clothes. Ann couldn't keep her mouth shut, and showed the grave to her cousin, Pauline, threatening her with a phrase I think of often with wide-eyed horror: "If you tell anyone, I'll kill you and follow you to hell." Pauline told. Months later, searchers discover Laura's body and the knife, and everyone and their brother believed Tom to be the murderer. Or maybe Ann. In true scoundrel form, Tom fled Wilkes, running to Tennessee. His boss, Grayson, who becomes a bit of a folk hero in his own right, turned him in to the authorities. Tom and Ann argued that they wouldn't receive a fair trial in Wilkes, and the case was moved to Iredell County. Both claim innocence. A trial of his peers finds Tom guilty. He absolved Ann of any guilt or involvement in the crime, though his written statement that he was "the only person that had any hand in the murder of Laura Foster," (12) led some to believe that Ann is the true killer, and that Tom, ever a chivalrous Southern gentleman, thought it obscene for a woman to hang, and thus protected her with his own life. For my part, I think a good man doesn't run around dumping girls in shallow graves, regardless of whether or not he stabbed them to death.

The lyrical structure of The Kingston Trio's version (see appendix A) alternates between chorus ("Hang down your head Tom Dooley/Hang down your head and cry/hang down your head Tom Dooley/Poor boy, you're bound to die") and verse. The verses are narrative in structure, outlining Dula's crime, capture, and eventual death. Crucially, the verses are written, and therefore sung, in Dula's voice, while the chorus takes on the voice of a third party. While the song has never been, to my knowledge, performed as a call and response, the lyrical structure suggests a shift between condemned and condemner. Unlike

other murder ballads that appropriate the voice of the murderer (i.e., "Poor Ellen Smith"), the speaker in Dula's verses does not attempt to garner sympathy. Dula's crimes are clearly described: "I met her on the mountain/There I took her life/Met her on the mountain/Stabbed her with my knife"—and he seems to accept both his guilt and punishment: "This time tomorrow/Reckon where I'll be/Down in some lonesome valley/Hangin' from a white oak tree." The structure of the ballad—chorus, verse, chorus, verse, chorus (x2), verse, chorus (x2), allows the condemner to frame the song, and therefore the story. Even if Dula is a "poor boy"—an adjective that can either convey sympathy or suggest poverty—he's still bound to die, and within the story of the song, deserves that fate for his murder of Laura Foster.

In this way, I believe, the narrative structure of "Tom Dooley," particularly the chorus, serves as a spell, a ward. Singers are able to condemn Dooley, repeating his crimes, decrying his violation of Laura Foster's body *and* her trust. Caruth notes that trauma creates a double wound, "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between *a crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (13). If we are singing about Laura Foster, we have survived becoming her. We may have been led to the proverbial mountaintop by someone who wished us harm, offered "Money and other fine things," only to realize the danger of the moment in a white-hot rush of fear. We may have escaped with the first wound, but we escaped.

The second wound, Caruth suggests, comes from the moment of realization that the first wound was inflicted: "so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (14). According to Caruth, the trauma, therefore, is not the event itself, not the first wound, not survival, but rather living after the event. We live through what we live through, and it is only after the danger has passed that we are able to recognize its impact; it is only through recognizing the second wound that we are able to begin processing the first.

And so, story—either one we tell ourselves, quietly, or one we share with someone else. The nature of trauma is that it eludes a standard narrative structure, "the 'unsharability' of pain results from its resistance to language" (15). In Laura Foster's story, and Dula's condemnation, we find a kind of catharsis within the performance of the trauma, a way to speak of Caruth's double wound. Singing "Tom Dooley" allows the performer to tell a story that is not quite our own, but perhaps mirrors it. Additionally, the long tradition of murder ballads being performed in a group setting—either in front of an audience or in small, intimate settings—creates community. In singing and listening to the ballad, we find a way to share "unshareable" pain. Perhaps more importantly, once shared, once *performed*, that pain can be resolved with the final notes of the song.

We should not overlook that this process is the result of a girl's murder. A *real* girl, who was *really* murdered, although we often think of her as a mythologized version of herself, born into and killed in a world that feels very far away from our own. Although Laura has no action in the song, her dead body functions as its genesis. Bronfen asserts that death and femininity are "culturally positioned as the two central enigmas of western discourse," and that those two enigmas "are condensed at the site of the feminine corpse, this figure serves as a superlative instance of proof for the existence of truth as well as for specific interpretation" (16). The image of a dead girl, therefore, simultaneously haunts and illuminates, demanding a particular truth, while preventing its expression. Laura Foster's body, "in so decomposed a position, [that it could not be ascertained] whether it [the knife] had cut the heart or not" (17) is as much a central part of the song, the story, the *truth,* as a living Laura, or a condemned Dula. Its discovery both cements a truth—Laura Foster is dead—and begins the quest for other truths: who killed her? Laura's corpse serves as the meeting place for truth, tragedy, and trauma—in short, discovery of the second wound. Laura's body is a place of knowing and unknowing. Bronfen further argues that death and the feminine "are used to represent that which is inexpressible, inscrutable, unmanageable, horrible; that which cannot be faced directly but must be controlled by virtue of social laws and art" (18). Foster's death is a story that must and cannot be told; it must be

remembered, and it must be forgotten. These actions cannot manifest divorced from one another—instead, they must happen in tandem, in the moment of the song. Like pain, story is often unshareable, existing only in liminality, happening in the past only when invoked in the present.

The Women

In both the Kingston Trio version of "Tom Dooley" (see Appendix A) and the traditional version, best known for its cover by Doc Watson (see Appendix B), Laura Foster lacks any direct agency. The lyrics tell a story about what was done *to* her, only obliquely noting the things she did (met him on the mountaintop, wore her finest gown). In the world of the song, there are ostensibly only three characters—Dula, Foster, and Grayson. In the world around the song, Ann Melton occasionally creeps in, and rarely fares well. Ann tends to be condemned either as a loose woman at best, or a murderer at worst. Seemingly, we have two modes of femininity at play within "Tom Dooley"—the innocent dead girl, Laura, or the evil woman complicit in her death. Bronfen notes that representations of feminine death in literature teach us two things: "For one, that woman's vulnerability in love is fatal, for another, that a woman transgressing norms will be punished" (19). In the lore surrounding "Tom Dooley," we see both aspects in both Laura and Ann. Laura, a vulnerable and naïve Madonna-to-be, receives a fatal wound and a shallow grave; Ann, transgressing the norms of polite womanhood, is defamed as Whore. If we take as truth the supposition that Ann did not kill Laura, and was instead caught in the vulnerability of love and betrayed by Dula, then she lacks as much agency as Laura, even if she managed to stay alive. Factual evidence of what happened to Ann Melton after she was exonerated for Laura's death is scattered, at best. While official records seem to lack detail, many suggest that she either went insane or died young (20). Even if Ann lived longer than Laura, her dalliance with Tom Dula seems to have cost her her life.

Polly Stewart's "Wishful, Willful, Wiley Women: Lessons for Female Success in the Child Ballads" (21) analyzes female action and success within orally transmitted Child Ballads. Stewart settles on about "three dozen or so" ballads that fulfill her criteria,

noting that the ones she examines are often "representative of the whole" in that they place women in antagonistic situations, wherein the women have "something to protect or something to gain" (22). Within the article, Stewart defines success in two ways: 1) cultural success, or marriage and childbearing, and 2) personal success, or "averting harm—death, rape, abandonment" (23). Stewart divides the categorization of the ballads thusly:

> Personal failure + cultural failure: "doomed women, who end up dead or damned, whether through someone else's actions or their own" (24). As such, the women are unable to achieve cultural success.
>
> Personal failure + cultural success: women are often raped and/or need to be rescued, but end up culturally successful, usually marrying either their rapists, or their rescuers.
>
> Personal success + cultural failure: a woman achieves what she desires, but fails at the "marriage-and-propagation mandate for cultural success" (25)
>
> Personal success + cultural success: women achieve their personal goals—generally, obtaining their intended partner—and the cultural standard of marriage and childbirth. Women in this category generally appropriate "the masculine decision-making prerogative" or succeed by relying on their wit (26).

Stewart's framework easily applies to "Tom Dooley." In pursuing cultural success, Laura falls victim to personal failure; Ann, though having achieved cultural success with her marriage to John Melton, succumbs to both personal and cultural failure by straying outside her marriage *and* failing to obtain the object of her desire, Dula. Furthermore, the very notion that Ann has desires outside of her prescribed lot in life *at all* doom her.

But there is a third, often overlooked woman within the "fatal triangle" of Dula, Laura, and Ann—Pauline Foster. Much of what we know of Pauline Foster is thanks to the meticulous work of Stephen Foster West. An attempt to piece together a somewhat coherent history of the scholarship on "Tom Dooley" would be incomplete without John Foster West's *Lift Up Your Head, Tom Dooley*. West, a fellow North Carolina native, was a renowned

creative writing professor at Appalachian State University and published two books on "Tom Dooley." West considered *Lift Up Your Head, Tom Dooley* as a revision of his previous book on the subject, *The Ballad of Tom Dula*. West's book stands as one of the most complete and thorough analyses of the Dula mythos. *Lift Up Your Head* is almost cleanly divisible into two sections. In the first, West offers his interpretation of the murder, Dula's involvement, possible motives, and final conclusion. The second is a painstaking transcription of the bulk of the court documents, including testimonies and witness statements. Much of the first half of West's book takes time to explain the economic and social hardships all three in the "fatal triangle" (Dula, Ann, and Laura) endured, and his personal conclusion:

> that Thomas C. Dula was illegally arrested, illegally transported from Tennessee to North Carolina, and unconstitutionally incarcerated in Wilkesboro jail before the body of Laura Foster was finally discovered, and that his trials and the verdicts of the two judges were blatantly unjust. However cruel and demoralized Tom Dula might have been, however distasteful his lifestyle, whether or not he actually murdered Laura Foster or conspired in her murder, he should have never been arrested as he was, found guilty, and executed. So as far as *legal* guilt and justice are concerned, Tom Dula can lift up his head (27).

West's assessment of Pauline is shakier than mine. While I assert that she's the hero—if there is one, or, perhaps more importantly, if there even needs to be one—of this grisly piece, West at best disregards her, and at worst posits Pauline's own involvement in Laura's death (28).

Pauline's position within the story of Laura Foster's death is a bit complicated. Though she shared a surname with Laura, she's actually more closely related to Ann, though there is a familial link to Laura as well. Pauline came to work in Wilkes from Watauga County, and some scholars, West among them, state that she came to town to seek treatment for syphilis (29). Though West suggests that Pauline might have taken part in the murder, little evidence exists to support that theory. Instead, Pauline seems to act as a witness to almost all elements of the story of Laura's death: she testifies that she saw Ann and Tom cavorting while Tom was

involved with Laura, that both Tom and Ann asked her for blue stone, blue mass and caustic to treat syphilis, that she overheard whispered conversation that Laura would no longer be an issue, and finally, that Ann showed her the location of Laura's grave. According to court documentation, it was Pauline's knowledge of Laura's shallow grave that led to her body's discovery.

Not much is known about Pauline's life after Tom's conviction and execution. As myth overtook history, she was lost in the shuffle. Yet, we know Pauline managed to step outside of the prescribed categorization of women in the Child Ballads. Unlike Laura, she lived; unlike Ann, she seemed to slip into obscurity, rather than infamy. Because so little is known about her whereabouts after the murder, we cannot say for sure that she achieved personal or cultural success within Stewart's framework. Instead, Pauline seemed to create a new cultural success—she helped ensure justice for Laura. Stewart—rightly—argues that murder ballads teach a particular lesson:

> that a man will take from a woman what he can and will punish her for being his victim; that a woman's needs are not a primary consideration either for her family or for men outside her family; that, for a woman, stepping outside the house is a dangerous act; that a woman's resources for protecting her own interests are slim indeed. By horrible example, a woman learns how not to get killed (30).

How much more strongly were these lessons taught to Pauline? Unmarried, her family at least a day's journey away, Pauline was dependent on the money she received from Ann and James. By showing Pauline the location of Laura's body, Ann sought to condemn her as well. Ann endeavored to doom Pauline with fatal knowledge. Ann threatened Pauline, anecdotally screaming that Pauline was "as deep in the mud as I [Ann] am in the mire." Regardless, Pauline told Laura's story. More than showing us how to "not get killed" Pauline shows us how to *stay alive*.

Pauline stands as both outsider and insider. She is involved, heavily, in the peripheries of the story, but because of the liminal space in which she exists, she is not the arbiter of central motion. She is able to express things that Laura, dead, cannot, and Ann, diminished by her moral missteps, is unable to. Pauline's insider/outsider dichotomy mirrors our stance as listeners. We

know the story, we've heard the tale of Tom's deceit, but we didn't witness the murder ourselves. We've seen Laura's body, though, or at least the sunken depression of her grave. Pauline's testimony that allows us to see that, allowed the poem to be written and the song to be performed and recorded and discussed. Pauline, I argue, is the entire reason I'm able to write this. We, listeners, skirt the edges of Laura's death, and though it isn't Ann telling us that she'll "kill us and follow us to hell," we've seen time and again the price of telling *the* truth, heard the threat implicit in telling stories like our own and like Pauline's. Her positionality within the story—reliant on the good grace of James and Ann Melton for money and lodging, make her testimony all the more triumphant. She exists outside of Stewart's categories of feminine success, draws her own outline, and skedaddles.

While Pauline is by no means the only town member that fingers Dula as Laura's murderer, her testimony seems to be the proverbial final straw. West reproduces Pauline's testimony in full, but he offers the following caveats: the reader should be aware that unlike today, where a court reporter would write down every statement verbatim using shorthand, trial records in the nineteenth century, especially in lower courts, were written after the fact, and in longhand (31). Having seen the court records myself at the North Carolina State Archives, I can attest to West's assertion that many of the specific words or turns of phrase are difficult to distinguish based on the state of the documents themselves, in addition to the, at times, harried cursive. West has transcribed the court proceedings as best he can, but certain words had to be guessed at. I agree, wholeheartedly, with his transcriptions.

Pauline's testimony is easily the longest, and most detailed of the trial. While the majority of townsfolk, including Laura's father, Thomas, could supply bits of information, only Pauline was witness to both Dula's courtship of Laura, the living situation within the Melton home, and the aftermath of Laura's disappearance. Because she is an outsider to the town, and an insider within the Melton household, Pauline is allowed access to a discourse community that hitherto only included Ann, Laura (32), and Tom. Pauline testifies that Tom was at the Melton settlement almost every day, and frequently at night. There were

three beds in the room, and Tom would often sleep with Ann (33). Ann fell ill, and began using "blue stone, blue mass, and caustic" (34), remedies often associated with syphilis. In a back and forth between Pauline and Tom, Pauline states that Ann had informed her that Dula had given her "the pock" (35). Later in the testimony, Pauline describes an encounter with Dula, in which he informed her that rather than running off with Laura, he had "no use for Laura Foster" (36). Pauline describes Ann leading her to a disturbed plot of earth, and then months later, after Dula's arrest, of forcing Pauline to look at Laura's corpse: "I saw the dead body. I thought it was the body of Laura Foster. I recognized her teeth and dress" (37).

During Pauline's testimony, we also discover a lot about her character. She was arrested for making a "joke" about her and Dula having killed Laura, which she argued was clearly meant as a joke because it was too ridiculous to be believed, and she was drunk when she said it. Pauline, it seems from the testimony, was often drunk, specifically on liquor, and often around men. She spoke to "colored" men. She had a "bad disease" (probably also syphilis). We should keep in mind that many of these less-than-savory details were discovered during cross examination, and most of us could easily be accused in a court of law of telling bad jokes and drinking liquor with boys. Regardless, Pauline is far from a lily white, impartial observer. Pauline is blatantly, and often painfully, human. When Ann leads her to Laura's grave the first time, she doesn't want to look. Who would?

Beyond wanting to avoid the grisly sight, Ann forcing Pauline to look at Laura's corpse is both a threat and a condemnation. Pauline may have known before that Laura was dead, and Tom killed her. But there is a difference between knowing and *knowing*, the latter full of absolute fact, the pain of Caruth's second wound. "What returns to haunt the victim," Caruth suggests "is not only the reality of the violent event but also the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (38). Upon viewing Laura's corpse, Pauline is condemned with the knowledge of her death, the "violence fully known." Ann damns her with the truth, and implicit within that truth is the threat that if Pauline tells anyone else, she will join Laura in the earth.

Pauline is able to release her trauma, and the truth, during her testimony. While we have no description of her "performing" her trauma in any sort of dramatic fashion—no weeping or gnashing of teeth—she nevertheless is able to speak the truth of what she saw and experienced. Through her testimony, she is able to release her trauma *and* ward against her own destruction. In doing so, she unknowingly offers us a chance to do so as well.

Conclusion

I understand, and to an extent even support, West's assertion that Tom Dula's execution was far from legally justified. In consideration of the legal statutes and standards of today or Dula's time, the machinations by which Dula was arrested and tried are ethically slippery, to say the least. Unlawful arrest, unlawful detainment—Dula's capture and arrest were poorly handled. And who doesn't support a proper trial, justice, and the American way? Again, as always, we run up against the delicate balance of *the* truth versus *a* truth. In the case of Laura Foster's murder, we have to accept that *the* truth died with her. All I, or West, or anyone else, can do is look at the pieces after the fact—*a* truth, and with it the pang of acknowledgement that in singing of Laura's death, we might be opening the second wound, letting the pain back in, performing our own trauma.

Anger, righteous or not, serves its own kind of catharsis. No matter how evolved or empathetic we think of ourselves, we have all conflated revenge with justice when justice wasn't achieved. With Dula's death, we can at least wrap ourselves in the pretense that legal justice was served. And so, when we sing the chorus of "Tom Dooley," condemning Dula to death over and over again, we needn't feel guilty for leaning into revenge. So many horrible people seem to be released on technicalities that victims' relationships with the justice system are understandably fraught. Bill Cosby's conviction is overturned after a bizarre backdoor deal; Brock Turner gets six measly months; Harvey Weinstein drags out his trial until he kicks the bucket (39). Within Caruth's framework, the recognition of the second wound happens on an individual level. We receive the wound, we recognize it, and thereby acknowledge the existence of trauma. Where then, do we fit in the re-traumatization of victims within the framework of

a system that so often fails? To carry on Caruth's analogy, how do we stop the bleeding?

The past event of Laura's death is resurrected with each retelling, each time the ballad is sung, but time has cemented her death and her body in the ground. Bronfen's dual enigma of death and the feminine may converge at the site of the patch of disturbed earth holding Laura's corpse, but the unknowability extends far beyond it, vivified by recitation of the ballad. The song pulls the murder into the present and drags our past right along with it. Like Pauline, though, we can decide what to do with that past. Writing of traumatic global events, Caruth proposes that "the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (40). It is through the recognition of Laura's betrayal and death that we are able to recognize our own trauma. It is through telling her story that we can tell our own, although the two tales, of course, end differently. The ward Laura's story provides is the echoing reality: we lived. Inverting the Biblical, within the confines of "Tom Dooley," flesh becomes word becomes song becomes ward. The repetition of Laura's story, of Pauline's courage, of our own reckoning with both, transforms the ballad into a protective spell, a repeatable magic.

Pauline lets us sing. When we sing "Tom Dooley," we might see Laura Foster as our analog of the dangers of womanhood, of the terror of love gone wrong. But our role in the story, really, is that of Pauline. We lived. We dug our way out of the mud, the mire. We tell. We sing. We survive.

Appendix A

"Tom Dooley"

Recorded by Alan Lomax, Popularized by The Kingston Trio

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die

I met her on the mountain
There I took her life
Met her on the mountain
Stabbed her with my knife

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die

This time tomorrow
Reckon where I'll be
Hadn't-a been for Grayson
I'd-a been in Tennessee (well now, boy)

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die (well now, boy)

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die

This time tomorrow
Reckon where I'll be
Down in some lonesome valley
Hangin' from a white oak tree

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die (well now, boy)

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die
Poor boy, you're bound to die
Poor boy, you're bound to die
(Poor boy, you're bound to die)

Appendix B

"Tom Dooley"

Recorded by Doc Watson

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster,
And you know you're bound to die.

You left her by the roadside
Where you begged to be excused;
You left her by the roadside,
Then you hid her clothes and shoes.

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster,
And you know you're bound to die.

You took her on the hillside
For to make her your wife;
You took her on the hillside,
And there you took her life.

You dug the grave four feet long
And you dug it three feet deep;
You rolled the cold clay over her
And tromped it with your feet.

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster,
And you know you're bound to die.

"Trouble, oh it's trouble
A-rollin' through my breast;
As long as I'm a-livin', boys,
They ain't a-gonna let me rest.

I know they're gonna hang me,
Tomorrow I'll be dead,
Though I never even harmed a hair
On poor little Laurie's head."

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster,
And you know you're bound to die.

"In this world and one more
Then reckon where I'll be;
If it wasn't for Sheriff Grayson,
I'd be in Tennessee.

You can take down my old violin
And play it all you please.
For at this time tomorrow, boys,
It'll be of no use to me."

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster,
And you know you're bound to die.

"At this time tomorrow
Where do you reckon I'll be?
Away down yonder in the holler
Hangin' on a white oak tree.

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster,
And you know you're bound to die.

End Notes

1. Lora Mathis, *Instinct to Ruin* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017)
2. John Foster West, *Lift Up Your Head, Tom Dooley*: *The True Story of the Appalachian Murder That Inspired One of America's Most Popular Ballads* (Asheboro: Down Home Press, 1996)
3. Cathy Carruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996) 6.
4. I'm using "ward" here as a shorthand for apotropaic magic, or the kind that "wards off" negative influences. A "ward" is often thought of as a protective spell or charm that prevents harm.
5. "ward, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford UP, September 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/225622. Accessed 21 November 2021.
6. Dooley is a regional pronunciation of Dula—think, Carolina Opera becoming Carolina Opry.
7. For more on the issues inherent in Lomax and his classification systems, see, Patrick B. Mullen, "The Dilemma of Representation in Folklore Studies: The Case of Henry Truvillion and John Lomax." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 37.2/3 (2000): 155–74. Accessed December 17, 2021 http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814631.
8. Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970.* Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2002.
9. "The Kingston Trio." Billboard, Accessed December 17, 2021, https://www.billboard.com/music/The-Kingston-Trio/chart-history/HSI.
10. Wilkes Criminal Action Papers. 1866. Box 254.31.1. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
11. Ibid.
12. From the signed statement of Thomas C. Dula, cited in West 49.
13. Carruth, 7.
14. Carruth, 4.
15. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992), 46.
16. Bronfen, 255.

17. From the testimony of Dr. George N. Carter, cited in West, 78.
18. Bronfen, 255.
19. Bronfen, 243.
20. Ann's presumed fate mirrors the fate of many "evil" women in literature—insanity or death.
21. Polly Stewart, "Wishful Willful Wily Women: Lessons For Female Success in the Child Ballads." in *Feminst Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radler (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1993), 54-75.
22. Stewart, 55.
23. Stewart, 57.
24. Stewart, 58.
25. Stewart, 63.
26. Stewart, 64.
27. West, 57.
28. West, 17.
29. West also proposes that Pauline was the person who gave syphilis to Dula, who then spread it around to the other women in the story.
30. Stewart, 66.
31. West, 72.
32. Whether Laura was aware that this discourse included Ann is certainly up for debate.
33. It is my understanding that this was meant literally—as in slumbering, rather than euphemistically, as in sex.
34. West, 80.
35. West, 80.
36. West, 80.
37. West, 82.
38. Carruth, 6
39. I am aware that these trials are for assault, rather than murder. However, their relevance to our cultural attitude towards men abusing women, and the justice system's inability to protect victims cannot be overstated.
40. Carruth 17.

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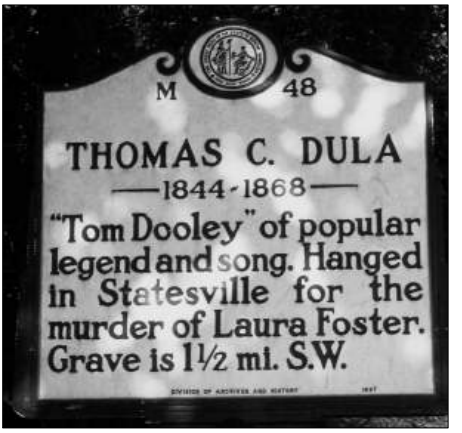

Photo (left): From a photo of the marker at a site reported to be the grave of Laura Foster in a pasture between the Yadkin River and Hwy 268, between Ferguson and Happy Valley, Caldwell County, NC, about six miles from the Dula highway historical marker.

Photo (right): From a photo of the North Carolina Highway Historical Marker located on Hwy 268, Yadkin River Bridge, Ferguson, Wilkes County, NC. The plaque reads, "THOMAS C. DULA 1844-1868 'Tom Dooley' of popular legend and song. Hanged in Statesville for the murder of Laura Foster. Grave is 1 ½ mi. S.W."

Madison Helman is a PhD candidate in Literature and Cultural Studies at West Virginia University. She holds an MA from North Carolina State University, and a BA from Campbell University. Her dissertation focuses on Appalachian murder ballads and what they reveal about community responses to trauma, tragedy, and femininity. Other research interests include Southern folklore, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Eudora Welty.

Asheville Mardi Gras "Turn on Your Love Light" 2021 House Float "Yardi Gras" Parade

Stefanie Mixon Kompathoum (*interviews*) & Paul King (*photographs*)

Eric Blore – Krewe of Bastet – "Temple of Anubis"

Eric is an accomplished costumer and no stranger to decorating his home for others to enjoy. For years, he has produced professional tableau for Halloween in his Hendersonville neighborhood. His connection to Mardi Gras is that love of costume, and he has traveled to Venice for Carnivale. He has attended the Asheville Mardi Gras parades and events for a few years and recently was welcomed into the Krewe of Bastet.

The Temple of Anubis featured three sculptures (Anubis, Bastet, and a set of ancient ruins). Beads and cups were offered as self-serve throws, and visitors lucky enough to be present when Eric was home could be granted beads from Anubis through a socially distant bead delivery system. The whole tableau was lit at night for around-the-clock enjoyment. Eric plans to participate again in the House Float parade, as it brought a fun outlet to add to his creative repertoire.

Jessica Coffield – Krewe De Yahoo Amis – "Fairytale Woodland"

Jessica Coffield marched with Krewe de Yahoo Amis in the 2019 Asheville Mardi Gras parade. Their Krewe theme was "Lucky Charms." Their Krewe included 15 people, some from Louisiana, and mutual friends from Asheville Sister Cities. Their parade entry included a truck and trailer float, banner, and

Frame photo: A house float in Asheville, 2021. Photo: Paul King.

themed costumes. She has connections to prior Royal Courts and to the year-round calendar of events in Asheville that support costume culture and creative expression.

In this year of Covid adjustments, it was hard to gather the group and inspire them. Jessica is very grateful to M Rathsack—the artist who brought the vision of her house float to life—for her positive energy, sharing ideas together, and the joy of the collaborative creative experience. Without M's help, the house float would not have been possible due to the great amount of time involved in creating it.

Jessica's home is located on a main West Asheville road, in a very visible location. She only recently moved to this location, where a neighbor is Melanie Brethauer, a Dead Royal of Asheville Mardi Gras and host of the Street Creature Queen Bee Pollinator house float. There were fliers distributed to their neighborhood about the House Float Parade and 2-3 of the houses on the street participated. She is hoping that this summer her house float experience can serve as an icebreaker with new neighbors and provide a conversation point.

Getting outside the house to decorate was a welcome distraction from the pandemic, and positive responses were received from neighbors, strangers, and even the mail carrier. Because of the location at the edge of the road with no sidewalk, she did not hand out any throws. People stopped in the middle of the road to take pictures and honked their horns in approval. There were no negative responses, and she thoroughly enjoyed the process, fulfilling a creative need. According to Jessica, Asheville embraces the Carnival culture of revelry, celebration, and history. Even so, she believes that during a normal Carnival season there is no way that a house float would happen for her at the level it did this year.

Johanna Finkelstein- Krewe de Deux –
"The Love Fence"

In the Malvern Hills neighborhood, facing the park, there was a shining span of banners, posters, streamers and beads. There was even a chalkboard wall where visitors could leave their own expressions of love. In a previous Asheville Mardi Gras parade, Johanna and a friend marched as the Krewe de Deux—a krewe of

two. They had been attendees of the parade in years prior and wanted to join in the celebration. That is what Asheville Mardi Gras is all about—join in the fun and create fun together. Johanna is not sure if she will have a House Float again if there is a traditional parade, but she does believe she will decorate for the season.

Elizabeth Sauls – Dead Royal Quing Eboo – "Out on the Bayou, Under the Sea"

Eboo initially was unsure about participating in the House Float Parade, not wanting to disturb her neighbors with traffic or wild decorations. Her irrepressible spirit took over, though, and inspired a full tableau of mermaids, a dragon ship, undersea creatures, and a bayou cabin. Contrary to her initial reservations, her neighbors enjoyed her display, and she made new connections in her neighborhood. Her eight-year-old neighbor even joined in the fun, working with her to create a remote-control octopus to patrol the area. Visitors to "Out on the Bayou, Under the Sea" were treated to a costumed Eboo, music, and dancing. Her joy at receiving visitors is unrivaled.

Quing Eboo is a Dead Royal, meaning she is a former Royal of the Asheville Mardi Gras. She is also a member of the Asheville Second Line band and has been part of the celebratory season here in Asheville for many years. She takes her duties as a Dead Royal seriously, participating in events and supporting the efforts of Asheville Mardi Gras to supply joie de vivre in the dark of Winter. She enjoyed the House Float Parade so much that she is helping to plan for the 2022 season House Float Parade, whether or not the in-person parade returns at the same time.

Photo by Paul King.

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Photos by Paul King.

Photos by Paul King.

Photos by Paul King.

Paul King is a photographer based in Weaverville, NC.
https://www.flickr.com/photos/185926752@N07/albums

Stefanie Mixon Kompathoum grew up in Louisiana, received a degree in anthropology from Western Carolina University, has participated in Asheville Mardi Gras since 2010 as Captain of Krewe of Bastet, and has served as chair of the Asheville Mardi Gras Executive Committee.

Knee to Screen:
Appalachian Ballad Singing in a Virtual World

Ian Kirkpatrick

I first met Sheila Kay Adams when I was a freshman at Mars Hill University in 2013, when we were booked as separate acts at a performance in Western North Carolina. I was one of the newest members of the Bailey Mountain Cloggers, a competition clogging and folk dance team associated with the University, and I remember being very interested in hearing Sheila sing what her family calls "the old love songs." Ballads, as they are known by academics and song collectors, are *a cappella* narrative songs that were brought to the Appalachian region with the early American settlers around the 1600s, where the artform continued to grow and distinct American songs were added to the pre-colonial list of tunes. These songs interested me because they reminded me of the music my family sang at holiday events and gatherings. I had no idea that this performance was going to be my first step in what I consider to be a lifelong journey to help preserve these songs for future generations.

Sheila and I soon realized that we were traveling on a similar performance circuit, and a close friendship developed over the years. I credit my interest in learning ballads to those early backstage conversations. However, due to a series of events related to busy schedules and relocations, we were never able to meet formally for me to learn how to sing them in the traditional manner while I was a student at Mars Hill.

After I graduated, I moved away from Mars Hill and was not able to see Sheila as often as I had in the past. Therefore, from the very beginning of my intentional relationship with this artform,

Frame photo: Ian Kirkpatrick & Sheila Kay Adams. Photo: Contributed by Ian.

I have been a non-traditional student, learning the ballads from recordings on CDs and YouTube as well as researching the vast collections of university archives for materials to which many do not have regular access.

Traditionally, ballads are taught in what is known as "knee-to-knee" style instruction: An experienced, often older, relative or community member will sit down with an often younger student face-to-face, so close together that the pair's knees are touching. The instructing singer will then sing a single verse to a selected song and have the student sing that verse back to them until they are satisfied that the student can perform the tune and words correctly. Then the instructing singer will sing a second verse and have the student sing the first and second verses back to them. The instructing singer will then continue to add verses in the same manner until the student is singing the entire song at once while the instructor sings only one verse at a time.

These songs have remained relevant across generations in part due to their uncanny ability to elicit familiar emotions in a modern audience and to engage the listener in an almost mythical past filled with adventure and intrigue. Songs like "Once I Courted a Pretty Fair Maid," "The Rejected Lover," "West Virginia Boys," and "Don't Believe in a Woman" immediately bring to mind the intensity and headiness of new love as well as the deep, scarring pain of rejection and the end of what was once a fantastic relationship. Other songs, such as "Lady Margaret," "Lord Daniel/Matthy Groves," and "Lady Nancy," have a strong focus on narrative exposition, including lyrics such as "[t]hen the King cut out Fair William's heart and put it in a cup of gold. 'Take that to Lady Nancy,' he said, 'for she is fearless and bold.'" The blunt and simple language incorporated in the lyrics is a fantastic element of storytelling that can keep a listener captivated in the action for long periods of time, and often these songs continue for 15 to 20 minutes before the plot is concluded.

Not only useful for entertainment and memorialization of historic events in a majority illiterate society, the ballads also serve a function for the mountain families. "Granny always said these songs have a moral message for women," Sheila frequently says. Interestingly, the moral learned from a certain song may be different for each person that chooses to sing it. "Knoxville Girl,"

a song about the murder of a woman for what many believe is her premarital pregnancy, may be interpreted as having a moral not to have premarital sex. Sheila, however, says the moral is "If a man tells you he is going to kill you, do not continue to follow him to your pre-dug grave." Frankly, that moral can be useful for people of all gender identities, though society does place a disparate proportion of such morals on women.

Though ballads have been performed on stage for over a century now, with some of the earliest folk festivals featuring ballad singers and many ballads being converted into country and bluegrass songs for more modern audiences, the traditional atmosphere for these songs is in the home. My grandmother used to sing "Barbara Allen" every morning while making coffee, and the song still has certain connotations for me when I hear it performed. Others sang ballads while doing household chores or when working in their fields and gardens. This connection to outdoor performance has contributed in part to the peculiarly loud sound and vocal ornamentations familiar to many ballad singers, what Sheila's family calls an "off the porch strong" voice.

Occasionally, as in the case of the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival every year in October, a group of ballad singers will gather for what is known as a "round robin," "ballad swap," or "sing." Singers sit in a circle, or in a straight line if the stage does not permit a circle, and trade songs with one another. It is customary for the oldest person in the room to sing first and the youngest to sing last, though sometimes the organizer of the event will sing first, and then the order will be determined by whoever is sitting next to them. The only real rules are that the same song cannot be sung twice and everyone must have the chance to sing before the order starts again at the top of the list. However, these rules may be broken, and it can be really interesting to hear another version of the same song from a different community where the tune or words may not be exactly the same.

In These Mountains

Lacking a good portion of this traditional engagement for many years, I was ecstatic to hear that South Arts had begun a Folk & Traditional Arts Cross-Border Mentor-Apprentice program as part of their In These Mountains initiative in January 2020. I

quickly sent a message to Sheila to see if she was interested in applying for this grant with me. After determining that we were eligible, we put together a plan to commit the next year to knee-to-knee instruction. I was finally going to expand my knowledge of the ballads in the traditional manner, and I was going to get to see my friend and mentor again after several years!

We got the news that our project had been approved on Friday, August 28, a world away from our original proposal. One of the questions that South Arts asked was "[w]hat precautions will you take as a team to ensure your safety during the current COVID-19 pandemic?" We had a simple answer, one that we had committed to memory after several months of social distancing guidelines. We were going to wash our hands, stay six feet apart, wear masks, and meet virtually in the event of a Stay-at-Home order. We met one time in person, during the period between the first and second wave of COVID-19 when guidelines were relaxed ever so slightly in an optimistic attempt to accomplish what we had originally planned. The rest of our grant was relegated to online Zoom calls, which we both still greatly appreciated because it was a regularly scheduled event in a world that had become very irregular.

The focus of this grant is described as being "specifically designed to support mentor artists and apprentice relationships that cross state borders in order to develop shared cultural heritage in Central Appalachia" (South Arts). Our original proposal was for Sheila and me to share ballads from our individual communities with each other to discover what our community repertoires had in common and uncover any songs that may be particular to only one area. One thing that I have heavily promoted over the years is that notable British folklorist Cecil Sharp visited both Sheila's community in Madison County, NC, and mine in Claiborne County, TN, in 1916 and 1917 respectively to collect ballads from the local singers, which were published in his book *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. My task, then, was to research the singers of Claiborne County and look for other collectors that may have visited the area to recreate a Claiborne County repertoire for comparison with the Madison County repertoire. Notably, my intentional study of the ballads had been specific to the Madison County ballads until this point

due to my friendship with Sheila, so we were both equally unaware of what I might find.

Sharp collected 22 ballads from four singers in Claiborne County: Mae Ray, Alice Parsons, Chester Lewis, and Kinley Brooks. All four singers appear to be students at Lincoln Memorial University around that time, and their songs match fairly closely to songs that I knew from Sheila and other regional ballad singers such as "Lady Margaret," "Lord Bateman," and "Daemon Lover." Interestingly, Kinley Brooks is a distant cousin of mine, and Mae Ray married another distant cousin of mine named Andy Houston Brooks just a few years after Sharp's visit. My own personal connection to these singers enhanced my determination to learn their songs, share their understanding of the ballads, and look for further connections in the region.

In this process, I discovered the collections of Artus Moser and C.P. Cambiaire, who were both faculty at Lincoln Memorial University in the 1930s and published ballads that were sung by their students. The liner notes of *North Carolina Ballads Sung by Artus Moser* (Folkways Records FA 2112) state, "Singer and college professor Artus Moser's interest in song collecting began when his students in Tennessee insisted they knew better versions of ballads than those presented in their textbooks." Many of these songs were similar to the ones that had been collected by Sharp in 1917, and several new additions to the repertoire included songs from students that originated from a wider geographic circle and relatively modern country songs that had become popular in the region. Before returning to his home in Western North Carolina in the 1940s, Moser was also able to make audio recordings of a handful of singers in Cumberland Gap that have been preserved by the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. These works further supplemented the ballads I was able to share with Sheila, and even more connections were made between the two communities.

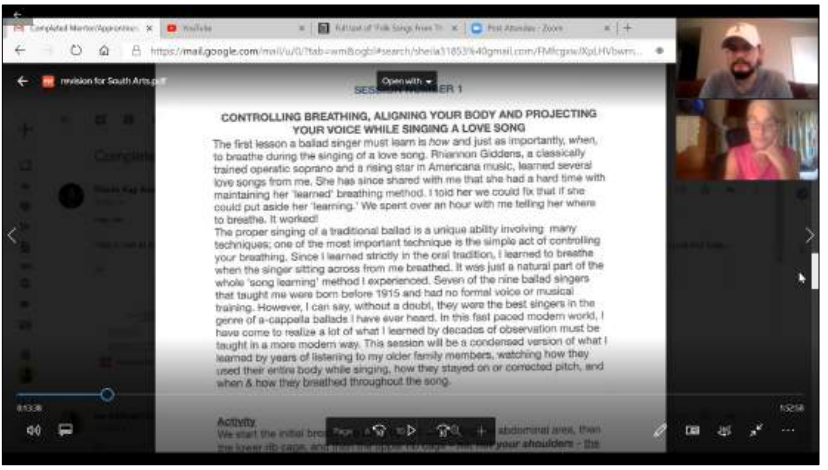
The biggest discovery I made during this time, though, was the collection of Tillman Cadle and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle preserved in the Library of Congress and the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) archives consisting of 580 discs of field recordings and other materials. Tillman Cadle, often referred to as a Kentucky coal miner in promotional materials, was born June

27, 1902, on Bryson Mountain in Claiborne County, TN (ETSU), making him the first ballad collector I had encountered to be from my home county. Moreso, Cadle and Barnicle were instrumental in collecting the songs of Jim Garland and his sisters Aunt Molly Jackson and Sarah Ogan-Gunning that were used as source material during the American Folk Music Revival of the 1940s. This connection makes the Cadle/Barnicle Collection an invaluable part of my research into the history of folk music in my area, and the sheer breadth of the collection is rivaled by very few others in the region.

Cadle's relationship to the region and the academic collection of folk music raises a rather important question: What does it mean to be raised as a member of a culture, fully taking part in all of its social rituals and activities, to later become a researcher of that same culture? Sheila and I both fit into this unique category, as does Bascom Lamar Lunsford and perhaps others who have forged similar paths. It is beyond the scope of this article to answer such a question, but I find it important to recognize that the question exists, as it speaks to the thoughts of the researcher during this exploration. The answer, of course, may only provide more questions.

As for the research, these discoveries were all made from the comfort of my own home during a global pandemic that forced innovative methods to be adapted in order to secure them. Rather than visit ETSU in person, I was able to email the archives staff and request digital copies of recordings be sent to me via Google drive. The website Archive.org was used frequently to listen to recordings owned by the Library of Congress and for viewing newly digitized recordings of the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival ballad swaps from the 1980s and 1990s. Another website, BluegrassMessengers.com (which temporarily disappeared for a portion of the pandemic), was a source for the Cambiaire collection, which is not currently commercially available to the public and is a rare book in university libraries. Another question then emerges, one I intend to at least partially answer in this article: What is the future of the folk ballads in an increasingly digital world?

Photos: Sheila Kay Adams & Ian Kirkpatrick on Zoom. Screenshot contributed by Ian.



Virtual Ballad Swaps

The use of modern technology as a method of communicating traditional materials is a controversial topic. In the liner notes to the 2017 album *Big Bend Killing: The Appalachian Ballad Tradition*, ETSU Professor Emeritus Thomas Burton is quoted as saying "[t]he influence of mass media, TV, movies and urban culture all had a great impact upon the singing of traditional ballads… And even in those situations where ballads are being sung, the instances in which they are being learned in the oral tradition are seemingly very small." In that same album, Appalachian Studies Professor Ted Olson, also of ETSU, states "[a]s evidenced in these contemporary renditions of ballads from both the Old and the New Worlds, the ballad tradition has reinvented itself over the years and has engaged new audiences along the way." As a ballad

singer myself, I can certainly find merit and evidence for a complete spectrum of opinions on the state of modern balladry. My personal experience and relationship with the ballad tradition, then, may contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity surrounding this discussion and further elucidate why these conflicting opinions exist.

In 2018, I had organized a round robin in Cumberland Gap, TN. I asked young singers from all across the Appalachian region to join me in my home county, which was coincidentally equidistant for all of them to attend. We called the performance One Evening in May, a play on the many ballads featuring the line "One Morning in May." My goal was to make this a yearly gathering, similar to the ones I had watched and participated in at Mars Hill University and the Bluff Mountain Festival in Hot Springs, NC. Unfortunately, we have not been able to gather together in that format again since that first meeting, and I cannot even blame COVID-19 for it! I was getting my MA at Appalachian State University at the time, and scheduling just proved more difficult for a repeat performance. So, I jumped on the chance when Susan Pepper, one of the co-stars of the 2018 show, and a personal friend, contacted me to set up a Zoom round robin in late March of 2020.

One hurdle I had to overcome to take part in these meetings was the unreliability of wi-fi in my community. Not only was my home internet service significantly slower than that of my office space on a normal day, it was also common for internet blackouts to occur for sometimes several hours at a time. After the second wave of the pandemic, I moved to a new apartment and decided not to purchase internet service due to a new position that required some nights and weekends and severely impacted the amount of time I regularly spent at home. Luckily for me, my job also requires me to have a smartphone, which I could use to download the Zoom app and use an unlimited data plan to attend the ballad swaps without access to wi-fi. Nevertheless, personal access to the technological necessities to attend these online meetings may be viewed as a similar barrier on par with, and in comparison to, travel necessities that bar some from attending physical ballad swaps—and organizers must take into consideration this barrier when planning such events.

We met some other challenges at first regarding general event production as well. Zoom was new to everyone, and we had to experiment to see what worked best. It became common etiquette to mute ourselves when someone else was singing to avoid background noise. We learned that our voices sounded better when we turned on something called "original sound." And lacking a natural sense of order based on who was next to us in the circle, we posted the order in the comments section and tried to stick to it as best we could.

But something amazing happened because of that experiment. We were able to connect with people from all across the region that were not able to attend meetings that may be too far away for them to travel. Or maybe they were not familiar with all the members of our group before, but they heard about us online and wanted to join in and meet new people. Sarah Elizabeth Burkey states, "Before having my children, I devoted all of my time to singing and writing. Then when we made the big move from Kentucky to Western North Carolina, I left behind all my musical mentors and friends and became more isolated… And now through the Ballad Zoom, I've been able to meet even more people in the Ballad singing community." Suddenly, an older generation of singers were teaching the newer generation new songs every month from the comfort of their own homes.

A seeming outlier of this group was quickly adopted: Derek Piotr, a singer, folklorist and researcher from Connecticut who had come to Appalachian music only recently. He states, "I felt initial trepidation about being a Yankee, but quickly realized some of the members of the group, while located in or near the Blue Ridge area, were originally Northerners, and I felt immediate support." Derek had studied folk music from around the world but fell in love with Mountain-style singing in late 2019, upon discovering the work of Lena Bare Turbyfill. Jean Ritchie and Shirley Collins were already familiar touchstones to him, so through the mutual friendship and connection with Leila Weinstein, Derek entered the group.

Variations and Best Practices

We did not learn all of the above techniques by ourselves, either. We found other groups across the country doing similar

events, and shared what worked best among us all. The Mermaid's Tavern livestream, run by Lynn Noel of Massachusetts, was started around the same time as our group. Noel's group features ballad singers from both US coasts, the Midwest, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other parts of Europe, and employed much of the above etiquette as well. In contrast, our group was a much smaller circle focused especially on the Appalachian region of Tennessee and North Carolina. The similarities and differences between the structural techniques of these two groups arose naturally for the most part, although some members of our group were aware of the Mermaid's Tavern at the time and proposed suggestions to strengthen our group's performance based on what they saw in the Mermaid's Tavern swaps.

One difference between the two groups is when they are scheduled to take place and how long each event lasts. In a blog post dated April 25, 2020, Lynn Noel states, "Ballad sings started on first Sundays, but have proved so popular there's now one every Sunday except third Sundays. Chanteysings on third Sundays use the time slot of our regular Boston Area Chantey and Maritime Sing at the USS Constitution Museum, which is closed for the duration" (2020). The Appalachian group, on the other hand, started as a weekly event and transitioned into a monthly event over a similar period of time. Whereas the Mermaid's Tavern met on the weekend in the afternoon, the Appalachian group originally met on Thursday evenings before moving to Tuesday evenings after dinner. The Appalachian events also typically last no more than two hours rather than the longer 3-4 hour events at the Mermaid's Tavern. All of this can be easily explained by the amount of singers involved with each group and the influence of their individual personalities.

Not to be overlooked, Noel's quote also suggests that the Chanteysings were already taking place in Boston at a regularly scheduled time, and the online adaptation was an innovation designed to continue that activity during the pandemic. Though I had invited some members of the Appalachian group to a previous ballad swap in Cumberland Gap, TN, and many of us performed together yearly at the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival in Mars Hill, NC, no such regularly scheduled event existed among our

membership prior to the pandemic. Some of our members may have been involved in other groups that met regularly in their own communities, but travel and scheduling excluded many of our members from attending those activities. While Boston's online presence increased their capacity to reach a more international audience and build on an existing platform, the Appalachian group was able to create a new event based on an understanding of how the traditional singers of the region met in a seemingly distant past.

Another major difference between these two groups is that, from the very beginning, the Mermaid's Tavern live-streamed their events on Facebook as well as Zoom. This gave the Boston events an additional stage presence that was absent in the Appalachian group events. An audience could watch the Facebook live-stream without participating in the event or even communicating with the attendees of the Mermaid's Tavern, but to view the Appalachian group event a person had to login to the Zoom meeting. The Appalachian group did not reject the idea of an audience, at times having members join in solely to listen to the other singers, but our intent and purposes were for building a community of regional singers who could learn from one another and advance the art of ballad singing in the Appalachian region. More of an online workshop than a performance, the early sessions were recorded and sent out to participants for instructional use. We later decided to stop recording entirely to further reduce the stage presence aspect and enhance what we felt was a more authentic communal experience.

Though I was simply a Facebook Live audience member for the early iterations of the Mermaid's Tavern events, I did attend and sing at a couple of the later events. To my surprise, I was greeted by the House Manager in a private message asking me if I wanted to sing a song for the event. I responded in the affirmative and was placed in the que of singers. When it was almost my time to sing, I received another private message confirming I was on deck. I also let them know what song I was going to sing, which was read out by the emcee along with my introduction. None of this behind-the-scenes engagement heavily resembling a backstage experience could be seen by the audience members, and it gave the event a much more formal sense than I felt at the Appalachian

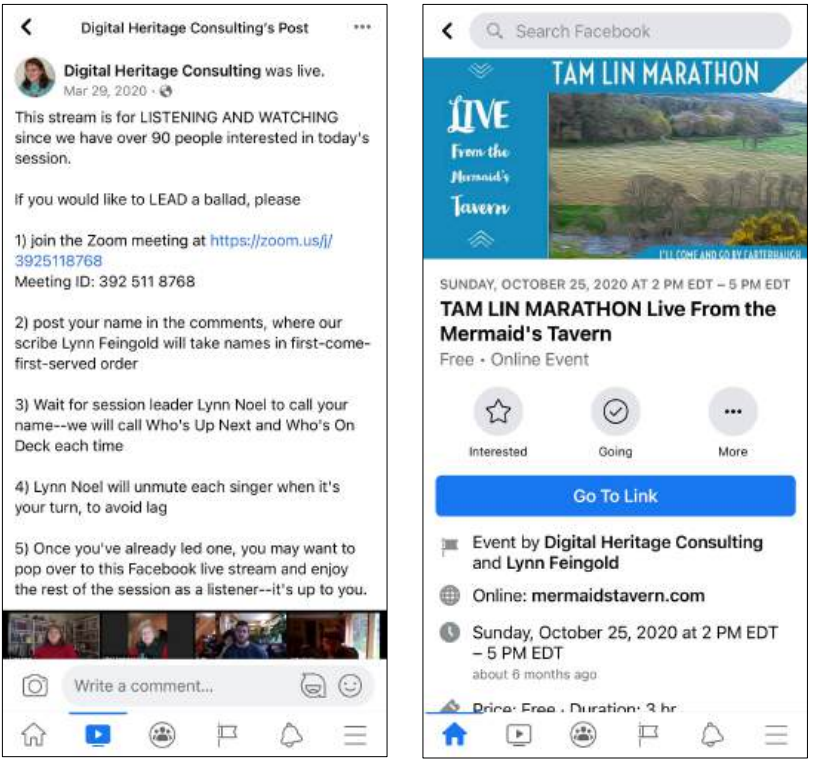
ballad swap, where the phrase "I think you are next" was commonly spoken aloud when the conversation reached a natural stop. This is further evidence that the number of participants in these events affected the overall presentation, and the groups migrated to practices that best suited the needs of the specific event.

Photo: A flyer advertising an online Ballad Swap scheduled for Fall 2020.

In addition to these two swaps was the 2020 Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival ballad swap, which I attended along with several Madison County ballad singers who were not affiliated with either group. The event was hosted, however, by Leila Weinstein of Mars Hill University's Liston B. Ramsey Center, who was a regular member of the Appalachian ballad swap group. For this event, we used the webinar function on Zoom to create a panelist link for performers and a separate attendee link for the audience. Though we were all on the same Zoom conference call, the performers could not see the audience, and audience engagement was filtered through the event host. This effectively mimicked the Facebook live stream component of the performance, but audience members still had to register to receive the Zoom link to attend the event. Using this method maintained a more formal appearance than the Appalachian ballad swap sessions and provided the audience with a sense of exclusivity that audience members of the Facebook live stream variation may not be provided due to the openness of the social media platform. It also

gave the performers more of a sense of being onstage, as the invisibility of the audience was reminiscent of staring into the void of the white stage lighting.

Concluding this section, there are many ways in which ballad swaps can be incorporated into the digital age. None take precedence over others, as the determining factors in event planning vary upon the size of the event, the desired level of formality among the participants, and the purposes the event is intended to accomplish. What is really important is the engagement and inclusion of the participants in the various steps of the process and providing a service that may not be achievable through other means or platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic gave the ballad singing community an opportunity it could not refuse, and the challenge was accepted and exceeded by participants in various communities all around the world.



Photos: Screenshots of Facebook Event information for online ballad swaps in 2020.

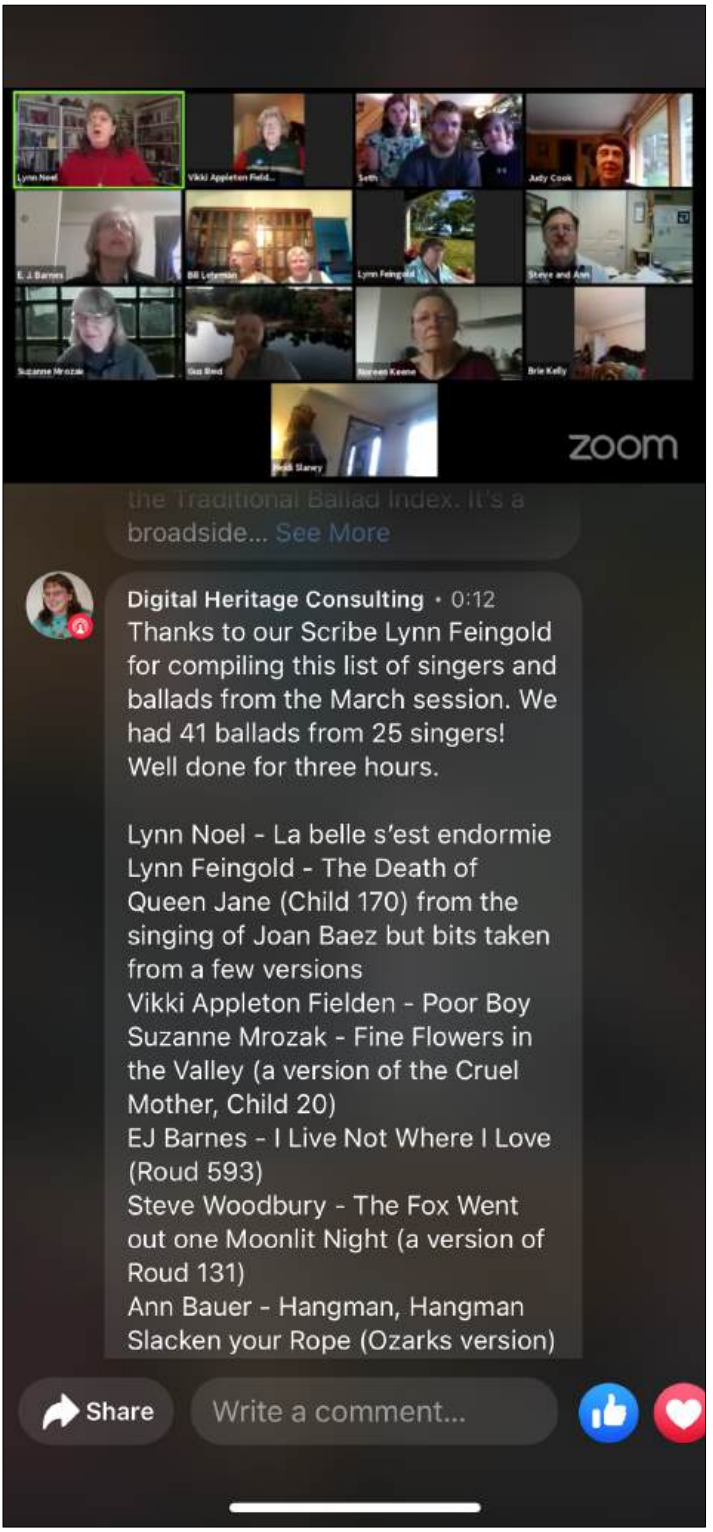


Photo: Screenshot of a Zoom meeting chat about ballad swapping in 2020.

Generational Gap

I have already spoken to the travel benefits and elimination of geographical barriers that virtual ballad swaps provide, but another boon to these events is the visualization of the younger generation taking up the mantle of preserving this artform in their own manner. Over half of the Appalachian ballad swap group consists of the 40-and-under age category. Singers like Saro Lynch-Thomason, William Ritter, Donna Ray Norton, and myself have easily adapted to the virtual format and have found great use in implementing the internet for this purpose. As Noel states, "The COVID crisis is an opportunity for fast, foundational change in how folk communities create and deliver value to one another through music, dance, and song" (2020). The younger generation is particularly skilled in participating in this digital transformation, and that skill will be essential in coming up with new and innovative methods to provide a platform for the continuation of the ballad singing tradition.

On the other hand, the older generation singers such as Sheila Kay Adams and Bobby McMillon of North Carolina, and Carmen McCord Hicks of Tennessee have found it equally as difficult to adapt to this new virtual platform. When Carmen joined our group in January of 2021, she proudly proclaimed it was her first Zoom meeting ever. In a blog post for our grant project, Sheila speaks of her own hesitation, stating, "Join up with us in thanking South Arts, Inc., and thank Ian for getting this old stubborn warhorse to come round to the virtual world" (2021). It is the responsibility of the younger generation to be patient with the older generation and assist them when they have difficulties with tasks that come as second nature to the former. The older generation can, and more and more frequently do, take part in virtual activities. Their inclusion is vital to the traditional form of passing down the old love songs, and to exclude them and their input from innovations regarding the tradition they bear is, by definition, to further remove the art from the tradition.

The reluctance of the older generation to join the online ballad events was not solely due to the lack of understanding of the internet, though. Sheila once told me in a personal conversation, "I'm the type of person that just wants to reach out and put my hands on your shoulders and shake you around a little bit; I want

to know that you are there and that you are paying attention." A much deeper fear is present that the tradition will lose an aspect of personal connection and communal engagement that was a driving force in what the older generation found particularly special about its preservation. It is my hope that framing these online activities as supplemental to the in-person gatherings rather than as a replacement for them will ease that fear.

Madison County native Donna Ray Norton refers to the way she learned how to sing ballads as "knee-to-CD," a play on the phrase "knee-to-knee." When I was first learning how to sing ballads, I closely identified with that classification and found a sense of legitimacy in knowing that others were learning the traditional songs in a similar manner. Now, with the obsoletion of the CD, and the lack of a CD drive in my laptop, I think it is time to propose we use the phrase "knee-to-screen." I fear the ballad singing tradition will end without an online presence of some kind, and a virtual revival needs a new name for an old artform.

An online presence has proven to strengthen the communal ties of the ballad singers, in spite of the generational gap. This experience has provided me the opportunity to meet and sing with people old and young from all over the world, and even people in my own state that I had not met previously. The knowledge that I have gained from meeting these singers has increased my repertoire just as much as my own research in archives and online collections. Sarah Elizabeth Burkey agrees, saying "Every time I have attended the Ballad Zoom (half a dozen or so times since Fall 2020), I am reminded of songs I haven't sung in many years, songs I had forgotten about. This is something I am really grateful for." The instant communication that the virtual space provides ensures those once-forgotten songs are preserved within a much larger community ethos as well and may provide an aid for other singers to remember their old songs with the resulting snowball effect.

Now that the social infrastructure has been built and many of the initial obstacles have been overcome, I believe this virtual community will be able to support and promote each other in ways that were not possible prior to the pandemic. The ballad tradition will live on in this new space, and perhaps it will take on new roots in an even newer generation. Burkey states, "Being a

part of this online ballad community in this time of isolation helps me be more engaged in the tradition again because these songs really are communal. I am so thankful to this group of people for helping these songs resurface and come back to me full circle." It will not be long until we are the ones complaining about the new format of the round robin on a platform I cannot even begin to imagine.

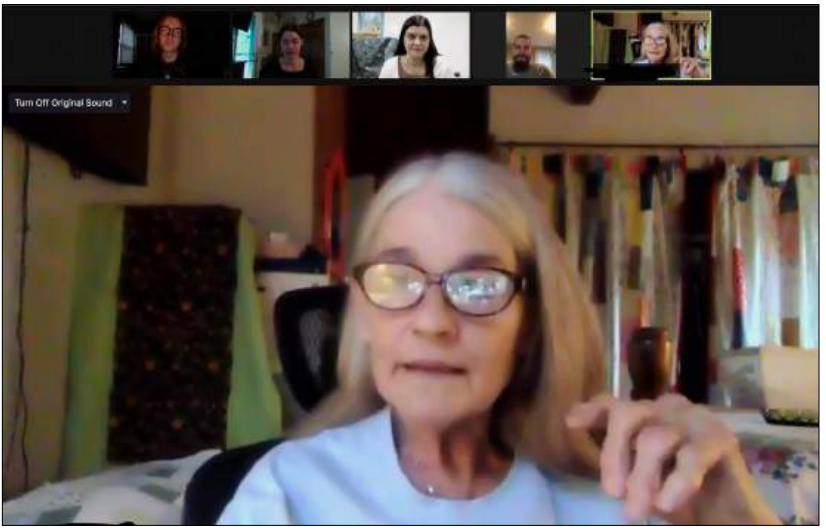


Photo: Sheila Kay Adams & more singers on Zoom. Screenshot contributed by Ian.

Future of Folk?

The post-pandemic folk music scene approaches, and serious conversations will soon need to be had about the functionality and presentation of these events moving forward. It is unlikely that a virtual component will disappear completely from ballad circles now that it has been so thoroughly introduced. This is not the end of the in-person ballad swap, but serious structural changes will need to be implemented in order to accommodate both the physical and the virtual worlds the ballads now inhabit. A balance will need to be found, and that will come with its own challenges, as the lack of use in the public, physical space for such a long period of time will surely have its repercussions.

It will not be difficult to have a livestream option at in-person events such as the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival and physical ballad swaps. The tickets to those events are free already—so, adding a virtual component will not allow one group of audience members to benefit from virtual attendance, while punishing via

ticket fees another group of audience members for watching the show in person. Should the physical event have a ticket price, there are ways described above that could effectively put a barrier on online viewership until the price is paid. I think it would be feasible for performers to join these events virtually, although it would appear more uniform if the cast of the performance were either entirely virtual or entirely in person. A hybrid cast, while theoretically possible, might be jarring for the audience and may result in a lack of physical attendance if virtual attendance is available. In my opinion, it would look better for a livestream show to feature panels with multiple cast members in one of the rooms than it would for an in-person show to have a computer in one chair with a single cast member attending virtually. As demonstrated by the archived Bascom Lamar Lunsford ballad swaps, many of these events are recorded for preservation purposes already, so connecting an existing camera to a Facebook livestream event would not be as difficult as introducing an entirely brand-new virtual set-up to the event space.

I hope to see the virtual ballad swaps continue in a post-pandemic world as a supplement, rather than a replacement, to the physical swaps. There have been grant requests in recent years from numerous organizations with or without a focus on folk music to digitize their archival materials. It will be interesting to see if these virtual events serve as future arguments for grants to provide transportation for transatlantic participants to attend a yearly physical ballad swap hosted in a migratory location. The online singing community would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet in person with these newfound friends and colleagues, and a travel grant would lessen the burden of the associated costs that may prevent them from such attendance.

One concern that these events may bring up is the effects of globalization on an artform that has traditionally been locally distinct, where one version of a particular song may become dominant among singers and the local variants may suffer due to such popularity. These arguments first arose from the popularity of the early field and commercial recordings, and critics may point to songs such as "Knoxville Girl" and "Pretty Polly" as becoming too uniform on a global scale. Organizations such as the Mermaid's Tavern have actively engaged with battling this

concern, hosting a special Tam Lin Marathon that produced over 19 versions of the same song in November 2020. The Appalachian group has also occasionally encouraged a "Dueling Ballads" activity between two or more singers to include engaging context and conversation surrounding the history of the specific ballad being performed. These events are specifically designed to maintain and preserve the fluidity and regionality of the ballads—and the challenge to performers to find a unique version from their own community raises the stakes and provides a lens for archival and communal research.

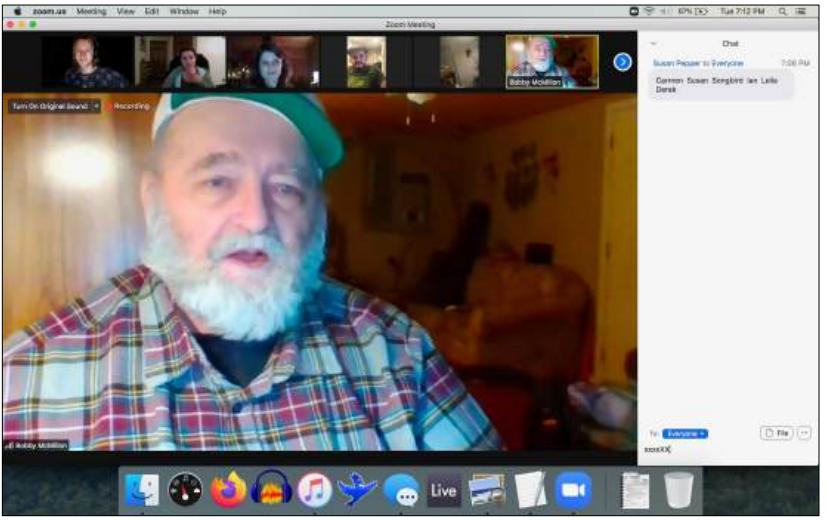


Photo: Bobby McMillon & more singers on Zoom. Screenshot contributed by Ian.

Conclusion

The nationwide shutdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic gave Sheila and me the opportunity to clear our schedules and come together on a project that we had wanted to do for several years. It also gave the greater Southern Appalachian and transatlantic ballad singing communities a chance to experiment with innovative methods of passing down traditional music and connect with each other in multiple brand-new ways. These projects may have emerged even without the influence of the shutdown, but they definitely benefited from the pandemic due to the multitude of participants willing to partake in the activities and the alleviation of burdensome factors such as scheduling and travel concerns. The result has been the creation of an online folk music

infrastructure that will carry this artform well into the 21st, and maybe even the 22nd, century.

It is imperative that more materials related to the ballads be digitized in the near future. Increasingly, young people are turning to the internet as a resource for folk materials rather than the local CD store. Those materials that are not digitized are quickly forgotten due to their lack of an online presence, while those materials that are digitized are far more easily preserved and maintained within traditional music circles. Now is the time to go into the shed in the backyard, find the dusty collection of albums and performances that were inherited from older family members, and get in touch with archives and community organizations that can assist us in this digitization process. The preservation of the tradition depends on it.

Resources

Big Bend Killing: The Appalachian Ballad Tradition (Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2017)

North Carolina Ballads sung by Artus Moser (Folkways Records FA 2112)

www.archive.org

www.bluegrassmessengers.com

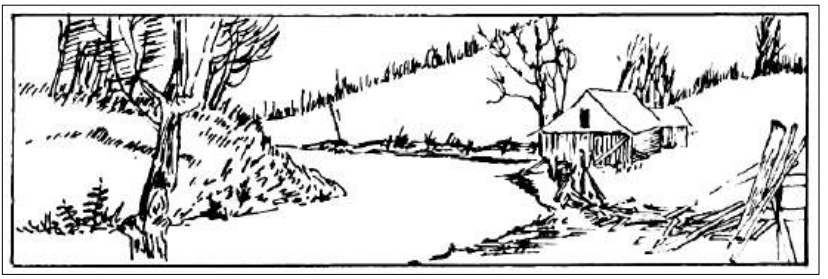
crosscurrentsmusic.blogspot.com/2020/04/live-from-mermaids-tavern-reflections.html?utm_source= Lynn+Noel%27s+Crosscurrents+Music+Newsletter&utm_campaign=65068992d3AUTOMATION__1&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2760958b65-65068992d3-380478501

www.etsu.edu/cas/cass/archives/

www.granddivide.com

www.southarts.org/artist-grants-fellowships/folk-traditional-arts-cross-border-mentor-apprentice-program

Ian Kirkpatrick received his master's degree in Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University in May 2019 (Thesis: "Competition Clogging: Preservation and Innovation in Mountain Folk Dance"). In 2020, he received the South Arts Folk and Traditional Arts Cross-Border Mentor Apprenticeship to work with ballad mentor Sheila Kay Adams. In 2021, he was named a South Arts Emerging Traditional Artist. He is excited to work with Tennessee ballad singer Carmen McCord Hicks on the Tennessee Arts Commission's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.



Remembering Bobby McMillon

William Ritter

On November 28, 2021, at the age of 69, we lost Robert Lynn McMillon, a "folklorists' folklorist" and keeper and inheritor of an incredibly deep ocean of lore, music, and knowledge. "Bobby's" grinning face, keen eyes, long beautiful ballads, and longer windy tales were a familiar sight at schools and folklife events in and around North Carolina. The NC Folk Heritage Award (2000) and Brown-Hudson Award (1995) winner performed at the Smithsonian's 1976 Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife, the 1982 Knoxville World's Fair, and was featured in the 1999 Tom Davenport film *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*. (1) That film was the seed for Daniel W. Patterson and McMillon's book *A Tree Accurst: Stories of Frankie Silver*. (2) It would be impossible to overstate the treasure that was Bobby McMillon. Of him Patterson wrote,

> As soon as he started singing and talking about ballads, it was obvious to me that he was one of the most important Appalachian tradition bearers of his generation…As a singer and storyteller he was very different from the performers so popular then in the "folk scene:" slick college boys like the Kingston Trio, or political activists like Joan Baez who took up the guitar, went on the concert stage, and sang a repertory of songs learned from books and recordings, dressing them up in harmonies and vocal stylings calculated to win a middle class audience. Bobby was more akin to Almeda Riddle, Roscoe Holcomb…

Frame photo: Illustration by Norma Farthing Murphy that appeared with Ken Kenkel's article "The Constant Aesthetic of Bobby McMillon: 'I've Just Always Tried to Find Any Old Song or Story That I Could." (1984 W. Amos Abrams Prize). in NC Folklore Journal *32.1 (Spring-Summer 1984).*

> Doc Watson and other traditional artists… These musicians performed the music of their own families, regions, occupations, and religious demonstrations (p2 *Tree Accurst*).

In other parlance, Bobby was the "real deal," and one of the last firm connections to the bygone world he celebrated in performance and in casual conversation. He was also a keenly self-aware, intelligent, skoal-dipping, Braves-rooting, mountain man with a voracious appetite for reading. The walls of his house (and other flat surfaces) were covered with J.R.R. Tolkien, H. Rider Haggard, and folklore and folk song collections from around the world.

For a man who so loved to talk, Bobby was a devoted listener—whether he was leaning in to decipher the singing of an elder on a scratchy field recording or asking to hear more about a niece's birthday party. His long and full versions of tales and ballads were a reflection of his earnest interest in the "details." He recorded tales, ballads, folk songs, and religious pieces from heroes, relatives, or friends like Rolf Ellison, Stanley Hicks, Aunt Lou Brookshire, and his great aunt Mae "Maw Maw" Phillips. (3)

Bobby was a great documenter, but also an excellent writer and "repairer" of songs. Like a brilliant mechanic or antique restorer, he could build back to a fully functional and beautiful old ballad with spare parts. He enjoyed thoughtfully constructing "collated" texts of old love songs that he carefully wrote down in his "Blue Book" college-ruled notebooks. Many people add verses to ballads from various sources, but Bobby's work was informed by a lifetime of experience as a cultural insider but also his own dedicated and wide-ranging research. His collated texts were usually rooted in a version he had heard first-hand, but if the song was fragmentary, he could make it whole again. He similarly added details and context to his sprawling tales, fleshing them out with his keen observations about mountain culture and folk idioms. Speaking to Daniel Patterson about his "Hunting Tale," Bobby said,

> "The part about living with my grandparents and my first cousin…at Green Mountain was true, and about his wife. But I just didn't tell about the railroad track coming down through the valley. I wanted it to sound like wilderness.

> If I tell it around up here, I don't even mention the Toe River, because they'd know about the railroad. I just say it happened in a river gorge back in the mountains." I do the same thing when I tell the scary story about "Who's got my big toe?" I introduce things about how people lived in the old times. A lot of times I'm telling the story to school children, and this makes the story informative as well as interesting." Bobby seems even to want hearers to experience the sound of the older people—their phrasing, their pronunciations—from whom he learned the tales. As he gets well into a story he begins—consciously or unconsciously—to slip in more of the vocabulary and grammar and pronunciations used by the people from whom he learned it. When he reviewed my transcription of his tale, he showed his keen interest in such details. Where he had said he had come out of the water and climbed up on a rock, I spelled his pronunciation as "clumb." Bobby asked me to change that to "clomb," which was always how he would pronounce it. And he added that over near Cosby in east Tennessee his kinfolks would pronounce the word as "clim" and people in the Beach Creek section of Avery and Watauga Counties would say "cloomb." (4)

In addition to his wife Joyce, his son James, step-daughters, two brothers, three orange cats, and many friends, Bobby has left behind a legacy of recorded material, papers, numerous "Blue Books," an extensive book collection (to be placed in the care of a regional institution), and memories of a gentle and generous genius. His work will continue to inspire and inform generations of musicians, singers, storytellers, and historians.

Following are excerpts from reminiscences of Bobby's friends and family on Facebook, words shared at a celebration of Bobby's life, and also the monthly ballad Zoom circle formed during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic—of which Bobby was an active participant.

Derek Piotr—12/29/2021—Email Correspondence

Though he graced my life for just under two years, I would count Bobby McMillon as one of the dearest friends I've ever made. We had instant sympatico. Bobby was not only a world-

class singer, but, like, an aficionado for the obscurest wisps of folklore: name a song, no matter how little-sung or local, and Bobby could point you to a version recorded in 19xx by such-and-such, and moreover sing you the fragment he recalled, typically from meeting said such-and-such. It was incredible how widely this man had cast his folklore net, and how freely he'd share even the remotest facts he'd gathered. He was truly my North Star and partner-in-crime as I've done obscure folklife research. More importantly, he was one of the warmest, most genteel fellows on the planet, often interrupting one of his long explanations of Western North Carolina with a meek, dear chuckle at some detail or other. I was blessed to know him. His loss is insurmountable.

Sheila Kay Adams—12/4/2021—Private Gathering at Sheila's to Remember Bobby

We're here in the middle of a grieving process. I know from all the time I've spent with grief, it has come through my door an unwanted stranger, but always left a trusted friend. They say there's seven stages of grief…shock and denial, pain and guilt, anger and bargaining, depression, the upward turn, reconstructing and working through, and finally acceptance and hope. My experience is that you bounce back and forth feeling all the stages, sometimes in one day. You can't just tick them off one at a time and be done with them. It's a process, and sometimes it takes a long time to reach the upward turn, but it does come, and we start to examine that big hole that's left in our heart that we will never lose, but we will find a way to live our lives around it.

The other thing about grief is the knowledge that it's not a mine field that we have to keep running through. The one guarantee we have is that we'll never have to grieve Bobby's passing ever again. There'll be times when we miss him dreadfully, but memories are the healing balm for our broken hearts. I've had so many memories of Bobby during the last week that I'd forgotten all about. I have thought of little else but him, and every day brings a new awareness as to all I have lost. Then I'll have a memory that sets me to laughing, and then the tears come for my brain interjects, "Remember this, for it'll never be again." Right now, I guess I'm still in the denial, pain and guilt. Some of you might be as well. Part of the reason I've not bounced to another stage—like anger, and there's certainly been some of

that to work through—but I was cleaning out my voicemail, which might surprise some of you, and the next-to-the-last message was from Bobby. He called me at 2:05 on Sunday afternoon and passed away at 5:06. He wanted me to come the next day because he needed to talk to me, tell me something important. I guess I'm a little mad at the hospital because I was up there by 9:00, and due to Covid rules and regulations, I didn't get to see him. I should've spent more time on the phone with him, visiting with him, but I didn't, and that can't be undone. Ain't it strange—all of us say when we lose someone we care so much about, "I'm going to change this in the future. I'm going to spend more time with the people I love." But don't you find that time goes faster and faster? I no more than get up and put my clothes on, look at the clock, and it's quarter to 10:00! And the rest of the day goes even faster. I still feel pain and guilt, though.

Bobby was my best friend. We had a connection with our love of the old folks, the old days, the old songs, the old ways. It was a love that bound us together for over 50 years. My questions are many, like, who am I going to call now to find out how to spell "garden" the way they said it over home? Or how would they have mentioned that a woman was pregnant since "pregnant" was considered a nasty word? I don't have that resource anymore. Our friendship was much more than that. This was no amorous or romantic relationship. We decided that early on. We transcended that early on. I suffered with all the romance in my life for the next 40 years, and it was Bobby I talked to. Marriages came and went, but not Bobby McMillon. Bobby came, and he stayed. We used to joke that we should've married because we had so much in common, but we both knew better than to mess with this special, almost ethereal, relationship we had throughout those many years. I shared secrets with him that he took to his grave. I'll take some to mine that he shared with me. What was between Bobby and me will forever stay between the two of us.

We performed a lot on stage together, but my Bobby story has nothing to do with performing….One summer, I was having a pool party when I lived up on Terry's Fork, and of course Bobby came early to help me get ready. He wanted to know how I was calling it a pool party when I didn't have a pool. So, we decided to fix that small problem by going to Roses and getting one. It

was so hot, and the little kids' pools were outside. We wandered around for a few minutes, and Bobby said, "I'll be right back," and disappeared. Fifteen minutes later, with sweat running into my eyes, I started to head back in the store to find him. I was pissed and hot as hell. Right as I got up to the door, there stood Bobby on the other side of the misted glass waving at me as he enjoyed a cold drink and all the sweet cool air from the air conditioner. He laughed all the way home, and by the time we got back to the house I was laughing, too. He said, "Why, I trusted your ability to find the best kiddy pool and didn't need my help at all. And it was nice and cool in the store!" I learned a lot from Bobby. Wherever he is, I hope he knows how much I appreciate his special presence in my life and how I'll keep on loving him till I join up with him again.

Don Pedi—11/29/2021—Facebook

So sad to hear of Bobby McMillon's passing. He was a dear man, with a good sense of humor. He was always willing to share his incredible knowledge of Appalachian culture and seemingly endless repertoire of traditional songs and stories. He'll be missed.

Lori Allison—11/28/2021—Facebook

I'm going to miss you so, so much, my uncle. You were one of my favorite people and my very, very best friends. I am so blessed to have had an entire 30 years of memories with you. You taught me so much and so many old songs/stories. The Appalachian folk world will never be the same without your knowledge. I will never be the same without your silly jokes and picking on times and love. I will forever be proud of the way you taught me to say words like Yellar (yellow) and arish (Irish). I will strive everywhere I go to share what makes those stories and songs special because that's what you did. I regret not being able to see you as often as I should have the past few years. I'll miss calling you every day or so, just catching up on the latest gossip and hearing you sing a song over the phone to me. I mostly am so upset that Maggie doesn't get to meet you this side of forever, but I will make sure you are a part of her little life from the moment she is born. Until we meet again, my sweet uncle, I will sing for you. I love you.

Saro Lynch Thomason—12/1/2021—Facebook

Bobby, it will take a while to understand the depth of your passing. There was no one else like you. Your encyclopedic knowledge of regional lore, songs, family names, geography…your humor and sweetness. You were always so welcoming and warm, so ready to sing, so ready to gossip about who did what and why in an old ballad or in some true crime scenario of centuries past (which is all I ever want to talk about anyway). You are dearly missed and will continue to be missed for countless years. I hope to sing with you again somewhere somehow.

Susan Pepper—12/15/2021—Ballad Zoom Circle

We are going to miss Bobby at our sessions. It won't be the same without him. He always had a spark about him and something interesting he wanted to share with us. He enriched our time together with his spirit, knowledge and generosity. He kept us on track. I'll never forget I was just gabbing at the start of one of our singing sessions like I usually do—this was the first session he came to—and he interjected pretty quickly, "Okay, whose turn is it? Someone going to sing?"

About a year ago, Bobby told me about a singer (Ethel Brown, 1910-1992) he and Sheila had known that lived up the road from me, and I wrote a short play. And thirty years later, Ethel Brown's signature song was sung once again in Jackson County when three thespians took to the stage and brought her songs and stories to life. That's just my story of what I learned within the last year from Bobby. Imagine all the threads he spun and connected among singers, songs, and lore over a lifetime of dedicated work.

The two songs that I'll probably most associate with Bobby are "Black is the Color" and "Young Emily." I first heard him perform back in 2005, and I remember being struck by that amazing verse "The fish that swims in the ocean swims over my true love's breast / His body's in a gentle motion, and I pray that his soul's at rest." There are others, too—"Dickie and Johnson," "The Old Grey Mare," and "The Old Churchyard."

I think I remember Bobby saying around the time that I met him that he doesn't perform the ballads, he presents them. That's the truth. He was so at home in the old love songs. The songs

were intertwined with his life, and his life intertwined with them. He was true to those songs through his last days, continuing to share them with us in our sessions, with his niece Lori, with William, Derek—and I am sure many, many others who sought him out or found themselves in his company. He even performed at Ferrum College after he had recently come home from the hospital with oxygen (and just weeks before his passing); his commitment to sharing the songs was clear.

I feel a knowing in my heart that he had peace around passing on so many songs to others who are actually singing them—keeping it, as they say, a living tradition. We are so lucky to have known Bobby and to think of him when we sing.

Amy Tipton Cortner—11/29/2021—Facebook

Lots of folks will be sharing memories of Bobby McMillon today. Here's one of mine. Late one afternoon at the Swannanoa Gathering, I came on Bobby sitting by himself on a stone wall. He was the master artist of the day, but instead of being surrounded by minders and students and other artists, he was alone. He waved, so I hopped up on the wall with him. We had a wonderful talk about our mutual ancestral stomping grounds. And we had an even better discussion of what the early settlers, who got here right after the buffalo vanished, might actually have been seeing in the woods. Bobby's theory was wild hogs. As we pondered the mysteries of names, he told me that "tiger" was another word for panther—the word my grandmother used for mountain lion. Then we discussed which restaurants to avoid in Black Mountain. That was Bobby. He could talk as entertainingly about "cold fajitas" as he could provide a scholarly rumination on how feral hogs could be mistaken for bison—while throwing in a sidebar about tigers.

Cassy Robins—11/29/2021—Facebook

We lost an amazing person yesterday. I have known Bobby since about 2004—we hit it off immediately! We spent an untold number of hours talking and laughing and researching songs in the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Handwritten Ballad Collection. We became fast friends and stayed in touch long after I had left Mars Hill. I was so excited to have Damon meet his Uncle Bobby this summer, where he sang to us for several hours and we caught up

after a long spell of not seeing each other. He was dear to me and to so many others, and the world is a little more dim today. My heart is sad, but I am rejoicing that he is in heaven, and I can just see him flirting around from one old ballad singer to the next and catching tunes.

Rodney Sutton—11/28/2021—Facebook

The voice of one of America's iconic folk performers and keeper of the old love songs fell silent today—Bobby McMillon died this afternoon of heart failure at Mission Hospital in Asheville, NC. Bobby was a close friend for years, and I began recording him back in 2011, thinking I was capturing dozens of the hundreds of songs that Bobby told me he had never "recorded!" I cherish the many hours I spent with him at his and Joyce's home in Celo, NC, though I learned that Dan Patterson and Wayne Martin, among many others, had in fact recorded most of these ballads years ago! When I asked Bobby about this, he said, "Oh, yeah, these have all been recorded. I thought you were asking me if they were on CD's." But I did ask him to include where he learned the songs from and the history of each song. Bobby was one of the smartest, sweetest people I have ever met—and his recall of songs, tunes and stories was as strong as ever up to his last days! Rest in Peace, my friend!

Denise O'Sullivan—11/28/2021—Facebook

I always loved hanging out with Bobby! He was such a great performer and an even better person. He was so humble and an encyclopedia of ballads & storytelling. I remember the first time I met him, and he sang "Farmer's Curst Wife."

Luke Hoilman—12/12/2021—Life Celebration for Bobby McMillon at Mars Hill College

The world has lost a piece of itself today, and all of us have lost a piece of our world. One can't be a good storyteller without first being a good listener. That's what Bobby was for me. What I most appreciated about him wasn't his singing or storytelling, as great as we all knew these abilities to be in him. It was his ability to listen. It was his willingness to listen without prejudice and the interest that he took in whatever I was saying that always made me feel loved and warm when talking to Bob and spending time with

him. His way of hearing you out, empathizing and sympathizing with you, then laughing or sighing at the perfect moment, always drew me to him. Bobby treasured those who came before him because of their wisdom and wit. I long for his presence today for those same reasons.

Bobby was very close to his family and grandparents. He was very sentimental. He could recall distant memories that changed his life like they'd just taken place yesterday. He collected family artifacts and music memorabilia. It was on these things that Bobby and I bonded and based our relationship. We shared a nostalgic love for the past and the memories that we created with our respective families and friends. We talked about what it means to be "Appalachian."

I've heard others say that Bobby was born at the wrong time, that his love and interest in traditions and the way things used to be would've made him better suited to have lived decades prior. He sought to understand the stories and context of old songs and stories from generations prior. Bobby filled his time researching and trying to reconcile how and why songs had multiple versions and lyrical incarnations. In doing so, he not only connected music, he connected people and their stories. In collecting ballads and tales, he saved and lifted up the memories, livelihoods and emotions of our ancestors and predecessors. His work wasn't just intellectual or academic. His passion wasn't just based on melodic interests or a hobby of reading. Everything he did was emblematic of his quest to remember and honor his loved ones that were no longer with him or slowly fading away. He sought to preserve their lives and feelings.

Bobby was a champion for those who came before us. His focus on family and those who laid the groundwork for him drove him to be as successful and wise as we all knew him to be with his work. That memory you have of your grandparents spending time with you during the summer, or the feeling of Christmas morning with your parents, or the piercing chill that overtakes you when you remember the last words spoken to you by a dear friend, the butterflies you get when you hug the person you love most, the guttural sentimental reaction you have when hearing a song that you haven't heard in twenty years, how the smell of a meal during Thanksgiving can take you back to your childhood, the pride of a

hard day's work, the tears brought on by an old ballad sang by one of the world's last true treasures…all of these emotions and feelings were rescued, documented, and safeguarded by Bobby's work. In doing so, he not only chronicled the stories and struggles of those who came before us, he captured all of those feelings and emotions that we still have today.

Branson Raines—11/28/2021—Facebook

Found out that one of my ballad singing heroes died today. Bobby McMillon, or as Sheila and I called him—Bobby Smithsonian—knew more ballads than any one person I know and probably more than all those I know combined. Sat many times on Sheila Kay's porch sitting with Bobby and just listening and asking questions. Truly will miss you, Bobby.

William Ritter—11/29/2021—Facebook

For the first time, I have a present all boxed up and wrapped for someone, but I'll never get the chance to give it to them. Inside is a Braves championship hat (that sure took its sweet time to get here). Also inside was the hope for a little gift to cheer someone up who had just had another tough go at the hospital. Inside was—soon celebrating the 70th birthday of a dear sweet and hilarious man, a little visit on Christmas, and that drive around Kona we never did get to embark on.

Late last night as I laid awake in my bed, deliriously tired from the grief still pouring out of me, but also unable to cross over into sleep, I had one of those dream-visions found on the borders of rest. In it, I saw Bobby board an old black steam train that wove its way up into the mountains, snake-like, deep into a holler where a little cabin full of old-faces-made-young-again waited to greet Bobby with grins and tales and songs.

If anybody would want a little "Cabin in the Corner of Gloryland," full of friendly faces, with a big wide porch for visiting, it would be Bobby McMillon. I'm grateful to have known the man, the myth, the keeper of old ways and old knowings. I did record a good number of songs and stories from him, (still a drop in the ocean of his knowledge), but whenever I would sit down to do anything with them, a little voice would say: "Instead of doing this right now, why don't you call him while you still can." So, I would ring him up, and he'd say, "Will-am C. Ritter!"

Or I would go over for a visit and help feed his and Joyce's little herd of orange porch cats—fluffy, beautiful, and kind of aloof Fuzz; sweet, snuggly Yeller; and that other little skittish one. My last visit to Bobby, we didn't really talk folklore. The Three Stooges were on, and muted. Their bodily humor was so genius that you really didn't need to know what was going on at all to be tickled.

I've learned so many songs from Bobby, and I will always treasure them. I could have tried to record him more, and I know I'll have those little regrets for not learning this or that, but I certainly do not regret choosing first and foremost to be his friend more than his documenter. I am grateful that Bobby got to see the Braves win the World Series. I am grateful, too, for his family and his dear friends. I'm also grateful for the words to this old song—"My Dearest Dear"—that Bobby sang for me in an old tobacco barn-turned-cabin in Winston-Salem years ago. Our paths diverge, dear friend. As I walk through these mountains, I feel blessed that your voice will still ring in my ears.

Photo: Bobby McMillon playing guitar. From: Bobby McMillon Collection, Southern Appalachian Archives, Mars Hill University.

"My Dearest Dear"

My dearest dear, the time draws near
When you and I must part
And no one knows the grief and woe
Of my poor aching heart
Or what I suffered for your sake
It's you I love so dear
I wish that you would go with me
Or I could tarry here

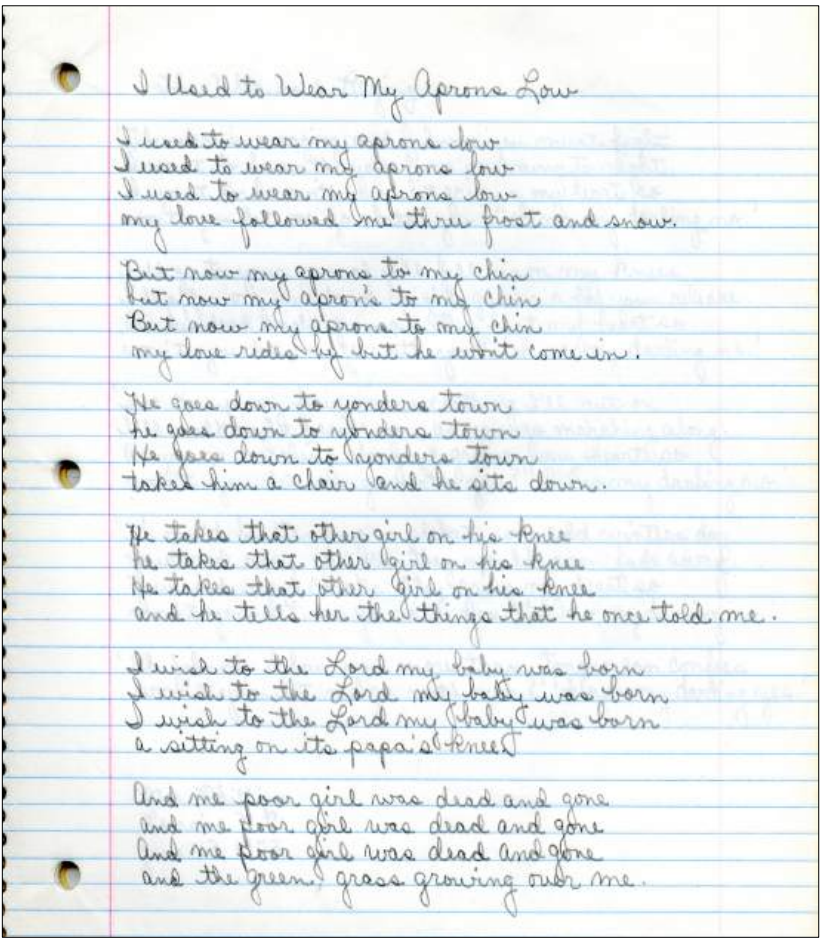
Your company, my dearest dear
Is so sweet unto me
It makes me think when we're apart
That every day is three
That every day is three my love
And every hour is ten
It makes me weep when I should sleep
And think I've lost a friend

I wish my breast were made of glass
Wherein you might behold
Your name in secret I would write
In letters of bright gold
In letters of bright gold, my dear
Believe me what I say
You are the darling of my heart
Until my dying day

I wish I were ten thousand miles
Or on some distant shore
Or down in some lone valley place
Where the wild beasts howl and roar
Where the wild beasts howl and roar, my love
Believe me what I say
You are the one that I love best
Until my dying day

And when I'm far from you, my love
Think on your absent friend
And when the wind blows high and clear
A line or two please send
And when the wind blows high and clear
A line please send to me
Make sure you may
That I'll repay when the wind blows fair to thee

Photo: Bobby McMillon, Old Kona Baptist Church, 2018. Photo: Leila Weinstein.



I Used to Wear My Aprons Low

I used to wear my aprons low
I used to wear my aprons low
I used to wear my aprons low
my love followed me thru frost and snow.

But now my aprons to my chin
but now my apron's to my chin
But now my aprons to my chin
my love rides by but he won't come in.

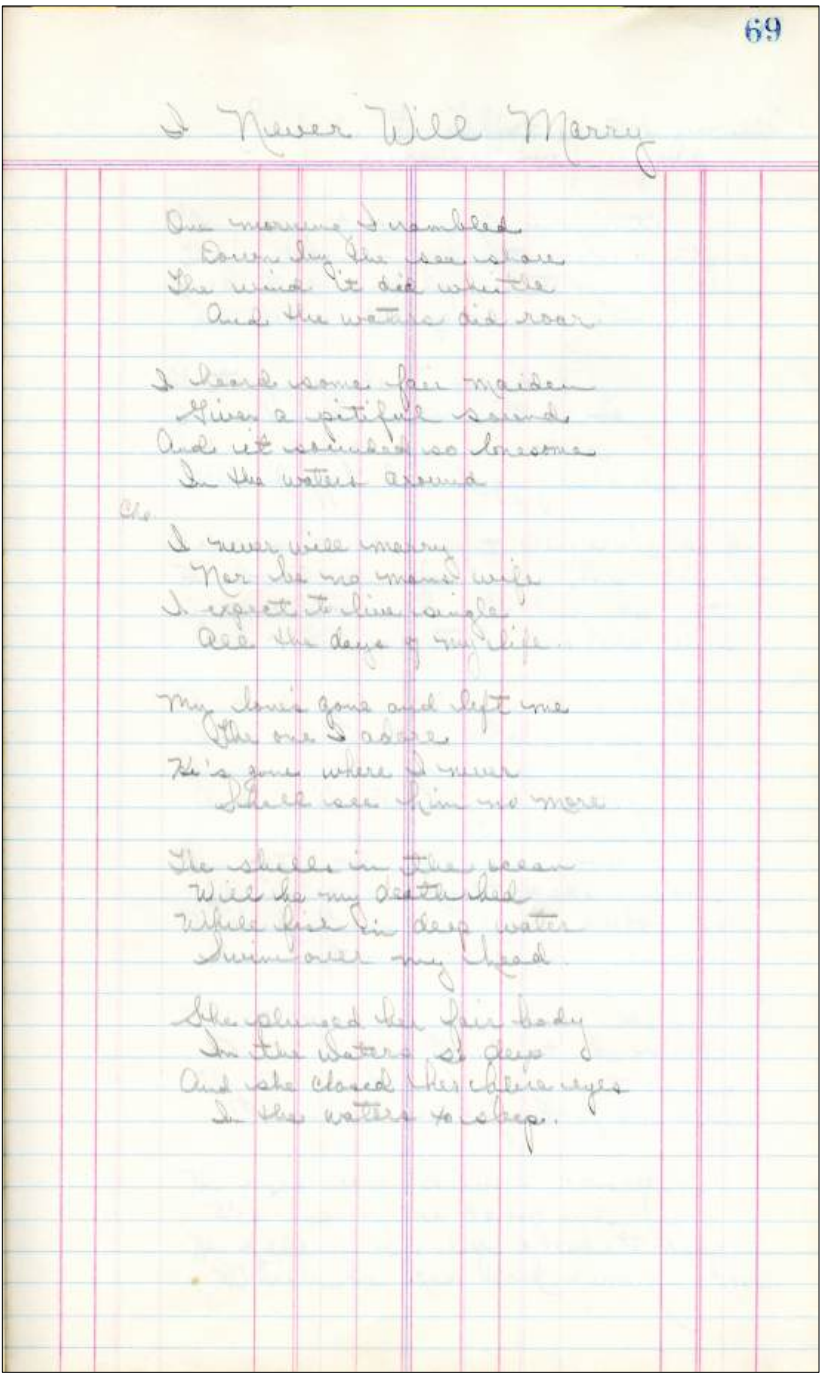
He goes down to yonders town
he goes down to yonders town
He goes down to yonders town
takes him a chair and he sits down.

He takes that other girl on his knee
he takes that other girl on his knee
He takes that other girl on his knee
and he tells her the things that he once told me.

I wish to the Lord my baby was born
I wish to the Lord my baby was born
I wish to the Lord my baby was born
a setting on its papa's knee

And me poor girl was dead and gone
And me poor girl was dead and gone
And me poor girl was dead and gone
and the green grass growing over me.

Photo: Bobby McMillon's handwritten transcription of the song "I Used to Wear My Aprons Low." From: Bobby McMillon Collection, Southern Appalachian Archives, Mars Hill University.



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I Never Will Marry

One morning I rambled
Down by the sea shore
The wind it did whistle
And the waves did roar

I heard some fair maiden
Give a pitiful sound
And it sounded so lonesome
In the waters around

Oh

I never will marry
Nor be no man's wife
I expect to live single
All the days of my life

My love's gone and left me
For one I adore
He's gone where I never
Shall see him no more

The shells in the ocean
Will be my death bed
While I lie in deep water
Swim over my head

She plunged her fair body
In the waters so deep
And she closed her Celia eyes
In the waters to sleep.

Photo: Bobby McMillon's handwritten transcription of the song "I Never Will Marry." From: Bobby McMillon Collection, Southern Appalachian Archives, Mars Hill University.

End Notes

1. *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* (1999), a documentary in The American Traditional Culture Series, jointly produced by Tom Davenport Films and the Curriculum in Folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill. It can be watched on the not-for-profit website Folkstreams.net. The film closes with a 9-minute Epilogue, "The Making of the Ballad Singer," in which Bobby and his sister-in-law Marina Trivette tell of learning the old songs and how much the songs mean to them. The Library of Congress has posted online a 2018 video interview with Bobby. He also sang in one scene in the commercial film *Songcatcher,* loosely based on the life of Olive Dame Campbell, an early folksong collector in Appalachia. Bobby was also the sole performer on one published CD, *Lords and Merry Maids All: Mountain Love Songs and Child Ballads* (Hickory, N.C.: Ivy Creek Recordings, 2008).
2. Patterson, Daniel W. *A Tree Accurst: Bobby McMillon and Stories of Frankie Silver*. United States: UNC P, 2003.
3. Bobby McMillon Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina Library. His collection holds both manuscripts and recordings and includes copies of both Bobby's own field tapes as well as recordings made of him. Many additional recordings of Bobby are also at the SFC in the collections of the Pattersons and others. Numerous tapes in these collections have been digitized and made available online through the website of the Southern Folklife Collection. Other libraries, including that of Mars Hill University, also hold significant materials relating to Bobby McMillon.
4. Patterson, Daniel W. "Contexts: Bobby McMillon's Tall Tale—Transcription and Commentary." *Folkstreams*. Accessed December 30, 2021. https://www.folkstreams.net/contexts/bobby-mcmillons-tall-tale-transcription-and-commentary

William Ritter is a musician, seed saver, and independent folklorist living in Bakersville, NC. In 2019, he and Bobby McMillon received the SouthArts In These Mountains Folklife Apprenticeship Grant to work together as Mentor and Apprentice. Ritter's first solo album is Mentor *(2022), and he participated in* The Resonance Sessions: A Benefit Album for Western NC Live from Marshall *(2025). He is founder of Song to Seed (www.songtoseed.com).*