Fellowship Activity Report  

Alan Lomax and his wife Elizabeth Lyttleton Harold came to eastern Kentucky in 1937 to record from informants the musical traditions of this part of the Appalachian Highlands. At that time the Cumberlands were a land of ridges, knobs, hollers with mostly scattered log or weatherboarded homes undisturbed by many paved highways or big cities. Livings were made on the farm, the railroads, and in coal mines. The people Alan and Elizabeth came to visit possessed a treasure not counted in gold, for in their isolated coves and hollers they passed along tales and ballads; played fiddles, banjos, and dulcimers.

Acting on grants from the Library of Congress, the Lomaxes visited the mountain folk, old and young, to record their various lore. At least one of their informants, Mrs. Eliza Pace, had been previously contacted by the famous English folklorist Cecil Sharp in 1916 on his historic trip to the Southern Appalachians to collect ballads from the supposed “remnant” people on whose lips flowed the words of old English ballads. Lomax reached the homes and schools of numerous folk during the period 1937-1942 throughout a goodly portion of eastern Kentucky.

Nine years after 1942 I was born in a small town in northwestern North Carolina named Lenoir. In a strange twist of coincidence I found out a few years ago that “Devil” Anse Hatfield’s son Johnse’s second wife was from Lenoir. The Hatfields and Kentucky McCoys played a significant part in the history of Pike County. However this may be, I grew up in a melting pot area; Lenoir was one of the main furniture making towns of the Carolina’s. My mother’s people were from the Mitchell-Yancey County area of North Carolina and my father’s family were from the Cocke County section of the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee.

As I grew up I would listen to the tales my folks would tell about bears and “painters” and “haints”, boogers, and witches. By the age of twelve I was learning Carter Family songs from my grandfather’s Victrola talking machine. Around this time I began to notice that many of the songs I heard on the old 78’s were known by folks in my family and the community with often different tunes and words. So I started learning all the old songs I could from my family and friends, which continues to this day.

During the course of many years I have found many parallels between the “love songs,” which is what the ballads were called from the many places in which I’ve heard them. In my family, my aunt’s mother, Mae Phillips taught me around one hundred songs which she’d learned over a lifetime (1900-1980) in East Tennessee. A lady from whom my family rented, Mrs. Lou (“Aunt Lou”) Brookshire taught me songs learned in her childhood in the Brushy Mountains of Caldwell County, North Carolina when she and her sisters stood guard watching for the “Revenue” men while the parent generations made blockade whiskey.

“Uncle” Bill Ellison of Meat Camp, North Carolina sang British ballads as well as a ballad he composed about a local murder in the community in Watauga County where he lived. He also told of the death of “Little” Boone Potter, a local outlaw from that section in 1904. My third cousin William Nathan Gortney ofGREEN Mountain in Yancey County, North Carolina was the first person to sing me one of the Child ballads -- “Lord Thomas and Fair Ellender”.

In my research at the archive here in Berea, which has focused on the Lomax Kentucky Recordings and the Leonard Ward Roberts Collection, I have come across many variants of the songs I learned in North Carolina and Tennessee. Basically the culture is the same in Kentucky as it is in those two states. The people who settled Kentucky often came from North Carolina. Daniel Boone who blazed the Wilderness Road used to live in Wilkes County, about twelve miles from my childhood home in neighboring Caldwell County. Many of his great-great grand
nieces and nephews live today in my home county of Yancey, North Carolina. These people who settled our country had an alike heritage of songs and customs. I have prepared a program of ballads and tales to show the similarities in these traditions of Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee.

Program

1. “Locks and Bolts” was collected by Alan Lomax from Mrs. Eliza Pace of Leslie County. Mrs. Pace had been previously visited by Cecil Sharp in 1916 on his collecting trip to the Southern Appalachians. She was one of the fuller stocked ballad singers that he came across. By the time of the Lomax visit she was quite old and her voice beginning to fail but her memory seemed still to be in good working order. She said there were a number of songs that she sang for Alan that hadn’t occurred to her during Sharp’s appearance.

I learned the song from Mae “Maw Maw” Phillips about 1967. She called it “I Dreamed A Dream the Other Night.” I think she learned it from her aunt, who married a Williams, prior to World War I. The tunes are different and order of the verses may be changed somewhat but it is the same song although Maw Maw’s version is shorter.

2. “Will Weaver- O” is a tale of infidelity going back several hundred years. Under the title “Will the Weaver” it has a long history and has been collected under a bevy of different names. In the 1920’s it was recorded in a jazzy version called “Everyday Dirt.” Alan Lomax collected it from Mrs. Nancy Boggs of Harlan County. I learned it in both North Carolina and Tennessee from Aunt Lou Brookshire and Maw Maw Phillips.

3. “The Golden Willow Tree” hearkens back to the sixteenth century to a song called “The Sweet Trinity” in which Sir Walter Raleigh commissioned a ship to “plow the lowlands” and ran into trouble while doing so. In this country the ballad has been found under a plethora of names—“The Merry Golden Tree,” “The Golden Vanity,” “The Green Willow Tree,” “The Golden Willow Tree,” “The Spanish Galilee,” etc. Lomax recorded it from Mr. Arlie Baker in 1937.

I learned it from Aunt Lou Brookshire of the Kings Creek community in Caldwell County, North Carolina. I also heard variants of it from Hattie Presnell of Beech Creek, North Carolina and Doug Wallin of the Sodom community in Madison County, North Carolina.

4. “A Pretty Fair Maid in a Garden a Walking” is a ballad I learned from my father Gordon McMillon, his oldest sister Flo Jenkins and from Hester Phillips of Morristown, Tennessee. They all learned it in their home communities near Cosby, Tennessee. Their version is a local combination of two songs—“A Pretty Fair Miss All in Her Garden” and “A Brisk Young Farmer” (“William Hall”). Alan Lomax recorded versions of both songs during his Kentucky trips in 1937, from Aunt Molly Jackson and others. It is one of the most well-known folk songs in the mountains.

5. “Lord Thomas and Fair Annet” is a Child ballad that goes back to at least the seventeenth century in Great Britain. It is, along with “Barbara Allen,” perhaps the best known of the older ballads although few remember it today.

I learned “Fair Ellender and the Brown Girl” from Nate Gortney of Green Mountain, North Carolina in Yancey County in 1967. Rolf Ellison of Meat Camp, North Carolina was the first person I ever heard play it with banjo accompaniment. Cas Wallin and Evelyn Ramsey of Madison County, North Carolina also knew it. Lomax recorded a version under the name “Fair Lander” from Mrs. Addina Wilson of Cumberland County, Kentucky.
6. “The Big Toe” was recorded by Leonard Roberts from a boy named Harold Valentine at the Hyden Elementary school in Leslie County, Kentucky in 1949. It is one of the best known of the many children’s scary tales told in the southern mountains. I learned it from multiple sources during my life.

7. “Lady Bright” is a version of “The Wife of Usher’s Well” a Scottish ballad of the supernatural. Lomax and others collected it under the title of “Lady Gay” from Aunt Molly Jackson and others. I learned it from Lizzie Ellison from Meat Camp, North Carolina and her brother Rolf. I think they learned it from their father W.T. Ellison from whom I learned a number of old ballads.