Sound Archives Fellowship Activities Report

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My proposal for my studies at Berea was to focus on rare ballad variants from the Leonard Ward Roberts Collection, with a special focus on ballads of European origin. “Rare” in this case had a plural definition: 1) rarely known or sung in contemporary oral tradition and 2) rarely known in scholarly traditions. The ballads studied could qualify in one of these categories, but would most desirably belong to both. The ballads which met these priorities I would then be learn, teach and perform these songs in venues throughout central Appalachia.

From February 25th to March 22nd, I engaged in my research at the Berea Archives. Below is an overview of the month’s activities, the results of my research, a review of my engagement with the Berea community and my plans for completing this project.

Review of Month’s Activities

In my month in the Berea archives I listened to and read through hundreds of ballads from the Leonard Ward Roberts Collection. The first week of my study was primarily devoted to the recorded and written ballad repertoire of the Couch Family of Harlan Co. Kentucky. Roberts made several visits and interviews with the Couches from 1951 to 1955. To many, the Couches are best known for their diverse knowledge of folk tales, riddles and jokes. Their folksong repertoire, however, was equally vast. I was able to locate several lesser-known ballads, one of which is explored in greater detail later on in this report.

During my second week I focused on: 1) recordings of singers whom Roberts had noted as having impressive repertoires, and 2) singers from the collection whom I found to have compelling repertoires. These singers included Florence Lamb and Mary Rowe of Pike County, Elbert Miracle of Bell County, Louise and Zelda Bertrand of Pike County and George Washington “Wash” Nelson of Greenup County. The recordings of these source singers spanned generally from the late 1940s into the early 1960s. I also spent several days listening to a variety of interviews conducted by Roberts with students from his various folklore classes. These interviews recorded the aggregate of folksong material collected by students as part of their coursework.

When some singers could be found in multiple collections, I spent time listening to these other recordings. The Barbara Kunkle Kentucky Traditional Music Collection, which contains recordings from the 1970s, provided songs from Wash Nelson not found in the Roberts Collection. Listening to conversations between Ms. Kunkle and Mr. Nelson gave me not only a more complete understanding of his repertoire, but more information on his background and life experiences.
In my third and fourth weeks at Berea I focused on Roberts’ extensive written collection or regional ballads and songs. This research fostered several compelling song variations from a broad variety of informants. In the last few days of my studies in the archives I listened to a smattering of other source singers in and out of the Roberts Collection. These included Nimrod Workman of Harlan County, sourced in various collections in the Berea Archives, and Mary Lozier and Aunt Emma Taylor, both interviewed by Barbara Kunkle.

During this month of study I maintained a blog called “Ballads ‘n’ Songs from the Leonard Roberts Collection.” I used this blog to report and reflect on songs I was studying in the Roberts Collection as well as deliberate on the modern social politics of ballad singing. It can be found at balladsroberts.blogspot.com.

I gave a presentation on my research during my fourth week at Berea. My presentation included performance of several ballads including Dan Wilder’s “Marching Away with the Spaniards,” Dave and Jim Couch’s “Barbary Allen,” and Louise Bertrand’s “Selling the Cow.” I facilitated audience participation in discussing the unique qualities of these variants.

Research Results

My time examining the ballads of the Leonard Roberts collection revealed a diversity of rare and compelling variants well worth contemporary appreciation and practice. Below is a sampling of these pieces from recorded and written sources.

Rare Ballads

• The Hunting Song, shared by Elbert Miracle, of Bell County, KY.

The Hunting Song is a humorous story of a man hunting down and successfully killing a large amount of deer. While appearing to be American in its composition, the song is almost certainly related to an English traditional often called “Darby’s Ram.” “Darby’s Ram” is not a narrative as much as a series of descriptive, humorous verses which exaggerate the qualities of a ram from “Derby” or “Darby.” “Hunting Song” has the same hyperbolic nature, shares at least one cross-over verse and closely matches Western NC melodies of “Darby’s A nearly identical version from the Roberts Collection was sung by Dan Wilder, also of Bell County, KY who recalled learning it from an African-American man who accompanied the song on the banjo.

• Selling the Cow: Collected from Louise Bertrand of Pike County, 1953.

Mrs. Bertrand possessed a compelling selection of ballads of European origin, all of which were either rare ballads or rare variants of better-known ballads.
Ms. Bertrand’s rendition of “Selling the Cow” is a nearly complete and very humorous narrative. A farmer’s son goes off to sell a cow at the fair. On his way back from the successful sale he encounters a robber. The boy outwits the robber, managing to steal his horse and saddle bags full of pistols, silver and gold.

“Selling the Cow” is obviously related to an English song called “The Crafty Farmer” which is in turn probably a variation of “The Yorkshire Bite.” Though versions of this song have been found in other parts of the eastern U.S., Roberts believed this ballad to be the only one of its kind collected in Kentucky. Mrs. Bertrand’s version is fairly complete and reads closely to versions found in Newfoundland in the early 20th century. In the recording, it appears Mrs. Bertrand forgets one to two verses, which Roberts has apparently pieced together in his written transcription.

**Rare Ballad Variants**

• **Marching Away with the Spaniards** from Dan Wilder of Pineville, KY.

Dan Wilder simply called this song “Spaniards.” It is a rare twist on a ballad type Francis Child popularly called “Gypsy Laddie” (Child #200). Most American and British versions of this song provide a basic plot of a nobly lady abandoning her lord and child for a gypsy or band of gypsies. Mr. Wilder’s version, instead, tells the story of a daughter running away from her father to join a band of Spaniards.

In many versions of this song, one of the first verses reads:

“She pulled off her high heeled shoes

They was made of Spanish leather

She put on her highland brogues

To go with the gypsy loddy.”

It is possible that the “Spanish leather” from these older versions has transformed into actual Spanish men, who take over the role of the gypsy or gypsy band. When I shared this version with respected folklorist and ballad singer Bobby McMillon of Western NC, he told me he had never encountered such a variation before.

• **Molly Bond**: Collected from Louise Bertrand of Pike County, 1953.

This is a short variation of an English broadside dating to at least the 19th century often called “Polly Vaughn” and “Molly Bawn.” Mrs. Bertrand’s version follows the basic plotline, with a few changes that create alternate imagery to older versions.
The song is four short verses. Jimmy Rando (called “Jimmy Randolph” in other versions) kills his lover Molly Bond upon mistaking her for a swan. The final verse reads:

“All the girls in Colorado was standing in a row,  
With Molly at the headmark like mountains of snow;  
All on Jimmy’s trial Molly’s ghost did appear,  
Saying, “Uncle, dear Uncle, Jimmy Rando comes clear.”

Generally the first two lines of this stanza are attached to a separate verse which describes the jealousy felt towards Molly by the girls of the country. An example can be read from Scottish singer Norman Kennedy’s version:

“The girls in this country they are all very glad  
Since the pride of Glen Allen, Molly Bawn is now dead.  
The girls in this country stand them all in a row  
Molly Bawn would shine above them like a mountain of snow.”

Mrs. Bertrand’s verse has changed several elements of the story. Firstly, the setting of the tale is now Colorado. Secondly, the formerly jealous girls are in a more ambiguous setting- perhaps in line to pay respects at a funeral. The word “headmark,” the meaning of which is ambiguous at best in American English, could here be interpreted as a headstone or gravestone.

**Barbary Allen**: Collected from Dave and Jim Couch of Harlan County, KY.

This version of the well-known Barbara Allen (Child #84) contains rare plot variations that I have not encountered in the many dozens of versions of this song I have previously encountered. The two major plot variations occur towards the end of the song. When Barbary Allen is walking home on the road, she encounters Sweet William’s ghost. She entreats him to lie down in front of her, and he refuses, saying, “I am a cold corpse of the clay, I can’t let you look upon me.” These verses have obviously evolved from the traditional encounter of Barbara viewing William’s corpse as it is carried in a coffin by his friends.

The second plot twist is offered just after this encounter. When William will not lie down for Barbary, she bursts out crying, saying, “Oh mother, you’re the one to blame. You would not let me marry him.” This is the first and only time I have encountered an American version with an alternate reason for Barbara’s refusal to be with William. When this ballad variation was shared with folklorist Bobby McMillon, he said he had not encountered either variation before.
**Rare Ballad or Ballad Variant, With No Given Melody**


This is a compelling variation of “Willie of Winsbury” (Child #100). The most notable difference being that the character of Willie, formerly a man of wealth and land, has here been transformed to a sailor named John Barber. The rhyming structure remains the same, with many verses reading similarly to older versions. As an example, below are parallel verses in which the lord questions his daughter of the identity of her child’s father. First from Child’s “Willie o Winesberry” 100C:

“Oh is it to any mighty man?
Or any lord of fame?
Or is it to the rank robbers
That I sent out o Spain?”

Comparative verse in the John Barber version:

“Is your lover some lord or knight?
Or is he a man of fame?
Or is he one of my own sea men?
That plows the raging waves.”

“John Barber” does not include the common scene of the father forcing his daughter to stand naked on a stone, exposing her pregnant state. However, the rest of the song follows the common “Willie o Winsbury” plot closely. The father threatens to hang John Barber, the daughter protests, and when the father finally sees John Barber he instead offers house and land, blessing the marriage.

A unique verse uncommon to “Willie of Winsbury” is found at the end of “John Barber,” reading:

“John Barber wears a suit of silk
As white as any snow, snow
With his read rosy cheek and white pearl teeth
And eyes as black as a crow, crow.”


This piece’s origins are foggy upon a preliminary search. Many elements make it appear to relate to 18th or 19th century English broadsides. When this song was presented to ballad folklorist Bobby McMillon, he was not familiar with it nor any variation. The story
is that a woman who dresses herself as a duke and boards a ship, seeking her lover who has been pressed into service.

The first verse reads:

“She dressed herself like any duke
With a star upon her breast
She said she’d kill the captain
If he did her molest.
The officers stood a-gazing
The noble duke to see,
They thought he was a-coming
Their commander for to be.”

In her disguise the woman accuses her lover of stealing from her, arrests him and takes him off the ship. Once safely away, she reveals herself to him, and the two lovers are united. I look forward to learning more about this song and its origins.

• We Met, We Met my Own True Love- Collected from Virgie Couch of Leslie Co., submitted by Martha Beddow of Knox Co. in 1956.

Though this version is a fairly classic rendition of “House Carpenter” (Child 243), it contains some rare phrasing and has been structurally changed to have a chorus.

In the first verse the mail lover has returned from the “Salt Lake Sea.” He explains “I could have married the king’s daughter. I could have worn the crown” - the last line being a rare expression. The chorus, which begins at the end of the second verse has been altered from lines commonly found in most versions of “House Carpenter”:

“Cheer up, cheer up, my own true love
Cheer up, again said he.
I’ll take you where the grass grows green
On the banks of Sweet Will-ie.”

The chorus appears again every two to three verses. The edition of a chorus suggests that the song may have been adapted for instrumental accompaniment or listener participation.

• In The Pines- Submitted by Doll Cornett of Fogertown, KY, 1958.

This song is a unique combination of “The Maid Freed from the Gallows,” (Child #95) (more commonly called “Hangman”), the popular folksong “In the Pines” and a traveling verse from “Look Up, Look Down that Lonesome Road.”

The first verse is the refrain from “In the Pines” reading:
“In the pines, in the pines,
where the sun never shines
And you shiver when the chilly wind blows.”

The verses then move into the common plot of “Hangman”- with the accused person asking various relatives if they have come to rescue him from the hangman's noose. However, the verses are shortened so that each interaction- the query to the relative and the response from the relative- all take place in four lines of the same verse.

The chorus of the song makes direct use of a popular traveling verse, found in American folksongs popularly called “The Longest Train” and “The Lonesome Road:”

“Look up, look down this lonesome road
Hang down your head and cry
For the best of friends must part some day,
And now it’s you and I.”

This refrain is used in the song to fit the sentiments of the person awaiting execution, fearful of separation from his lover through death.

This mix of influences in this song indicate that the singer may have lived in a community with ballad and blues influences. Although “In the Pines” is of 19th century Appalachian origin, blues musician Lead Belly had popularized this song in the 1940s. The repeating refrain and the loose structure of the narrative itself may also indicate that this song was performed with musical accompaniment in blues or old-time styles.

**Engagement with the Berea Community**

During my time at Berea I engaged in a series of activities with college students and faculty as well as the local community.

As part of the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center's *Dinner on the Grounds* series, I performed a one person multi-media show called “The West Virginia Mine Wars through Talk, Song and Slideshow.” This performance proved popular enough that I was asked to perform again for Professor Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens’ class as well as invited to perform for a school-wide convocation in January 2014.

I hosted two public community singings in the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center. These singings utilized group song from a variety of genres including Appalachian folksong, work songs, English balladry and American hymnody. Students and local community members attended.
Trajectory for Anticipated Outcomes

In my fellowship proposal to Berea, I described how I would use my studies to produce workshops, a website and performances to teach and disseminate ballads from the Roberts Collection. Beginning in mid-May, I will learn and memorize approximately 25 pieces as the initial stage for implementing these goals. More details are written below.

1) **Workshops:** I will design a workshop focused on the Roberts ballads and begin teaching them in the summer. My first opportunity to teach will be at the Whipporwill Festival near Berea on July 11\textsuperscript{th}-14\textsuperscript{th}. I will plan for several more in North Carolina throughout the fall. Due to my planned convocation engagement at Berea in January 2014, it is likely I may schedule my workshops in Berea and eastern Kentucky for that same time period. Other engagements such as Mountain Justice Spring and Summer Breaks 2014 (in Virginia and West Virginia) and summer festivals will follow.

2) **Website:** During the summer of 2013 I will develop a website that features recordings of me singing ballads studied from the Roberts Collection. These recordings will also be shared with the Berea Archives, and I can assist in getting them on the Sound Archives website if so desired. My website will be connected to the Roberts Collection blog, and will list upcoming performances and workshops of songs from the Collection. These events will be advertised on various networks.

3) **Performance:** This summer, as I teach workshops and spend time becoming more familiar with the Roberts ballads, I will build a specific repertoire for a show devoted to the Roberts ballads. The performance will include observations from and information on source singers, and I will commit time to engaging with the material I have collected from Berea for these purposes as well. In all likeliness, I will begin performing this show in the fall of 2013. If so desired, I can perform this show during my visit to teach workshops at Berea in early January.