For the past ten years I have told stories professionally and have aimed to present several of the many forms of Appalachian storytelling. First telling from the tradition of tall tales, I sought to expand my storytelling knowledge and repertoire to include traditional stories and ballads. Learning stories from books proved to be unfulfilling, as there were many elements of orature that were lacking in print version. Learning the stories from old people proved to be difficult in locating sources of authentic tellings. I realized that if I planned to call myself a bearer of tradition and keeper of that practice, authenticity was to be key. I decided to turn to field recordings.

As part of this search, I proposed to study items from the Leonard Roberts Collection in the Berea Sound Archives. My focus was on those artifacts and mentifacts with earlier collection dates, hoping that the informants would have had less interaction with outside media (at that time, radio more than television) and less influence of “standardized” or “normalized” English education. I wanted to hear traditional stories that were told with pure, unaffected accent and dialect. I also wished for telling with as little literary influence as possible.

One particular interest in the Roberts collection was to compare print and aural versions of the same story. I was somewhat familiar with two of Roberts’s print collections as I have used them in teaching and personal research. What stumped me was the common occurrence of pausing prose to interject verse at a pivotal moment in the narrative. Literature is able to convey verse only so far whereas oral delivery conveys meter more clearly, especially with regard to Appalachian accent and, in some cases, dialect. My hope in studying Roberts’s audio recordings was to find clear rhythmic patterns in the sections of verse that I could then use when telling traditional stories. The patterns could also be adapted to my original stories in order to provide greater authenticity as an Appalachian voice.

A second interest in the collection took more of the personality of a treasure hunter. A study of the stories that Roberts chose to print reveals a set of motifs and tale types that, although characteristic of Appalachian stories, is not wholly unique to the region. Common motifs include Jack with brothers Tom and Will (three siblings), a helpful singing bird, and the broken token. Tale types include those such as the transformational journey and a character rising from lowest to highest class. I was interested in hearing additional stories that either weren’t included in print format or weren’t the version used in print. My desire was to find other motifs and tale types that I found to be interesting and less common. The intent was to learn these stories as interesting additions to my repertoire and collect motifs for potential use in future story creation. My hope was to find stories that had eluded popular telling.

As far as authenticity is concerned, Roberts’s collection seemed fit. He can be heard repeatedly through the recordings screening his informants with several questions: where did you hear this
story and are you sure it wasn’t read to you out of a book? A majority of the recordings I studied were made between 1949 - 1955; that many informants responded having heard the story from a family member at least a generation above them was a boon to the tradition-bearing goal of my research. The listening proved to be full of the treasures I hoped to find.

Rhythm

My first task was to listen for verse passages. The rhythms were easy to identify and notate, and many were common to a number of different stories.

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Figure 1

a. **Nippy** LR001 A05 told by Billy Ray Woods  
   “Daub it with moss and slick it with clay”

b. **Jack and the Bull** LR009 A03 told by Bug Cornett  
   “(They) fit and they fought and they fit and they fought”

c. **Tailipoe** LR050 A01 told by Jane Muncy  
   “Tailipoe, Tailipoe, I want my tailipoe”

These rhythms were used in many verse sections of other stories, even when the words varied or contrasted.

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Such use of verse makes it easy to recall particular sections of the narrative when passed through an oral tradition. I found that it also marked important or pivotal moments of the narrative. In the example of **Nippy** (see fig. 1a), the narrative switches to verse to indicate a clue of how to solve the story’s main problem. Perhaps on a psychological level this is a more important reason why sections of these stories remained in oral tradition: they cue important information like a verbal spotlight.

While listening for the verse rhythms I noticed a phenomenon somewhat similar to being fully immersed in a foreign-language setting: I was comprehending the accents and elements of dialect as a different language. Because most of the people with whom I interact on a daily basis don’t talk with the same cadences and accents as those in the recordings, the act of wearing headphones in the reading room was much like transporting to a different world. Indeed, the rhythms used in the verse sections of traditional stories were easy to hear, but in the language immersion I noticed that the verse rhythms were also evident in the prose passages of the narrative.
I first observed the “Daub it with Mud” rhythm (fig. 1a) recurring through the narrative of a number of stories in the collection. A sample of stories and the instances of this rhythm (with slight variants) include:

Merrywise LR001 A01 told by Jane Muncy  
(so she) took out a bag, a felican (?) bag

Reptensil LR002 A03 told by Patsy Ann Stacy  
(theys an old) woman came out and she was a witch

Jack and the Beanstalk LR005 A03 told by Curt Duff  
(when he) walked on the floor it sounded like thunder

Deer & Peach Rock LR005 A08 told by Judy Day  
.he climbed up a peach tree and’s eatin’ some peaches

Jack and the Bull LR009 A03 told by Bug Cornett  
swing to the back or cut with a sword

Old Woman Who Loved Mush LR011 A09 told by Martha Roark  
(I’ll) make me some mush and ya won’t get a bite of it

The Man & His Three Sons LR 005 A12  
(The) next boy went out and he done the same thing

Another example of a recurring rhythm comes from Jane Muncy’s telling of Jack and the Bull Strap (LR001 A07). This rhythm is structurally similar to the first example above (1a), in that it can be notated in the western notational meter of twelve-eight with a division of four sets of three beats. In Ms. Muncy’s tale, the rhythm can be heard in her narrative line “got out and went in and nobody knew ‘em.” Other stories with this rhythm include:

Tailor and the Giants LR013 A04 told by Bill McDaniel  
(this fella come along there and selling belts so)
this little tailor he bought him a belt

The Silver Tree LR001 A06 told by Lige Gay  
(old) woman this looks like my poor little girl’s [foot] (other body parts are used in repetition)

Rawhead and Bloodybones LR002 A06 told by Jane Muncy  
wash me and dry me and lay me down easy

Rawhead and Bloodybones LR016 A07 told by Patsy McCoy  
wash me and dry me and lay me down easy

Woodchopper’s Son LR006 A01 told by Marilyn Baker  
.they went to the top of the hill that day

In total, I found nearly twenty rhythms that appeared in the prose speech patterns of more than one story. See Appendix I for more details.

The occurrence of rhythm used in both verse and prose made me question its existence in the storytelling. The rhythm could be a subconscious tool for remembering certain elements of the story. More interestingly, it seems as if there is a rhythmic vocabulary in the informants’ English dialect of eastern Kentucky. The rhythms recur in different stories with different words, which leads me to believe that the rhythms might be more broadly language-based and less important on the individual level.

A related rhythmic occurrence that is worth mentioning is what I call the curious hesitation. I observed that in some of the stories, the informant would either pause, hesitate, or make a
mistake in the narrative and then go back to retell the erroneous section of story. In many cases, when the teller restarted with the narrative, the words that immediately followed the curious hesitation were spoken with a stronger, clearer element of rhythm. After identifying this as more than an isolated phenomenon, I was able to easily locate occurrences of the curious hesitation simply by waiting for a pause in the narrative. For more information, see Appendix II.

A third rhythmic observation is worth mentioning. Many of the stories in the Roberts collection are told by multiple informants from different counties, collected in different years. Because of this, the collection is good for comparing variants of certain folktales and motifs. Some examples with a fair selection of variants include the narratives 1) where if a man can stay in a haunted house overnight then he will be rewarded with treasure, 2) the big toe/Taileypo story, and 2) Jack and the Robbers. One story of particular interest to me was two versions of Rawhead and Bloodybones. Although a few informants were collected telling a related story (usually following the storyline of The Two Sisters) and a few informants were collected telling stories (with completely different narratives) where a character is named “Rawhead and Bloodybones,” Jane Muncy and Patsy McCoy each shared a variant of Rawhead and Bloodybones that have narratives similar enough to be the same story (and different from the other types mentioned). I made a point to compare the rhythms in these two recordings, because 1) Jane Muncy tells with a level of lyricism and rhythmic definition far greater than most of the other informants, 2) both young women have a similar rhythm to the delivery of the verse “Wash me and dry me and lay me down easy” (spoken by each Rawhead-and-Bloodybones character to the main characters), and 3) Ms. Muncy and Ms. McCoy were both living in Leslie County when Roberts recorded them. Because of several strong differences in the narrative events, it is doubtful that the girls heard the story from the same person.

What I found to be interesting about this particular comparison has to do with a section of the narrative where the main character returns home from a long journey. At this point in both girls’ narratives, a sentence with strong rhythmic elements is spoken. The wording is different and the rhythms are different, but the moment in the narrative shares the presence of rhythm.

Rawhead and Bloodybones LR 002 A06 told by Jane Muncy
(they) couldn’t hardly look at her she was so pretty

Rawhead and Bloodybones LR 016 A07 told by Patsy McCoy
she was so pretty that theys all have to look at her
longer than they would have before

I find it fascinating and quite curious that each girl would use a strong rhythm at the same moment in the story, even though the actual musicality of the passages differ. But it suggests that either 1) at one point in time, this section was told with a common verse that has changed in time through orature, 2) the girls originally heard versions of this story where this passage used verse and they have changed the narrative themselves while retaining the presence of verse (note that both passages contain the words “she was so pretty”), or 3) perhaps much more of the original (or earlier) story was in verse and this is a passage that has remained.
I found many of the stories in the Roberts Collection to have passages of verse in the midst of prose. The rhythms used in the verse sections are not unique and appear in sections of verse of other stories. Careful listening revealed that these rhythms also occasionally appear in the natural delivery of the prose passages. It is possible that at an earlier time these stories existed completely in verse to aid in recollection. A more likely case might be that the stories alternated between prose narrative and song (verse), and the elements of rhythm in the verse were common enough to manifest in the narrative telling. A third option might be that a particular rhythmic component exists in the accent and dialect (and perhaps even in the older form of English) used in eastern Kentucky during the time these recordings were made. It is important to note that the stories where these rhythms exist are traditional stories and not personal narrative. What can be concluded is that the existence of the rhythmic element is important enough to the storytelling (and perhaps the survival of the language) that it persisted in the telling styles of many people of varying ages from a large selection of rural, mountainous counties.

Stories of Interest

Although the rhythmic elements that appeared in the traditional telling fascinated me (and continue to do so) and consequently consumed much of my time researching in the Roberts Collection, part of my Fellowship was set aside to search for interesting stories and elements of folklore. I was able to fulfill this goal in addition to learning more about rhythm in verse.

Foremost, I have learned *Rawhead and Bloodybones*, a tale which is accessible to adults and children, teaches a good lesson, has an ending that is appropriate for non-traditional family settings, and includes interesting motifs such as combing treasure from one’s hair.

Another tale that I have learned is *The Diamond Axe*, a version of a story that appears in several forms and traditions around the globe. This particular version interested me because of the imagery of axes made of different materials (diamonds, gold, silver) and because it is a teaching story suitable for very young ages.

I was able to compile a list of nearly fifty interesting motifs that were less familiar in the stories I know or altogether absent. Some of these motifs include:
- a witch that could take the form of a pig
- a rocking chair that grants wishes
- everlasting water from a fountain made of a tree trunk
- a $5 gold piece that returns to one’s pocket
- finding a cure in three spoonfuls of bull blood
- magical items inside of bull horns or horse ears
- baking money inside of bread
- drinking enchanted water makes a pearl and diamond fall from one’s mouth during speech
- losing one’s memory when a dog licks one’s lips
What Comes Next

My time in the Archives was fruitful and yielded intended and unintended outcomes. In the month since completing the Fellowship, I have found myself already employing the rhythmic phrases in my traditional telling and have watched how they contribute to captivating an audience, allowing them to more fully enter the complete world of a particular tale. I have tried my hand at telling some of the stories from the collection and will continue to prepare them for the public. I was able to present some of my rhythmic findings to much interest at the Ohio Storytelling Conference.

I would be very interested to return to Berea at a future time to listen through the remainder of the Roberts recorded collection; extreme weather conditions and a tight schedule made it so that I was only able to hear about half of it. I would also be interested in revisiting the entire recorded collection because much of the research developed as I listened through the collection in chronological order, usually with only one complete listen of each tale. I am sure that revisiting the collection with current knowledge would allow for the identification of additional instances of rhythmic prose.

As of the writing of this report, I am in a Spoken Word Residency at the Banff Arts Centre in Alberta, Canada. New stories are in development that reflect the knowledge collected in Berea. It is my plan in the next year to produce a story in the form of an epic journey through the folklore of Appalachia, of which the Roberts Collection has already influenced. As I continue to tour the country telling and teaching about storytelling, I will call upon my research in the Roberts Collection to share Appalachian stories and storytelling with the world.
Appendix I

The following rhythms appeared in multiple stories behind different words. Rhythms are shown without meter but with beaming indicative of stress. Examples from the Roberts collection indicate a sample of appearances of each rhythm. The use of (var.) indicates a slight variation of the notated rhythm. Parenthesis in examples indicate words used for context that are not part of the rhythm.

1.  
   Merrywise LR001 A01 told by Jane Muncy: took out a bag a felican bag  
   Nippy LR001 A05 told by Billy Ray Woods: daub it with moss and slick it with clay  
   Reptensil LR002 A03 told by Patsy Ann Stacy: woman came out and she was a witch

2.  
   Merrywise LR001 A01 told by Jane Muncy: seven mile step  
   Hopo My Thumb LR004 A01 told by Henry Rennington: quick as daylight come  
   Watching Bulldog LR004 A02 *I did not record the informant’s name in my notebook: tear the winder out  
   Animals & Robbers LR005 A11 told by Clarence Day: rooster why d’you crow?  
   Woodchopper’s Son LR 006 A01 told by Marilyn Baker: what must I ask John?  
   Big Black Toe LR007 A01 told by Bill McDonald: (I) want my big black toe  
   Lazy Irishman LR007A05 told by Delbert McDaniel: (One) time old Pat and Mike  
   Foolish Jack LR050 A02 told by Jane Muncy: (He) did such foolish things

3.  
   The Silver Tree LR001 A06 told by Lige Gay: Old woman this looks like my poor little girl’s foot  
   The Big Toe LR002 A02 told by Harold Valentine (var.): (she started) tastin’ of it and she tasted, she tasted it all up

4.  
   Jack and the Bull Strap LR001 A07 told by Jane Muncy: Bull strap make it come true  

5.  
   Jack and the Bull Strap LR001 A07 told by Jane Muncy: went to this girl’s house  
   Two Wood Cutters LR006 A03 told by Clarence Day: (you) come go with me

6.  
   The Big Toe LR002 A02 told by Harold Valentine: What’s that big nose fer? [var: that tail, them ears, them teeth]  
   Rawhead and Bloodybones LR002 A06 told by Jane Muncy (var): (it) pinched her and hurt her  
   Greedy Fat Man LR003 A07 told by Estill South (var): Ha Ha I’m Out  
   About George Joseph LR006 A04 told by Mrs. Robert Wolfe (var): this ain’t the one, says

7.  
   Watching Bulldog LR004 A02 *I did not record the informant’s name in my notebook:  
   werser and werser around her winder  
   Woodchopper’s Son LR006 A01 told by Marilyn Baker (var): they went t’the top of the hill that day
8. Animals & Robbers LR005 A11 told by Clarence Day: a. (the) donkey’s brayin’ the; b. dog was barkin’ the; c. cat was meowin’

Jack and the Bull LR009 A03 told by Bug Cornett: a. finest horses and; b. (var) best saddles and


9. About George Joseph LR006 A04 told by Mrs. Robert Wolfe: (this is) ev’ry word the truth

Bear and the Baby LR006 A05 told by Mrs. Robert Wolfe (var): (I’ll) have to sort of study it

Jack and the Giant’s Task LR009 A12 [10] told by Bill McDaniel (var, as above): (this) boy he fell in love with her

Ghosts & Other Sketches LR011 A05 told by Dan Taylor: Back in ancient days

Jack & the Bull’s Horns LR015 A05 (var): (He) eat and he eat and eat

Jack and His Bull LR006 A06 told by Will Witt: (He) went and went and went

Jack and His Bull LR006 A06 told by Will Witt: (He) fit and fit and fit

The Prince and the Monster LR007 A16 told by Bill McDaniel: (He) sailed and sailed and sailed

King Richard of England LR008 A09 told by Bill McDaniel: (He) fought and fought and fought

10. Haunted House LR006 A15 told by Will Witt: I spread the sheet over Bud

Jack and the Bull LR009 A03 told by Bug Cornett (var): three times and you’ll never be killed

11. Reptensil LR002 A03 told by Patsy Ann Stacy: back once a day for a month

Boy That Never Seen Afraid LR002 A05 told by Don Saylor: Hey are ye dead are ye dead?

Rawhead and Bloodybones LR002 A06 told by Jane Muncy (diminution): Down horses down

Woodchopper’s Son LR006 A01 told by Marilyn Baker (var): He had a boy named John

Woodchopper’s Son LR006 A01 told by Marilyn Baker (var - see above): Ask him about my beard

Bears In A Holler Tree LR006 A07 told by Robert Wolfe: (and he) tracked and he tracked and he tracked

Silver Tree LR006 A16 told by Mrs. Robert Wolfe (var): (a’)plowin’ and he plowed and he plowed

Jack and the Bull LR009 A03 told by Bug Cornett (var): (and he) weeped and he weeped and

Old Woman Who Loved Mush LR011 A09 [11] told by Martha Roark (var) I’m gonna beat you to death this time

12. Rawhead and Bloodybones LR002 A06 told by Jane Muncy:

Once upon a time there was a woman and she’d married

Irishmen Looking For Gold LR006 A11 told by Will Witt: (theys) going down the river and they’s a-huntin’ for a gold mine
13. **Animals & Robbers** LR005 A11 told by Clarence Day: (well they) said they’s gonna kill me

**Jack and the Giant’s Task** LR009 - 12 [10] told by Bill McDaniel: (lived) happy ever after

**Tailipoe** LR050 A01 told by Jane Muncy: I’ll fix you you thing you

**Tailipoe** LR050 A01 told by Jane Muncy: (this) thing he eat my dog up

**Witch Store Robber** LR011 A10 told by Martha Roarke: (and) say I’ll see you later

14. **Animals & Robbers** LR005 A11 told by Clarence Day: (that) donkey placed his feet in the winder

**Two Wood Cutters** LR006 A03 told by Clarence Day (var): (don’t) let me in I’ll break this door down

15. **The Man And His Three Sons** LR005 A12 told by Joseph Mitchell: (he) heard a little knock on the door

**Silver Tree** LR006 A16 told by Mrs. Robert Wolfe (var): tasted and she tasted all the way

**Girl in the Robber’s Cave** PR013 A03 told by Bill McDaniel (var): (He had a) purty little girl by his first wife

**Pewee Under the Tub** LR013 A06 told by John McDaniel (var): (they all went a-) huckleberry pickin’ one day

16. **The Man and His Three Sons** LR005 A12 told by Joseph Mitchell: (are) you pretty hard to get along with?

**Gold In The Chimley** LR011 A14 told by John McDaniel (var): (and ya) stole all the money-I-ever had

17. **Mother Golden** LR 006 A02 told by Martha Joseph: Here comes our golden girl

**The Enchanted Cat** LR 007 A13 told by Bill McDaniel: Well you can stay with me

**King Richard of England** LR008 A09 told by Bill McDaniel: Fin’ly the time arrived

**Jack and the Bull** LR009 A03 told by Bug Cornett: cuttin’ their toenails off

18. **Bears In A Holler Tree** LR006 A07 told by Robert Wolfe (var): (shot the) bear right square between the eyes

**Irishman and the Watch** LR006 A12 told by Will Witt: (He) all-ays wanted him a watch
Appendix II.

The following selections demonstrate a small sample of the curious hesitation: instances where the informant stopped telling the story (due to a mistake, hesitation, or other pause) and restrated the story with clear rhythm. The use of — indicates where the teller pauses.

*Irishman and the Watch* LR006 A12 told by Will Witt
where can I, said — where can I find me a watch at?

*Silver Tree* LR006 A14 told by Mrs. Robert Wolfe
old woman says come over here — says come over here old woman says and get this rabbit

*Irishman and the Fiddler* LR007 A04 told by Charlie Halcomb
Well said he had a thing — said a big long thing got it outta the trunk ate a supper and twist its ears saw a stick over its back ‘til it squalled like a car and I didn’t know That-and-my-Christ (?) I didn’t know what to think about that

*Jack and the Bull* LR009 A03 told by Bug Cornett
three days and — three days and three nights and three hauers and three minutes and three seconds and lived happy ever after

*Old Woman Who Loved Mush* LR011 A09 told by Martha Roark
...chips, and I’ll — make me some mush and ya won’t get a bite of it

*The Tailor and the Giants* LR013 A04 told by Charlie Halcomb
...fella come along there, and — selling belts so this little tailor he bought him a belt