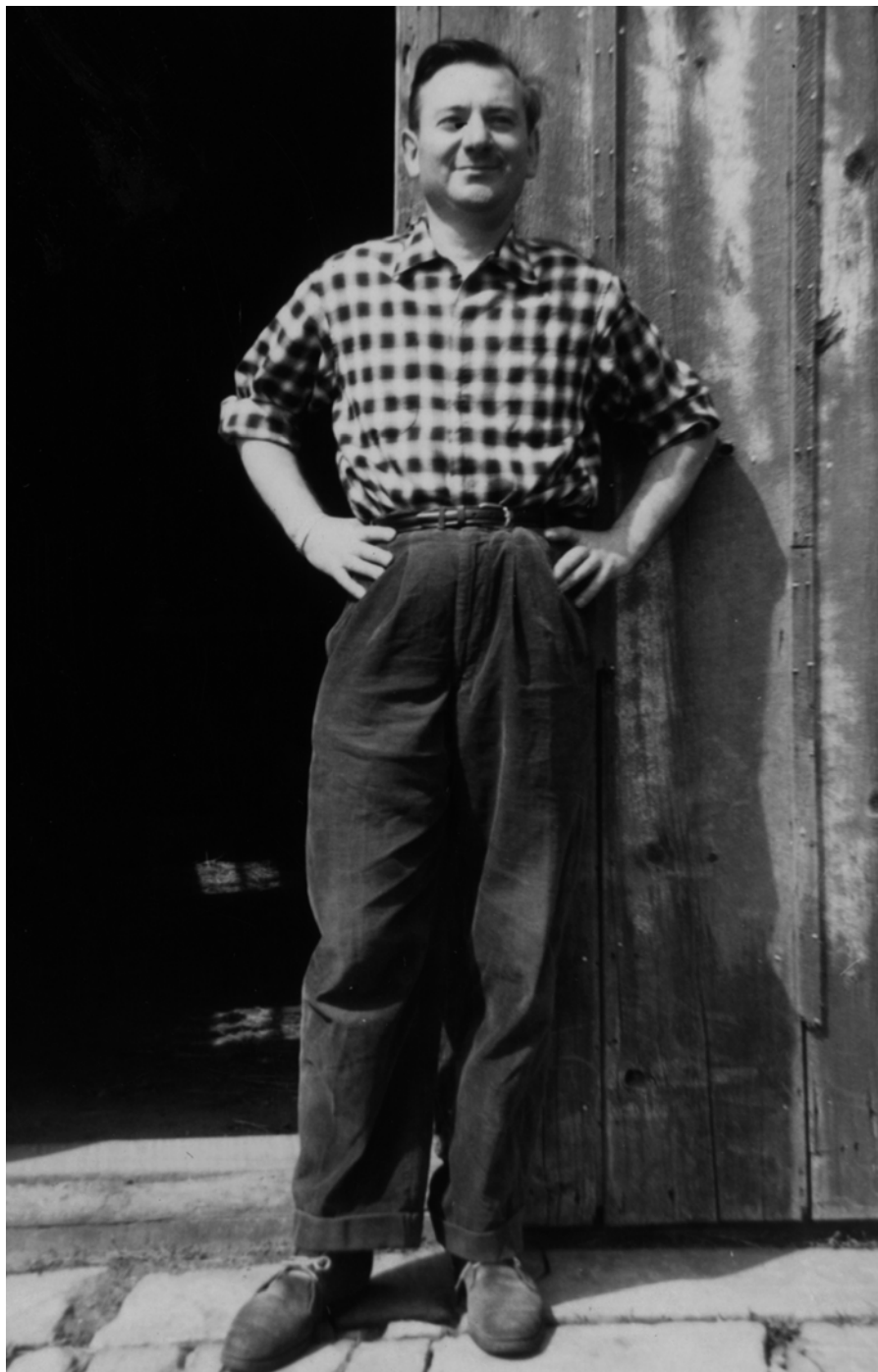


56.1 Spring-Summer 2009

North Carolina

Folklore Journal





North Carolina Folklore Journal

Philip E. (Ted) Coyle, Editor
Thomas McGowan, Production Editor

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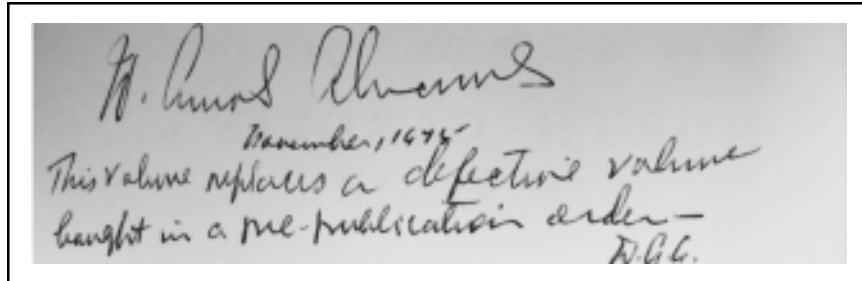
Dr. Philip E. Coyle
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

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North Carolina Folklore Journal

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Frame Photograph: "Doc" Abrams's notation on the flyleaf of his copy of Volume Two: *Folk Ballads from North Carolina* of *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. The inscription reads, "W. Amos Abrams / November 1975 / This volume replaces a defective volume / bought in a pre-publication order— / W.A.A." The volume includes ballad texts collected by Cratis Williams and Abrams and by Abrams's student Edith Walker, discussed on pp. 33-40.

Cover Photographs: Front cover: The young Archie Green. Southern Folklife Collection #P3388, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Back cover: The cd cover of *Rank Strangers*, which is reviewed by Lisa Baldwin on pp. 49-54.



Editor's Foreword

By Philip E. "Ted" Coyle

Appalachian State University has long been a key institution for the documentation and promotion of folklore in North Carolina. Early advocates for the North Carolina Folklore Society, like "Ike" Greer and "Doc" Abrams, had enduring connections there. Today, we continue to rely on Tom McGowan and other scholars and students associated with Appalachian State University to perpetuate our society and its activities, like this journal itself.

This issue continues our publication of work related to Appalachian State University's "So Mote It Ever Be" Project, which digitized manuscripts and recordings in the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection. In our previous issue we published overviews of the project by ASU Librarian Fred J. Hay and Project Administrator Paul Robertson. This issue focuses on the student research projects that were facilitated by digital access to these ballads. They represent a new era of research about ballads, ballad-singers, and scholarly interpretations of ballad traditions in the Southern Appalachians. This issue also includes an important series of reviews written by students of Tom McGowan. They highlight the quality and value of recent projects documenting a range of distinctive North Carolina folk traditions.

Frame photograph: W. Amos "Doc" Abrams (l) and Cratis D. Williams probably at Abrams's departure ceremony from Appalachian in 1946. Abrams, whose collection is discussed in this issue and NCFJ 55.2, and Williams collected ballads together for The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore. Photo courtesy of the Appalachian State University Archives.

Just as the North Carolina Folklore Society depends on the scholars and students associated with Appalachian State University, Dan Patterson's tribute to the late Archie Green reminds us that we all depend on each other. Archie Green's accomplishments in North Carolina are the result of a series of human relationships that connect people from different walks of life, but with a similar commitment to documenting, understanding, and celebrating the North Carolinians whose traditional cultural expressions help to make our days worth living. The North Carolina Folklore Society itself is an important part of that network of connections. In his tribute, four recipients of the North Carolina Folklore Society's Brown-Hudson Folklore Award are mentioned: Dan Patterson, Archie Green, Terry Zug, and Joan Moser. The list of Brown-Hudson awardees associated with Appalachian State University—Tom McGowan himself prominent among them—multiplies those connections again. And so we are privileged to contemplate a heroic genealogy—an “emblazoned fraternity,” as Melville put it—to which we ourselves pertain. We hope that you enjoy this issue of the *North Carolina Folklore Journal*.



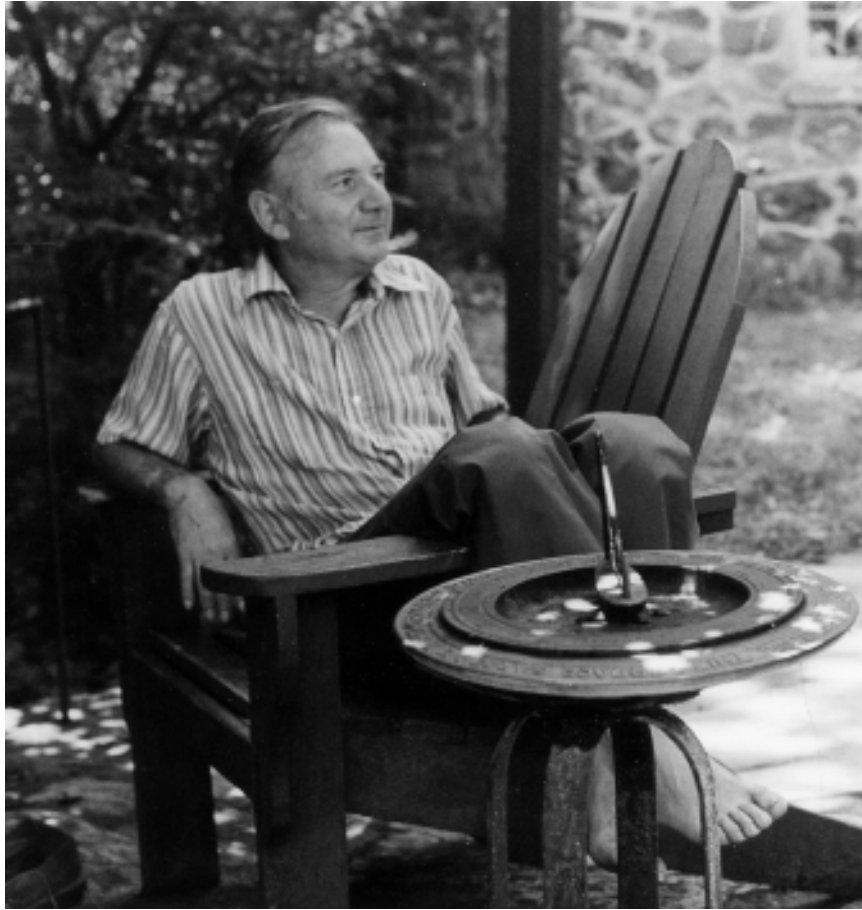
A North Carolina Memorial to Archie Green

By Daniel W. Patterson

Archie Green, one of the most prominent and influential of American folklorists, died on March 22 at his home in San Francisco. Many have already written tributes to this learned, wise, energetic, humane, and selfless man. They have told the story of his life: a Russian Jewish immigrant's son who took a bachelor's degree at the University of California at Berkeley in 1939 and then joined a carpenters' union on the San Francisco docks, spending twenty years learning his trade and building ships before turning librarian and then getting a doctorate in folklore at the University of Pennsylvania and beginning a new career in this field. People have already written of him as a seminal figure in the study of what he called "laborlore" or workers' culture. They have described his central role in lobbying in 1976 for the American Folklife Preservation Act, which established the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. They have described his influence as a teacher, both in the classroom and one-on-one with every kindred spirit he encountered.

Dan Patterson has been teacher, mentor, and friend to young and old folklorists in North Carolina and a long-time supporter of the North Carolina Folklore Society. Retired after a distinguished career at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as Kenan Professor Emeritus, he continues to study our state's rich folklife and to encourage other scholars in their work.

Frame photo: Archie Green listens to presentations at Laborlore Conversations III, sponsored by the Curriculum in Folklore and the Fund for Labor Culture & History, UNC-Chapel Hill, 24 September 2005. Photo by Derek Green.



Archie Green at the John C. Campbell Folk School, Brasstown, NC, 1980. Original photo was published in Joyce Hancock's "Appalachian Welcome: A Photographic Essay," *Appalachian Journal* 8.3: 192.

My tribute will sketch the outlines of another story, his inestimable contribution to the study of folklore in North Carolina. Archie's commitment to the study of workers' lore and lives led him and his close friends Eugene Earle and Ed Kahn in 1961 and '62 to interview and record Dorsey, Howard, and Nancy Dixon, textile mill workers in East Rockingham, and to edit the tapes into the LP *Babies in the Mill* (Testament Records, ca. 1963). This important album includes both textile folksongs with histories that can be traced back into mid-nineteenth-century mills, gospel songs they loved, and also country-music hits composed by these textile workers in the twentieth century.

Archie's affection for North Carolina was fed also by other things. One was the fiction and egalitarian outlook of an Asheville stone-carver's son, Thomas Wolfe. Another was the early publication of labor-song studies, *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926) by Howard Odum and *John Henry* (1929) by Guy B. Johnson, faculty members in Chapel Hill. This led him, when he passed through town, to call on me and Terry Zug (his classmate in folklore studies at the University of Pennsylvania) and encourage our efforts to revive the Curriculum in Folklore.

This gesture was to have unforeseen consequences. In the late 1970s a dean at the University sent us a notice: He had scheduled the Curriculum in Folklore for an evaluation by a scholar in the field. Whom would we recommend to do the review? Terry and I thought and thought—and thought of Archie Green. As we very quickly learned, this was a stroke of genius. Archie spent a week on campus meeting with students and department chairs and higher officials and left. He had lobbied while here and quickly sent a detailed report, and a week or so later the dean for the first time gave the Curriculum a budget for library purchases and for equipment for field work and teaching. He raised our annual budget for visiting speakers from \$25 to \$2,500. He gave us assistantships for students. Archie had been busy on campus that week! But it was not until much later that we fully realized what a force we had innocently turned loose upon the University—and how much good it was going to do.

This is only the beginning of my story. I want to tell it because it shows so clearly the generosity, energy, ideas, and negotiating skills that Archie Green brought to us—and, I'm sure, to every other situation where he saw an opening to do something he thought valuable. The opening Archie saw was a public university in a state that had a textile history and textile songs he loved, a Southern school with a history of concern for the wellbeing of ordinary citizens in its state and with scholars, such as Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, who as early as the 1920s were writing laborlore studies, and a graduate program in folklore that had nearly gone defunct but was being revived by two of his friends. He also spotted potential in an archival collection of sound recordings we had begun to build.

On this collection Archie seized for his next initiative. He and a circle of friends had already created the John Edwards Memorial Foundation around an Australian's collection of commercial recordings of American vernacular music, particularly country and blues and gospel. They had gained an international reputation for it by



Archie Green with Dorsey Dixon and a mule. Southern Folklife Collection #P584, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

publishing both a quarterly journal and a series of LP's from the collection. They had originally placed the collection at UCLA, which they now felt gave it too little support. Archie solicited an offer for it from UNC. We found great support in the library, the administration, and academic departments, and Archie engineered the transfer of the collection to Chapel Hill.

Invited to return to review the Curriculum in Folklore a second time, Archie secured not only the Dean's commitment of a new faculty position to the Curriculum but also the official acceptance of the recordings in our Southern Folklife Collection as a unit of the Library system, and then got the promise of a staff position for it, the position in which Steve Weiss now so admirably serves. Then Archie donated funds for an endowment on behalf of the collection—and

induced old friends to donate to it. Archie also donated his own recordings, papers, books, and rare labor songsters to enrich the collection—and has never stopped steering the collections of others to it.

But Archie also urged service and outreach from the Collection to the wider field. He showed us the importance of mounting a celebratory three-day conference to assess the work already done to study Southern vernacular music. It brought together an extraordinarily diverse gathering of musicians, scholars, field collectors, record collectors, record producers, filmmakers, activists, archivists, academics, and public folklorists, all of them enthusiastic students of Southern vernacular music. And he got us to publish the proceedings of the conference under the title *Sounds of the South* (1991). Later he stimulated the Southern Folklife Collection and the UNC Library to publish (with the help of the John Edwards Memorial Forum) *Country Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music* (2002), compiled by his friends Guthrie T. Meade, Jr., Dick Spottswood, and Douglas S. Meade. Archie also urged the SFC to publish a series of recordings. The first CD—jointly sponsored by the SFC and the NC Folklife Institute, and the NC Arts Council—was *When I Get My New House Done: Western North Carolina Fiddle Tunes and Songs* (2007). It contained field recordings of Marcus Martin, who was the subject of Joan Moser's 1963 UNC master's thesis, one of the earliest written about an American fiddler. Archie also inspired the Southern Folklife Collection to become a joint sponsor with his Fund for Labor History and Culture of a series of conferences called "Laborlore Conversations."

But Archie didn't confine himself to collections and academic structures and events. He always put people—particularly young people—first. So next he donated more money to UNC to establish an Archie Green Fund for Workers' History and Culture. Since 1997 it has supported the research of more than 25 graduate students from Folklore, History, and Anthropology. A mere decade, but already the University of Illinois Press has published one resulting book, William Jones's *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (2005) and the University of North Carolina Press another, Patrick Huber's *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (2008).

As I reflect on all this, I see Archie Green as a man of so many ideas that he could not possibly carry out all of them in a lifetime. He

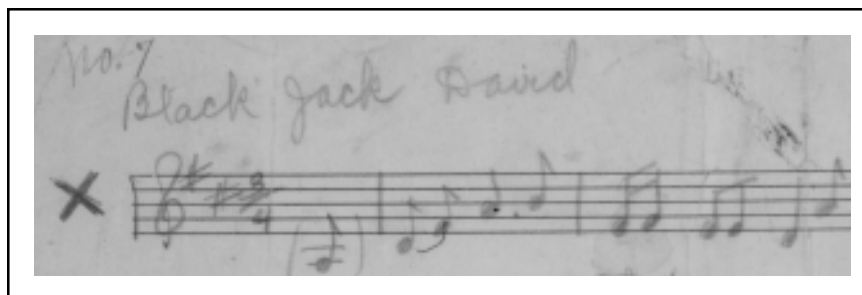


MEMORIAL TO ARCHIE GREEN

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knew this. So he tried to empower others with his ideas, advice, money, and skill as a lobbyist. He enjoyed helping others find fulfillment and make contributions. He told me once that his success as a lobbyist lay in showing another person that the goals of each support those of the other. And I think that in the UNC case, this is what happened. We at UNC and across North Carolina are grateful for all he did for us and proud that we could offer hands to carry out projects in which he believed. I'm pleased to repeat the praise of him offered by Julie Ardery, a former UNC student who became one of his scores of protégés. In a heart-felt tribute she called him "the smallest giant I've ever known."

SPRING-SUMMER 2009



Returning to the Far Past: Isaac Garfield Greer's Ballad Collection Revisited

By Travis A. Rountree

In his 1968 article on Isaac Garfield Greer, Arthur Palmer Hudson notes that Greer was “not a folklore scholar, and he published almost nothing. But he was a perambulating anthology of NC folklore” (63). While Hudson did not consider Greer a folklorist, Greer did indeed contribute greatly to the continuing knowledge of Western North Carolina balladry. He traveled throughout Western North Carolina collecting ballads from his home county, Watauga. Later in his life, Greer continued the ballad tradition by performing them to audiences both nationally and internationally. Through examining Greer's biography and two of the ballads that he frequently sang to audiences, we can see how he wanted people to appreciate the literary and historical significance of these ballads.

Growing up in Zionville, North Carolina, Greer was around people who sang local ballads like “Tom Dula” (a spelling that Greer demanded, noting that he knew a soldier who had served with Dula in the Civil War), “Frankie Silver,” and “Claude Allen.” Along with these

Travis A. Rountree teaches in the English Department at Appalachian State University and also at Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute. He graduated from the Cratis D. Williams Graduate School at Appalachian with a Master's in English and a certificate in Appalachian Studies.

Frame photo: Musical notation for “Black Jack David” (“The Gypsy Laddie” Child 200, Brown 37). Isaac Garfield Greer Papers, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C.



I.G. Greer and Willie Spainhour Greer. Isaac Garfield Greer Papers, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C.

local ballads, he also heard ones that derived from Scottish, Irish, and English traditions such as “Black Jack Davy,” “Beaulampkins,” and “The Old Arm Chair.” Greer expanded on his local mountain education when he went to college at the Appalachian Training School (now Appalachian State University) where he graduated in 1906. From 1906 to 1910 he continued his education at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill (Hudson 63).

Before graduating from UNC in 1910, Greer had the opportunity of meeting folklorist C. Alphonso Smith. After Greer recited ballads for Smith’s class, Smith told him, “The day is coming when the ballad and folk song will be taught as literature and music wherever the English tongue is known. Go back to the hills, Greer, and collect every ballad and folk song you can find, because the day is coming when it will be appreciated” (Greer “North Carolina Folk Songs”). Greer followed the advice of his professor and went back to his mountain home of Watauga County where he taught government and history at Appalachian State Teachers College until 1932. While there, he collected and performed numerous ballads from Watauga County residents.

While Greer collected he also performed these ballads for the entertainment of national and international audiences. Joseph Robinson wrote in the *Winston Journal and Sentinel* that in November of 1931 Greer entertained author Sherwood Anderson (who also resided in the Appalachians in Southwest Virginia). Robinson remarked that “Professor Greer combines various gifts as a ballad singer. He sings the old folk songs as he heard them sung as a boy, which is the manner in which they should be sung, for his manner of singing is that which came down out of the far past” (Robinson). From his comments Robinson affirms that Greer attempted to reconstruct the ballads of Europe as they were passed down in Western North Carolina. Some of the characters in these ballads would have certainly entertained Anderson, who is noted for the unusual and “grotesque” characters and events in his novel *Winesburg, Ohio*.

In 1932 Greer decided to leave his beloved Watauga County and move to Thomasville, N.C., where he became the superintendent of the N.C. Baptist Orphanage. Soon after, he returned to Chapel Hill where he was an executive of the Business Foundation of the University of North Carolina. While out of the mountains, Greer continued to give speeches and recite ballads around the state. The voluminous correspondence in the I.G. Greer Collection at Appalachian State illustrates the high demand for Greer’s performances throughout



the state of North Carolina and often nationwide. Greer himself explains the ballad form and how he would recite them during these performances:

The ballad singer doesn't have a trained voice; you'll soon find that out. The trained voice doesn't interpret the ballads. And this is truly an interpretation. The ballad is a story that you sing. It isn't a ballad unless you sing it. It isn't a ballad unless it tells a story. The ballad singer doesn't sing for entertainment. He sings for his own satisfaction. He's telling the story of someone else. He's completely absorbed in the story that he's telling and he's oblivious to the crowd about him. He's telling the story, the story that took place somewhere. (Greer, "Talk at the G.F. Women's Club Asheville, NC")

Through this statement we can see how Greer approached ballads as an objective singer who sings to entertain himself rather than for the appreciation of an audience. This idea dates back to when ballad singing was a pastime for farmers who worked hard in the field and used the music as a means of entertainment in the evenings after all the farm work was done.

While Greer collected ballads from Watauga County residents in North Carolina, he often made changes to the ballads that he recorded in order to bring them back to their European roots. These changes illustrate that Greer was trying to make the ballad more European and take away the oftentimes rough American translation of the ballad. Through these changes he was trying to deconstruct the hillbilly stereotype and edit the ballad to render a more medieval theme. Greer recalled the reaction of London professors to his ballad performances:

We gave a performance at the Cecil Sharp House in London. Some of the professors from Oxford were there that evening, and they came up and said, "Greer, we thank you. You've preserved the English ballad truer to its original form in the rural areas of America than we have in England...Be careful about this: don't jazz them, don't commercialize them, and sing them as you've been singing them, without any accompaniment." (Greer, "North Carolina Folk Songs")

These comments show that Greer was able to change the ballads that he recorded into renditions that fit within the parameters of the Child ballads. He did bend the rules of ballad collecting by changing a few words of those from whom he collected; however, he did it to create an appreciation for mountain ballads that shows their link to European balladry. He no longer wanted his audiences to associate

this music with Appalachian stereotypes, but rather as ballads that were passed down through generations, ballads that evoked images of European lords and ladies. He wanted these ballads to be celebrated for their literary and historical value.

Greer's concern for these ballads exceeded his performance on stage. As he collected the ballads, he submitted many of them to Duke University where they were published in the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. He also recorded many ballads and anecdotes for the Library of Congress, which are included in the Anglo-American Ballads (AFS L 7) and the Anglo-American Songs and Ballads Collections (AFS L 12 and AFS L 14). To continue his legacy of ballad collecting and preservation, Greer's relatives donated most of his hand-written ballad collection to the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection at Appalachian State University in 1971.

Perhaps two of Greer's most interesting ballads that kept both him and his audience "completely absorbed" were "Black Jack David" and "Beaulampkins." These ballads were derived from Child ballads and involve the dark side of humanity, a side that Greer forced many people to see as he recited these ancient ballads. The historical significance of these ballads is evident through the variations found in the collection and how they compare to the earlier Child versions. By briefly citing some of the lines of the ballads we can also speculate about Greer's reasons for choosing to perform these particular ballads.

One of the ballads that Greer performed the most was "Black Jack Davy," sometimes cited as "Black Jack David." His particular interest in this song is evident in his frequent use of it during his performances. While the Child ballad "Johnny Faa" relates to "Black Jack Davy," "The Gypsy Laddie" (Child 200) is perhaps the closer rendition of the ballad. However, Bertrand Harris Bronson in *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* cites 128 versions of "The Gypsy Laddie."

All versions of these ballads include the theme of a woman who leaves her husband and child and goes to live with a lower-class man who is a gambler and an outlaw. Albert Friedman writes that in the Scottish version the "husband recovers his wife and hangs the abductor and his accomplices. No American ballad has this ending. Rather, the Lady scoffs at her husband and refuses to return, though upon reflection she comes to feel none too happy with her new lot" (105). Greer's versions agree with Friedman's comments containing the unsatisfied wife at the end of the ballad. While the American version



Musical notation to a variant of "Black Jack Davy" ("Gypsy Laddie" Child 200, Brown 37). Isaac Garfield Greer Papers, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C.

is not as dramatic as the previous Scottish version, it still contains the dramatic topic of infidelity. Despite the discrepancies that occur among "Black Jack Davy," "The House Carpenter," and "The Dae-

mon Lover” it is even more interesting to note that there are many different variants of “Black Jack Davy” included in the Greer file. All of them represent a dignified, interesting ballad that contains both literary and historical elements.

Greer’s first three versions begin with the narrative of Black Jack Davy as he rides through the woods “singing so loud / and merry, that the green hills / all around him rang” as he “charmed the heart of a Lady” (Variant 1, lines 2-3). In the second stanza the first variation differs from the other two. It seems that Greer marked out “honey” and replaced it with “Lady.” This change could have been made for two reasons. One could be a natural human error, as Greer collected numerous ballads from throughout Watauga County. The second could be that Greer wanted the song to become more formalized. The word “honey” is a departure from the European roots of the song that date back as early as 1630 in the Skene Manuscripts (Bronson 198). The first variant again differs from the other two versions as Greer pencils in an exclamation point after the girl answers Black Jack Davy with a “Gee, he, he” (line 13). This exclamation point shows the initial excitement and anxiety of the girl as Black Jack Davy flirts with her. It reveals how she knows that leaving with Black Jack Davy is finally an escape for her to leave her husband and child and flee to a life of freedom.

Despite these changes in variations, Greer retained the original theme of the ballad. He was celebrating the ballad in various ways. The first was that he was trying to have his audience be impressed by the ballad, which seems to be why he changed the couple of words. He removed the local colloquial expressions in order to make the ballad understandable to a more refined audience and to dispel the stereotypes of the Appalachian dialect. Secondly, when he performed the ballad he pronounced every word and did not use a local dialect. Often backed by his wife on her dulcimer, his deep bass voice trembled through the words clearly. Thirdly, we see the telling of a tale that kept the audience’s attention the entire time. By the end of the song Greer shows us how the woman’s love to Black Jack Davy has gone cold and that she is no longer satisfied. As is typical in traditional ballads, the last verse does not moralize, but simply makes the realistic lesson that the woman must suffer penance for leaving her husband and child. The only thing that she has now is Black Jack Davy and his poverty-stricken living conditions.

Another ballad that Greer performed numerous times and one which stands out for its particularly gruesome nature is



"Beaulampkins." This ballad's roots trace back to the Child ballad "Lamkins" (Child II 93). The versions that are in the Greer file are "Beaulampkins" and the more Americanized version "Bold Adkins." Both versions focus on an unpaid hired worker who is involved in a graphic infanticide. This ballad is important in the collection because of its clear transition from the European version to the American version. Greer more than likely picked it to perform because of its drama and also because of the European history that it entails. It is particularly interesting to look closely at this ballad and decipher the reason why Greer felt that this ballad would be an appropriate one to recite to his numerous audiences.

At the beginning of the ballad we are introduced to Beaulampkins' troubles with his landlord. The ballad states that Beaulampkins "was as fine a mason / As ever laid stone / He built a fine castle" however for "pay he got none" ("Beaulampkins" lines 1-4). Clearly there is an injustice present in this verse where Beaulampkins has built a whole castle for the landlord, yet he has not been paid for his work.

In the second verse in both songs we see the potential for danger from the disgruntled hired help. In "Bold Adkins" as the landlord leaves he tells his wife to "be ware of Bold Adkins / He comes unbenown [*sic*]" ("Bold Adkins" lines 7-8). This interpretation signifies Bold Adkins as a man who stays in the shadows preying on unsuspecting women. However, in "Beaulampkins" the landlord tells his wife to beware of Beaulampkins "should he catch you alone" (line 8). However, in both variations the wife is indignant to her husband's warnings: in "Bold Adkins" she even states, "What cares I for Adkins" (lines 9-10). This continual rising action has listeners wanting to hear more. We know that something is going to happen, but we are not sure. The story itself is compelling to us as listeners because of its curious scenario.

The two variations split in the next verse; however, they still have the hired help finding his way into the home. After he makes his way into the home, the ballad takes a turn to the gruesome. Beaulampkins, wanting to see the Lady of the house, states that he will "get her down" by "stick[ing] her little baby / full of needles and pins" ("Beaulampkins" line 30, 31). Interestingly, in the "Beaulampkins" text Beaulampkins "rocked [the baby] hard / And the false nurse she sung / While the tears and red blood / From the cradle did run" (lines 33-36). These descriptions graphically show that Beaulampkins brutally stabs the baby and then rocks it to death. As he commits this murder the false nurse is in the background singing, proving that



she was working with Beaulampkins. This gruesome scene grabs the audience's attention and shows the brutality of Beaulampkins and the false nurse; such a scene could be easily spotted in contemporary graphic horror films. The scene serves as shock value and helps to enforce the cruelty of Beaulampkins. As the teller, Greer surely enjoyed capturing his audience's attention at this point. Though this is a particularly gory scene, Greer is helping to perpetuate the history of the text by continuing to sing it in all its horrific glory to the public.

Next in the ballad, the lady makes her first pleading offer of money to Beaulampkins, who quickly rejects it. Then she attempts to appeal to Beaulampkins' emotions: "Oh spare me Beaulampkins / Oh spare me awhile / Don't you hear how mournful / My little baby does cry" (lines 45-48). This plea is authentic; however the next offering by the Lady shows that her motherly traits do not last. While she first appears distraught over the loss of her baby, she then offers up her daughter's life to save her own. She states, "Oh spare me Beaulampkins / Oh spare me one hour / And you shall have my daughter Betsy / My own blooming flower" (lines 49-52). We can assume that Greer would know that these types of appeals would cause an emotional reaction from the audience. He has used the spoken word to create a response, an action that is indicative of all great written and spoken texts.

In reply, the mason in both versions does not accept the offer given by the Lady but reject her with a harsh reply stating, "You can keep your daughter Betsey/ To wade through the flood./ And to scour the silver basin/ that catch your hearts blood" ("Bold Adkins" lines 41-44). This verse establishes yet another level of gruesomeness from Bold Adkins. He will not take Betsey; instead, he will force her to watch her own mother's death, and then clean up after the murder.

The final verse in both ballads is just as gruesome and violent as the earlier acts. The landlord returns to find his family murdered and has the worker hung from the "gallows so high" while the false nurse was "burned / at a stake standing close by" for her possible links to the murders ("Beaulampkins" lines 65-68). The landlord revokes the worker's power and ends up killing both him and the false nurse. The final statement in the ballad seems to be that the landlord still retains control of the situation; however, we never see any sort of reconciliation on the side of the worker or the landlord. Nei-



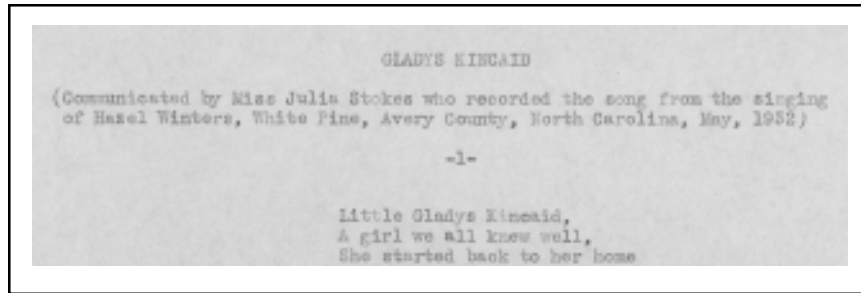
ther seeks penance for the wrong that they have done, whereas in "Black Jack Davy" we at least hear of the wife's regret for leaving her wealthy husband. This ballad style appeals to the human desire for sensationalism because of its use of brutal violence; however, by couching the violence in the medieval setting of Scotland, it seems more remote and therefore less horrific to the audience.

In closing we may ask: Why did Greer pick these two ballads, out of the numerous that he collected, to perform? Why are they so compelling to study? It seems that I.G. Greer particularly enjoyed performing these ballads because of their historical and literary elements. As with any good piece of history or literature, there always seems to be some sort of drama or conflict. "Black Jack Davy" shows the difficulties of a marital relationship that resulted in both the husband and the wife's broken hearts. "Beaulampkins" illustrates (and exaggerates) the consequences for a man who has not paid his help. These two ballads portray basic human qualities that are found in any piece of good fiction. The two actions that occur in the ballads are two that continue in our society today. In a memory book in the Greer File, D.C. Redmond writes a note that Greer once said, "Get this, a man ignorant of the past is not trustworthy of the future" (Greer, "Memory Book"). By acknowledging the common experiences from the ancient ballads Greer collected, we are able to connect them to our experiences in modern life. It would seem that Greer would be happy to see these connections and recognize that the ballads that he collected are still as valuable to us today in the digital age as when he gathered them by hand, sitting on the porches of his fellow mountaineers.

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The Murder of Gladys Kincaid: The Story Behind the Ballads

By Kevin W. Young

Among the ballads in the W. Amos Abrams Folksong Collection is "Gladys Kincaid," a song describing the 1927 murder of a fifteen-year-old white girl in Morganton, North Carolina and the subsequent manhunt for her accused killer, an itinerant black construction worker named Broadus Miller. The work of an unknown author, the ballad was collected in Avery County in 1932 and two years later was included in Mellinger Henry's *Songs Sung in the Southern Appalachians*.

At least two other ballads were inspired by Gladys Kincaid's death. Perhaps the best known of the three folksongs bears the title "The Tragedy of Gladys Kincaid" and exists in at least two different versions with slight variations in wording. The unknown author set the words to a traditional folk melody, and the resulting ballad was collected by Professor Frank C. Brown of the North Carolina Folklore Society sometime before 1943.

Kevin W. Young is a Ph.D. student in History at the University of Georgia. The current article is adapted from his M.A. thesis "The Broadus Miller Affair: Murder and Public Vengeance in 1927 Morganton" (Appalachian State University, 2007), and he would like to thank his thesis advisor, Dr. Edwin T. Arnold.

Frame photo: Opening text of the ballad "Gladys Kincaid" from the W. Amos Abrams Folksong Collection. Used with permission of the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University.



Tombstone of Gladys Kincaid, Catawba Valley Baptist Church, Morganton, NC. Photo by Kevin W. Young.

A third song—"The Dreadful Fate of Gladys Kincaid"—is the only one of the three ballads with an identifiable author. Written in the autumn of 1927 by Morganton guitar and fiddle player Tim Poteat, the song was then recorded in Atlanta by a group of Morganton musicians. Although the family of the murdered girl refused to give



"THE MURDER OF GLADYS KINCAID"

By

H. D. Holsclaw and J. H. Pennell

Written by permission and based on the information of Mrs. Mary Jane Kincaid, and her two brothers, Harry and Willie Dean, all of Morganton, N. C.

Between twenty-seven and June the twentieth
This crime was committed and it is the very worst,
By a brutal Negro man in the County of Burke
Who accused Gladys Kincaid coming home from her work.

She was killed in her youth, being only fifteen,
By a Negro Broadus Miller the meanest he been
She lived with her Mother, her Father is dead
For her Sisters and Brothers she helped to keep bread.
She worked in the mill and boarded at home
Lived just out of town and walked all alone
While she talked to Mrs. Whitman a Negro passed by;
But little did she think how soon she would die.

Gladys left her friend and went towards home
Not thinking of trouble or afraid to be alone
Didn't know at all or think any harm;
A-foot the Nigger's iron pipe or coat on his arm.

She got nearly home say a fourth of a mile
There the Nigger was waiting to slay the poor child,
He hid her in the briars the woods and the vines
Who ever heard of any manner a crime.

Just how it was done we never will know
But the girl was dashed by a horrible blow
He hit her in the back of the head,
With a piece of iron pipe and now she is dead.

The Mother was at work out in the field
Expecting Gladys at home to start the supper meal
When her Mother went in she never noticed the time
and through the dark cloud the Sun failed to shine.

Harvey said "Mamma" in a very anxious tone
It's Seven O'clock, Why don't Gladys come home?
"I don't know" she said and her voice was shrilled,
What could be the matter I'm afraid she's killed.

Then Harvey to soothe the worried Mother's mind,
Said "Mamma you know there's nothing of the kind;
She's stopped some-where and don't think it long,
You're always thinking of trouble when nothing is wrong."

But the words of her Son could not ease her mind
For she never knew Gladys to stay over time;
As the moments passed by she couldn't be still;
So they went to Mr. Fox's just over the hill.

But failed to find out what she wanted to know
So to Mrs. Whitman's was the next place to go;
She said Gladys passed here and talked with one
About an-hour ago Oh! Where could she be?

A Negro passed by while we were talking,
and towards post home he went on a walking;
A Nigger to advise those Neighbors lived in sight;
Gladys hadn't went home and 'twas almost night.

Virgil Fox, and one Mother and Harvey by searching
around.

About the back of the road her Daughter they found,
She wasn't quite dead but never did speak;
By the way she had told they knew she was gone.

They sent for Dr. Fisher as quick as they could
And took Gladys to the Hospital but it done no good
About three-thirty before the break of the day
The life of poor Gladys had done passed a-way.

Then to June Broadus they proceeded to take her
Prepared for the burial by the Kirksey Undertaker
Two Preachers were there, Rev. Spaulds and Bradshaw,
For the Father of Gladys who was killed by the way,
law.

She was buried in Catawba Valley and covered mighty
deep
Leaving a poor old Mother to mourn and to weep
She followed the path that her Saviour had trod;
We believe she is saved by the grace of her God.

She lived a Christian life as her friends all know
and joined Catawba Valley Church about two years ago.
She was honest and kind so lovely and true;
Her hair was black and her eyes were blue.

She left her Brothers in this world of sorrow
Who will some-time die and it may be tomorrow
And two small Sisters about four and six,
And a dear old Mother, imagine her fix.

Then to get the Old Nigger was the next thing to do,
There was an eye-witness and where was the clue
It was the blood on his coat that he left at his home;
And they found the iron pipe but the Nigger was gone.

They got on his track and they had a blood hound,
Over the rivers and mountains and around and around
He scented his partners in distant ways;
But they kept the search up for about twelve days.

He broke in a Restaurant, on Saturday night
By the trail that he made they knew they were right;
It was up in the Mountains near Linville Falls;
Where Commodore Burleson, shot the Football-balls.

That killed old Broadus, and the news began to fly
On Sunday morning the third of July;
They brought him to Morganton, in a Car that would run;
Black Broadus Miller, and the twelve gage gun.

That he shot at Mr. Burleson, up in the woods
But Commodore, stuck till he brought in the goods
He killed old Broadus one bright Sunday morn;
Who ought to have been burned the day he was born.

May this be a warning to the whole Human race
Especially the black to stay in their place,
And little white girls be careful where you go;
Be sure you are safe and know that you know.

Composed Saturday, July the 9th. A. D. 1927.

By Henry D. Holsclaw, R. F. D. 4, Box 26, Lenoir, N. C.

AND

Harry Lee Pennell, R. F. D. 4, Taylorsville, N. C.

Price 25c a Copy, By mail Post Paid.

Copyrighted 1927 by Henry D. Holsclaw, Lenoir, N. C.

Broadside poem "The Murder of Gladys Kincaid." Courtesy of Dr. Bruce Baker.

their consent to the record's release, for several years the song was performed at country dances throughout Burke County, and in the 1950s Tim Poteat's son regularly played the song for audiences in Louisiana. However, the lyrics to "The Dreadful Fate of Gladys Kincaid" have never been published.¹

In addition to the three ballads, the case also inspired a popular broadside entitled "The Murder of Gladys Kincaid," which was the collaborative work of two men—Henry D. Holsclaw of Lenoir and Harry Lee Pennell of Taylorsville—and was penned less than a month

after Kincaid's death. Copies of the poem were sold for twenty-five cents apiece, and the work was later reprinted in the Morganton *News-Herald*. Eighty years after "The Murder of Gladys Kincaid" was written, numerous people in the Morganton area still possess copies of the poem, in the form of either the original broadside or a clipping from the *News-Herald*.² Each of the three ballads and the broadside poem use racially inflammatory language to describe the murder of Kincaid and the hunt for Broadus Miller. Kincaid's murder is portrayed as an intolerable challenge to the racial status quo, and the ballads and poem explicitly warn of the fate awaiting any black man who attempted to assault a white woman.

Although Gladys Kincaid achieved fame in death, her short life had been decidedly modest. She was born in 1912 and grew up on the Johns River, a few miles north of Morganton. Her father, a farmer named James Kincaid, died in January 1923 at the age of forty-seven, leaving a widowed wife and eight children. After his death the large family found it difficult to make ends meet, so they moved from the rural countryside to the outskirts of Morganton. At the beginning of June 1927, young Gladys began working at Garrou Knitting Mill in downtown Morganton. On Tuesday, June 21, her shift at the mill ended around 5:30 p.m., and she began her mile-and-a-half walk home. She never arrived. Later that evening her mother and brothers began searching and found her unconscious and bleeding profusely in a clump of bushes beside the road. Her skull behind her right ear had been crushed by one or more blows from a blunt instrument, and an iron pipe, stained with blood, was lying near her body. She never recovered consciousness and died that night in the local hospital ("*Negro Attacks*," "*Suspected Slayer*," "*Thousands*").

Police quickly suspected that Kincaid's attacker was a black construction laborer named Broadus Miller, who lived in a nearby boardinghouse and had been seen walking along the road carrying an iron pipe. When investigators arrived at Miller's boardinghouse the suspect had disappeared, but articles of clothing had been taken from his room and a blood-stained raincoat had been left behind. A massive manhunt immediately began for Miller, and more than two thousand armed men frenziedly searched the town of Morganton and the surrounding countryside. There was a very real possibility, especially in the first hours of the search, that any black man in Morganton might be mistaken for the accused killer, and at least one young man was almost lynched when a mob of enraged whites seized him in the southern end of town. The mob was starting to hang the man from a

railroad bridge when one of his white coworkers happened to arrive on the scene, recognized the intended victim, and persuaded the crowd to release him (Evans).

By dawn on Wednesday, Broadus Miller had still not been found. Considering that over two thousand angry armed men had spent the entire night hunting the suspect, journalists marveled that the search had not resulted in any serious injuries to innocent persons. On Wednesday morning the local sheriff signed an affidavit stating that Miller was wanted for murder, and two Burke County justices of the peace then issued a proclamation designating Broadus Miller an outlaw: "It is . . . ordered that any citizen of the County of Burke may arrest, capture and bring said Broadus Miller to Justice, and in case of flight or resistance by the said Broadus Miller, after being called on and warned to surrender, may slay him without accusation or impeachment for crime" (*Negro is Declared*). Burke County authorities offered a \$250 reward for the outlaw's capture or death, and the state of North Carolina promptly matched this offer with an additional \$250 reward. In addition, Morganton resident Sam Taylor gathered a large private reward, eventually totaling \$1500, from local businesses and individuals. Because of the outlawry proclamation and the offered rewards, any North Carolina citizen had both a legal right and a financial incentive to kill the fleeing fugitive.

The hunt for Broadus Miller attracted widespread newspaper coverage throughout North Carolina and beyond, but the press reported almost nothing about Miller's past. Born about 1903-04, the accused killer had grown up in the Walnut Grove district of Greenwood County, South Carolina, which encompassed the rural northwestern part of the county and included the small community of Shoals Junction and the surrounding countryside. In the early twentieth century an African-American couple named Thomas and Alpha Walker were tenant farmers in the Walnut Grove district, and among the children in the Walker household were a girl and three boys, listed on census records as the Walkers' niece and nephews and having the surname "Miller."³

In early 1921, seventeen-year-old Broadus Miller left Greenwood County and moved to the nearby city of Anderson, South Carolina, where on Sunday, May 1, 1921, a middle-aged black woman named Essie Walker was murdered in a downtown boardinghouse. Her skull was crushed by multiple blows from a baseball bat, and according to news reports she "had been beaten so that she was hardly recogniz-

able" (*Negro Confesses*). Police quickly arrested Broadus Miller, whose clothes were stained with blood, and charged him with Walker's murder. Whereas the killing of a young white girl in Morganton six years later would generate massive media coverage and be chronicled in dozens of newspapers, the violent death of a middle-aged African-American woman in Anderson received comparatively little attention. The records of the case are fragmentary and sometimes contradictory, but on May 14 the judge presiding over Miller's trial noted that it had "been brought to my attention that there is some doubt as to the sanity of the defendant," and he ordered Dr. Anne Young, a prominent local doctor, to examine Miller and make a determination concerning his sanity (*Records of General Sessions of Anderson County*). Dr. Young concluded "that Miller was not normal mentally, and was irresponsible for the crime" (*Broadus Miller Still*). On May 26, 1921, Broadus Miller pled guilty to manslaughter in the death of Essie Walker and was sentenced to three years in the state penitentiary in Columbia (*Records of General Sessions of Anderson County*).

While Miller was in prison his family moved from Greenwood County to Asheville, North Carolina, and upon his release in 1924 he headed north to join them.

Soon after his arrival in Asheville he married an eighteen-year-old girl named Mamie Wadlington, who was also originally from South Carolina, and the newlyweds took up residence in a downtown black neighborhood known as the Block.⁴ The Millers had arrived in Asheville at a time of worsening race relations, for the large influx of black immigrants from South Carolina was prompting a hostile reaction from the local white community. In the fall of 1925 a series of alleged rapes of white women by black men brought the city of Asheville to the brink of widespread racial conflict, and after Miller achieved notoriety as the accused killer of Gladys Kincaid, it was widely suggested that he may have been responsible for these alleged sexual assaults (*Wrong Man*).

However, evidence of the purported assaults in Asheville was extremely dubious, and it is unclear if Broadus Miller was actually present in the town when these alleged assaults took place. Sometime in 1925 or early 1926 he returned to Greenwood County, South Carolina, where he was arrested by police in March 1926 and charged with housebreaking and larceny. Miller pled guilty and was sentenced to one year of hard labor on a county chain gang (*Records of General Sessions of Greenwood County*). After being released from the chain



gang during the 1926 Christmas season, he again traveled to Asheville to rejoin his wife and other family members. In the spring of 1927 he began working as a construction laborer for an Asheville building contractor who had been hired to construct a palatial stone house for Frank Tate, a wealthy and socially prominent resident of Morganton. Broadus Miller was one of the men the contractor took to Morganton to dig the house's foundations ("*Suspected Slayer*").

Following Gladys Kincaid's death, the massive manhunt for the accused killer lasted thirteen days. In the words of Morganton native Sam Ervin, Jr., the search for Miller was the "largest manhunt in western North Carolina's history" (Ervin). Scores of black men over a wide area were arrested and held for identification. When bloodhounds caught scent of the fugitive along the Johns River, posses followed the trail north into the mountains, and for over a week hunters combed western Caldwell County. The fugitive was alleged to have stolen food from several homes and springhouses, and eighty years later a number of elderly area residents still have vivid memories of the manhunt and the large, heavily armed posses who roamed the local woods (Coffey). Searchers claimed to have spotted and fired at Miller as he crossed a railroad trestle over Wilson Creek, but they eventually lost his trail in the rugged wilderness west of Mortimer.

In the early morning hours of Sunday, July 3, 1927, an intruder broke into a café and store in the small town of Linville Falls and milk was stolen from a springhouse in the nearby community of Ashford. As the crow flies, Linville Falls was only ten miles west of Mortimer where the outlawed fugitive had last been spotted, and groups of hunters and bloodhounds rushed to the scene. One of the hunters was Commodore Burleson, a resident of Morganton who had grown up in Linville Falls. After tracking Broadus Miller for several days and over a number of counties, Burleson was now following the trail back to his own childhood home and to familiar hunting grounds. While following the fugitive's trail from the Ashford springhouse and up the thickly wooded mountainside behind Concord United Methodist Church, the hunter came upon the wanted man. According to Burleson, Miller possessed a stolen shotgun that he fired at his pursuer. Armed with a .45 caliber pistol, Burleson then shot and killed the outlaw (Burleson, "*Broadus Miller, Outlaw*").

Eager to claim the reward that had been offered for the fugitive, Burleson and his companions tied a rope around Miller's legs and dragged him out of the woods to the road. The body was then thrown into the back of a car and rushed to Morganton, where it was pulled

from the car and dragged into the Burke County courthouse. The car with Miller's corpse had arrived in town just as local residents were leaving Sunday church services, and a huge crowd quickly gathered on the courthouse square and demanded to see the body of the notorious outlaw. The Burke County sheriff acquiesced to the crowd's demand, and the body was dragged from the courthouse and placed on public exhibition on the square. Traffic on a nearby highway came to a standstill as people stopped to see what was happening in downtown Morganton. Counting later arrivals, around 5,000 people viewed the dead body.

A local photographer named Walter Green took pictures of Commodore Burleson and of Broadus Miller's corpse. Green worked for a photography studio owned by Lloyd Webb, and throughout the afternoon hordes of people stampeded Webb's studio to buy copies of the photographs. The photograph of Commodore Burleson shows him standing on the courthouse lawn with his arms at his sides, holding a tobacco pipe in one hand and a cloth cap in the other, and carrying in his waistband the pistol with which he had killed the outlaw. In the following days Burleson would become one of the most recognizable men in North Carolina, for the picture would appear on the front pages of newspapers throughout the state.

Walter Green took at least two photographs of Broadus Miller's body, which is shown lying on some sort of platform or porch. A knotted sheet has been looped around the outlaw's shoulders, presumably to use in carrying or dragging his dead body. On top of the outlaw's corpse is the shotgun he was apparently carrying when killed. In one of the photographs the corpse is spread-eagle, legs outstretched to the edge of the platform, while two men—with only their lower legs visible—stand behind the body and raise it by the arms for the benefit of the camera. In order to keep the dead man's head upright, one of the men uses his foot to prop the head up from behind, and there is a striking contrast between the dead man's head, with its gaping mouth and open eyes, and the highly-polished leather dress shoes of the man who props it up. The second photograph is a close-up shot taken from the side. Because the body is not being held up and stretched by the arms, the dead man's expression appears much more natural, and his wide-open eyes attract the viewer's attention. The head rests on the upper end of the sheet that has been wrapped around his shoulder, and a dark bloodstain is clearly visible on the sheet beneath the head.



Contemporary newspaper coverage offers multiple and occasionally contradictory accounts of the afternoon exhibition. From piecing together the various accounts, it seems that the body was first dragged from the courthouse and placed on display at the base of an imposing monument to the Confederacy. During the exhibition an aisle was roped off and members of the crowd were allowed to pass one-by-one in front of the displayed corpse, which was guarded by some fifty town and county officers. After some time the body was dragged from the monument to a jailhouse on the south side of the square and locked inside a cell. However, the crowd continued to demand a public viewing of the corpse, so it was then carried out of the jail and displayed on the jailhouse steps (MacNeill, "*Long Hunt*").

The public exhibition of the dead body lasted throughout the hot July afternoon. As evening came, the atmosphere on the courthouse square became increasingly tense. Members of the crowd had been drinking and local officials worried that an attempt might be made to seize and mutilate the body. Although hundreds of spectators were still waiting to be let into the roped passageway to see the corpse, it was taken back inside the jail and placed in a coffin. When an eastbound train stopped in Morganton at 6:30 p.m. police officers loaded the coffin onto the train, and a deputy sheriff and an employee of a local funeral home were given the task of accompanying the coffin eastward to an undisclosed location for burial. Two hours after leaving Morganton the coffin was unloaded in Statesville, where the following morning Broadus Miller was buried in an unmarked grave ("*Negro Outlaw*," "*Broadus Miller's Body*").

In the decades following 1927, the case of Gladys Kincaid and Broadus Miller ceased to be a topic of widespread public discussion in Morganton. Kincaid's murder and the treatment of Miller's corpse were sensitive issues that many area residents believed should be ignored and forgotten. For many years very little was written about the case, but in the mid-1990s folklorist Bruce Baker brought it to the attention of a larger audience by publishing his research on the ballads inspired by these events. Two of Commodore Burleson's children live in Morganton, and Charles Burleson gladly recounts the story of how his father shot and killed the fugitive outlaw. The pistol that his father used is now a treasured family heirloom (Burleson).

In 1986 the Frank Tate House, whose construction brought Broadus Miller to Morganton, was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The town jail where Miller's body was temporarily held has undergone significant alterations, for the top storey has

been removed and the remaining structure has been converted to an art gallery. The historic Morganton courthouse still stands in the middle of the grassy lawn on which Miller's body was dragged and publicly displayed, but the building has been converted to a visitor's center and museum. Although the courthouse museum chronicles local history, none of the exhibits mentions Broadus Miller and the events of 1927. Instead, the museum celebrates Burke County's Confederate heritage and the county's role in the Civil War.

Eighty years after Gladys Kincaid's murder, her younger siblings still live in Morganton. Kincaid's sister Elizabeth was six years old in the summer of 1927, and although she has few memories of the murder itself, she does remember the horrible fear she felt for years afterwards. Gladys' brother Cecil was ten years old when his sister's brutal death rocked Morganton, and though he remembers the family's grief, he also remembers the lesson that Mary Jane Kincaid taught her surviving children. "My mother told us not to go around hating black people," Cecil Kincaid says, "because there were good and bad black people, the same as everybody else" (Kincaid).

Garrou Knitting Mill, where the fifteen-year-old Gladys Kincaid was employed, eventually became Premier Hosiery and was in operation until the mid-1990s. The closing of the mill left the building deserted, but in 1999-2001 it was renovated and now houses the Morganton City Hall. On the outskirts of Morganton is Catawba Valley Baptist Church, and behind the church is a well-kept, unfenced cemetery. In the corner of the cemetery, immediately next to the church parking lot, is the small gravestone of the young girl whose death shocked and infuriated an entire community. The gravestone's inscription is still legible, but slowly fading, and the passage of time has eroded the face of the lamb carved on top of the stone.

NOTES

¹"The Tragedy of Gladys Kincaid" is sometimes referred to as simply "Gladys Kincaid"; for an alternate version of this ballad, see the on-line folksong archive of California State University, Fresno (<http://www.csufresno.edu/folklore/supptrad.html>). For information on "The Dreadful Fate of Gladys Kincaid," see Bruce Baker's "Lynching Ballads in North Carolina" (MA thesis. U of North Carolina, 1995, p. 54) and Marion H. Lieberman's article "Making Sweet Music—Even Without a Banjo" (Photocopy in "Crime and Criminals" vertical file, Burke Co. Public Library, Morganton, N.C.).

² Several Morganton residents have mentioned the poem to me, and I have seen yellowing clippings of the poem from the *News-Herald* (unfortunately missing the date).

³ For information concerning the Walker/Miller family, see the following: 1910 census: Greenwood County, SC, Walnut Grove township, district #98, dwelling #79. 1920 census: Greenwood County, SC, Walnut Grove township, dwelling #121. 1930 census: Buncombe County, NC, Asheville township, ward #1, 134 South Beaumon [*sic*] Street (sheet # 24-B). Asheville city directories, 1921-1927 (Asheville, NC: Commercial Service Company), available in North Carolina Collection at Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC.

⁴ For Miller's release from prison, see Central Register of Prisoners, S.C. Department of Corrections. May 27, 1913-May 2, 1925; available at the South Carolina State Archives, Columbia. Broadus Miller/Mamie Wadlington marriage license and certificate, June 30, 1924, available at Buncombe County Register of Deeds. Asheville city directories, 1921-1927 (Asheville, NC: Commercial Service Company), available in North Carolina Collection at Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC. Miller's relatives remained in Asheville after 1927; see 1930 census, Buncombe County, NC, Asheville township, ward #1, 134 South Beaumon [*sic*] Street (sheet # 24-B).

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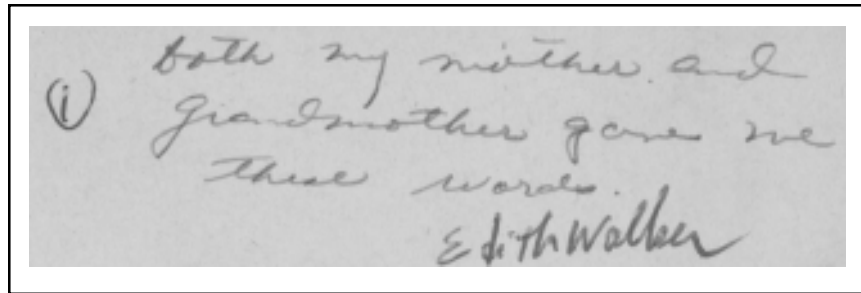
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A Ballad Collection in the Making: One Student's Contribution

by Amanda Hedrick

Often as students and scholars of Appalachian studies, we wonder whether or not our work has any purpose, or if it will be remembered in the future. The purpose of this paper is to give us hope that our work won't fall by the wayside, but will be significant in some way many years down the road. To accomplish this, I'd like to tell you the story of Edith Walker.

I first came across Edith's name while performing metadata research for an online ballad collection available through Appalachian State University entitled, "'So Mote it Ever Be': The Folksong Heritage of North Carolina's Northern Blue Ridge Mountains, The W. Amos Abrams Collection." Dr. W. Amos Abrams, a folklorist and English professor at Appalachian State Teachers College from 1932 to 1946, amassed a ballad collection of over 400 song titles during his tenure at the school. The name "Edith Walker" kept reappearing as an informant to the collection, and our digitization team decided that it would be interesting to learn more about this individual who contributed so much material to Dr. Abrams. We discovered that Edith Walker was a student at Appalachian State Teachers College during

Amanda Hedrick graduated from West Virginia University in 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. She received a Masters of Arts degree in Appalachian Studies from Appalachian State University in 2008. She is currently employed as an archivist by the Blue Ridge Institute and Museum of Ferrum College in Ferrum, Virginia.

Frame photo: Handwritten citation from the Abrams Collection manuscript "A Paper of Pins," Variant 1, Page 1. No date given.



Edith Cavell Walker's senior year photo from the 1939 *Rhododendron*, the Appalachian State Teachers College yearbook.

the 1930s. She became Dr. Abrams' assistant and donated over 70 songs to his collection, including Child Ballads such as "The Two Sisters," "Fanny Gray," and "The Butcher Boy."

Edith Cavell Walker was the daughter of William Carl Walker and Boyd Ovella Thomas. Edith's mother, Boyd Thomas, was born on 17 May 1890. She was the daughter of Alexander Thomas, Jr. (1861-1930), and Jo Etta Shull (1869-1961) of Valle Crucis in Watauga County, North Carolina. Edith's maternal side of the family had been established in Watauga County for three generations, specifically in the Shulls Mill and Valle Crucis areas. Her ancestors were landowning farmers, musicians, and upstanding members of their community (*Heritage of Watauga County* 346-7, 362).

Edith's father, William Walker, was born on 4 July 1893. He was the grandson of John Walker (1819-1912) and Rebecca Ward (1824-1907), also third generation members of the Valle Crucis community in Watauga County, North Carolina. William grew up on his

grandparent's farm, and soon discovered his talent for fixing watches. He opened his own jewelry repair shop in 1906 in Valle Crucis (*Heritage of Watauga County* 365).

Boyd Thomas married William Walker in 1906 under interesting circumstances. According to an article Edith wrote for the 1984 Watauga County heritage book, William secretly met Boyd at her cousin's house, and then took her into Tennessee in a wagon. Edith wrote, "On top of the Stone Mountain, in the middle of the night and in the middle of the public road, William Carl Walker and Boyd Ovella Thomas were married by preacher J. C. Johnson who had to be awakened to perform the ceremony" (*Heritage of Watauga County* 365). To this union were born four children: one son and three daughters.

A few years after he married Edith's mother, William Walker moved his jewelry repair store to Butler, a small town in Johnson County, Tennessee, which borders Watauga County, North Carolina. William dabbled in other business ventures in Tennessee, and at various times owned a photography studio, an ice cream parlor and soda fountain, a restaurant, and a barber shop. Walker remained in Butler until 1923 when he moved his family and his jewelry repair business back to Boone, North Carolina (*Heritage of Watauga County* 364-5).

Edith Walker was born on 15 July 1919 in Butler, Tennessee. She lived in Butler for four years until her family moved to Boone, North Carolina. Edith attended Oak Grove School in Watauga County until 1933, the year she began the eighth grade at Boone High School, also known as Boone Normal School. Edith graduated from high school in 1936 and entered Appalachian State Teacher's College that fall where she became a student of Dr. W. Amos Abrams. She received a bachelor's degree in elementary education in 1939, and decided to continue her education. In 1944, Edith received a master's degree in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill under the guidance of Dr. Arthur Palmer Hudson, a noted folklorist and collector of Mississippi folksongs (*Heritage of Watauga County* 269-70).

On a side note, between her time at Appalachian State and UNC Chapel Hill, Edith took classes at Columbia University in New York City, and in 1941 she also attended the Bread Loaf School of English, part of Middlebury College in Vermont. While at Bread Loaf, Edith corresponded with Dr. Abrams about her studies, and one letter, dated 4 July 1941, revealed that she met poet Robert Frost at one of his

readings. Edith described his talk as “fragmentary,” and wrote, “Several times he mumbled to himself, and twice he forgot his poems and recited them again. People who have known him from previous years say he is very, very feeble.” Frost would have been 67 years old at the time.

After finishing her formal education, Edith became an educator in the public school system in North Carolina, and also taught English classes for a while at Winthrop College in South Carolina. At the age of 31, Edith married George Howard Madison of Charlotte, North Carolina in 1950. George served in World War II, and then attended business school after his stint in the army. He also participated in a government-sponsored watchmaker’s school and became a watch repairman like Edith’s father. George worked in Mr. Walker’s jewelry store after Edith’s father grew too old to continue working (*Heritage of Watauga County* 269-70).

Edith and George were married in St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Boone, and had their only child, George William Madison, three years later in 1953 in Charlotte, North Carolina. Edith and her husband moved back to Boone in the late 1950s to take care of her aging parents. Her husband George passed away in 1967, and Edith remained in Boone until her own death in 1994 (*Heritage of Watauga County* 269-70).

While Edith’s life is interesting for her various educational opportunities and teaching positions, for the purposes of this paper and related digital folksong project, we are most concerned with her role as a student at Appalachian State Teacher’s College under Dr. W. Amos Abrams. This is where Edith made a lasting impression on the world of Appalachian studies.

As previously mentioned, Dr. Abrams collected a significant number of songs from over 200 people living in North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, and Georgia. Many of these informants were his students, among which was our leading lady Edith Walker, who is cited on over 70 documents in his collection. Edith is also heard on 19 audio tracks recorded by Dr. Abrams, including a song entitled “The Little Mohee.” In the recordings, Edith sounds shy as she sings quietly and is sometimes hard to understand.

In an article she wrote for Watauga County’s heritage book in 1984, Edith declared that her interest in folksongs and folklore began in the fourth grade, long before she met Dr. Abrams. I believe, however, that her interest in old songs began before the fourth grade, for she was exposed to ballads and other folk music in her early child-



hood. This exposure came from members of her mother's side of the family, including her mother Boyd Thomas, her grandfather Alexander Thomas, her grandmother Jo Etta Shull, and her great-uncle Joseph Thomas, a singer of old songs.

Alexander Thomas played the banjo, "which he could do the very first time he picked up a borrowed one to try it . . . his parents had been gone and were surprised, as they neared home on their return, to hear banjo music; they thought the instrument's owner had returned" (*Heritage of Watauga County* 346). Edith described her "Granny Thomas" (Jo Etta Shull) as a "small woman, but full of vim" who had a "clarity of mind and a fabulous memory seldom unequalled." Jo Etta would entertain her family's children with stories and tales on winter evenings (*Heritage of Watauga County* 346). She also must have sung many songs to Edith as a child and young adult, and passed on the old ballads to her granddaughter. Jo Etta is cited on 12 songs in Abrams' collection. Some of these songs include "A Paper of Pins," "One Morning in May," and "Weevily Wheat."

Edith's mother, Boyd Thomas Walker, the daughter of Jo Etta and Alexander, also had significant musical ability, probably learned and inherited from her parents. Boyd is described by Edith as "not bigger than a minute," but musically inclined. "Possessing an inborn talent and perfect pitch, [Boyd] could play any musical instrument she ever saw, as could her brother and sister. Together she, her brother Hard, and her sister Selma formed what may have been the first string band in this area . . . She knew hundreds of tunes and songs, including the old ballads, and was helpful to Dr. Frank C. Brown, when he visited this region while making his collection" (*Heritage of Watauga County* 363). Boyd is also cited on seven songs in Dr. Abrams' collection, among which are "Hard Times" and "Rose Connaly." Edith's great-uncle Joe Thomas is listed as a contributor, as is Edith's sister, Selma Frances Walker. Clearly, Edith's family played a significant role in her early interest in balladry and folklore because songs and stories were part of her everyday life from a very early age. Edith, therefore, gleaned numerous songs and tunes from her relatives to give to Dr. Abrams.

Edith, however, didn't confine the collection of ballads to her family. She went out in the rural areas of Watauga County and collected songs from numerous people. Edith's most cited informants were Nora Hicks and her daughter Addie, residents of Sugar Grove, North Carolina. These two women are cited on 27 songs in Abrams' collection, on titles such as "Barbara Allen," "The Daemon Lover,"

and “The Wife of Usher’s Well.” Furthermore, Edith continued collecting ballads after she left Appalachian State Teacher’s College and Dr. Abrams’ tutelage. Correspondence from Edith to Dr. Abrams in 1948 reveals she continued to look for ballads and informants to add to his collection, and her master’s thesis from UNC Chapel Hill centered on a song entitled “The Ballad of Barbara Allen.”

This information led us to believe that Edith may have collected songs from various other people that we don’t currently know about. There is evidence to suggest that Edith had her own ballad collection, or at least a manuscript book of songs. Handwritten numbers are visible in the upper right hand corner on some of her songs displayed online in Dr. Abrams’ ballad collection. There are such numbers on many of the documents credited to Edith, and we deduce that these documents were pages of a manuscript book that were copied and incorporated out of their original order in Abrams’ collection. This manuscript book is also cited in a letter from Edith to Dr. Abrams written in February 1948, and is mentioned in Dr. Frank C. Brown’s exhaustive collection of North Carolina folklore. The Appalachian State University library staff hopes to recreate her manuscript book in sequential order in the future.

Edith Walker wasn’t just instrumental in the making of a local ballad collection, for, as I mentioned before, she and members of her family are cited in Frank C. Brown’s North Carolina folksong collection. Edith briefly stated her connection to this collection in her article in the Watauga County heritage book, writing that she “contributed her own finds and provided leads toward locating other materials” (*Heritage of Watauga County* 270). Indeed, Edith is cited as an informant or a collector on 59 items in Brown’s printed collection. Also, in the third volume of North Carolina folksongs, Brown specifically thanks Edith for allowing him to borrow and copy her manuscript book.

This brings us to the first point in the discussion of Edith Walker’s significance to Appalachian studies. Edith is important because she actively sought out and contributed songs to local, regional, and state-wide collections of folklore. In doing so, she associated with prominent folklorists of her time and helped them successfully collect, document, and publish parts of North Carolina’s rich folk culture. Because of informants like her, we have wide documentation of songs, ballads, and other folklore in North Carolina and throughout the Appalachian region.



Ballad collecting was a hot topic in Appalachian regional studies during the early part of the twentieth century. For some, collecting songs was a way to link the Appalachian people, who at the time were considered our “noble, contemporary ancestors,” to their cultural roots in the British Isles. But for others, the collection and documentation of songs and ballads preserved a mountain culture they loved, were a part of, or sought to understand. I believe Edith falls into the latter category.

The songs Edith and others contributed to folklore collections are themselves significant because they can help scholars understand aspects of Appalachian culture. For example, most ballads relate a moral or contain certain values that are esteemed in regional culture. Religious values, social mores, and personality traits such as honesty, loyalty, love, and humor are among the things we find in ballads. By studying these songs for their underlying morality tales, we can learn what character traits and social interactions are, or are not, valued by members of the communities in which they are sung. Ballads are also used to record important events in a community or region, and can be used as key primary sources of historical research.

Finally, these ballads and their informants, including Edith Walker, will remain significant in the future. As libraries and other institutions housing Appalachian scholarship put documents and photographs online, the realm of Appalachian studies will greatly expand. Soon, students, scholars, old-time music buffs, performers, and other interested individuals will be able to easily access the songs collected by Edith and others to learn their musical, cultural, and historical lessons. I am sure this is an accomplishment that Edith never imagined, but would be pleased and honored to be a part of.

Edith Walker and her work are significant because she found value in her own culture. She recognized the importance of her musical heritage and worked to preserve it and share it with others. Without students, scholars, and informants like her, there would be no ballad collections to digitize, no fieldwork to analyze, and no lessons to learn from Appalachian people and their culture.

So, my fellow students, scholars, folklorists, and Appalachian enthusiasts, let's look to people like Edith Walker as our models. Like her, we should seek out things of value in our lives, preserve them, and share them with others so they can increase their knowledge and appreciation of something we find significant. You never know

when your research will have an impact on an individual's understanding or on the larger field of Appalachian studies. Keep working, researching, and writing. Who knows? One day we might be digitizing your work.

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Orville Hicks in Two Books: A Review Essay

By Anne E. Chesky

Ebel, Julia Taylor. *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns as Told by Orville Hicks*. Boone, NC: Parkway Publishers, 2009.

Ebel, Julia Taylor, and Orville Hicks. *Orville Hicks: Mountain Stories, Mountain Roots*. Boone, NC: Parkway Publishers, 2005.

Orville Hicks has a long list of professions—trader, farmer, hunter, herb gatherer, recycling guru, professor, author—but the one which he is best known for is “yarnspinner.” His new book, coauthored with Julia Taylor Ebel, begins:

A yarn is a tale, especially an exaggerated tale.
To *spin* a yarn is to tell a tale.
A *yarnspinner* is a storyteller.
Orville Hicks is a yarnspinner,
A teller of the Appalachian Mountain tales of his people.

Born and raised on the “back side of Beech Mountain” (Ebel and Hicks 7), Orville comes from a long line of storytellers—he’s the great grandson of Council Harmon, the son of Sarah Ann Harmon

Anne Chesky, a Master’s candidate in the sustainable development concentration of the Appalachian Studies program in the Cratis D. Williams Graduate School, is the assistant editor of the Appalachian Journal.

Frame photo: Orville Hicks at his old worksite, the Aho Road Recycling Center between Boone and Blowing Rock, NC, before his handpainted lair’s bench sign. Winter 1999. Photo by Thomas McGowan.

Hicks, and the cousin of Ray Hicks—and may be one of the last great mountain storytellers. I refer to him as Orville rather than Mr. Hicks, or simply Hicks, because that is how Ebel refers to him in her books, because there are a number of important Hickses referred to, and also because Orville would not want to be referred to in a more formal manner—being “Orville” is a fundamental part of his identity.

In spring semester 2009 at Appalachian State University, Orville taught two Appalachian Studies courses with long-time friend Thomas McGowan. As a member of the graduate-level colloquium class, I would, every Wednesday night, sit and listen to Orville tell old-mountain yarns, Jack Tales, the occasional off-color joke, and many, many personal experience stories. The long history and sense of adventure behind each tale flowed through Orville’s sweeping hand motions, individual character voices, traditional mountain dialect, and his infectious chuckles. Capturing the essence of such a vibrant character on paper should be a difficult task, but Julia Taylor Ebel maneuvers the obstacles of transcription with the ease necessary for the relaxed oral styles of Orville Hicks in her latest book, *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns as Told by Orville Hicks*.

Though the best way to experience a Jack Tale is in person, Ebel has managed to capture Orville’s words in a way that connects the audience to the teller. Through an ethnopoetic format and strategically placed bolded, enlarged words, Ebel helps readers, as much as possible, imagine that they are listening to the tales being told by Orville himself. In her Introduction, she explains her transcription methods and pushes the reader to feel as though they are a part of the story telling experience:

The stories that follow are transcriptions of Orville’s words. The stories keep his words with minor editing for clarity...The poetic line form reflects the rhythms of his speech. Listen for Orville’s voice in the printed words. Hear the runs and pauses of voice as he draws in his listener to the stories. Imagine his laughter punctuating the tales. Picture his hands rising, falling, stretching wide, drawing listeners into his tales. (Ebel 2)

Ebel chooses not to designate when Orville makes hand motions, gestures, or expressions throughout his tales, and neither does she designate when he laughs. What readers may lose from this decision—the complete texture of a live Orville performance—they gain back by being able to concentrate solely on the rhythms and inflections of Orville’s story. No notes from the author interrupt the flow



of the stories. In this same vein, by creating a glossary of “Regional Speech” and “Pronunciations” at the end of the book, Ebel represents Orville’s traditional mountain dialect without drawing unnecessary attention to it during the telling of the tale. Just as one would never interrupt a storyteller to ask a question in the middle of a tale, Ebel allows the reader to experience the tale uninterrupted.

Ebel’s new book is very much a companion book to *Orville Hicks: Mountain Stories, Mountain Roots*, published in 2005. When Ebel first met Orville and heard him tell tales, they decided to do a children’s book about how Orville learned stories from his mother. But Orville, always full of stories, had too much to share and the book grew into a biography of sorts, compiled from stories of Orville’s family and life. This book tells the background—the context—behind Orville’s tales and stories that appear in their next book. In the chapter “Shelling Beans, Bunching Galax, and Storytelling,” Orville tells Ebel a story about how his mother, Sarah, would make hard mountain work fun:

“Sometimes us young’uns would be out playing in the yard. Mama’d call out, ‘You young’uns want to hear a tale?’ and we’d come running. She’d show up with a big old tub of beans or a big old tub of peas or a sack of galax...”

...As she and the children worked, Mama told her stories.

While Mama and the children prepared herbs and produce for sale or use, Orville gathered the stories Mama told—stories full of freshness and ripe for plucking. (Ebel and Hicks 63-64)

The stories his mother told came down from her father, McKeller (Kell) Harmon, and her grandfather, Council Harmon. These are the same stories, slightly modified by each generation to make them their own, that Orville shares with readers in *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns*.

According to Orville, his father, Gold Hicks, “saw no value in the tales Sarah told her children. ‘That’s a bunch of foolishness,’ Daddy’d say. Still, he didn’t hinder her storytelling,” lucky for the mountain tale and all her listeners (Ebel and Hicks 65). Though his father was strict and dismissed the mountain tales as foolish, especially in contrast to the religious texts he held sacred as an unlicensed preacher, Orville tells fond, funny, and touching stories of his father throughout *Mountain Stories, Mountain Roots*. He remembers “Daddy” with special regard:

“Daddy was always expecting to find a diamond somewhere,” Orville



Orville Hicks's parents, Gold and Sarah Ann Harmon Hicks, in a family photograph.

says with a chuckle. "We'd see him coming across the hill of the evening...Thirty minutes later we'd look back, and he'd hardly moved. He was looking at rocks."

"He'd say, 'We're rich, we're rich! I found a diamond! We don't have nothing to worry about now!' I bet he had a thousand diamonds when he died—every one of them quartz." (Ebel and Hicks 19)

Orville learned his stories from hearing them told again and again. And in much the same way, he tells the same stories over and over, but never in quite the same way—and sometimes in very different contexts. The story of Gold Hicks finding diamonds is retold in *Mountain Stories*, *Mountain Roots*. One day, while Ebel and Orville were walking together through the Beech Mountain woods, Orville told the story again. Ebel writes, "Orville looks at a wash of rocks along the path of a creek. 'Now if there was a diamond here, Daddy would have found it. He was always looking for diamonds. He'd pick up a rock and say, 'I found one! I'm rich!'" (Ebel and Hicks 129)

Ebel, making ties throughout the book between Orville's life and the stories he tells, ends the chapter on Gold Hicks: "While Daddy collected his diamonds, Orville gathered stories of family life—jewels of a different sort" (Ebel and Hicks 19). By referring to Gold



Hicks as “Daddy” in her own narrative, Ebel allows the reader to stay within Orville’s personal experience stories rather than be jolted by an outside narrator’s comments. Every editing decision by Ebel appears to be carefully thought out to avoid bringing the reader out of the tale or story.

But Orville’s stories have not all been handed down or experienced. *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns* is organized by type of tale, beginning with “Growing-Up Stories, Riddles, and Songs,” followed by “Jack Tales,” and then “Other Traditional Tales.” The real magic of this book, however, (especially for those of us who have heard the tales live) are the final sections, “A Folktale in the Making” and “Orville and the Little People.”

In “A Folktale in the Making,” Ebel publishes a never-before performed folktale written by Orville about his “cousin, friend, story-telling mentor, and ‘second dad,’” Ray Hicks (Ebel and Hicks 99). The story, “The Little Boy of the Blue Ridge Mountains,” is written like a Jack Tale and revolves around Ray’s experience as a child providing for his younger brothers and sisters. This story Orville began writing on paper, but as Ebel notes, “...Orville is a storyteller. To tell the story, he would put the paper aside and tell the tale as he recalls it” (Ebel 149). And, true of any great tale, “If Orville told this story a number of times, it would become deeper and richer with the telling—and if someone else heard it and told it, the story would change a little here and there. Before long, it could be like another Jack Tale, but with Ray as the main character” (Ebel 149). As the story evolves it will likely take on many characteristics of the traditional Jack Tale. In Orville’s early version of the story, Ray must go to two houses before he is able to find work. Jack Tales tend, however, to closely follow Olrik’s Law of Three, that is, events typically happen in sets of threes. I would wager that in later versions of the story, Ray may have to knock on one more door before he is able to find work. Regardless of how this story evolves, access to the first draft will be useful for folkloristic comparisons later on.

Ebel notes, “Wherever Orville is, he offers each story as a gift to those who listen” (Ebel 155). The last tale in the book, “Orville and the Little People,” was written by Orville for Ebel and her awaited grandson. Like “The Little Boy of the Blue Ridge Mountains,” “Orville and the Little People” began on paper. But for this story, rather than being transcribed into a traditional paragraph format like she has done with Ray’s story, Ebel publishes the handwritten notebook paper pages given to her by Orville. He begins the story as he begins all



Orville Hicks with Eustace Conway's mule Rabbit, Turtle Island, NC, spring 1986. "Mule Eggs" has become a signature tale in Orville's performances. Photo by Thomas McGowan.

his Jack Tales, "Way Back in the mountains..." (Ebel 159). The pages, complete with spelling and non-standard grammar, reflect Orville's skill in crafting oral tales as well as his desire to remain true to his mountain dialect and culture.

Each book lends understanding to its counterpart, so much so that they should be sold and purchased as a set. *Mountain Stories*, *Mountain Roots* is filled with black and white photographs of Orville's family and homestead, and animated shots of Orville gesturing in the midst of telling tales. These family pictures aid the stories by visually representing many of the subjects of Orville's personal experi-



Sherry Jenkins Jensen's sketch accompanying Orville Hicks's "The Mule Eggs" in *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns as Told by Orville Hicks*, p. 16.

ence stories. Many of them are wrinkled and worn. These shots encourage the reader to travel back in time and imagine what it would be like to live in a farmhouse without electricity, gathering herbs to sell, and swapping tales for entertainment. This collection of photographs nicely complements *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns*. In Ebel's second book, stories find companions not with photographs, but with detailed, pencil sketches by Sherry Jenkins Jensen. With an illustration on almost every page, Jensen is able to build upon each story by creating visual interpretations of the many characters—human and non-human, real and imaginary—that populate Orville's stories.

The purpose of these books goes beyond entertainment, beyond cultural appreciation, to the hardy role of preservation. Is Orville Hicks really the last of the Beech Mountain storytellers? If so, these books, especially *Jack Tales and Mountain Yarns*, with so many tales preserved within its covers, are vital to keeping the mountain storytelling tradition alive. Some may question the validity of oral tradition preservation through written accounts, but as the people of Beech Mountain opt out of continuing the tradition, these books may be all that is left. Let us hope, however, that the stories live on in people like Orville Hicks.

On the last page of *Mountain Stories, Mountain Roots*, Ebel speaks of preservation: “Rosa [Ray Hick’s wife] says she once asked Ray, ‘Why do you talk so much?’ ‘So I can remember,’ he said” (Ebel and Hicks 133). Listening to this story,

Orville laughs and nods. “Yeah.” That’s why Orville still tells tales—so he can remember...

The hills and hollows are full of stories—Orville’s stories. Orville is the keeper of stories, the one who gathers and tells the tales of his people—so we all can know, so we all can remember. (Ebel and Hicks 133)



Reviews

Rank Strangers: The Music of Mrs. Hyatt's Oprahouse. Harvest Recordings (415 Haywood Rd., Asheville, NC 28806). 2005. CD.

Reviewed by Lisa Baldwin

It is reassuring to know that there is still a place like Mrs. Hyatt's Oprahouse (or "Music House" as it is referred to today), where traditions are being passed down, with care, from generation to generation. The gift of playing music and singing traditional songs was handed down to me at an early age when my family members gathered on a Friday or Saturday night on Sand Mountain in Alabama. The children would be busy pushing all of the chairs up against the walls to make room for the musicians to play and the dancers to kick up their heels.

Rank Strangers was originally a documentary by Asheville filmmakers Rod Murphy and Scott B. Morgan of 6;14 Films and was accompanied by a photo exhibit displaying the work of Asheville photographer Ken Abbott, who served as a producer on the film. This third part of their project is the musical companion produced by Harvest Recordings and containing recordings from the Oprahouse sessions. Hunter Pope of Asheville's *Mountain Xpress* named the CD one of the five best local recordings: "an excellent compendium of mountain musicians who seek neither fame nor fortune."

Frame Photo: Portion of the photo montage on the cover of the Rank Strangers CD.

The collage of photographs on the cover of the CD and those featured inside the CD booklet, all taken by Ken Abbot over a three year span at the Thursday night jam, capture the intimacy of the setting and the spirit of the participants. Black and white photographs date back to 1947, the year of the jam session's inception. More recent color photos include action shots of Nelia Hyatt, the singers, musicians, dancers, and listeners, who range from less than one year to 95 years of age, and then there is one photograph of the long table of food provided for the pot-luck supper.

The CD contains twenty-seven songs and tunes. There are two tunes by Bryan Sutton and his father, Jerry. Rod Murphy mentions in the liner notes that Bryan Sutton got his start at Mrs. Hyatt's Oprahouse. Sutton first came to prominence as part of Ricky Skaggs' bluegrass band Kentucky Thunder and won the title of Guitarist of the Year by the International Bluegrass Music Association in 2000, 2003, and 2004. Recently he has been nominated for Top Guitarist of the Year by the Academy of Country Music awards. Josh Goforth, who also appears on the CD, has played with Laura Boosinger and the award winning musician, songwriter, and storyteller David Holt. The professionalism in Sutton's and Goforth's tunes shines on this recording, but they hold true to tradition and the spirit of this recording. Although Bryan Sutton is known for what many have called a jaw-dropping technique and guitar style, he steers away from playing too many hot licks on this CD. There are no additional chords thrown in or new arrangements on "Bully of the Town" (the Suttons) or "Snowflake Reel" (Goforth). "Nelia's Dance," written by Sutton, also appears on *Rank Strangers*.

Most of the musicians on this CD are not professionals, and they present their material just as they have in their living rooms and on their porches down through the years. The recording expresses a sense of respect for what has been handed down to the musicians by tradition bearers who once had only the music, songs, and stories to keep them entertained. In a 1991 NBC report of Nelia Hyatt's gathering, Tom Brokaw commented on its specialness: "With compact discs, MTV, and all, it's easy to forget the times when music meant bringing people together to perform and also to listen. Not so in Appalachia, where the hills still are very much alive."

I applaud Rod Murphy and Scott Morgan for their creation and for choosing Mark Capon and Matt Schnable, who run Harvest Records, to work with them on the CD. Together, they have man-



aged to deliver a plain, direct recording that allows the listener to step into the context of this gathering while listening to songs such as “Going Down That Road,” “Gold Watch and Chain,” and the old-time standard “Rank Stranger.” “Freeborn Man,” sung and played by Baxter Myers and Ed Hyatt, shows that they have heard Jimmy Martin’s version of this song as they give it that special Bluegrass treatment.

The chirping of crickets and the squeaking of chairs placed me in this special setting the minute I hit the play button, and I’m almost certain that I can hear taps on the shoes of one of the dancers. This sound could be the dancing steps of Jenny Robinson, who was a regular at the jam for twenty years. She was 95 years old when she died in 2005. The traditional fiddle tune “Down Yonder” (track 26) was played every Thursday in her honor.

There are no overdubs or retakes here. Some of the recordings were rescued from reel-to-reel tapes recorded over thirty years ago by Mrs. Hyatt’s husband, Wayne, in the front room of their home, and some were found in Nelia’s closet. The tracks also include live field recordings and band sessions at the Oprahouse. Fiddle Player Tommy Farmer, who was said to be at the first gathering at the Hyatt’s house back in the 1950s, plays “Whiskey Before Breakfast” on the first track. Ed Hyatt’s Railroad Gang plays many numbers, including “Listen to the Mockingbird.” There are compositions by A. P. Carter, Merle Haggard, and the Stanley Brothers.

The beautiful and distinctive Appalachian mountain dialect can be heard as the musicians make comments like “That’s the only one I know,” “I’m not sure what that song means,” and “I messed up the last few words.” There are several apologies by the musicians, yet another touch that exemplifies the real and honest demeanor of these tradition bearers. In the liner notes Roger Howell writes, “Some have never even played in front of a microphone before, and have no desire to.” Howell himself plays “Hop Light Lady” on the CD.

While there are instruments out of tune on many of the tracks, and words aren’t sung as they were originally written and recorded, the rhythm is always good, the harmonies are sweet, and the spirit of the playing and singing is uplifting. You can hear the conviction in the gospel song “Sun’s Coming Up,” sung by Edgar Netherton and his daughters.

Everyone comes to this scene to enjoy a very old and lasting Appalachian tradition. Kenley Jones, an NBC news correspondent who traveled to Asheville in 1991 to report on Mrs. Hyatt’s Operahouse,

commented on the importance of such a gathering in the preservation of cultural heritage:

They are participants in what may be the largest jam session still held weekly at a private home in the Appalachian Mountains. There is something more important going on here. This is a learning experience where older musicians teach the younger ones the traditional tunes that have bound neighbors and generations together since these mountains were settled. While these pickers, young and old, are having a good time making music, they are also helping to preserve part of their cultural heritage, traditional mountain music.

This particular traditional gathering is unusual in that Nelia Hyatt isn't a musician. Her husband, who was an instrument maker and musician, had worked with the Southern Railroad and wanted to host traditional bluegrass, old time, and early country music at their home as a way to relax after a hard week's work. At the suggestion of Ed Hyatt (or Wayne, as Nelia called him), the jam began and Nelia fell in love with the music.

The event started in the front room of their home in Asheville. After Mr. Hyatt retired, the couple decided to convert their garage into a suitable place for jamming. They held the celebration every Thursday night. After Mr. Hyatt's death, many thought the jam would be discontinued; however, Nelia Hyatt didn't want to disappoint those who had grown accustomed to this weekly gathering. With the help of the musicians who wanted to continue the tradition, and her family members, Mrs. Hyatt's Oprahouse (a garage on every night of the week except for Thursdays) became an Asheville institution.

Mrs. Hyatt received the Community Traditions Award at the North Carolina Folklore Society's annual meeting in 2006, and she has also received the Lamar Lunsford Folk Festival Award for her work. In the Community Traditions Award citation, Kara Rogers Thomas celebrates this woman who supported not only her husband's passion of music but the passion of the loyal musicians and their families who gathered at her home for a weekly tradition of playing music, singing, dancing, eating southern home cooked food, listening, and socializing. Thomas writes, "She enthusiastically supported his passion, and the musicians and their families that gathered at the Hyatt home as often as Mr. Hyatt's workload permitted soon became Mrs. Hyatt's extended family" (11).



Mrs. Hyatt also wanted to provide a place for the younger generation to learn the traditional songs and music. Thomas continues:

Mrs. Hyatt has provided a safe musical environment for four generations of musicians. Musicians who play there often describe the family-like atmosphere of the Thursday night jam. At ease in the setting, older and experienced players perpetuate traditional tunes and musical styles by encouraging young and beginning musicians to jump into the fray and play along.” (12)

In these troubling economic times, it is easy to relate to words in the old standard “Rank Stranger”: “I wandered again, to my home in the mountains, where in youth’s early dawn I was happy and free.” In *Our State*, Alan Hodge suggests the effects that modernity could have on this celebrated tradition:

There’s been talk of moving the Music House to the nearby Western North Carolina Farmers Market. But Hyatt, who celebrated her ninety-first birthday in June with a big bash, intends to keep the music coming and the toes tapping in her backyard as long as she can. (37)

The musicians on *Rank Strangers* are not concerned with perfection or slick renditions of the tunes and songs. They don’t take themselves too seriously, as they throw in a joke encouraging the listener to get a free copy of the CD by sending in a fifty dollar bill. *Asheville Citizen-Times* correspondent Carol Mallett-Rifkin writes, “A simple ‘live’ style gives the feel of what it’s like to visit Hyatt’s home and captures the sounds of an era.” This recording is for those who are interested in songs and tunes that have been kept alive through many generations in the Appalachian Mountains, and for those who enjoy heartfelt singing and playing. In the liner notes of the CD booklet, Rod Murphy writes, “Our biggest hope for *Rank Strangers* is to preserve a vanishing tradition in its truest form and setting.”

If you are a collector of Appalachian folklore, you will want to add this CD to your collection. If you want to create a scene in your home that is reminiscent of life in the Appalachian Mountains, you can push the chairs back to the wall, put on this recording, and feel the music pulling you to “cut a rug.” You’ll probably be singing along with most of the songs, and your neighbors will most likely show up on your door step, just as they do at Mrs. Nelia Hyatt’s Music House

these days. The memories of my childhood on Sand Mountain remind me to be thankful of the musical traditions passed down to me and to be thankful that there are still folks like Mrs. Nelia Hyatt bringing the community together and keeping traditions alive in Appalachia.

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Mountain Talk: Language and Life in Southern Appalachia. Dir. Neal Hutcheson. DVD. NC Life and Language Project, 2006.

Reviewed by Joshua Noah

The southern Appalachian dialect has long intrigued onlookers. Whether identified as being inferior to Standard American English or romanticized as having Elizabethan roots, Appalachian English is certainly a unique variant of American English. The language of southern Appalachian culture, particularly its folk speech, has received a great amount of positive and negative attention for over a century.

In the documentary *Mountain Talk: Language and Life in Southern Appalachia*, producer Neal Hutcheson, working with the NC Life and Language Project and narrator Gary Carden, presents candid interviews with western North Carolina residents. Through fieldwork in ten western North Carolina counties, the Project allows the people to speak for themselves. The songs, stories, and unique personalities that they offer provide an insight into the language and its strong

connection to the communities that these informants are a part of.

Words such as *si-gogglin*, *jasper*, *plumb*, *airish*, *dopes*, *boomer*, *scald*, and *gaum* speak for the creativity and spontaneity of language in the southern uplands. Isolation is referenced as one of the reasons that mountaineers have been creative in their choice of words. Watauga County resident Orville Hicks supports this idea: "We never went nowhere hardly, and we basically grew up in the holler there." Other words, such as *poke*, are noted as deriving from the British Isles, being brought over with early European settlers. The film also presents words with notable regional dialect pronunciations. Words like *tire*, *air*, *fire*, and *there* are pronounced differently in the mountains, in comparison to mainstream English. When natives speak these words outside of their homeland, it often directly identifies them as being from the mountains. With the stereotypes that exist about Appalachians, residents of the mountains are often wrongly pigeonholed as being ignorant and ungrammatical in their speech.

Because of this linguistic discrimination, and the role that language plays in influencing assumptions about socioeconomic status, several informants make note of discrimination against mountain talk. Carden explains this situation: "Mountain people are either depicted as in-bred and stupid, variations of the guys in *Deliverance*. Or there's the other extreme where they're impossibly noble, and remarkable and intelligent, and I can't stand either one of them." Although mountain people are aware of the negative connotations that exist, they are not quick to give up their linguistic identity. As Bertie Berlson notes, "These other young people would come back and they'd try to talk like Yankees, and we'd all make fun of them and say they had the brogue. You know that's like trying to be somebody you're not, getting above your raising." Social pressures exist outside of Appalachia and also inside of the region.

This documentary offers more than a portrait of mountain dialects: the people share through their language a connection to the land and communities that they are a part of. The sense of place that pervades the documentary is connected to the language of the mountaineers. Discussed through the mountain dialect are themes of neighborliness, a sentimental view of the past, the positive and negative influences of tourism in the state, experiences of discrimination against mountain talk, and the differences between how northerners and southerners talk. As informant Bertie Berlson shares, "Oh I lived in Washington, DC about four and a half years, and I just as soon be in the hills with my back broke as live there. People are so good to

each other here.” These individuals hold a close connection to the area, and language is at the foundation of this connection.

While some of the informants make note of their concerns about recent changes to mountain talk, others see the language as continuously evolving. As Orville Hicks puts it, “You got to change a little with the time.” Carden concludes that the mountain dialect is “evolving, not disappearing.” Carl Presnell, however, sees mountain language and culture as disintegrating, stating, “A lot of us, we’re losing our heritage. My son he don’t talk like me.” Still, the film’s overall message is that local people hold mountain culture and language close to their hearts, but realize that it is changing.

Mountain Talk is highly recommended if for no other reason than because of the footage of the late Popcorn Sutton and music of Mary Jane Queen. Scenes include Popcorn Sutton’s vintage automobile, a hardware store, a back porch, and the homes of people featured in the documentary. Witnessing the places that the informants call home allows viewers to put the mountaineers’ sense of place into perspective. The film is relevant to anyone hoping to better understand the language and culture of mountaineers, and how the residents view their connection to their land and communities. The project is an excellent documentary that would be effective in classrooms or simply for personal enrichment.



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North Carolina Folklore Journal
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
101 McKee Building
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

