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FOLKTALES FROM THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS OF VIRGINIA

From a paper by Chuck Perdue

(A few months ago, on November 11 to be exact, Cora and John Jackson and I went to Philadelphia to visit our friends, Chuck and Nan Perdue. About ten in the evening, the three of us arrived at the Perdues', poured some drinks, sat down in front of the fire, and turned on a tape recorder. I hesitate to call what followed a collecting session because we cracked jokes, swapped stories and sang songs much as we always do when we have a chance to be together. But all through the night the tape recorder reels were turning. When we took them off the machine at four in the morning, they contained an extraordinary amount of Negro oral literature.

During the next few weeks, Chuck transcribed the tapes, analysed some of the specifically traditional material, and wrote a paper on it. The title, "I Swear to God It's the Truth If I Ever Told It," is an expression John uses when he is about to bring forth a story of contingent verisimilitude.

Here are some excerpts from the paper. In submitting them, we all join in the hope of sharing not only the lore and the scholarship, but also the warmth of a very happy evening. (Gerald E. Parsons, Jr.)

FOX AND THE RABBIT

Chuck - Did you ever hear any stories about...oh, things like how the rabbit got its short tail, you know, or how various animals got to be the way they are?

Cora - Yeah. Mr. Fox told old rabbit to do that.

Chuck - Do what?

Cora - How he got his short tail.

Chuck - How's that go?

Cora - Well, Mr. Fox went down to the river and caught a big bunch of fish, and was in winter time. So he come back by Mr. Rabbit's house and he said (Mr. Rabbit said), "Mr. Fox, where'd you get all them fish at?" He say, "Oh, I stuck my tail down in the water and next morning I got up it was strung full of fish." So, the old rabbit, he goes and sticks his tail down in the water and wraps a blanket around him. Next morning his tail was froze there. He pulled, and he pulled, and he pulled, and he thought he had a bunch of fish on there and he kept a-pulling till he pulled his tail out. That's how come he got a short tail.

Chuck - Where'd you hear that?

Cora - Oh, I heard that when I was a little girl. My father told me,

THE PREACHERS AND THE SPOOKS

John - Mama told a tale one time about this haunted house - about nobody couldn't stay in it. Said they hired this preacher to go there and stay. Said he was gonna stay and find out what this ghost was. He got there, made him a good fire in the fireplace, and sat back smoking his pipe. Finally, a little cat come, whining. He let him in and commenced to playing with him. The cat laid by the fire ever so long and got warm and stretched out and after he laid there a few

COLLECTANEA:

Sings are held at 8 p.m. the last Saturday of the month at the Alexandria Folk-Lore Centre, 323 Cameron Street, Alexandria, Virginia, admission free; at 7:30 p.m. usually the first Tuesday (but on Tuesday, February 13, this month) at the Hyattsville Branch of the Prince Georges County library, 6530 Adelphi Road, Hyattsville, Maryland, admission free; and during "The Odd Friday, Coffeehouse Evening," at 9 p.m. the first Friday in the Washington Ethical Society auditorium, 7750 - 16th Street NW., Washington, D.C., donation seventy-five cents.

Monthly sessions in English Country and Morris Dancing under the direction of May Gadd will begin in March at the Potomac School in McLean, Virginia. For information, contact Mrs. Newell Price, 3019 Orchard Lane NW., Washington, D.C. 20007 (Telephone: 234-1944).

Tradition Press, a division of Folklore Associates, Hatboro, Pennsylvania, has reprinted in facsimile the 1879 edition of a three-volume History of Maryland by J. Thomas Scharf, with a new foreward by Morris L. Radoff and a new index.

With this issue, the Society publishes its first Newsletter Supplement. This Supplement is to go only to Society members, subscribers and those with whom we exchange publications. If you are a member in good standing, or have paid a dollar subscription fee, then you should find the Supplement attached.

Future Society events: Lou Killen, traditional singer and concertina-player from northern England, 8:30 p.m., Friday, March 8, Washington Ethical Society auditorium; Tom Paxton, 8:30 p.m., Saturday, April 20, Lisner auditorium; and Get-Away III, May 3-6 or April 26-29, Prince William Forest Park. Annual Society dues are \$7.50 family and \$5.00 individual.

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BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES...

Folksongs from Martha's Vineyard: Some Songs of the Singing Tiltons of Chilmark, As Learned and Sung by Gale Huntington. (Northeast Folklore, Vol. VIII, 1966) Orono, Maine: Northeast Folklore Society, 1967. Editing and Foreward by Edward D. Ives. Introduction and notes to the songs by E.G. Huntington, 88 pp. Illus., map, music, bibliography. Paper, \$2.00.

When one currently thinks of Martha's Vineyard, he thinks doubtless of expensive yachts, interminable cocktail parties, the Washington summer set at ease, in a word, "the beautiful people." "But it wasn't always so," claims Gale Huntington, longtime Vineyard resident and compiler of Folksongs from Martha's Vineyard. There was a time when the island was composed of small villages and a few subsistence farms, and what wealth came to the island came from the sea. It was also an island where a singing tradition existed with some tenacity.

Huntington willingly admits that the book is not a collection. It is a book drawn from memory, Huntington's memory of the songs his wife's family, the Tiltons of Chilmark, sang. Huntington apparently sang along with the Tiltons both before and after he was married, but when he finally realized that he should have collected some of the material, alas, "it was too late." But fortunately, the author's memory serves him well. He has recalled the words and music of twenty-nine songs, all delivered in this tidy volume with footnotes and bibliography.

The book's songs have been arranged as more collections should be, by singer. The songs of Welcome Tilton, Huntington's father-in-law, dominate the list, though the partial repertoires of Welcome's son and two of his brothers are included. Clearly, the songs the Tilton family sang smack of their sea experience. They may not have been "'round Cape Horn on a frosty morning," but they knew the coasting trade, and from that experience came the bulk of their singing tradition. Edward Tilton, the only member of the family who didn't go to sea, sang only "Gospel song and white spirituals," and he was considered "one of the 'strange' Tiltons."

One regrets, perhaps, that Huntington did not spend more time discussing the milieu in which these songs were passed on. This book might have been a richer reward for the folklorist with less comment on the seriousness of marriage and more discussion of the style of performers and the part their art played in those small self-sufficient seaside towns, before the onslaught of the summer trash.

George G. Carey

Folk-Songs of the South Collected under the Auspices of the West Virginia Folk-Lore Society. Edited by John Harrington Cox. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967. An unabridged and unaltered republication of the work originally published by Harvard University Press in 1925. xxxii, 545 pp. Index of Titles, Index of First Lines, photographs, map, music. Paper, \$3.00.

John Harrington Cox's title Folk-Songs of the South is a misnomer. With the exception of a few variants from states privileged to share a border with West Virginia, the collection comes entirely from the Mountain State. Of course, to an unabashed Allegheniaphile (or is it West Virginian?) this is a petty criticism - one we are inclined to dismiss with the observation that ballads and tunes found in parts of the South other than West Virginia are almost certainly inferior and not likely to appear in print anyway.

Having admitted the possibility of one drawback, however, we might as well face another, which is that for the general reader, the Introduction is a crushing bore. This comes as a particular disappointment to me because the colorful and eccentric studies of Professor Cox figured large in my bedtime stories as a child. My father, a student at West Virginia University in the 20's, remembered Cox as an advisor to the Phi Beta Kappa Society who greeted antics of a mock fraternity (the Fi Batar Kappars) with spectacular indignation. For this the brotherhood wrote him into the Lydia Pinkham ditty:

John Harrington Cox was a village blacksmith,
But he couldn't shoe a cow.
So he took...he took...he took...two bottles of "Compound"
And he's teaching English now.

Coming to the book from this background, I couldn't help but feel let down by an Introduction that consists mainly of acknowledgements to long-departed, small-town school teachers, laced with the history of the now moribund West Virginia Folk-Lore Society. A few glimpses of the richness that is to follow do appear, however.

We could not leave the Introduction without mentioning one brief picture it gives us of everyday life in West Virginia. "While we were at breakfast, we heard a crash and loud shrieks. A freight train had struck a gasoline hand-car right in front of the house. We all rushed to the door where a most horrible sight greeted us... No more ballad collecting that day," comments Cox.

In truth, the railroad accident is an all too common sight in the Alleghenies. It's not hard to see why. Roughly one third of the Nation's soft coal is dug in West Virginia - to carry it away takes railroads and lots of them. The landslides, level grade crossings, tunnels, trestles, and steep grades of mountain country add considerably to normal hazards of operation. Not surprisingly, many of the region's songs about railroading carry a burden of grisly detail. When on the morning of October 23, 1870, George Alley piled the F.F.V. into a rock slide at Hinton, local composers told it like it was:

Brave and strong he held his grip; at last she made the crash,
Knocked poor George upon his face, his tender breast did smash.
His head and face all covered with blood, his eyes you could not see,
And as he died he cried aloud, "O, nearer my God to Thee!"

Today the sophisticated suburbanite reads that and chuckles. It's just too graphic to be anything but comical. In order to appreciate the song in the spirit in which it is intended, it is necessary to get a little closer to the scene. And this brings us to a chief merit of this book.

Many of the wrecks, blood feuds, love affairs, great crimes and other events celebrated in American balladry were fresh in mind at the time Cox did his collecting. For example, his informants for the notes that preface "Wreck on the C&O" include George Alley's sister and brother. Short of resurrection, one could scarcely get much closer to the source.

Another likeable quality is the unmistakable impression of a vigorous and widespread oral tradition. Most of the songs were collected between 1915 and 1919, in other words, before automobiles, before radios, and even before bluegrass.

There is, consequently, a wealth of very old material here.

The book's only real weakness lies in the category of Negro music. Although Cox readily gave credit for Negro contributions, even authorship, of the songs he included, there isn't a single work song or spiritual in the collection. Why this omission? In the Introduction and the notes there is no hint of prejudice. And certainly Negro material was in abundant supply at that time. The only possibility that suggests itself is that Cox, an English teacher and former student of George Lyman Kittredge, was looking for literary folklore at a time when Negro songs were thought to be unpoetic. Whatever the reason for his shortsightedness, we are all, scholars and singers alike, the poorer for it. In addition, we must put another mark against his choice of title.

Despite its drawbacks, Folk-Songs of the [white] South gives us 185 classic and well-annotated texts, twenty-nine with tunes, plus eight photographs of informants standing in front of what appear to be their homes, plus a 1966 U.S. Geological Survey, fold-out map of West Virginia.

Gerald E. Parsons, Jr.

Jamaican Song and Story. Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes. Collected and Edited by Walter Jekyll. With New Introductory Essays by Philip Sherlock, Louise Bennett, and Rex Nettleford. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966. An unabridged and unaltered republication of the work first published by David Nutt, London, in 1907, as Publication of the Folk-Lore Society LV (1904). Introduction by Alice Werner. Appendices by C.S. Myers and Lucy E. Broadwood. liii, 288 pp. Music. Paper, \$2.50.

This is a sturdy, handsome reprint with plastic-laminated cover of a collection of Jamaican tales, work songs, singing games and dance tunes. Included are Alice Werner's original introduction which deals primarily with African and European elements in the tales, and brief original appendices by C.S. Myers, whose professed object is "to emphasize our present ignorance of African music," and by Lucy Broadwood who traces some English airs and motifs in the collection. There are three very brief introductory essays, a helpful socio-historical sketch by Philip Sherlock, a memoir by Louise Bennett (who has recorded Jamaican songs for Folkways), and a note by Rex Nettleford on the theatrical potential of Anansi (Annancy), the Spider-Trickster hero of the tales.

The book should be on the shelf of everyone interested in the folktale, origins of American music, or Afro-American backgrounds. However, there are limitations. With the collection itself, these primarily are the limitations of one age as viewed from another. In his Preface, Jekyll states, "Here and there, but very rarely indeed, I have made a slight change, and this only because I thought the volume might find its way into the nursery," and he lists all emendations ("viscera," "Stinking-toe," "hell," and "belly") in the texts of the collection as published. From his statement, one may infer something about the reading audience he envisioned. But this watering-down was consonant with the practice of the English school. (How more complete than Jekyll's Anansi seems Paul Radin's Trickster!)

As is the case with a number of present and past folklore collections, the use of dialect in the texts seems harshly exaggerated and more confusing than enlightening, although each tale in Jekyll's collection is accompanied by his notes which treat of meaning and delivery.

With the present edition, although a new introduction to a reprint is preferable to none and Dover is to be complimented, one wonders how, after the intervening work of folklorists, musicologists and anthropologists in Africa and Jamaica, some of the problems cited in the original introduction and appendices may not have been resolved. Two of the new essays deal with creative use of folk material, perhaps a subject for scholarship but hardly a substitute for it. It's true that Anansi is a natural stage figure, but to emphasize this is out of tenor with the rest of the volume.

Jekyll collected his material from Jamaicans in his employ. In February, 1968, in the United States, one is startled by the irony and reality of some of his statements, as in his Preface: "The book as a whole is a tribute to my love for Jamaica and its dusky inhabitants, with their winning ways and their many good qualities, among which is to be reckoned that supreme virtue, Cheerfulness."

George A. Simpson

Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia. Collected by Helen Creighton. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966. An unabridged and corrected republication of the work first published by J.M. Dent & Sons Limited, Toronto and Vancouver, in 1932. The "Post-script, 1966" to the Introduction was written specially for this edition by the author. Preface by John D. Robins. xxvi, 334 pp. Index of Titles, music, bibliography. Paper, \$2.50.

Dr. Helen Creighton recently received her third honorary degree in tribute to four decades of folksong collecting in the Maritime Provinces of Canada. This reprinting of her earliest book takes us back to her first and chief area of collecting, Halifax County, Nova Scotia. Its 150 songs all include tunes, not a standard practice in the 1930's, and it still ranks among the best of those North American collections which present the cream of regional folksong traditions. Several folksong singers have already tapped Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia for performance materials. This reprint should increase such use, and the modest price will insure its accessibility to even the most thrifty folklore student.

J.C.H.

Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life? The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs. Recorded by Guy and Candie Carawan. Photographed by Robert Yellin. Music transcribed by Ethel Raim, with a Preface by Alan Lomax. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966. 191 pp. Photographs, music. Cloth, \$5.95; paper, \$3.95.

Those who enjoyed the CBS Camera Three film of Johns Island will find much of the same thoughtfully documented folklore and folksay in even greater detail in this publication. Already in its second printing, this is a book that would enrich any culturally or folkloristically oriented library with materials worthy of both research and inspiration.

J.C.H.

Note: Books for review should be sent to the Book Review Editor, Joseph C. Hickerson, at the society address.

RECORD REVIEWS...

"Songs and Ballads of the Bituminous Miners," Recorded and Edited by George Korson. Library of Congress L60. \$4.50 (\$4.95 by mail).

George Korson died here in Washington on May 23, 1967, but his spirit and his warm heart live on in his trail-blazing studies of the songs and folklore of the coal miners - Minstrels of the Mine Patch and Coal Dust on the Fiddle - as well as in his other books and articles.

When the great folklorist, Cecil Sharp, combed the coal-filled mountains of West Virginia in 1916 looking for folksongs, he found plenty of fine songs about lords and ladies, but he never stumbled across a single one about a coal miner, though mines and miners abounded in every valley. Some years later, George Korson, who, as John Greenway wrote, "did not know he was a folklorist when his wonder was stirred by the coal miners one evening in 1924," went through these same mountains and came out with a treasure-house of memorable coal mining songs. He was armed only with an old portable recording machine, a letter from John L. Lewis, and his love and understanding of the coal miners and their dangerous craft. The miners

returned this love with the one gift they could give him - the earthy, comic, sad, bitter, sentimental, and oh, so precious songs which he saved from almost certain permanent disappearance.

Before George died, the Library of Congress issued "Songs and Ballads of the Bituminous Miners," a long-playing record of eighteen of the many dozens of songs he had recorded on little black acetate discs. (Some years previously the Library of Congress had issued Korson's record, 'Songs of the Anthracite Miners.")

The songs we hear are the originals, just as Korson recorded them out in the field in Price Hill, West Virginia; Shamrock Mountain, Kentucky; or Trafford, Alabama. There is not much fancy music in these field recordings, but there is a lot of heart and humanity in them. Take "Drill Man Blues," written and sung by George Curly Sizemore of Lochgelly, West Virginia. Korson told me that recording Sizemore was a painful affair because Sizemore was suffering from coal dust on his lungs and was constantly gasping for breath. Sizemore told Korson that sometimes he made up songs down in the mine, but he could not open his mouth to sing them for fear of getting too much coal dust into his already poisoned lungs. The record tells the tragic story as Sizemore sings with difficulty:

I'm thinking of poor drillmen
Away down in the mines
Who from eating dust will end up
With a fate just like mine.

Another fine song is "Dis What de Union Done," composed by Uncle George Jones, an old, blind, Negro coal miner in Alabama. Uncle George was sixty-eight years old when Korson recorded him, but he sings with vigor and drive:

Hooray! Hooray!
Fer de union we must stan',
It's de only organization
Protects de laborin' man;
Boys, it makes de women happy,
Our chillun clap deir hands.
To see de beefsteak an de good po'k chops
Steamin' in dose fryin' pans.

In Coal Dust on the Fiddle, Korson tells how a committee of miners, black and white, representing the Alabama district, would visit Uncle George in his tumble-down cabin each year and, in effect, commission him to write a song for the forthcoming district convention. Relates Korson:

On the day the district convention opened, an automobile called at his cabin and he rode to the convention hall in state. When his ballad was ended the delegates applauded, cheered, whistled and stamped their feet...Uncle George's battered old hat made the rounds of the convention and came back filled to the brim with bills and silver. There was no odor of charity about this gesture. The miners understood that they were paying a fee for a service that gave them great pleasure, and in that spirit Uncle George accepted the money. He was living by his minstrelsy, a profession rich in tradition and full of honor in the mining community.

Uncle George Jones has long since died and his songs and his story would have died with him, except for the dedicated work of George Korson.

In addition to the songs I have mentioned, there are sixteen other songs, all of them interesting and important, some of them exciting and moving. I have only one criticism of this album: The jacket is printed in a typical deadly, bureaucratic, colorless style. No color and no illustrations, no photo of a coal miner, or Korson, or anybody, or anything. But don't let the dull jacket keep you from getting this lively and historic record.

Note: Records for review should be sent to the Record Review Editor, Gerald E. Parsons, Jr., at the society address.

MEMBERS AND FRIENDS...

Peter Forsyth sends the following news about the Keele Festival in England last year.

"I met up with the McPeakes at Keele and they remember with pleasure their stay with Chuck and Nan Perdue and their visit to Washington (in March, 1965)...They were really on form at Keele. The Keele Festival was rather better this year than last because they brought back the workshop format again...They had a good crop of traditional performers though perhaps fewer than last year. But the old faithfuls - Jimmie MacBeath and Packie Byrne - were there as usual, and, of course, Jeannie Robertson who delighted us with some slightly bawdy songs and stories."

Some of the workshops were: "Ritual Dance," where the movements of a sword dance were taught; "Ritual Drama," where the subject was the mummers' play, their types and the present-day scholar's view of their origin and significance ("enthraling," Forsyth writes); "Prehistoric Folksong," where Bert Lloyd spoke about songs which occur in primitive societies and evident survivals from primitive European culture in European folksong; and "Tradition," that is, a talk on Scottish folksongs given by Arthur Argo, of Aberdeen ("lively," Forsyth writes).

The festival weekend also had evening concerts on Saturday and Sunday afternoon there was a concert. Two evening concerts were held on Saturday, "Traditional" and "(Folk Boom) Revival."

Peter Forsyth, an Englishman, teaches Physics at the University of Liverpool. A member of the Society when he lived in the Washington area, he is interested in traditional songs. He is a member of one of the many folk clubs to be found in English cities, "Jackie and Bridie's." He also is a member of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. At the club, he often tapes performers and he hopes soon to collect from some traditional singers in Scotland.

June Silverman

FOLK DANCE...

...From an Extensive Listing by Vera Duerksen

Following is a list of folk dance activity in the Washington area (partial list only):

Sunday:

Brookland Methodist Church, 14th and Lawrence Streets NW., D.C., 7-9:30 p.m. About every two weeks. Check with leader, Vera Duerksen (LA 9-0845 or LA 6-6699).
Beginners and intermediate.

Baltimore YWCA. 8-11 p.m. First and third Sundays.

Monday:

Ben Murch School, Ellicott Street and Connecticut Avenue NW., D.C., 8:15 p.m.
St. Andrews Society Scottish Country Dance. Leader, Harry Ways. Call Dave Thomas (WO 6-3838).

Hillel Foundation, Maryland University. Israeli dancing. Call Steve Sklarow (882-4641).

Sligo Community Center and Argyle Community Center. During summer only. No instruction. Call JU 9-1480.

Bethesda Youth Center. 8:30-10:30 p.m. Leaders, Mel and Phyllis Diamond.
Beginners and experienced. Admission, one dollar.

Tuesday: Jewish Community Center, 1529 16th Street NW., D.C. Leader Mary K. Dewees. 7:30 p.m. - 10 p.m. Israeli dancing, intermediate. 75¢ non-member, 50¢ member.

Wednesday: Square Dancing, Pierce Hall, 15th and Harvard Streets NW., D.C., 8 p.m.;
International, beginner-advanced, Centre School gym, Greenbelt, Md., 7:30 p.m.

Thursday: Roosevelt High School, 13th and Upshur Streets NW., D.C. 8:30-10 p.m.
Leader, Nancy Rosenburg. Admission, 50¢.

Saturday: International Folk Dance Club, 8 p.m., Pierce Hall. Larry Weiner (927-3743).
Through Feb. 17 only.