Fellowship Activity Report
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My intent, with the first half of my fellowship, was to delve into the biographies of some of these women, to make contact with folks who knew them, and begin the process of recording stories of their lives, and begin to think about how to share them.

It has, then, been a successful six weeks, in my estimation, though there’s still a lot of work to be done; with each contact I make, I get passed on to another person to speak with, another lead to follow.

I have conducted interviews with Effie Pierson’s two remaining daughters, Lillian and Pauline; I have received a number of digitally scanned photos of her, from her son-in-law, Walter. (I am waiting to hear back from him, but am anticipating that these images will be donated to the archive.) I will follow up with the daughters, as I begin in the next weeks to sort through the interviews and begin to put the pieces together, for a fluid written narrative of her life. Sadly, there are no leads for further recordings of Pierson, beyond a miraculous find of tapes from WLAP, unlikely at this point.

I have interviewed Earl Thomas, Junior, about Lella Todd; he knew and played with her towards the end of her life. Both he and John Harrod have photographs of her, which I will arrange to have copied and donated.

I have conducted an extensive interview (over three hours) with the two children, Jim and Sandy, of Blanche Coldiron. I’ve also interviewed Sue Massek, who was a friend and student, about their relationship. (After that interview, it occurs to me that, one day down the road, there needs to be some work done about documenting the stories that the Reel World ladies have to tell. I’m not sure if this is something I’ll have time for this semester, but on down the road, certainly.)

I have been in touch with the daughter of Emma Lee Dickerson, Sharon Nunley. She has recently donated fourteen cassette tapes to Morehead State University’s Archive, at the Kentucky Center for Traditional Music, tapes which contain a few fiddle tunes, and some of Dickerson’s harmony singing and guitar playing, with her cousin Quentin. Dickerson, like the other fiddlers I’ve been studying, is someone whose tunes I have been learning on the fiddle, and attempting to make transcriptions of the tunes as an aid to my analysis of their style.

I interviewed Linda Martin, of the Renfro Valley Barndance, about her experience playing fiddle, and performing. Though she was from Indianapolis, the interview lent insight into the experiences of some of the other women’s experiences as performers, with this music, as well as a few specific stories about the Amburgey Sisters, with whom she played in Atlanta.

I have spent time, reviewing the collections of John Harrod, Bruce Greene and Barbara Kunkle, as well as the photographic collections, with the idea of identifying female musicians within the archives.

I have also made transcriptions of the field recordings (the dialogue) of Blanche Coldiron, Effie Pierson, and Emma Lee Dickerson.

I have begun writing about each of these women, planning out ways that their stories can be told, selecting elements of interviews that I found most interesting, and recordings of interest, to be used towards my final project.
The next six weeks promise to be busy.

I’m in touch with two students of Blanche Coldiron, both of whom are pursuing musical careers in Nashville. In addition, I will interview Blanche’s sister Irene, who lives in Powell County. Her family is planning on donating their reel to reel tapes, cassette tapes and videocassettes, and some photographs and articles to the archive (or at least copies of them), and I will be working with them, to make that happen! In addition, I am in touch with folks both at Appalshop (where she performed, at their Seedtime Festival)

I have interviews scheduled with folks who knew Lois Short: Cathy Fink, Guy and Candie Carawan, a visit to the Highlander Center, and Lois’ son, who lives in Cincinnati. Beyond these interviews, I am hopeful that these visits will result in the collection of photographs of Lois, as well as potential audio material of her.

I will interview the daughter of Dora Mae Wagers next week, in Corbin; she has a number of photographs, and material about her mother, too, which I hope to be able to get copies of for the archives. In addition, I hope to be able, through her daughter, track down information about a commercial recording Dora Mae made with Lily May Ledford and Rosie Ledford, during the time that all three were at Renfro Valley, and secure a copy for the archive.

I have just received a lead (finally) from Earl Thomas Jr, about someone who knew Lella Todd. This is a lead that I’ll be following, in the next month. Earl knows of a few more folks who might have known more about her; now, it’s a matter of talking to folks who know how/where to get in touch with them.

In May, I will conduct a series of interviews with John Harrod, who had a close relationship with Blanche and Lily May Ledford, and recorded Effie Pierson. In addition, he will be a good resource, to speak more generally about his ideas about why there were so few women fiddlers; this general theme is certainly something I’ve kept in the back of my mind, during the last weeks, though the individual biographies of these women has been my focus.

Among significant women fiddlers I have not really been able to spend time researching are Cousin Emmy, Opal and Bertha Amburgey (both of whom played fiddle), and Granny Harper (a fixture on Renfro Valley who also played fiddle). There is great information about Cousin Emmy, as well as an article about the Amburgey Sisters, but if there is time, it would be interesting to try to pursue additional information about them, particularly with specific interest to their fiddling, repertoire, and how they learned to play. I think it would be both useful and interesting, for future research (of my own or of others), to begin to generate a list of female musicians within the archive—guitarists, and singers.

With regards to my final project (or series of them). I am in touch with a website-savvy colleague of mine, who’s helping me brainstorm ideas for a website. The development of this website, as well as the creation of and editing of the content is a hefty project, I realize, but one I am serious about pursuing, even following the end of my official time here at Berea. The more I learn about these women, the more I am eager to put my energies towards creative and accessible ways to share them with other folks, and it seems like a website would be the way to go.

I am in touch with the Old Time Herald, who seem interested in my research, and I’m hoping to do a series of articles about these women, for them.

I am making a presentation at the Cowan Creek Mountain Music School in June, in Whitesburg, about my research; I am also presenting my research at the Augusta Heritage Center’s Old Time week.