

WAYFARING STRANGER: SIDNEY ROBERTSON, AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC, AND
THE RESETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATION, 1936–37

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Musicology in the Department of Music.

Chapel Hill
2016

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ABSTRACT

Samantha C. Horn: *Wayfaring Stranger: Sidney Robertson, American Folk Music, and the Resettlement Administration, 1936–37*
(Under the direction of Philip Vandermeer)

During the 1930s, the United States government operated a variety of folk music collecting initiatives through New Deal agencies, ranging from academic archival projects to the more utilitarian efforts of the Resettlement Administration (RA), which sponsored field recordings of folk musicians in an attempt to boost morale and political awareness among displaced workers. Focusing on the work of Sidney Robertson, who recorded folk musicians for the RA from 1936–37, this thesis examines the relationship between the RA folk music program and broader trends in both academic folklore studies and United States politics in the late 1930s. Infusing the activity of field recording with a sense of social responsibility derived from leftist politics, Robertson’s RA recordings represented a novel turn in American elites’ engagement with folk music, rejecting ideological and methodological tenets long central to folklore studies in favor of more dynamic understandings of both folk music and ethnographic recording.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KL Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration

RA Resettlement Administration

WPA Works Progress Administration (later Works Projects Administration)

INTRODUCTION

Since her death in 1995, Sidney Robertson Cowell has been best-remembered as the wife of American composer Henry Cowell. Indeed, the last thirty years of her life were largely dedicated to the preservation of her late husband's legacy, culminating in her donation of his music manuscripts and personal papers to the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress late in her life.¹ But when she began to draft a memoir in her late eighties, much of her writing concerned not her marriage to Cowell but her own career as an early ethnomusicologist and active collector of folk music. Writing about her first solo field recording trip, a two-month expedition spanning more than a thousand miles across much of Appalachia and the Ozarks, she highlights an encounter with a family of singers which would come to be emblematic of her broader work on folk music:

So by November 14th [1936], I was recording the wonderful singing and fiddling of "Old Man Russell," in Marion, Virginia. His grandson Jake sometimes sang with him; he also played on a dulcimer he had made himself. His son Joe is down in my notes as "playin' on the banjo and hollerin'." Mr. Russell was an authentic ballad singer who preferred to sing "without music" (instrumental accompaniment). He was 81. The next generation of men in their 50s were often entertainers, either performers in minstrel shows or influenced by them. The third generation was represented in the Russell family by Robert Russell and Viola Russell, whose duet repertory included religious songs and sentimental songs with a moral like "That Lonesome Valley" and "Careless Love." I was to find this kind of difference in repertory and taste fairly often, between three generations, whenever I was lucky enough to find three generations in a single singing family. Everybody in the

¹ While her marriage to Henry Cowell lies beyond the scope of this thesis, the latter's biographers have extensively documented their relationship and her role in maintaining his legacy. See, for example: Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 493, 509–10.

family knew all the same songs, of course, but there was a distinction in what each generation wanted to record that was marked.²

This fascination with multi-generational musical change would become a recurring theme in her later work on folk music, serving as the basis for (among other things) a paper presented at the Eighth Annual Conference of the International Folk Music Council in Oslo, Norway in 1955 and her recording of the Walker family of Wisconsin released by Folkways Records in 1956. At the time of the recording trip, it also distinguished her work from that of many of her contemporaries, folklorists and musicologists primarily interested in the kinds of “authentic ballads” remembered by singers like Old Man Russell at the expense of younger generations’ contributions.

Sidney Cowell (or Sidney Robertson, as she was still called in the late 1930s) conducted this field trip late in 1936 under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration, a New Deal social agency conceived as a lifeline for the most impoverished and disenfranchised victims of the Depression.³ To further its goals of promoting solidarity, cooperation, and recovery among displaced farmers and workers, the agency had developed a recreational music program led by Charles Seeger. Folk music — especially but not exclusively Anglo-American vernacular song — played a key role in the conception of the Resettlement music program, as Seeger hypothesized that the agency’s clients would respond best to musics with which they were already familiar. Song collectors like Robertson were therefore sent into the field on behalf of the administration to track down music which might be useful.

² “First Solo Field Recordings, Nov. 10, 1936,” Box 19, Folder 7, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

³ While Sidney Robertson would later be known best by her second married name Sidney Robertson Cowell, I have chosen to use her name as it was during the period she was working at the RA unless specifically referring to her work after her marriage to Henry Cowell in 1941, i.e. Robertson rather than Cowell.

Robertson's willingness to record not only "authentic ballad singers" but also musicians from a variety of generational, regional, ethnic, and stylistic backgrounds made her a particularly good fit for the program. Over the course of her employment with the Resettlement Administration (and its successor, the Farm Security Administration) from 1936–37, Robertson contributed more than 150 discs of field recordings to the Special Skills Division's collection, dwarfing the contributions of both Seeger and the program's most celebrated field representative Margaret Valiant. While the Resettlement Administration (RA) and its collecting activities were both defunct by the winter of 1937, the Special Skills Division's archive of field recordings have since taken on new life at the Archive of American Folk Song (now the American Folklife Center), where they continue to comprise one of the most remarkable and diverse collections of field recordings from the late 1930s.⁴

This thesis examines the relationship between Robertson's field recordings for the RA and broader trends in both academic folklore studies and United States politics in the late 1930s. Focusing on her earliest recording ventures in Appalachia and the Ozarks, I argue that her work in 1936–37 — and, by extension, the RA music program as a whole — represented a novel turn in American elites' engagement with folk music. Through her fieldwork and administrative duties for the RA's Special Skills Division, Robertson rejected certain ideological and methodological principles which had been central to the academic folk song collecting tradition since the nineteenth century. Whereas folklorists and comparative musicologists tended to frame collecting as a purely scientific pursuit undertaken for the sake of facilitating historical analyses, I argue that Robertson reimagined collecting as a fundamentally political activity, one with

⁴ Writing about federal government work in the 1930s necessarily involves wading into the infamous "alphabet soup" of New Deal agencies. While my focus is on the Resettlement Administration (RA), many other New Deal institutions operated similar collecting projects or otherwise impacted Robertson's work, chief among them the Works Progress Administration (WPA). For the sake of brevity, I will refer to these two agencies by their acronyms.

potentially powerful ramifications not only for the career of the fieldworker but also for the musicians recorded, their communities, and the nation as a whole. Infusing the activity of field recording with a sense of social responsibility derived from their leftist politics, Robertson and her RA colleagues promoted a broader and more dynamic understanding of both folk music and fieldwork. By bringing their work into dialogue with broader trends in these fields, I aim to challenge the often homogenous (and male-dominated) narratives about archivists' motivations and actions in the 1930s.

Music documentation in the United States

Archives of field recordings like Robertson's have served as sources for the study of folk traditions since their creation. Indeed, the very act of field recording was often driven in part by the perceived research value of these musics, even for collectors ostensibly driven by more pragmatic concerns. But while the musical contents of these recordings have long been the objects of music scholarship, it has taken much longer for music scholars to seriously consider the circumstances under which they were produced. Arguing for the importance of studying music documentation in Israel, ethnomusicologist Edwin Seroussi warned in the mid-1990s that research which ignores the people, institutions, and ideologies involved in recording "runs the risk of overlooking important factors that ultimately determine the nature of the data used in analytical and interpretative stages."⁵ Scott Spencer's introduction to a recent collection of essays on North American ballad collecting similarly laments the lack of scholarly attention paid

⁵ Edwin Seroussi, "Documenting Music in Israel," in *Documenting Israel*, ed. Charles Berlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Library, 1995), 157.

to collectors' participation in broader "social and technological currents" and "the impact their efforts had on larger social movements."⁶

Moreover, the research that has been conducted on field recording and song collecting has tended to focus on a rather limited subset of collectors, genres, and geographical regions. Ballad collection in the United Kingdom and the southern United States has been unusually well-studied since D. K. Wilgus's landmark 1959 study *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*. Wilgus's study proposed a historical narrative of folk music collecting and scholarship which proceeds from Cecil Sharp's early work through the "ballad wars" of the 1920s to ultimately culminate in the work of the Lomax family from the 1930s on.⁷ Later writers have tended to repeat rather than question Wilgus's narrative; even David Whisnant, whose *All That Is Native And Fine* broke new ground by contextualizing the work of ballad collectors in Appalachia within a broader historical trend of elite appropriations of rural Southern folk culture, largely restricted his discussion to Cecil Sharp and his colleague Olive Dame Campbell.⁸ The abundance of scholarship on John and (especially) Alan Lomax — in Wilgus's narrative the mid-century heirs of Sharp's lineage — similarly speaks to the persistence of Wilgus's "canon" of collectors. This is not to say that Sharp, the Lomaxes, and the Appalachian ballad collectors in between do not warrant the scholarly attention that has been paid them. But at the same time, the single-minded focus on this rather limited group of canonic and predominantly male collectors

⁶ Scott B. Spencer, "Ballad Collecting: Impetus and Impact," in *The Ballad Collectors of North America: How Gathering Folksongs Transformed Academic Thought and American Identity*, ed. Scott B. Spencer (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 12.

⁷ D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959).

⁸ David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

has often precluded the inclusion of other important figures whose contributions might enrich our understanding of this phenomenon.

In spite of her significant contributions to both the Resettlement Administration collecting project and to her own California Folk Music Project in the late 1930s, Sidney Robertson Cowell's contributions to folk song collecting in the United States went unrecognized for more than half a century. Folklorist Deidre Ní Chonghaile's 2013 article on Robertson began the significant task of bringing her recording work back into conversation with the broader phenomenon of American folk song collecting, but much of her work focuses on her later recordings in Europe and Asia.⁹ Even more recently, James P. Leary's writings on field recording in the Upper Midwest has begun to deal more directly with her work for the Resettlement Administration, especially her recordings of traditional music in languages other than English; yet his work, too, focuses more on the content of the music Robertson collected than the process of collecting.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Janelle Warren-Findley's published work discusses the Resettlement Administration music program in great detail yet largely glosses over both Robertson's involvement and the program's song collecting projects.¹¹ My aim in writing this thesis is in part to offer a corrective to these oversights, re-positioning both Sidney Robertson Cowell and the Resettlement Administration within the broader history of folk song collecting in the United States.

⁹ Deidre Ní Chonghaile, "In Search of America: Sidney Robertson Cowell in Ireland in 1955–56," *Journal of American Folklore* 126, No. 500 (Spring 2013), 174–200.

¹⁰ See both James P. Leary, "Foreign Words and Folksongs: Field Recordings from America's Upper Midwest," *Western Folklore* 74, No. 3 (Summer 2013), 294–315, and James P. Leary, *Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings from the Upper Midwest, 1937–1946* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015).

¹¹ Janelle Warren-Findley, "Musicians and Mountaineers: The Resettlement Administration's Music Program in Appalachia, 1935–37," *Appalachian Journal* 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1979): 105–23.

A common thread running through many of these existing studies has been an emphasis on the way Robertson's work now seems to have been "ahead of her time." Her concern for performers' rights, her diverse musical interests, and her attention to the cultural and social context of performance prefigured later developments in the budding field of ethnomusicology as well as in folklore more generally.¹² In her progressive approach to field recording (and her remarkable independence in a culture and time which frowned upon middle-class white women taking extensive solo trips at all, much less through rural North America), Robertson can rightfully be viewed as a sort of proto-feminist. At the same time, she was not simply a prescient outlier; her work must be considered within the broader context of folk music collecting and scholarship in the 1930s. For instance, while her collection documented a broader range of peoples and musics than many of her predecessors', she nevertheless continued to conduct most of her field recordings in "remote" rural regions. Even when she did record in urban settings, as at the National Folk Festival in Chicago, Illinois, in May 1937, most of the musicians featured on her discs hailed from rural backgrounds, leaving the music of urban America almost entirely absent from her recordings. In this thesis, I build on these previous discussions regarding innovation and tradition, positioning Robertson as a pioneering figure while also contextualizing her work in 1936–37 within broader intellectual currents as well as within the opportunities and limitations of government cultural work during the New Deal.

The Resettlement Administration music program

While many New Deal music programs had as their aim the alleviation of poverty and unemployment through the arts, few pursued this idealistic goal so rigorously as the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration. Established by Roosevelt via executive order

¹² Chonghaile, "In Search of America": 184.

on May 1, 1935, the Resettlement Administration (RA) was created to oversee federal projects aimed at alleviating poverty among the country's displaced workers and farmers. These diverse projects ranged from financial interventions (e.g. loans, grants, and debt adjustment) to environmental conservation efforts (soil conservation, pollution control, and reforestation), but the Administration's most substantial venture involved the maintenance of a system of resettlement communities where impoverished agricultural and industrial workers could be housed and equipped with new skills. The RA worked with nearly two hundred such communities across the United States during its brief two-year history, including five communities in southern Appalachia initially established by earlier New Deal agencies.¹³

From the beginning, the RA social programs had a decidedly utopian bent. As Seeger biographer Ann Pescatello points out, RA director Rexford Tugwell viewed the Administration not only as a provider of emergency relief but as an opportunity to experiment with egalitarian and collectivist social structures.¹⁴ Therefore, the resettlement communities were intended in part to foster "new cultural attitudes and patterns based on collective interests" rather than capitalist individualism. But Tugwell's utopian hopes proved difficult to realize. As early as autumn 1935, it became apparent that social harmony among the communities' residents was rapidly deteriorating. This disintegration was due in no small part to the extraordinary diversity of these communities, where families from disparate religious, political, occupational, and ethnic backgrounds found themselves thrown together with complete strangers after being reluctantly (sometimes forcibly) uprooted from their original homes. Fred C. Smith and Jannelle Warren-

¹³ The Appalachian communities included Arthurdale, WV; Cumberland Homesteads, TN; Tygart Valley Homesteads, WV; Westmoreland, PA; and Red House Farms, WV. See Warren-Findley, "Musicians and Mountaineers," 106.

¹⁴ Ann M. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger: A Life in American Music* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 137.

Findley both identify the settlers' continued economic anxieties and the stigma of being "'condemned as 'government wards'" as further sources of social unrest.¹⁵

In response to these growing tensions, the RA instituted a series of recreational arts programs administered by the Special Skills Division (KL) in late 1935 intended to promote social togetherness among its residents.¹⁶ The first and arguably most successful of these was the RA music program, established by KL director Adrian Dornbush and music program director Charles Seeger upon the latter's appointment in November 1935. Like Tugwell, Seeger had long been interested in leftist political and social thought. His appointment to the RA came on the heels of his involvement with the radical Composers Collective in New York City, a circle of predominantly Communist-affiliated composers aiming to compose experimental music for proletarian audiences. According to Seeger, the Collective's members were themselves "trying to do something about the Depression" through their work, in part out of a sense of responsibility because they "thought that we were to blame because [they] couldn't connect [their] music with the social situation."¹⁷ By the mid-1930s, however, Seeger had become convinced that the key to fostering social change lay not in the composition of new "art" music for the masses but in promoting the folk traditions already widespread among the rural and urban poor.

¹⁵ Warren-Findley, "Musicians and Mountaineers," 109. See also Fred C. Smith, *Trouble in Goshen: Plain Folk, Roosevelt, Jesus, and Marx in the Great Depression South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 6–7.

¹⁶ While I focus here on the Special Skills Division's music program, headed by Seeger, the division itself was much larger. Under the leadership of painter Adrian Dornbush, Special Skills employed artists in fields ranging from furniture design to photography to document the RA's work and promote the creation of folk crafts in its residential communities. Robertson and her colleagues alternately referred to Special Skills by its official name or by its administrative code, KL. For the sake of brevity, I will use the latter abbreviation here when referring to the division.

¹⁷ Charles Seeger, quoted in Leonora Saavedra, "The American Composer in the 1930s: The Social Thought of Seeger and Chavez," in *Understanding Charles Seeger, Pioneer in American Musicology*, ed. Bell Yung and Helen Rees (Urbana, Il.: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 39.

Accordingly, the guidelines Seeger devised for the RA music program stressed the necessity of encouraging community residents to embrace their own musical heritages. In a later publication with former field representative Margaret Valiant, Seeger outlined ten principles which he claimed guided his organization of the program:

1. Music, as any art, is not an end in itself, but is a means for achieving larger social and economic ends;
2. To *make* music is the essential thing — to listen to it is only accessory;
3. Music as a group activity is vastly more important than music as an individual accomplishment;
4. Every normal person is musical, and music can be associated with any normal human activity, to the advantage of both parties to the association;
5. The musical culture of the nation is, then, to be estimated upon the extent of the participation of the whole population rather than upon the extent of the virtuosity of a fraction of it;
6. The basis for musical culture is the musical vernacular of the broad mass of the people — its traditional (often called “folk”) idiom; popular music (jazz) and professional (high art) music are elaborate superstructures built upon the common base;
7. There is no ground for the quarrel between the various idioms or styles, provided proper relationship between them is maintained — jazz need not be scorned, nor professional music artificially stimulated, nor folk music stamped out or sentimentalized;
8. The point of departure for any worker new to a community should be the tastes and capabilities actually existant [sic] in the group...; and the direction the activities introduced should take should be more toward the development of local leadership than toward dependence upon outside help;
9. The main question, then, should not be “it is good music?” but “what is the music good for”; and if it bids fair to aid in the welding of the people into more independent, capable and democratic action, it must be approved;
10. With these larger ends ever in view, the musician will frequently find himself engaged in many other kinds of activity, among them the other arts; this, however, promotes a well-rounded social function for him and ensures plenty of opportunity to make music serve a well-rounded function in the community.¹⁸

¹⁸ Charles Seeger and Margaret Valiant, “Journal of a Field Representative,” *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 2 (May 1980), 179–80.

While these guidelines stress the importance of allowing community residents' skills and tastes to determine the repertoire used, it is clear that Seeger envisioned folk music at the heart of the program, as this was the music towards which (in Seeger's estimation) residents' tastes should naturally run.

The primary goal of the RA music program was the creation of participatory music projects in each homestead. These residential music programs were run by professional musicians ("field representatives") who, after a two-week training session at the RA headquarters in Washington, D.C., moved to the resettlement communities and organized music and dance events based on residents' wants and needs. Often the most effective music projects involved the creation of music classes at local schools, teaching resident schoolchildren to sing folk songs and supplementing their regular curricula with music appreciation lessons, but the representatives' activities frequently included working with church choirs and organizing community dances as well.¹⁹

Because American folk music was to be the cornerstone of the RA music program, field representatives were encouraged to collect traditional songs from their residents and base their programming around this material; Margaret Valiant and Herbert Haufrecht notably produced large collections of sound recordings and transcriptions, and Seeger himself sometimes ventured into the field as well.²⁰ Additionally, the RA employed several individuals from 1936–37 specifically as folk song collectors, including Bascom Lunsford, Rupert Hampton, Lawrence Powell, and Sidney Robertson.²¹ While some of these collectors took on other administrative

¹⁹ Warren-Findley, "Musicians and Mountaineers," 113–15.

²⁰ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 140–43.

²¹ Warren-Findley, "Musicians and Mountaineers," 113.

duties as well, their work focused on recording traditional songs both on resettlement homesteads and in the surrounding areas. These collecting efforts produced a substantial archive of field recordings, currently housed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. However, the songs collected were also fed back into the program itself (albeit in a more limited fashion than Seeger had intended) through endeavors like the RA song sheet program, in which broadside-like pamphlets containing a folk melody and text were distributed among residents to be used in community singing.²²

“A new and unheard-of kind of job”: Sidney Robertson and the Special Skills Division

In an unpublished autobiographical writing titled “Lady on Wheels,” Sidney Robertson Cowell describes her first meeting with Charles Seeger while visiting the Archive of American Folk Song, an encounter which would directly lead to her employment with the RA:

In 1936 I was waiting in Washington D.C. for space on a freighter to take me back to California, after a bout with bronchitis that put me in the hospital for 3 months. By chance I met Charles Seeger, once a familiar figure in Berkeley where he headed the music department at the University of California [...] and at the time I met him he was excited by the challenge of a new and unheard-of kind of job. [...] I was fascinated by the problems [posed by the RA music program], which paralleled my own puzzles in music and its use in bringing people together, and our discussion led to my being offered a job as his assistant in the music unit of the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration.²³

Robertson would soon be hired as Seeger’s assistant, a job which would entail both administrative work and substantial fieldwork. In her role as administrative assistant, she played a critical role in the organization and implementation of the music program, preparing training documents for field representatives on topics ranging from field recording techniques to folk

²² For a more detailed discussion of the RA song sheet program, see: Janelle Warren-Findley, “Passports to change: The Resettlement Administration’s folk song sheet program, 1936–1937,” *Prospects* 10 (1985), 197–241.

²³ Sidney Robertson Cowell, “Lady on Wheels,” undated, Box 19, Folder 9, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

dance pedagogy and instrument purchases; after the RA's restructuring in early 1937, she eventually served as the KL regional representative for the upper Midwest as well. As a fieldworker, she traveled across much of the southern, eastern, and mid-western United States recording singers and instrumentalists whose music she deemed relevant to the administration's social agenda. While I will focus on Robertson's role as fieldworker, the documents produced over the course of her administrative work will also be discussed at some length for the insight they offer into both her field recording and the broader aims of the RA music unit.

While Robertson's work for the RA may have been her first experience in the employ of the federal government, it was neither her first experience with fieldwork nor with folk music and dance. As she admits at the beginning of "Lady on Wheels," folk music had already been her "chief preoccupation for a long time." Born Sidney William Hawkins in San Francisco, California, on June 2, 1903, Robertson developed an interest in music and dance from an early age. After graduating from Stanford University with a Bachelor of Arts in Romance Languages in 1924, Sidney married Kenneth Robertson and soon moved to Paris to study piano with Alfred Cortot at the École Normale de Musique. She returned to her native California in 1926 to teach at the Peninsula School of Creative Education in Palo Alto, where she would become head of the school's music department and institute a successful English country dance program while continuing her private music studies with Ernest Bloch, Charles Koechlin, and Harold Bauer. After her divorce in 1933, Robertson relocated to New York City in 1935 to head the social music program at the Henry Street Settlement, a private social agency dedicated to providing education, health care, and arts instruction to impoverished immigrant communities in Manhattan.²⁴ While she would later express frustrations with the working conditions at Henry

²⁴ Sachs, *Henry Cowell*, 367.

Street, her involvement with the settlement made possible her first serious fieldwork project transcribing songs of elderly Jewish immigrants.

Robertson's experiences at the Peninsula School and Henry Street — and her studies with Composers Collective member Henry Cowell, whom she would marry in 1941 — led her to develop keen interest in the aesthetics and social function of folk song by the time she was approached to work for the RA in early 1936. Her correspondence from her earliest RA field trips stresses the importance of documenting, studying, and performing specifically American folk traditions:

For good or ill musical education in this country has been oriented so exclusively toward Europe that the better a musician you are the less you know about American music... [N]ot only are singing and playing widespread among great numbers of our people, but, further, our folk music represents an unbroken tradition of several hundred years just as our language does; and like our language, it has changed in this country and taken on the spicy flavor, the humor and the sentimentality which so plainly mark the American character in its other manifestations... I cannot help feeling that it is awfully important to music in this country that we should all know and value properly our own musical idiom.²⁵

Her insistence on the value of understanding “our own musical idiom” as part of a living (if also “unbroken”) tradition echoes Seeger’s admonishment to field representatives to encourage resettled communities to embrace their own musical heritages. But while this view undoubtedly made her a valuable asset to Seeger’s program, it was sometimes a liability in the field, bringing her work into conflict with that of local folk song experts who frequently controlled her access to the musicians she sought to record.

Although Robertson did not write extensively on her political views, her social and professional circles as well as the contents of her personal music collection suggest that she was

²⁵ Sidney Robertson to Pat, 20 August 1936, Box 6, Folder 5, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

at least sympathetic to the kinds of socialist, anti-fascist views espoused by Seeger and others. Even before meeting Seeger in 1936, she seemed to have sought out the company of fellow musicians who were also political radicals, studying with French socialist composer Charles Koechlin while in Berkeley and running in social circles which overlapped considerably with the Composers' Collective while in New York; later, she would also become fast friends with Henry Cowell's student Lou Harrison, an outspoken pacifist and early support of gay rights as well as an avant-garde composer.²⁶ Her work at the Henry Street Settlement in particular seemed to have encouraged her fascination with the relationship between music and progressive activism, and she amassed a substantial personal collection of leaflets containing picket line chants and other protest songs. Included among these was a 1933 copy of the communist youth songbook titled *Pioneer Song Book: Songs for Workers' and Farmers' Children*, which contained socialist contrafacta of popular songs like "Yankee Doodle" ("Yankee Doodle has a boss, high hat Uncle Sammy/Uncle's profit is his loss, cock-a-doodle dammy") and contemporary anti-fascist tunes like "Hit, Hit, Hitler" ("We'll make hash of the fascist state/smash the Hitler hold!").²⁷

Robertson spent roughly a year and a half in the employ of the RA music program. An initial training trip to North Carolina with prominent folk music specialists John A. Lomax and Frank C. Brown in July 1936 led to a longer solo expedition through the Appalachians and Ozarks later that year, during which she honed her recording skills and developed what would come to be her signature style of fieldwork: a socially-conscious approach which stressed the importance of developing cordial relationships with the musicians being recorded and remaining

²⁶ See Robertson's correspondence with Harrison in Box 1, Folders 51–53, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

²⁷ Harry Alan Potamkin, *Pioneer Song Book: Songs for Workers' and Farmers' Children* (New York: New Pioneer Publishing Co., 1933), in Box 25, Folder 18, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

aware of the recordist's position within the unfolding performance. She then spent much of the remainder of her RA tenure in Wisconsin and Minnesota, where she continued to record local folk musicians in between her administrative duties as the area's regional KL representative. While Robertson was dismissed in late 1937 as the program's funding neared its end, her field recording work continued through the WPA California Folk Music Project (1938–42), which she founded and directed, and through later independent collecting trips across North American, Europe, and Asia.

Folk music as living tradition

By the time the Special Skills Division began sending song collectors into the field, ballad collecting and field recording had already become a thriving industry. For decades, folklorists, musicologists, and literary scholars in the southern and eastern United States had made song collecting the basis of their careers. Several key assumptions underlay these scholars' projects. For many collectors, the documentation of folk music amounted to a sort of musical paleontology: excursions into the field were not seen as a way to learn about contemporary life but rather seen as opportunities to unearth rare musical "fossils," primarily ballads and other songs understood to have originated in bygone eras. Once documented, these relics could be taken back to the "lab" where they could be analyzed for clues to their origin and compared with other variants to determine what the "original" versions may have sounded like. Folk music, then, was primarily valuable for its perceived historical value. Recently-composed songs and variations on well-recognized tunes were not evidence of a vital, living tradition but of corruption, failure of memory, or — most damningly — the influence of popular music.

By the late 1930s, some collectors had begun to adopt more progressive views on folk music. Yet most major collectors continued to follow the antiquarian approach, especially in

areas like southern Appalachia where the legacy of traditional collectors like Cecil Sharp, Maud Karpeles, and Olivia Dame Campbell still loomed large. Furthermore, even more progressive collectors still saw preservation and analysis as their primary aims. Most took for granted that notation or recording should preserve the “correct” version of a tune, and rhetoric stressing the importance of documenting music for posterity continued to drive nearly all collecting projects.

Against this backdrop of antiquarian research and preservationist rhetoric, the Resettlement Administration’s music program — and especially its song-collecting activities — stands out as starkly divergent. At its core, it was based on an ideology which valued folk music for its qualities as a “living tradition,” a flexible entity of continuing relevance to contemporary American life. Seeger, Robertson, and others took the stance that the repertoire’s continued evolution was not only something to be encouraged but was in fact what made the repertoire worth studying, performing, and documenting in the first place. In short, they re-conceptualized folk music as a process — and in doing so recast the song collector as an active participant in this process, one whose main contribution was not to fix songs in stone (or acetate) but to facilitate their continued development by making it possible for them to spread beyond their geographical origins to other communities.

This radical reconceptualization of folk music ultimately proved difficult to put into practice. As Warren-Findley has pointed out, nearly all of the musicians employed by the RA had previously been active as classical musicians, and many remained skeptical of folk music’s social value even after their training in Washington.²⁸ Seeger’s directive to use music already familiar to RA clients stood at odds with the prevailing understanding that music education (and especially training in the Western art music tradition) could be used as a means of social uplift.

²⁸ Warren-Findley, “Musicians and Mountaineers,” 118.

Even musicians who did subscribe to Seeger's views often found themselves forced to fall back on more conventional approaches, whether due to institutional constraints on time and money or conflicts with more conservative folklorists.

Sidney Robertson's work for KL, then, makes for a compelling study in part because she seemed to have genuinely subscribed to the living tradition model of folk song and song collecting. Her writings, both personal and official, reveal a concern with the process of field recording that goes beyond its technical dimensions to focus on the position of the collector and the record vis-a-vis live performance. Moreover, her frequent (and sometimes fraught) negotiations with local folklorists set into sharp relief the conflicting ideologies and assumptions driving their respective approaches.

This thesis is broadly split into two parts. The first, Chapters 1 and 2, deal broadly with conceptual and methodological issues that emerged during Robertson's RA fieldwork. Chapter 1 explains that Robertson adopted a more progressive concept of folk music that included all repertory performed in her informants' milieu, a radical break from the comparatively restrictive understanding espoused by antiquarian folklorists. Taking Robertson's training trip to North Carolina in July 1936 as a case study, I show how these conflicting ideas complicated her working relationships with local experts upon whose cooperation her work depended. Chapter 2 then takes up the issue of Robertson's field methodology to demonstrate how her approach — and, by extension, the approach championed by the broader RA recording program — challenged the pervasive understanding of audio recording as an objective tool primarily oriented towards preservation. Instead, Robertson advocated for a more dynamic understanding of the field recording process, one that emphasizes both the positionality of the recordist within the

fieldwork setting and the ephemeral nature of the recordings themselves in such a way that anticipates later developments in ethnomusicology and other ethnographic scholarship.

The second half of the thesis comprises an extended account of Robertson's first solo field recording expedition, a two-month trip through Appalachia and the Ozarks in late 1936. In Chapter 3, I apply the concepts discussed in the earlier chapters to this southern mountain expedition to demonstrate how Robertson navigated various political and cultural cross-currents which complicated her recording efforts. Focusing on three case studies taken from the Ozarks leg of the trip, this final chapter critiques Robertson's engagement with issues of race, class, and politics as well as questions regarding collaboration with other collectors and the social responsibility of fieldworkers towards their informants. Finally, I conclude this thesis with a brief discussion of Robertson's legacy (or lack thereof) in the broader field of American folk music scholarship, considering the reasons for her marginalization as well as what it could mean to bring accomplished but under-recognized women like her back into the larger historical narrative.

CHAPTER 1: RE-DEFINING THE SCOPE OF FOLK MUSIC IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA, JULY 13–27, 1936

On August 20, 1936, Robertson wrote the following to a friend from her temporary lodgings in Blowing Rock, N.C.:

Last week I packed my bag and gave up my room twice, expecting to go straight from the office to a community in southeastern North Carolina; but that plan met with unexpected checks so I unpacked and settled down again. Yesterday to my surprise I was suddenly sent off down here, rather as a 'reward for a good girl' who had labored through a hot summer in Washington. I am apprenticed — it amounts to that — to the dean of all field collectors of American folk song, to get some experience in collecting and running the recording machine in the field. He is here at the invitation of a scholarly expert in the songs of western North Carolina, and I am to follow them about where allowed, and be of help if I can.²⁹

Her remarks about its suddenness aside, Robertson's trip to North Carolina could not have come as much of a surprise. This expedition was her second to the region in as many months in the company of John A. Lomax, the “dean of all field collectors” then active recording Southern folk music on behalf of the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song. At the request of Charles Seeger, Robertson accompanied Lomax across western North Carolina as his temporary field assistant, gaining experience in field recording to prepare her for later solo expeditions. In addition to this technical training, she had been instructed to use these trips as opportunities “to get training and experience in contacts with what [she] had been led to believe were difficult and

²⁹ Sidney Robertson to Pat, 20 August 1936, Box 6, Folder 5, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

strange folks, the mountain people."³⁰ While most of the recordings collected on these travels were destined for Lomax's projects at the Library of Congress rather than the RA collections, Robertson's presence as a representative of the RA also seems to have been intended as a way for the Administration to quietly identify contacts and repertoires in the region that might suit its own needs.³¹

In traveling to southern Appalachia (and North Carolina especially), Lomax and Robertson entered a region which had gained a reputation as a particularly fertile site for song collecting. The sudden growth of interest in Southern traditional song in the first decades of the twentieth century meant that the legacy of early ballad collectors like Cecil Sharp, Olive Dame Campbell, and Maud Karpeles still loomed large over the mountains, their influence continuing to shape folklorists' decisions concerning repertoire and authenticity even in the late 1930s.³² This old tradition of song collecting was represented in their party by their local "scholarly expert" Frank C. Brown, professor of English at Duke University and an expert in the folklore of western North Carolina. Brown accompanied Robertson and Lomax as their guide, introducing them to local tradition-bearers in mountain communities willing to perform old folk melodies for them, and was the first of many such contacts with whom Robertson worked during her RA fieldwork. Folklorists like Brown were invaluable for government song collectors operating on tight budgets and strict schedules, as they often provided quick access to established networks of local musicians with whom it might otherwise take weeks or months to make contact. Yet these

³⁰ Sidney Robertson, "Report on Two Weeks' Trip to North Carolina, July 13–28, 1936," 1936, Box 6, Folder 1, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 112.

relationships could also prove vexing when conflicting ideological or aesthetic agendas, professional goals, or personal foibles prevented easy cooperation.

As her first foray into the field as an RA representative, Robertson's trip to North Carolina in July 1936 was intended in part to provide her with the technical training necessary to handle the recording machine. It seems, however, that the most valuable lessons Robertson learned during this trip were conceptual rather than technical. Ongoing tensions among the three members of her party — and especially between Brown and the others — restricted her access to the musicians and repertoires most relevant to the RA's work. By the end of the trip, Robertson came to recognize that these personal tensions had their roots in conflicting ideological orientations: she, Lomax, and Brown understood the nature and function of both folk music and field recording in fundamentally different ways. Folklorist Deidre Ní Chonghaile identifies this trip as a foundational moment in Robertson's recording career, one which exposed her for the first time to the “long-standing antiquarian school of song-collecting in America that was established and legitimized by the Harvard literature professor Francis James Child” against which she would pioneer her own innovative collecting methodology.³³ This trip also had profound implications for the scope of what Robertson — and, by extension, the RA music program — considered “folk music.”

In this chapter, I address the question of how Robertson and her RA colleagues conceptualized folk music, focusing on how their understanding of this concept fits within the broader context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trends in folklore studies, musicology, and leftist political thought. Because the term “folk music” has been used in many different contexts and eras to refer to different traditions, practices, and musical repertoires, I

³³ Chonghaile, “In Search of America,” 182.

will not address the complex history of the phrase and its usage.³⁴ Instead, I focus on the continuities and conflicts between the conceptualization of folk music as a “living tradition” central to the RA program and the more static model which had historically been more prevalent in academic folk music studies. I begin with a brief overview of folk music scholarship in the United States from the early 1900–30s in which I discuss the theories and approaches which characterized the “antiquarian” school of song collecting. I then discuss the appropriation of folk music by leftist causes in the late 1920–30s, a paradigm shift in which the RA music program would play a part, before addressing the RA’s definition of folk music (or lack thereof) more directly. Finally, I conclude by returning to Robertson’s North Carolina trip, examining both the repertoire recorded during the trip and her negotiations with her fellow folklorists in greater detail as a case study in the way KL’s understanding of folk music played out in its field collecting program.

Finding the “folk” in North America: Folk music scholarship in the United States

By the time Robertson joined KL in late May 1936, the intellectual elite of the United States had been enthralled with the country’s folk song traditions for more than four decades. Pete Seeger biographer David King Dunaway identifies the period from the late 1890s through the 1940s as the nation’s “first folk revival,” characterized primarily by increasing interest in the collection and systematic analysis of this music.³⁵ Inspired by similar efforts by Romantic intellectuals and artists in Europe, American literary scholars began compiling collections of

³⁴ The contentious nature of the term “folk music” has been treated at length, implicitly or explicitly, by nearly every scholar who has written on this music within the past several decades. Matthew Gelbart gives a succinct summary of this debate in *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2–10.

³⁵ David King Dunaway, *Singing Out: An Oral History of America’s Folk Music Revivals*, ed. David King Dunaway and Molly Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.

Anglo-American ballad texts in an effort to better define both the substance of American “folk” culture and the persistence of vernacular traditions imported from Europe. D. K. Wilgus credits Francis James Child with sparking interest in the United States’ folk song tradition with the publication of his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–89), a multi-volume collection of 305 ballads and 1,216 variants from the British Isles which also included a small number of items from the rural United States.³⁶ Child’s work established both a central canon of English-language folk songs and a theoretical template for later Anglo-American folk scholarship:

The distinguishing traits of American academic collection derive clearly from Child: the treatment of a folksong as a document for study, the emphasis on the text, and the predominant position accorded to the Child canon. Whatever the concessions made to the function and performance of folksong, the emphasis was placed on the record — the *accurate* record — of a text as a subject of literary and comparative analysis.³⁷

Following Child’s lead, American academic folklorists would establish an approach to folk song collecting which prioritized text over context, analysis over performance.

Debates over the precise nature of folk music shook this enterprise from the beginning. By the end of the nineteenth century, scholars of Anglo-American folk song were embroiled in debates over the origins and transmission of folk music in what folklorist D. K. Wilgus terms the “Ballad War.”³⁸ Two camps emerged. The first, the “communalist” school, accepted German folklorist Johann Gottfried Herder’s theory that this music emerged “naturally” over long periods of time as collective expressions of a community’s essential character. Accordingly, these

³⁶ Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship*, 144.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii–xiv. Note that Wilgus’s “Ballad War” refers to scholarly conflicts distinct from the “ballad wars” Whisnant describes in his work on Appalachian song collecting, discussed below.

scholars tended to adopt an “armchair” approach to the study of this music, analyzing ballads apart from their performance context in the hopes of identifying their (mostly hypothetical) original versions. The second camp, the “individualists,” saw folk song instead as a product of individual musicians’ creative efforts. While they, too, initially tended to study ballads apart from their contexts, individualists eventually proved more receptive to the value of studying the current state of folk performance or at least variations in melodic lines. By the 1930s, the individualist camp had largely won out, with folklorists increasingly viewing field collection as an essential part of their work.³⁹ Nevertheless, the antiquarian views espoused by the communalists continued to inform the attitudes scholars held towards this music and its study. This was particularly true in regions like the southern Appalachians, where much was made of the persistence of old English and Scottish folkways in the most remote parts of the mountains.⁴⁰

The legacy of Child’s work — and the persistence of the antiquarian approach — also helped shape the way “the folk” was circumscribed in early American collecting efforts. Since its origins in Herder’s work on German *Volkslied*, the concept of folk music had always been closely associated with class and racial difference⁴¹ in addition to national identity.⁴² Imported to the United States, the racial implications of the term intensified, as sociologist William G. Roy explains:

³⁹ This was due in part to the advent of portable recording machines, which had made large-scale collecting projects more feasible than ever before. See Chapter 2 for more discussion of technology’s impact on collecting practices.

⁴⁰ Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 110–13.

⁴¹ Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, “Music and Race, Their Past, Their Presence,” in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 15–16.

⁴² Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music,”* 102.

Because America lacked an ancient past and any remnant of a national peasantry, scholars initially doubted whether it had a folk culture. But as a wave of stigmatized immigrants began to diversify America in the late nineteenth century, scholars discovered what they identified as a remnant of English folk culture in remote southern mountains. American folk music was fashioned along racial lines. The 'folk' of America were explicitly Anglo-Saxon.⁴³

Paradoxically, published collections of black vernacular music actually predated those of Anglo-American folk songs, first in songbooks by both black and white abolitionists in the mid-nineteenth century and later in academic studies by (mostly white) folklorists after the Civil War.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the American “folk” continued to be equated primarily with the nation’s rural Anglo-American poor, and movements to promote this music in regions like Appalachia were sometimes explicitly motivated by racist and nativist ideologies.⁴⁵ By the 1920s, this had begun to change through the efforts of more broad-minded (if not wholly progressive) folklorists like John Lomax — whose recordings of “Leadbelly” and other black prisoners in the South gained wide recognition — as well as those of leftist activists for whom the mobilization of black workers presented significant political opportunities.⁴⁶ But if the understanding of American folk culture had expanded to include African American traditions, the old Anglo-Saxon-centered model persisted both in the unintentional biases of collectors and scholars and, in cases like the

⁴³ William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35–36. See also Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship*, 144.

⁴⁵ Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 92.

⁴⁶ Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, 2.

White Top Folk Festival, in projects which had been designed specifically to downplay the contributions of black musicians to the national soundscape.⁴⁷

By the 1920s, the publication of works like John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910) and especially Cecil Sharp and Dame Campbell's *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1917) had solidified the agenda for American folk music studies: regionally-specific collection projects, focused primarily on English-language songs of rural white Americans and oriented towards publication in large-scale anthologies with an eye towards the music's historical value. While these collectors moved away from the "armchair" model of scholarship by venturing into the field themselves to interact with living musicians, their work continued to frame this repertoire as essentially antiquarian in nature, a musical "window" into the past. This view would persist through the 1930s, until the rise of leftist musicians and activists like Charles Seeger would signal a shift towards a different understanding of folk music.

Folk music and the political Left

While the folk revival of the 1960s naturalized the relationship between folk music and the political Left in the minds of many Americans, scholars of both folk music and early twentieth-century progressive movements have been quick to point out that this has been a relatively recent development. Historian Peter Gough observes that, in spite of the music's working-class associations, there is little in many folk songs' textual or musical content that demands a leftist interpretation.⁴⁸ Indeed, as he points out, the lyrics of many songs included in

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of the racist ideology of White Top Folk Festival founder John Powell, see Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 235–46.

⁴⁸ Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 167.

this repertoire seem more readily aligned with conservative or reactionary political stances. Folk song collectors were just as likely to hold moderate or reactionary views as they were to adhere to the sort of socialist ideology underlying the RA's programs, and many of these conservative folklorists were the same individuals with whom RA collectors like Robertson had to cooperate during their recording trips, among them the elder Lomax and the early directors of the White Top Festival.⁴⁹

The equation of folk music with progressive ideology took some time to take root even within the political Left. Earlier in the century, a young Charles Seeger himself had commented on what he saw as the regressive qualities of American traditional music, arguing instead that Western art music alone was the proper medium for rallying the working class to revolution.⁵⁰ R. Serge Denisoff dates the appropriation of this repertoire by the American political Left to the Gastonia-Loray strike of 1929 in North Carolina, while Gough notes that the editions of the *Little Red Song Book* had contained Appalachian folk songs as early as the beginning of the 1920s.⁵¹ In any case, folk music had by the 1930s become closely linked with a wide spectrum of left-wing activity in the United States, from the work of the American Communist Party to the more centrist-progressive cultural activities of President Roosevelt's New Deal administrations. Denisoff attributes this to the rise of what he calls a "folk consciousness," the "gestalt of factors which... motivated its adherents to present rural music as the genre of the urban proletariat" and

⁴⁹ Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 232.

⁵⁰ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 164.

⁵¹ R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 24–25. See also Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 164.

in turn reimagine rural folk singers as the voice of the nation's downtrodden in a shift which applied Marxist philosophy to Herder's folk concept.⁵²

While both left-wing activists and academic folklorists staked a claim to the conglomerate of musics broadly identified as "folk music," the two groups conceptualized this music in vastly different ways. Whereas scholars of folk music traditionally stressed the significance of songs' literary and musical texts and the historical aspects of their transmission, leftist folk musicians and folk song promoters emphasized its performed nature, prioritizing performance over collection and study. Sociologists Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta note that the latter activists "reinvented traditional music as a political force by interpreting it as a depository of the 'people' or the 'folk,'" thereby reframing this music as essentially proletarian and therefore potentially revolutionary.⁵³ On a more basic level, though, this shift also redefined folk music according to the groups of people who performed it and the way in which it was performed. While traditional folklorists had long paid attention to the transmission of songs from generation to generation over a broad historical timescale, these new enthusiasts stressed the importance of the act of transmission which occurred within a performance itself. The authentic "folkness" of a particular music, as Seeger would later define it, came down to the degree to which its content and performance diverged from the rational and objective values of elite culture — through, for instance, oral transmission.⁵⁴ If folk music was defined more by its mode of transmission than by its specific geographical or cultural origins, then the scope of folk music collecting could

⁵² Denisoff, *Great Day Coming*, 8.

⁵³ Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States," *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (August 1996): 501.

⁵⁴ Charles Seeger, "The Folkness of the Nonfolk and the Nonfolkness of the Folk," in *Studies in Musicology, 1935–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 339.

similarly be opened up to include those musics which had previously been shunned in the academy. The KL music project and Robertson's collecting endeavors in particular bore witness to this paradigm shift.

“Music that's gifted to us”: Sidney Robertson and the RA on folk music

I established in the previous chapter that Seeger's guidelines for the RA music program placed “traditional” or “folk” idioms at the center of the RA project. Yet Seeger's rules largely left unaddressed the question of which (and whose) musical practices should be taken to constitute these idioms, and very few official KL documents attempted to define or otherwise limit the scope of the musics its employees ought to seek out beyond recommending they focus on what seemed currently popular. To some extent, this ambiguity was intentional on Seeger's part, a way to encourage KL collectors overcome tendencies to focus on one style more than another or to omit things unfamiliar to them. Robertson later recalled Seeger's advice:

“Record EVERYthing!” he said as emphatically as he could. “Don't select, don't omit, don't concentrate on any single style. We know so little! Record *everything!*” What he was trying to do was to inoculate me against contagion from the local collectors I was to meet, for each of them as a matter of course picked and chose items for his collection according to some personal standard of authenticity, or taste, or esthetic quality, or topical interest. Charlie knew it was important to disabuse me of any notion I might have that any particular part of the tradition was more important than any other.

But while she agreed with him, she also commented on the impracticality of these directions, remarking “that no three lives would suffice to get all this done.”⁵⁵ Armed with such ambiguous (or at least impractical) directions — and faced with limited resources and growing political pressure from Congress — KL fieldworkers like Robertson were largely left to their own devices

⁵⁵ Quoted in Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 141.

to interpret Seeger's directions. A better way to understand how the RA conceptualized folk music, then, may be to look at the way its music workers engaged with this music.

The question of folk music's nature and scope had occupied Robertson long before she was hired by KL; in fact, as Chonghaile notes, the meeting with Seeger which led to her employment in the first place came about as a result of a visit to the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, where she had hoped "to ask the question regarding the identity of American folk songs that arisen during her time at the Peninsula School."⁵⁶ Her writings show her wrestling with these issues across her career. One illuminating article, titled "The Songs of a Nation Collect a Forgotten Claim" and published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* the year after she was terminated by the RA, outlines the history of folk song collecting in the United States. In addition to announcing the imminent launch of her California Folk Music Project, Robertson argues for the importance of documenting, studying, and performing music "native" to the United States. She chastises previous generations of American musicians and scholars for "wait[ing] for authority from Europe" to recognize the nation's folk songs as part of "a folk art with an honest claim to beauty" instead of dismissing them as "quaint and entertaining bits of Americana."⁵⁷ Robertson does not mention the RA by name, but her discussion of recent geographical shifts in song collecting resonates with its "living tradition" model:

At first it was assumed that only in the Appalachian region could these interesting survivals be found. Later research in New England and the Southwest has proved this assumption to be utterly mistaken, and the emphasis has shifted from an exclusive concentration upon the old songs preserved in remote regions, to include the dynamic folk tradition which can be found all around and is very much alive indeed and carrying

⁵⁶ Chonghaile, "In Search of America," 2.

⁵⁷ Sidney Robertson, "The Songs of a Nation Collect a Forgotten Claim," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 September 1938.

the unmistakable [sic] tang and savor of the ironic American spirit. [...] Unfortunately most people still cherish the sincere conviction that, though there may perhaps be native songs and fiddle tunes elsewhere in America, certainly here [in] California (or Wisconsin, or New York or Iowa) we have nothing at all like that. Pressed to recall songs familiar in childhood... such doubting Thomases invariably reply in amazement: “Of course I know those; but I had no idea that such things were folk songs.”

For her own part, Robertson did seem to take to heart Seeger’s directive to “record EVERYthing!” Most scholars who have written on her career comment on the astonishing variety of music represented in her field recordings, both those produced during her RA tenure and in her later work. Between her work for the RA in 1936–37 and her later recording project in California (1938–40), these recordings include items in more than eighteen languages originating from twenty-three countries in Europe and the Americas. Many of these, like her extensive recordings of Finnish and other Nordic immigrants in Minnesota and Wisconsin, had never been formally documented in the United States prior to her work. In a field where most prior attempts to document “ethnic music” had focused on African American, Native American, French, or Spanish song⁵⁸, Robertson’s recordings were remarkable for what James P. Leary calls her “open[ness] to whatever folk-musical strains [she] encountered,” a trait shared with only a few of her contemporaries like Alan Lomax and Helene Stratman-Thomas.⁵⁹ Rejecting definitions which would limit the repertory to rural Anglo-American musics, Robertson argues for a broader understanding of the category of “folk music,” one which could also include musics in languages other than English and newly-composed tunes.

⁵⁸ Catherine Hiebert Kerst, “The Ethnographic Experience: Sidney Robertson Cowell in Northern California,” *California Gold: Northern California Folk Music from the Thirties Collected by Sidney Robertson Cowell*, American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, online, updated 27 June 1997, accessed 16 June 2016, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afcchtml/cowsonek.html>.

⁵⁹ Leary, “Foreign Words and Folksongs,” 295.

That is not to say that the Child repertoire and similar Anglo-American ballads are not represented in her recordings. Indeed, such music comprises the majority of what she recorded in her first expeditions with KL, especially in places like southern Appalachia and the Ozarks where the local experts with whom she worked prized this music above all else. Even while recording such canonical Anglo-American repertoire, though, Robertson's broader understanding of folk music nevertheless influenced the way she approached her recording work in these early trips. For the remainder of this chapter, I discuss Robertson's first recording expedition to North Carolina in July 1936, a trip which brought to the fore some of the ideological clashes between her approach and that of her guides. I will return to these themes in Chapter 3, where I will examine in more detail her expedition through Appalachia and the Ozarks later that year.

Robertson, Lomax, and Brown in North Carolina

The trip through western North Carolina (July 13–28, 1936) was planned in two phases. After collecting Brown, Robertson and Lomax spent the first half of their trip recording traditional musicians in the vicinity of Blowing Rock, a town in the northwestern region of the state which would serve as their home base through July 21. Their itinerary this first week took them through Silverstone, Shull's Mills, Estatoe, Zionsville, and Mabel to visit six families and individuals known for performing ballads and dance music. A brief visit to a state prison camp in Boone on July 18 proved especially productive in Robertson's view, yielding four discs of work songs and religious music performed by the camp's black prisoners.⁶⁰ After a detour through Tuckasegee and Charlotte to record elderly ballad singer Myra Barnett Miller on July 22, Robertson and Lomax parted ways with Brown and traveled to Asheville to observe the Mountain

⁶⁰ While not all of the discs produced during the North Carolina trip were destined for the Library of Congress, select recordings are now housed in the American Folklife Center in Washington DC under the call numbers AFS 836, 860, 861, and 862.

Dance Contest and Mountain Music Festival organized by fellow KL worker Bascom Lamar Lunsford, where they would remain until they returned to Washington on the 28th.

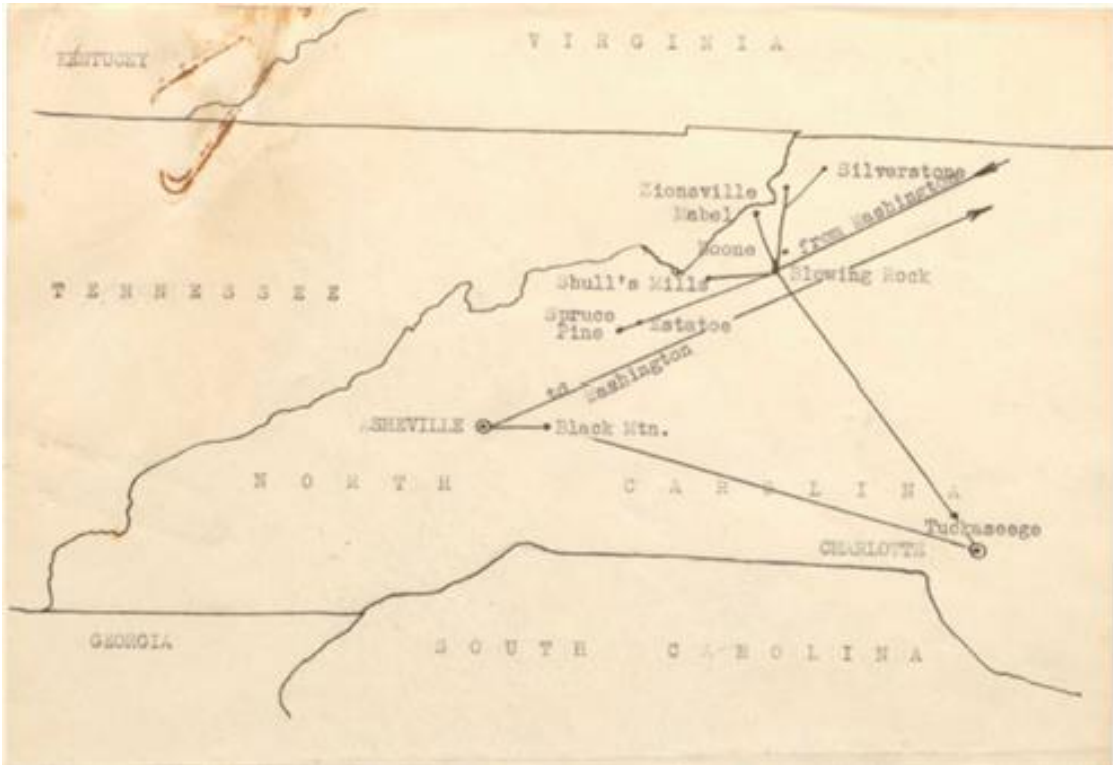


Figure 1a: Map of July 1936 route, from Robertson's "Report on Two Weeks' Trip to North Carolina, July 13-28."

Monday, July 13	Depart Washington, DC
Tuesday, July 14	Hickory, NC Blowing Rock
Wednesday, July 15	Blowing Rock
Thursday, July 16	Silverstone
Friday, July 17	Blowing Rock
Saturday, July 18	Shull's Mills (morning) Boone state prison camp (afternoon)
Sunday, July 19	Estatoe
Monday, July 20	Zionsville
Tuesday, July 21	Appalachian State Teachers College in Boone Mabel
Wednesday, July 22	Tuckasegee Charlotte

Thursday, July 23– Saturday, July 26	Mountain Dance Contest and Music Festival in Asheville
Monday, July 27	Return to Washington, DC

Figure 1b: Timeline of July 1936 recording trip.

That tensions would arise among the three was perhaps inevitable considering the varying musical priorities and institutional entanglements Robertson, Brown, and Lomax brought with them. Like Robertson, Lomax came to western North Carolina under the auspices of the federal government as part of his work for the Archive of American Folk Song and had previously gained fame for his publications of “cowboy” and frontier ballads as well as the work songs of black prisoners in the South. Brown, on the other hand, brought with him both a literary background and years of intensive focus on the music of western North Carolina, which he was planning to publish as a printed collection.

From the perspective of the RA music program, the recording trip was only partially successful. As Robertson later noted, the expedition did offer her experience running the sort of “temperamental” portable recording machines used by Lomax, which would prove valuable in her later fieldwork.⁶¹ Nor was the trip entirely without material benefit for the RA music program. Although the field recordings Lomax and Robertson produced were officially destined for the Archive of American Folk Song rather than KL, the close relationship between the two government entities meant that one’s gain was the other’s as well. As a result, the RA gained access to (if not exclusive ownership over) twenty-eight new field recordings of ballads, work songs, dance tunes, and other music from a region in which the agency was heavily invested.⁶²

⁶¹ Sidney Robertson Cowell, “Lady on Wheels.”

⁶² Robertson, “Report on Two Weeks’ Trip to North Carolina.” See Appendix 1 for a partial list of the repertoire recorded during this trip.

But as Robertson remarked in her official report on the expedition, Brown's own priorities often prevented her and Lomax from accessing material that would be of use to the RA. Like many folklorists of his generation, Brown was primarily interested in "older" repertoires, primarily ballads and other songs whose lineages could be traced back to the British Isles. Newer, less "authentic" songs were to him of little research value:

Dr. Brown conceives of the "old tunes" as something static, so that it is possible to hunt down the tune going farthest back chronologically and say: "This is the right tune." Or, "This is the nearest we can come to the right tune, which is now lost." (This, while people continue to sing!) The present process of cultural infiltration is only to be deprecated, from this point of view... His whole contact with contemporary life is that of a man with his head over his shoulder toward the imagined perfections of the past.⁶³

Seeger had likely realized that Brown's agenda would conflict with that of the RA collecting program when he arranged Robertson's "apprenticeship" with Lomax. But with her guide so fixated on hunting these "old tunes," Robertson's access to "the main current of contemporary culture" in western North Carolina was severely limited, making it difficult for her to encounter the sort of "really current and actively sung" folk songs the RA hoped to uncover for use in its programs:

As Dr. Brown was preoccupied with the oldest members of the community his field wasn't fertile for our purposes except when I could chat with children and grandchildren. The time was too short... to make the exploratory trips through the mill towns, etc., that I might have done, following up my few contacts with young people. My interest in the younger generation's singing and dancing was frowned upon [by Brown] as irrelevant and a waste of precious time."⁶⁴

⁶³ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

Accordingly, most of the performers they visited were ballad singers or (to a lesser extent) dance musicians. At least three individuals recorded during the first half of the trip were singers in the “traditional style,” one of whom, Myra Barnett Miller, evidently justified the trio’s detour southeast to Tuckasegee to record her repertoire of Child ballads — the “find of the trip,” Robertson remarks in her field notes, at least “from the research scholar’s point of view.”⁶⁵ This preoccupation with the lineage of Appalachian ballads profoundly shaped Brown’s approach to recording even when dealing with folk musicians with other specialties; Robertson recounts that Brown tended to open his sessions by presenting singers with a “long list of 75–100 songs” which he “press[ed] them to remember,” a strategy which seems to have “paralyzed singers” more than helped them.⁶⁶

Moreover, Brown’s protectiveness of his “field” prevented Robertson and Lomax from recording music or musicians to which he had already laid claim. Brown had already amassed a vast collection of field recordings during his years of research and, intending eventually to publish his findings in a book on North Carolina folklore, had worked out an agreement with Seeger prior to the expedition restricting Robertson’s access to this collection. While Robertson acknowledged the necessity of such an agreement, her report laments that:

...Dr. Brown undoubtedly has things in his collection that we might like to use, for his is under a compulsion to seize upon everything... But I do not think there is the slightest chance of getting anything from him under conditions acceptable to us, and the chances of getting anything at all under no matter what conditions are slight too. Mr. Lomax has seen one thing, a lullaby, from his collection, in all this time.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ “Field Notes, 1936,” Box 6, Folder 2, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

⁶⁶ Robertson, “Report on Two Weeks’ Trip to North Carolina.”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

Robertson seems to have interpreted Brown's wariness as a sort of jealous neuroticism, a notion she revisited in a letter to Seeger a year later in which she playfully notes that "the cultivation of one's contacts is extremely personal with irrational beings like folksong enthusiasts."⁶⁸ But Brown's suspicion makes sense against the history of what Whisnant calls "the theoretical and territorial ballad 'wars'" which had waged in Appalachia less than twenty years earlier among scholars and collectors eager to protect their "discoveries" from rivals.⁶⁹

The legacy of ballad collecting in Appalachia thus contributed to the disappointing outcome of the July 1936 expedition. Brown's antiquarian views on musical change and authenticity, which can be traced back to those of early ballad collectors, limited the scope of the folk repertoires the federal collectors encountered under his guidance, as did his fierce protection of what he saw as "his" music. But paradoxically, this legacy was also what made the trip possible in the first place: Without Brown's cooperation, it would have been prohibitively difficult for Robertson to access even the few musical contacts she was able to make, and it is likely that the history of Appalachian ballad collecting lent her work legitimacy in the eyes of both Brown and the musicians.

The pedagogical nature of the trip meant that Robertson had limited ability to correct what she saw as her colleagues' shortcomings. Stuck between Brown's antiquarian approach and the RA's living tradition model with Lomax as an unsatisfactory midpoint, Robertson ultimately had to put their agendas above hers, costing her opportunities to encounter the kinds of music in which the RA was most interested. When similar issues of access, ideology, and repertoire would

⁶⁸ Sidney Robertson to Charlie Seeger, July 1937, Box 6, Folder 12, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

⁶⁹ Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 112.

come up in her later recording ventures, however, she would have greater freedom to steer her work to better fit her interests and the needs of the RA.

CHAPTER 2: “IF WE ARE TO BECOME A SINGING COUNTRY”: SIDNEY ROBERTSON AND THE ART OF FIELD RECORDING

A full day’s drive brought Robertson and Lomax from Asheville back to Washington on July 27. After a weekend excursion to Lewisburg to attend the Pennsylvania Folk Festival at Bucknell University, Robertson resumed her full-time work as music assistant in the KL office on August 3. She would not return to the field for another three months. Instead, she spent the intervening time attending to the administration of the RA music program, where her duties ranged from overseeing the department’s acquisition of instruments to collaborating with staff from the Library of Congress to identify items from their collection of field recordings of interest to the RA. While much of Robertson’s administrative work dealt with the minutiae of the residential music program, field recording nevertheless remained a priority for her during this time. Her official writings — memos, training documents, and weekly reports — are peppered with insightful reflections on the North Carolina trip and ideas about the role of recording more broadly. In August alone, she spent substantial time producing training documents detailing the proper use of recording devices, proposing ways to integrate RA recording work with the song sheet program, and meeting with field representative Margaret Valiant to discuss the latter’s recording work at Cherry Lake Farms in Madison, Florida.

By the end of the year, this work would culminate in her first solo recording expedition, a two-month expedition spanning more than a thousand miles through Appalachia and the Ozarks which will be the subject of the next chapter. Yet her writings on field recording warrant examination in their own right. I argued in the previous chapter that the understanding of folk

music promoted by the RA represented a break with the antiquarian approaches of established folk music scholars, positioning American folk music as a “living tradition” valuable as much for its recent developments as for its historical interest. But Robertson’s work also makes clear that this “living tradition” was not something collectors and recordists merely documented but was a collaborative process to which their own work actively contributed. By positioning the collector as an active participant in folk performance and maintenance of music traditions, her collecting work — and, by extension, that of the RA music program as a whole — anticipated later reflexive turns in ethnomusicology.

This chapter is about methodology, specifically the field recording procedures Robertson both used herself and prescribed for other workers. Taking her administrative writings from 1936 as a starting point, I examine the ethical, ideological, and aesthetic assumptions underlying the RA collecting project. My analysis will focus on three aspects of the RA recording project: first, Robertson’s recommendations regarding proper procedures for song collectors in the field; second, the relationship of the recording project to the RA music department’s other major material project, the song sheet program; and finally, the ethical and political implications of these projects as part of a utopian imaginary. I argue that the RA collecting project was itself as a dynamic, even performative, process, one which ultimately aimed less to preserve vernacular music than to facilitate its continued spread and evolution.

Field recording and the “ethos of preservation”

In his history of early sound recording, Jonathan Sterne observes that recording technology was entangled from the start with what he calls an “ethos of preservation,” which framed recording technology as a sort of auditory embalming through which sound could be

preserved indefinitely for the entertainment and edification of future generations.⁷⁰ This apparent ability to suspend time made the phonograph an attractive tool for anthropologists studying so-called “primitive” cultures, as it seemed to offer the “potential to preserve the voices of dying cultures” against their seemingly inevitable decline.⁷¹ In spite of concerns over wax cylinders’ fragility and inaccuracy, anthropologists and comparative musicologists in the United States began to incorporate recording into their studies of American Indian cultures as early as the late 1880s. By the early twentieth century, the practice of anthropological field recording became increasingly commonplace as these early “audio ethnographers” demonstrated the ways this technology could streamline their work in the field, shifting the burden of memorizing and repeating from human participants to the machine.⁷²

The same ethos of preservation that drove early ethnographic recording also spurred the creation of formal sound archives. Not coincidentally, the two phenomena began almost concurrently, with the establishment of the Columbia Phonograph Company’s commercial archive in 1890 and the research-oriented Phonogrammarchiv at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 1899 coinciding with the first flourishing of recording-based research in anthropology, linguistics, and musicology. As Sterne notes, the establishment of such archives served to preserve not only the “voices of the dead” contained in sound media but also the physical media themselves, which were far more fragile than the optimistic rhetoric of

⁷⁰ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), 298–99.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 317.

preservation suggested.⁷³ By 1910, government-sponsored research institutions throughout Europe like the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv and the British Library National Sound Archive had already amassed extensive collections of wax cylinder recordings. Comparable public sound archives would take somewhat longer to emerge in the United States, where the Archive of American Folk Song was not established until 1928 with the appointment of Robert W. Gordon as folk song consultant to the Library of Congress.⁷⁴

The phonograph quickly became integral to comparative musicologists' work, functioning as a sort of "scientific tool" which offered an unprecedented ability to test hypotheses through repeated listenings.⁷⁵ Folklorists in the United States, however, took longer to uniformly adopt field recording as a standard practice. D. K. Wilgus credits John Lomax as the first to use sound recording in the collection of English-language song in the United States, integrating it with more traditional methods in his work on cowboy songs and frontier ballads in 1907–10.⁷⁶ Even so, field recording remained a novelty in American folk music scholarship into the late 1920s, and its proponents evidently still felt compelled to justify its merits through the end of the 1930s. In a 1937 *Southern Folklore Quarterly* article on his experiences using recording machines in the field, John Lomax addressed several reasons for the delayed adoption of this technology. Chief among them was the machine itself. Lomax praises the improvements

⁷³ Ibid., 326–29.

⁷⁴ Peter Thomas Bartis, "A History of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress: The First Fifty Years," PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1982, 31.

⁷⁵ Dieter Christensen, "Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv: The First 100 Years," in *Music Archiving in the World: Papers Presented at the Conference on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv*, ed. Gabriele Berlin and Artur Simon (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 2002), 21.

⁷⁶ Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship*, 59.

in sound quality achieved with the move to aluminum and acetate discs but observes that the equipment had remained extremely heavy and cumbersome until recently, making it prohibitively difficult to move in an automobile. In some cases, transporting older models could even be dangerous; Lomax mentions that his son Alan had suffered acid burns from electric phonograph batteries when their car overturned during a 1933 recording trip.⁷⁷ He also cites the cost of the machine and the limited lifespan of the discs as complicating factors, noting that even the newest acetate discs could not be played more than fifty times.

Lomax points out that the lack of general interest in “native folk music” earlier in the century had similarly inhibited the development of a widespread field recording practice in the United States.⁷⁸ But with the development of lighter and less expensive machines — and, eventually, the resurgence of national interest in regional musics and the establishment of federally-funded music projects in the New Deal era — recording became a more viable option for folk song collectors in the late 1920s. The use of recording machines in folk song collecting had grown substantially by the late 1930s, and by the end of the decade it was seen by many collectors as preferable to the older method of memorizing tunes from informants and notating them by hand. As the editor of *Southern Folklore Quarterly* noted in 1937, the development of portable recording machines presented for the first time the possibility of documenting in real time the “exact way a folk singer renders a tune” down to the finest details.⁷⁹ Moreover, because the physical disc was imagined as a “permanent” record of the performance, the rendition of a

⁷⁷ John A. Lomax, “Field Experiences with Recording Machines,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1937), 58–59.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

tune it preserved could be revisited for study even after the death of the original performer — a particularly attractive benefit to scholars whose most prized subjects were often in their seventies or eighties. That these recordings were neither completely accurate nor truly permanent did not diminish their contribution to the project of preservation; indeed, as Lomax argues, field recording was “necessary” if collectors were to stave off the “end both to the creation and to the artless singing of American folk songs.”⁸⁰

Sidney Robertson and RA field recording methodology

Among the writings Robertson produced upon her return to Washington was a memorandum titled simply “Observations on Technique of Collecting.” Based largely on her observations of Brown and Lomax’s approaches to fieldwork, it reads both as a personal reflection on what she learned under their tutelage and as a crash course in basic recording techniques for other RA song collectors. Robertson’s memo briefly addresses technical questions like the placement of the machine and the costs associated with recording, but she makes it clear from the beginning that these issues are to her of secondary importance. Successful field recording hinges not on a collector’s skill with the machine but on his or her skill in navigating the social dimension of recording:

I came to the conclusion that the collector’s visit to make records should be a social occasion, never a business one. All the social amenities should apply with particular force. In general, I think it is best to avoid any suggestion of being in a hurry; and anything like a crispt [sic] businesslike manner smacks of the city and will defeat one’s end.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Lomax, “Field Experiences with Recording Machines,” 60.

⁸¹ “Observations on Technique of Collecting,” undated (probably August 1936), Box 6, Folder 17, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

The paramount importance of social concerns is a recurring theme in Robertson's writings on song collecting. The following July, she would lament to Charles Seeger about John Lomax's representation of field recording in his *Southern Folklore Quarterly* article, taking particular issue with his claim that "an hour's instruction will enable a person of ordinary intelligence to set up a recording machine and make recordings"⁸²:

Miss [Marjorie] Edgar showed me the Southern Folklore Quarterly, and I do most furiously resent Lomax's statement that anybody can run one of the machines with an hour's practice! Dear me! if learning to twirl switches in the right order were all there is to it...!⁸³

Elsewhere in the letter, she stresses the importance of "cultivating" close relationships with local folklorists and musicians. Her repeated insistence that "the collecting business is so personal a thing" brings her frustration with Lomax's article into sharp relief. She seemed to find his claim vexingly inaccurate not only because he downplayed the difficulty of using the machine but because he fundamentally misrepresents the nature of field recording.

Nowhere does Robertson suggest that the recording machines were easy to use. Indeed, many of her letters to Charles Seeger and Adrian Dornbush from her later field trips stress the temperamental nature of the machine and especially the difficulty of finding quality needles for creating new records.⁸⁴ So why do her writings on recording technique focus so much on

⁸² Lomax, "Field Experiences with Recording Machines," 59.

⁸³ Sidney Robertson to Charlie Seeger, undated, Box 6, Folder 12, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Robertson's report to Adrian Dornbush sent in early December 1936, in which she mentions that she "spent some time [in Little Rock, Arkansas] going through... Kress', Woolworth's and the music stores — none of which, however, have any Burmese thorn Victrola needles!" In "Negro group at Clinton, Ark.," 2 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

personal relationships to the neglect of technical advice? While it could simply be that she felt collectors could readily come by this information elsewhere, a closer examination of her writings suggests that she viewed recording as a process fundamentally dynamic and social in nature, one in which the collector was as much a “performer” as the musician being recorded.⁸⁵ As Robertson explains in her memo on technique, a collector’s recording visit should recreate an “informal” performance as much as possible by minimizing the presence of the recording machine. She identifies two benefits to maintaining this air of informality. It would, of course, help set the performer at ease; but it would also prevent the musician from becoming suspicious that “somebody, somewhere, is ‘doing them out of a chance to make some money.’” The latter is the greater danger as it risks re-framing the performance as a commercial affair, thereby “defeat[ing] what should be [the] primary aim: the continuance of a live folksong tradition.”

Paradoxically, though, minimizing the presence of the machine does not mean minimizing the presence of the person running it. While she argues that the collector should take measures not to distract the musician by “fiddling unnecessarily with his gadgets” or becoming too engrossed in note-taking, she admonishes fieldworkers to remember that their presence makes them a participant in the unfolding performance, too:

While music is being recorded I felt that the collector should listen and enjoy it to the full... In one way or another he must manage to seem to participate in the performance, not only to profit from it — if only by sharing the feeling of the performer about the music. This is indispensable if the collector is to obtain the finest possible performance for his record; but even when the quality of the performance doesn’t much matter to him, he should feel the obligation to leave the music in as natural and unselfconscious a state as he found it. With the encumbering machinery this is no small task. I believe, however, that the collector should definitely take on the responsibility of preserving the love of music-making for its own sake. He can do this if he will see to it that he doesn’t so cut

⁸⁵ Robertson, “Observation on Technique of Collecting.”

himself off from the performance as to become “audience” — someone observing something from the outside which is of no real importance to himself.⁸⁶

Robertson’s suggestion that collectors should “seem to participate in the performance” may seem at first somewhat superficial, perhaps only a strategy for setting an antsy performer at ease. But her indictment of those who allow themselves to become mere “audiences” makes clear that, to her, the boundary between collector and performer — between the act of recording and the act of performance — becomes blurred the moment the collector enters the field.

By positioning the collector as an active participant in the unfolding performance, Robertson (and by extension the RA collecting program as a whole) reimagined the entire project of ethnographic recording as a performative act, a view which stood in stark contrast to the traditional understanding of recording as a tool for objective scientific observation. This view was complemented by her habit of taking extensive notes on the social and cultural context of the music she recorded, a technique she impressed upon her California Folk Music Project employees later in the decade.⁸⁷ In doing so, Robertson’s approach to recording prefigured the emphasis on positionality which would characterize later reflexive turns in twentieth-century ethnomusicology, in which ethnomusicologists like Kay Kaufman Shelemay would increasingly acknowledge that ethnographers “seeking to document the transmission process [become] a part of it.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 183–84.

⁸⁸ Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist, Ethnographic Method, and the Transmission of Tradition,” in *Shadows in the Field*, 2nd ed, ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 144.

Field recording and the song sheet program

In both the documents she wrote for the Special Skills Division and in her private writings, Robertson stressed the importance of letting the performed and performative aspects of folk song guide every step of the field recording process. Her memos repeatedly reminded collectors that they should not focus on seeking out songs of some narrow musicological interest but should make it a priority to find songs whose aesthetic value derived from them being, in her words, “particularly good fun to sing.”⁸⁹ For once collected, these songs were meant to be sung again: the RA archive in Washington, DC, was to be only a temporary stopover for folk tunes on their journey from musicians in far-flung regions of the United States to eager music-starved residents of resettlement communities. The records themselves became mnemonic devices, containing songs just long enough for their musical and verbal texts to be printed on broadsides or taught to local song-leaders.

One means through which this transmission was accomplished was through the RA’s song sheet program, a series of single-sheet broadsides envisioned as the print counterparts to the records Robertson and her colleagues produced during their field work. Meant to “supplement popular collections”⁹⁰ of well-known folk songs, the song sheet program functioned parallel to the recording project as another means of transmitting folk songs from field sites to residents of the RA homesteads. Because the song sheets and field recordings were conceptualized, at least initially, as equally-important parts of the same process — and because Robertson’s recording and administrative work both overlapped with the planning and execution of the print series — it is worth discussing the former in more detail here.

⁸⁹ Robertson, “Observations on Technique of Collecting.”

⁹⁰ This disclaimer appeared on every printed RA song sheet.

As originally envisioned, the song sheet program was remarkably ambitious. An August 22, 1936 memo by Robertson proposes a series of 52 songs, 18 of which were to come directly from RA field recordings. Other songs on the list were to be substituted for songs from the RA archives as their collectors found more “suitable material.”⁹¹ In the end, budgetary constraints and the looming closure of the RA forced them to pare this list down to a mere 10 songs, only 9 of which were ultimately issued:

1. The Farmer Comes to Town
2. Cooperation is Our Aim
3. Young Man Who Wouldn't Hoe Corn
4. We Aint Down Yet
5. Down in the Valley
6. The Dodger
7. The Buffalo Skinners
8. Sweet Betsy from Pike (never issued)
9. Wayfaring Stranger
10. Bethlehem

But while the song sheet program was unable to materialize to the extent that it had originally been envisioned, Seeger and Robertson repeatedly stressed its importance to the overall aims of the RA music program.

The repertoire included in the song sheet program speaks both to the pragmatic orientation of the RA arts programs and to the leftist ideologies underlying it. Warren-Findley describes the song sheets as “passports to change,” intended to introduce homesteaders to progressive attitudes about the relationship between individual and society while also introducing the professional musicians hired as field representatives to the legitimacy of

⁹¹ “Proposed List of Songs for Publication in Song Sheet Form,” Box 6, Folder 20, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

vernacular music.⁹² As Pete Seeger later recalled in an interview about his father's work for the RA, the progressive orientation of the repertoire collected in the song sheets may have been partially responsible for the program's discontinuation:

Henry Wallace went up to Capitol Hill to see if he couldn't get the Resettlement Administration reapproved by Congress. And there was a conservative southern Senator, said, "Mr. Wallace, you want me to vote for that Resettlement Administration of yours, look what it produces." (Slap! Down on the table went a copy of "The Candidate's a Dodger.") "Did you expect me to vote for that?" And that song was one of the reasons that the Resettlement Administration folded.⁹³

The song Seeger refers to, "The Dodger," was the sixth in the song sheet series. While the version referenced for the publication was from a field recording made by John Lomax and Laurence Powell in August 1936 for the Archive of American Folk Song, the song is typical of those sought out by RA field collectors. Indeed, Robertson would make a point of seeking out Emma Dusenbury — the folk singer from Mena, Arkansas, whom Lomax and Powell recorded performing this song — during her recording trip to the Ozarks later that year. The song opens with a verse criticizing politicians' duplicity:

Yes, the candidate's a dodger, yes, a well-known dodger;
Yes the candidate's a dodger, yes, and I'm a dodger.
He'll meet you and treat you and ask you for your vote,
But look out, boys, he's a-dodging for a note!

Later verses call out corruption among lawyers, doctors, the clergy, and "lovers," warning the listener of the ways each group takes advantage of those they claim to help. The penultimate

⁹² Warren-Findley, "Passports to Change," 197–98.

⁹³ Quoted in Dunaway and Beer, ed., *Singing Out*, 46.

verse, on farmers, is a notable exception, purporting to explain how they, too, are “dodgers” while actually praising them for their hard work:

Yes, the farmer he’s a dodger, yes, a well-known dodger;
Yes, the farmer he’s a dodger, yes, and I’m a dodger too.
He’ll plow his cotton, he’ll plow his corn,
He’ll make a living just as sure as you’re born!

Against the other verses’ pointed criticisms of society’s elite, this verse sets off farmers as the only members of society who earn an honest living — perhaps the only honest members of society at all. It also speaks to the conception of these song sheets as tools for cooperative organization and political recruitment within the Resettlement communities; agricultural workers encouraged to sing songs contrasting their hard physical labor and the corruption of the lazy upper class might be more inclined to unionize, protest unfair working conditions, or otherwise align themselves with leftist political organizations. Tellingly, a note on the back of the sheet remarks that Dusenbury learned the song long before the Depression era in a time “when a farmer could still make a living, ‘just as sure as he was born.’”

This glorification of hard physical labor and championing of the downtrodden poor are recurring themes in the ten RA song sheets. Like “The Dodger,” “The Farmer Comes to Town” valorizes farmers’ role in society while lamenting their poor treatment by all above them on the social ladder. Both “Cooperation is Our Aim” and “We Ain’t Down Yet” deal directly with the value of unionization and solidarity among workers; explanatory notes on the reverse of each sheet highlight their origins as labor protest songs. Even songs with relatively apolitical texts are presented with a distinctively progressive bent. The first verse of the carol “Bethlehem” — issued in time for Christmas in late 1936 — stresses the conditions of abject poverty surrounding

Christ's birth. Meanwhile, the version of "Wayfaring Stranger" printed ninth in the series includes several supplemental verses contextualizing the narrator's suffering within a long-standing system of inequity. Two verses from an anonymous singer in Virginia detail the unfairness of this situation with notable specificity:

Our fathers dear fought for our liberty,
Across the ocean they did roam,
They suffered pain and many hardships,
For this land to build a home.

We've lived here many generations,
And many dear ones here have died,
But still our lives are filled with trouble,
In vain a helping hand we've cried.

Two other verses collected in Florida by RA field representative Margaret Valiant similarly lament the experience of suffering across multiple generations of the narrator's family. And while new budget constraints halted the production of song sheets in January 1937, Archie Greene notes that the next four were planned to include the Industrial Workers of the World anthem "Solidarity."⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Archie Green, "A Resettlement Administration Song Sheet," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 83.

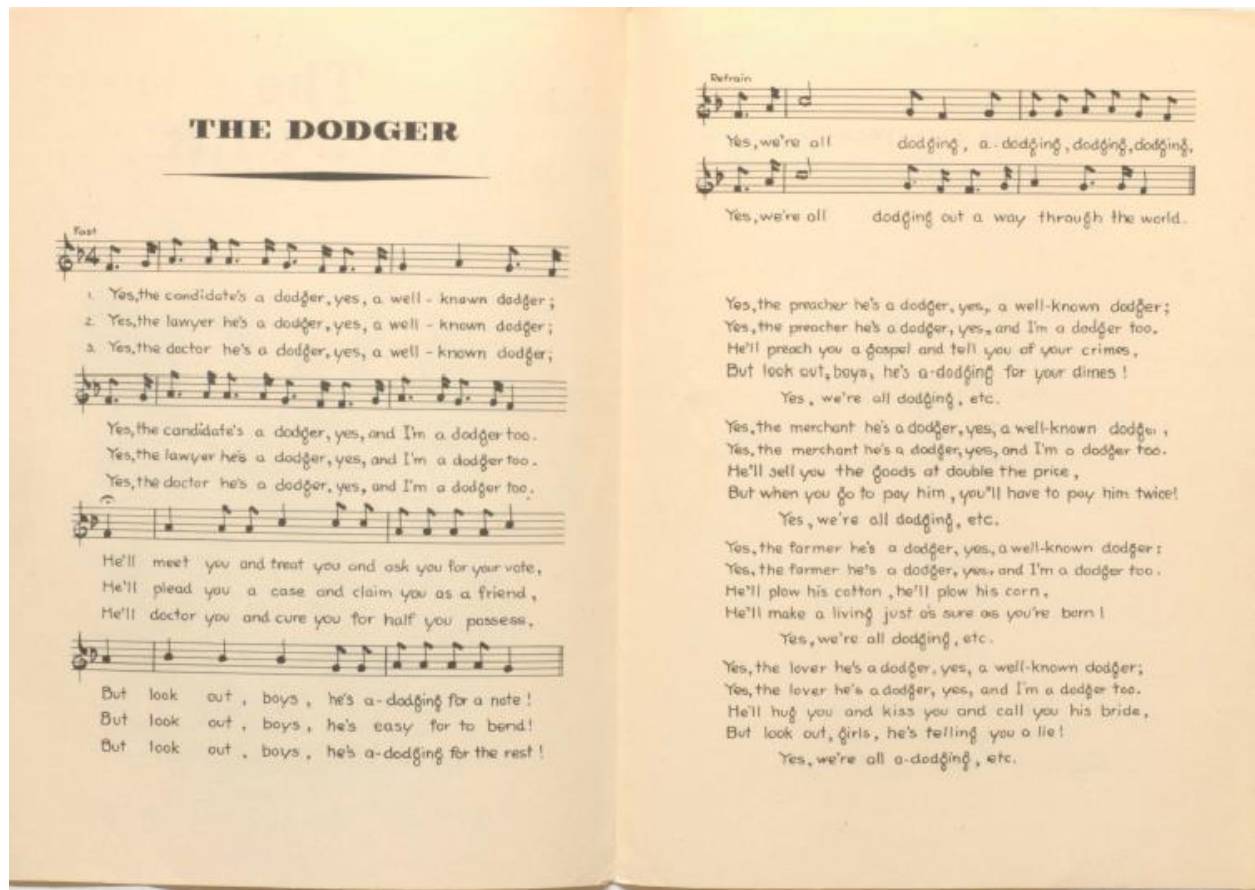


Figure 2: RA song sheet no. 6, “The Dodger.”

Music for “a singing country”

On August 20, 1936, Robertson collaborated with Seeger on a memo to be sent to KL director Adrian Dornbush. Ostensibly a clarification of the relationships among the RA’s field recording project, song sheet program, and residential music activities, the memo quickly turned into an impassioned manifesto on what they considered the ultimate aim of such projects: not merely the cultivation of social harmony in RA communities but the facilitation of a nation-wide folk music revival. While they acknowledged the circulation of a “few cowboy and hillbilly songs” via radio and commercial recordings, Robertson and Seeger noted that the vast majority of American folk repertoires had gone unrecognized beyond their immediate places of origin —

a tragedy, in their eyes, as it threatened this music's continued survival and inhibited its inherent potential to act as an "integrating social force."⁹⁵ The RA music project, they argued, therefore had a broader responsibility to promote this music to the American public, starting with those who had been displaced by the Depression but ultimately extending its reach to the nation as a whole.

Robertson and Seeger positioned the joint enterprise of RA song sheets and field recordings at the core of these efforts. They envisioned a widespread training program which would distribute copies of such media as widely as possible, both in RA homesteads and in other communities across the nation. But while they acknowledged that such a program would facilitate the maintenance of existing folk song traditions, they did not seem to envision preservation as the ultimate aim of the proposed project. Indeed, the authors specifically warned against any inclination to allow preservation media to "fix" a particular version of any one song. Not only were the recordings and notated tunes to be used only by "local leaders" (and even then only for a limited time as memory aids), but these leaders were to actively encourage the continued evolution of these tunes in their own communities:

To avoid giving traditional music survival or antiquarian value by studying it in this way, it will probably be necessary to make very clear our intention that these records are to be studied by local leaders, but are to be used with homesteaders only as a stimulus to further performance of their own kind of music. [...] We must also take care to prevent the 'fixation' of a traditional basic tune, which tends to settle into a static form once it gets onto a record. I believe this may be done by repeated requests for local version and by the free adaptation of such songs to local situations which our field people must be urged to make. [...] If we are to become a singing country, the sooner we are all able to burst into song without benefit of instrument or songbook, the better.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ "Integration of Work on Song Sheets and Recorder with an Annual Music Program," 20 August 1936, Box 6, Folder 16, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Such a broad-reaching program never materialized, at least under the RA's auspices; indeed, funding cuts and political pressure made the continuation of even KL's existing activities contentious. But the transformative potential Robertson and Seeger envisioned in the RA's music activities sheds light both on Robertson's particular approach to field recording and the significance of field recording to the RA's work in general. By insisting that collectors cast off the obsession with preservation which had been the *raison d'être* of sound recording since the beginning, they sought not only to further the RA's own ends but to harness what they saw as the redemptive power of folk music to revitalize both its practice and the nation.

CHAPTER 3: “WAYFARING STRANGER”: SIDNEY ROBERTSON IN THE SOUTHERN MOUNTAINS, NOVEMBER 1936–JANUARY 1937

Robertson’s first solo expedition was an impressive undertaking, spanning more than 4,100 miles across seven states during her two months on the road. That the trip ultimately centered on the southern mountain regions of Appalachia and the Ozarks was more a product of happenstance than any intentional effort to focus on these regions. Her original vision of the trip had been even more ambitious, her route through the Appalachians into Arkansas and Missouri only the first leg of a journey that would take her further west into Oklahoma and, in some versions of the plan, all the way to California. Funding constraints, illness, and the pressure of winter weather ultimately forced her to return to RA headquarters in Washington before even reaching Tulsa. The focus on rural mountain music that resulted from these constraints, however, makes Robertson’s expedition a particularly insightful case study of the ways government song collectors negotiated ideas about the nature of folk music as well as their relationships with the musicians they worked with in the field. Because these regions of the South were among the most heavily serviced by the RA residential music programs, the trip also highlights the intersections between Robertson’s recording work and the broader aims of this New Deal agency.

The latter half of the expedition comprising her work in Arkansas and Missouri is both particularly noteworthy and (as yet) rather understudied. While local folklorists like Vance Randolph had been engaged in documenting Ozarks folk music for some time prior to her visit, Robertson’s field recordings were among the first of their kind in the region. Nor was her work

here a modest endeavor: of the eighty-two recordings produced during the full expedition, fifty-one were recorded in these two states alone. As a result, she came to be recognized as something of an “authority” on this music, at least until her foray into this music was eclipsed by Vance Randolph’s publication of his monumental *Ozarks Folksongs* beginning in 1946.⁹⁷

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of Ozarks folklore scholarship through the mid-1930s, considering both the parallels that had been drawn between this region and Appalachia as well as some reasons for the general dearth of Ozarks folk music scholarship during that time. After an overview of Robertson’s trip in its entirety, I present three detailed case studies on her work with specific individuals and communities in Arkansas and Missouri. I first consider Robertson’s recording work in the black community of Red River near Clinton, Arkansas, conducted early in December 1936. While much of her field recording work focused on the music of rural whites, her Clinton recordings speak to her efforts to broaden the scope of folk song collecting in the United States. Her efforts to include black musicians in her musical snapshot of the Ozarks is particularly striking given the lengths to which the region’s white residents had historically gone to erase African American contributions to southern mountain culture. Next, I discuss Robertson’s recording session with Emma Dusenbury, an elderly blind folk singer based near Mena, Arkansas, who has become an iconic figure in Ozarks folklore. Even by the time Robertson visited Dusenbury in late 1936, the singer had gained a modest degree of fame for her voice and her expansive knowledge of old Anglo-American ballads, yet she continued to live in extreme poverty. Robertson’s recordings in Mena shed light on the ways her work intersected — and sometimes conflicted — with previous folklorists’ work with the same subjects, while her efforts to improve the Dusenburys’ living conditions give some insight

⁹⁷ Sachs, *Henry Cowell*, 369.

into her understanding of fieldworkers' ethical obligations. Finally, I discuss Robertson's collaboration with Ozarks folk music specialist May Kennedy McCord in Springfield, MO. Her work with McCord makes for an especially insightful case study as the press attention it attracted sheds light on the reception of her work (and of government folk music initiatives more broadly) by the general public.

Folk music scholarship in the Ozarks Mountain Region

The Ozarks Mountain Region has long been considered the lesser counterpart to the larger and better-known Appalachians, which has in turn carried major implications for the way folklorists and musicologists have approached its folk traditions. Geographically, the position of the two mountain ranges in the rural South, the difficulty they have historically posed to transportation, and the economic vulnerability of their inhabitants has led scholars and other commentators to consider the regions as two halves of a single unit. Cultural studies of both regions similarly tend to hinge on notions of "remoteness," which position the mountains' inhabitants as far removed from modern urban culture physically as well as temporally. Consequently, scholarship on the Ozarks has tended to follow many of the same currents as scholarship on southern Appalachia.

These parallels are not purely imagined constructions. As Bethany K. Dumas notes, by the mid-twentieth century the majority of the Ozarks' inhabitants were themselves descendants of pioneers from Southern Appalachia who brought with them the same cultural traditions they had maintained in the East.⁹⁸ Many inhabitants of both regions continue to share a common dialect, which Dumas terms "Southern Mountain English," and collections of Ozarks folk music by folklorists like Vance Randolph often include many of the same ballads and tunes present in

⁹⁸ Bethany K. Dumas, "Southern Mountain English: The Language of the Ozarks and Southern Appalachia," in *The Workings of Language: From Prescriptions to Perspectives*, 67–68.

Appalachian collections. Nevertheless, the tendency to draw parallels between the two regions meant that the qualities of folk culture unique to the region were often neglected in favor of comparative studies. Perhaps it was in part because of this that efforts to collect traditional music in these mountains lagged decades behind their counterparts in the east.

The southern mountain recording trip: An overview

Robertson did not leave Washington with a particularly concrete plan for the trip; indeed, whether she would make the expedition at all was not determined with any finality until the very end of October.⁹⁹ Certain highlights, however, had been predetermined. First, she was to return to western North Carolina to network with Bascom Lamar Lunsford and collect whatever she could find in the vicinity of Asheville. Second, she hoped to record a group of singers she had heard about in a small African American enclave in rural Clinton, Arkansas. Finally, she would visit Springfield, Missouri-based folklorist and small-time journalist May Kennedy McCord, who had volunteered to introduce Robertson to musicians familiar with the traditional music of the Ozarks. Her exact itinerary continued to evolve even after she had set off on her trip in early November, but these three landmarks remained a major part of her journey.

While it is unclear exactly when Robertson began planning this trip, her weekly reports indicate that she had initiated conversations with Seeger and Valiant about a possible solo recording expedition as early as August.¹⁰⁰ Her primary objective was, of course, the recording of musical materials which could be of use to the residential projects as discussed in Chapter 2. That this expedition focused on Appalachia and the Ozarks spoke to both the strong presence of the RA in the rural mountain South and to prevailing ideas about the nature of the American

⁹⁹ Sidney Robertson to Joe Jones, 28 October 1936, Box 6, Folder 5, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹⁰⁰ Sidney Robertson, memorandum, 19 August 1936, Box 6, Folder 5, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

“folk” which located this culture first and foremost in these regions. The trip was also planned in part as a way for Robertson to follow up with contacts various RA representatives had made during their work on the homesteads and in the field; her visit to Asheville to record Bascom Lamar Lunsford in mid-November and her work with Emma Dusenbury in December followed up on Robertson’s own work in North Carolina and preliminary recording undertaken by John Lomax in Mena, respectively. The expedition served, too, as a means for KL’s Washington-based staff to conduct routine checks of the homestead music projects in the regions she visited. To this end, Robertson loosely planned her route around regions where the RA had a strong presence.

Robertson finally departed Washington, DC during the first week of November, 1936.¹⁰¹ She first headed north to Pennsylvania, arriving at the Westmoreland Homesteads in Greensburg on November 8. After two days of recording in nearby Ligonier, Robertson’s route took her gradually further south through Morgantown, West Virginia (November 11), and Marion, Virginia (November 12–14), before finally arriving in Asheville, North Carolina, where she remained for the better part of a week. On November 20th, Robertson set off on the Tennessee leg of her journey, which would take her through Smithville, the Cumberland Homestead in Crossville, and Memphis before finally bringing her to Arkansas on the 26th.

Recording in Arkansas and Missouri had been a priority from the beginning; her original travel plans had her in the states for nearly a month, and later delays eventually extended her time in the region to nearly six weeks. In spite of the efforts of local folklorists and musicians like Vance Randolph and May Kennedy McCord, the traditional music of the Ozarks had yet to

¹⁰¹ The following data on Robertson’s route and itinerary, including the dates in the table on page 66, was compiled from Robertson’s correspondence with Adrian Dornbush, Charles Seeger, and Robert van Hyning between from 16 November 1936 and 5 January 1937. These documents are located in Box 6, Folders 7–9, of the Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

be recorded in any systematic way by the late 1930s. John Lomax had previously undertaken some preliminary work recording the elderly blind ballad singer Emma Dusenbury, but he had recorded only small selections from her repertoire. Seeger, at least, seemed convinced that Dusenbury still had more repertoire to offer, not to mention other musicians in the region. For her own part, Robertson showed particular interest in recording at Clinton, a predominantly black community which she had heard to be home to a thriving musical scene; she was particularly eager to record a local singer-composer who had written a song in praise of the WPA.¹⁰² While later projects like the Ozarks Folksong Collection at the University of Arkansas and Randolph's multi-volume *Ozarks Folk Songs* would eventually amass substantial written and recorded collections, Robertson's expedition was at the time the most expansive folk music collecting endeavor ever undertaken in the region.

From her arrival on November 20 until her departure on January 9, Little Rock, Arkansas, and Springfield, Missouri, would serve as the central hubs for Robertson's recording activities in this region. She arrived in Little Rock on November 20, hoping to make a trip as soon as possible to visit both the black singers in Clinton and Dusenbury at Mena. Heavy rains and poor roads repeatedly complicated her plans to record in Clinton early in her trip, however, causing her to put off her planned visit there until December 1; the Mena trip had to be put off even longer and would not be completed until late in December. After a visit the following week to record labor organizers in St. Louis, she relocated her activities to Springfield, Missouri, where local folklorist May Kennedy McCord had agreed to lend her resources and expertise to Robertson's efforts for the remainder of her trip.

¹⁰² Sidney Robertson to Charles Seeger, 29 November 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

Robertson had originally planned to begin her return trip to Washington on December 21, re-tracing her original route through Tennessee and arriving back at KL headquarters by December 27. On the day she was supposed to depart, however, a sudden bout of flu caused her to request additional leave. Her illness ultimately extended her trip until January 9, giving her another sixteen days in the Springfield area. While much of this time was occupied by her recuperation, she continued to pursue her recording work as much as she was able, including a trip to follow up with Dusenbury on December 22–24 and further recording at McCord’s Springfield house before her departure in January.

Nov. 8	Depart Washington, DC for Westmoreland, PA
Nov. 9–10	Ligonier, PA
Nov. 11	Arthurdale Project in Morgantown, WV Elkins, WV
Nov. 12–14	Marion, VA
Nov. 15–17	Asheville, NC Leicester, NC
Nov. 21–24	Smithville, TN Cumberland Homesteads in Crossville, TN
Nov. 26	Memphis, TN
Nov. 27–30	Little Rock, AR
Dec. 1	Clinton, AR
Dec. 2–5	Little Rock
Dec. 6–10	St. Louis, MO
Dec. 14–17	Springfield, MO
Dec. 18–24	Mena, AR
Dec. 25	St. Louis
Dec. 27–Jan. 6	Springfield
Jan. 7	Crossville
Jan. 9	Return to Washington, DC

Figure 3: Timeline of Robertson’s southern mountain expedition.

The southern mountain expedition proved remarkably productive for the RA. In spite of illness, repeated stretches of foul weather, and the burden of balancing other administrative

responsibilities, Robertson logged an impressive eighteen days of recording in more than ten communities across the southern and eastern United States. Her efforts and those of her interlocutors resulted in eighty-two discs documenting performances of hundreds of individual songs. Although Childs-type ballads still comprised a large share of these items, it seems clear that Robertson took as seriously as she could Seeger's advice to "record EVERYthing," documenting a diverse collection of repertoires ranging from lined-out hymns and black spirituals to play-party songs, blues, newly-composed political ballads, and picket-line chants. (See Appendix 2 for a complete list of repertoire recorded during this trip.)

Case study 1: The Red River, Arkansas, recordings

It is no secret that the social and cultural programs of the New Deal disproportionately benefited whites over people of color. In his history of the New Deal, Michael Hiltzik frames the RA as a rare "bright spot for the black community" in the late 1930s, arguing that the RA operated "with admirable color-blindness" overall.¹⁰³ More than one-fifth of the 150 communities operated by the RA served at least some black residents, and the nine all-black communities counted among the administration's most successful experiments. Hiltzik undoubtedly exaggerates the extent of the RA's color-blindness; although the RA operated twenty-six mixed-race communities, their facilities were still segregated, and the program was complicit at least once in forcibly removing an impoverished black community from federal land designated for white RA clients.¹⁰⁴ But with most relief agencies disproportionately benefiting poor and middle-class whites, the RA's emphasis on distributing aid more or less equitably may well have made the agency a rare beacon of hope for black farmers and workers, especially in Southern states where Jim Crow laws compounded their suffering.

¹⁰³ Michael Hiltzik, *The New Deal: A Modern History* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 314

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 316.

While the majority of Robertson's RA recordings were of white musicians, encounters with black musicians figured prominently in both her July 1936 recording trip to western North Carolina and in her southern mountain expedition later that year. Robertson's expedition to Clinton, Arkansas, halfway through the latter trip proved especially noteworthy, as her inclusion of black voices in what was otherwise becoming a survey of Ozarks folk music ran counter to the prevalent image of that region as exclusively white. Race relations had been especially complicated in Arkansas during the first decades of the twentieth century, tied to debates on prohibition, class consciousness, and the state's agricultural economy as well as to the legacy of slavery and racism.¹⁰⁵ Jim Crow laws officially made segregation the law of the land, encouraging acts of violence against blacks and fostering the spread of white supremacist beliefs even among the most progressive white Arkansans. Nevertheless, interracial interaction, cooperation, and even tenuous friendships were common in parts of the state, especially among the poorest laborers. In the eastern delta region, where sharecropping and tenant farming were the norm on what Jeannie M. Whyne calls the "new plantations," black and white agricultural workers sometimes set aside racial animosity to campaign for better working conditions, most notably in the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers' Union.¹⁰⁶

Such cooperation was much rarer in mountainous western Arkansas, where a wave of lynchings and violent expulsions from 1894–1909 had made the southern Ozarks virtually uninhabitable for blacks.¹⁰⁷ As J. Blake Perkins claims, "perhaps no other region of comparable size in America claimed

¹⁰⁵ Jeannie M. Whyne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 2–6.

¹⁰⁶ Whyne, *A New Plantation South*, 196–98.

¹⁰⁷ Kimberly Harper, *White Man's Heaven: The Lynching and Expulsion of Blacks in the Southern Ozarks, 1894–1909* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2010), xvi.

fewer black residents than the Ozarks” by the 1930s.¹⁰⁸ Even so, a handful of small black communities took root in the Arkansas Ozarks after the Civil War and continued to survive well into the twentieth century. One such community, known locally as Red River, was founded just north of Clinton in Van Buren County in the early 1890s.¹⁰⁹ The community eventually expanded to include churches, stores, and a school, and many of its men found employment with the WPA in the 1930s.¹¹⁰

Although there was no RA homestead in Clinton, Robertson seemed particularly excited by the prospect of recording there. Her itinerary as of November 17 already included a stop in northwest Arkansas “to find that curious negro group of Civil War deserters,”¹¹¹ and upon arriving in Little Rock at the end of the month she remarked again that she was “looking forward to the negro group at Clinton very much.”¹¹² Some of her enthusiasm certainly stemmed from the novelty of both the town and its musicians. Much like the southern Appalachians, the Ozarks had long been whitewashed in the popular imagination, the presence of people of color and their contributions to mountain culture ignored or deliberately erased in part as a result of the region’s history of violent racial cleansings.¹¹³ Robertson’s

¹⁰⁸ J. Blake Perkins, “Mountain Stereotypes, Whiteness, and the Discourse of Early School Reform in the Arkansas Ozarks, 1910s–1920s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (May 2014), 200.

¹⁰⁹ While the community was known as Red River, Robertson did not seem to be aware of its proper name, referring to it as “Clinton” in all of her writings. For this reason — and because the recordings were actually conducted in Clinton and not Red River proper — I will use the two names interchangeably.

¹¹⁰ Steven Teske, “Clinton (Van Buren County),” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies at the Central Arkansas Library System, online, last updated 15 April 2016, accessed 13 June 2016, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1001>.

¹¹¹ “Recording with Lunsford at Asheville,” 17 November 1936, Box 6, Folder 6, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹¹² Sidney Robertson to Charles Seeger, 29 November 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹¹³ Among others, see: Harper, *White Man’s Heaven*, 252–53.

eagerness to record this “curious” community betrays a degree of what Mark Duffett has termed “ghetto voyeurism.”¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, her efforts to include musicians of color in her survey of a region which had been both subject to racist assumptions and home to pervasive discrimination also speaks to what Peter Gough has called her commitment “to giving voice to the anonymous but substantive talents of musicians of the Depression era,” an attitude she would bring to her later recording projects as well.¹¹⁵

Robertson’s fascination with the Red River singers specifically, though, also stemmed from what she had heard about its musicians and their repertoire. Before arriving in Clinton, she reported to Seeger that the singers there “[had] a song called ‘Hard Times on the PWA’” in addition to “much of the regulation stuff.”¹¹⁶ The latter “regulation stuff,” primarily African American spirituals and other hymns, ultimately comprised most of what Robertson heard there. The former, though, was of particular interest to her. Actually titled “Song of the PWA,” the song had recently been composed by one of the town’s inhabitants about the Public Works Administration. Its relevance to contemporary life and especially its references to government relief agencies must have made it particularly attractive to the RA song collector. Moreover, the co-existence of a thriving, socially-relevant songwriting tradition with older repertoires made Red River a virtual microcosm of what the RA music administrators imagined as rural American music.

¹¹⁴ Duffett defines “ghetto voyeurism” as “the tendency of white listeners to construct their accounts of listening experience in ways that re-inscribe social distance *often despite a sense of cross-racial empathy*.” He notes that such tendencies informed the recording of black blues musicians by folk song collectors in the early twentieth century. While he singles out John Lomax’s work with Leadbelly earlier in the 1930s, a similar criticism could easily be made of Robertson’s recordings of the Red River singers. See: Mark Duffett, “Ghetto Voyeurism? Cross-Racial Listening and the Attribution of Class Difference in Popular Music,” *Volume!* 10, no. 1 (2013), 98–100.

¹¹⁵ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 184.

¹¹⁶ Robertson to Seeger, 29 November 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

Weather delayed Robertson's journey to Clinton until December 1. Arriving in the afternoon with Laurence Powell — a Little Rock-based conductor and composer who was also an amateur collector of Arkansan folk music and employee of the RA¹¹⁷ — she set up the recording machine at a general store located just northwest of the town. Due in part to heavy rains and automobile problems, Robertson was only able to spend a few hours recording, producing four discs containing seventeen items. Nevertheless, the Clinton discs still offer some illuminating insight into both Robertson's expedition and the broader issue of race in the RA's folk music projects.

Three singers predominate in the Clinton recordings: Estelle McNeely, her daughter Hazel McNeely, and Will Wright, the young composer of "Song of the WPA." Two additional singers, Albert and Richard Harper, joined the younger McNeely for a performance of the spiritual "If You Wanta Get Up in Heaven," and Robertson's report to Dornbush notes that two others had hoped to join them as well — Bill McClure and an "Uncle Martin" (who was "born in the first year of freedom") — but were unable to come. It became clear during the recording session that Wright, the McNeelys, and the others were not necessarily accustomed to singing with one another, which led to some disagreements:

Mrs. McNeely could only sing the lead, she couldn't alto; but her voice was disparaged by her daughter, who preferred to lead. Will could lead or bass but he couldn't tenor! So they felt their singing wasn't full enough.

Robertson seemed less bothered by this than the performers, remarking that the sparseness allowed her "to hear the bare parts" more easily.¹¹⁸ Later, upon playing the Clinton recordings for the black staff at a

¹¹⁷ Warren-Findley, "Musicians and Mountaineers," 112–13. Powell would become a recurring figure in Robertson's Ozarks work, accompanying her later to Mena for the sessions with Emma Dusenbury.

¹¹⁸ Sidney Robertson, "Negro group at Clinton, Ark.," December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

hotel in Little Rock, she would learn that their performances represented an older style of singing, the harsher vocal timbres and “draggy” tempos contrasting with the “richer” and livelier style then in fashion.

The repertoire recorded in Clinton mostly fell in line with Robertson’s expectations, primarily religious music (spirituals and hymns from shape-note anthologies) on the one hand and original compositions (ballads and blues) on the other. Wright and the McNeelys performed most of their sacred repertoire as an ensemble, usually with one leading the other two. Only Estelle performed hymns unaccompanied, recording four for Robertson without accompaniment. One of these, “Out in the Cold World A-Lone,” was apparently of great personal significance to her, as Robertson recounts:

Mrs. McNeely (Estelle) sang a doleful ballad, with this remark: “I’m goin’ t’ sing a song accordin’ t’ my condition: Out in the cold world a-lone.” She has known this song since she was a child, and remarked that she used to sing it “a-scrubbin’ up an’ down the floor; you know they used t’ call it scrubbin’ in those days.” I nodded, supposing that what they called it “in those days” they still do, but when she added: “Then I’d get up and say a speech to the audiempts” I decided I didn’t understand. It sounds a little like what Langston Hughes’ mother called “an elocution party”.¹¹⁹

Meanwhile, original songs written by one of the singers tended to be performed by the composer alone, as with Hazel’s performance of her sentimental ballad “Wondring Sweetheart.” What impressed Robertson most, however, were the songs of Will Wright. The composer of the song which had drawn Robertson to Red River in the first place, Wright performed the “Song of the PWA” as well as another New Deal-themed song, an ode to the president¹²⁰:

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ He also performed the blues “Gonna Lay My Head Down on Some Railroad Line,” which Robertson attributes to Wright as well but which was most likely a version of Richard Jones’s “Trouble in Mind,” which had gained wide circulation as a blues standard in the 1920s and 30s.

I thank Mister Roosevelt for the good that he have done.
He get so many poor men and he save so many lives.

Mister Roosevelt, the second day of November
I fell down on my knees, (Lordy, Lord!)
And the words that I used in my prayer said,
“Lord, we’ll take Mr. Roosevelt if you please.”
And I know that the good Lord above surely heard my prayer.

Well, I was at my home, baby, and I asked the men
How they really liked Mister Roosevelt.
They looked at me and laughed, and they said:
“I tell you, buddy, that’s a good man, can’t be turned down.”

Mister Roosevelt, you got the world in a jug.
(Hold to it, Mister Roosevelt!)
Stopper in your hand,
And hold to the stopper till the world come under your command.

Thank you, Mister Roosevelt.¹²¹

Wright’s “Mr. Roosevelt” evidently impressed Robertson so much that she asked Dornbush to make a copy of the record to send to the president himself.¹²² The song’s unabashed praise of Roosevelt and “the good that he have done” makes obvious its appeal to Robertson, especially given the delicate political situation the broader RA found itself in by the end of 1936. But Wright’s lyrics also bears witness to the attitudes of at least some black Americans towards the work of New Deal agencies like the RA; even if many of the administrations failed to accomplish the degree of social and economic change promised, they nevertheless represented a symbolic hope for many and in some cases led to very real material benefits for the country’s most marginalized.

¹²¹ “Mister Roosevelt,” Box 25, Folder 17, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹²² Robertson, “Negro group at Clinton, Ark.”

Robertson's report on the Clinton recordings treats her performers with a remarkable degree of dignity for her time, an approach rapidly becoming a hallmark of her field recording. Describing the scarcity of primarily black communities in rural northern Arkansas, she remarked that they seemed to be on "fairly equal terms" with their white neighbors:

This group of negroes has been in the same locality since the Civil War... A colony of negroes is rare outside of the larger towns in northern Arkansas. This seemed a particularly free and independent group — on fairly equal terms with the white people who run the store; we all sat around the stove and ate sandwiches and drank Coca Cola together at noon.¹²³

She notes, however, that the white storekeepers' ease with such casual interracial interaction may have been due more to financial necessity than to any progressive convictions, as "the store [was] supported chiefly by the trade of this negro group scattered through the hills." Robertson also expressed some concern over the musicians' refusal of payment. She was especially concerned about Wright, whom she had caused to miss a half day of work; she was able to convince him to accept seventy-five cents for his time but still worried that he would face repercussions from his white employers at a local garage, who might view him as "undependable."

This was neither the first nor the last time Robertson worked with black musicians during her RA tenure. As discussed in Chapter 1, her earlier trip to North Carolina had included a trip to Boone to record the black prisoners at the penitentiary there, a stop which left her deeply dissatisfied with their treatment both by the prison warden and by her fellow travelers. The following week, she would also record picket-line chants and other labor songs from black union members Gladys, Mattie, and Juanita Crouch in St. Louis, Missouri. The Clinton recordings, however, are especially significant given the town's location in the rural Ozarks. That they

¹²³ Ibid.

appear alongside recordings of the region's white ballad singers and fiddlers reads as a rare acknowledgment of mountain communities' racial diversity, locating black musicians and their traditions not only in southern prisons but as a crucial part of the musical landscape across the entire region.

Case study 2: Emma Dusenbury in Mena, Arkansas

Because of the wide-ranging nature of her southern mountain expedition and her limited resources from the RA, Robertson rarely spent an extended amount of time recording any one individual. Most of her sessions resembled the ones she conducted in Clinton, involving multiple performers and focusing if anything on family groups more than individual musicians; even in Asheville, where Robertson spent most of her time recording an elderly singer named I. N. Marlor at Lunsford's suggestion, she conducted only one recording session with him in spite of her sense that his full repertoire was much larger. While Robertson often remarked in her correspondence that she wished she could spend more time at each stop, she understood that the trip's purpose was not to record any one individual's full repertoire but to "skim off the cream, in large variety" to maximize her chances of finding useful material for the RA.¹²⁴

Robertson's recordings of Emma Dusenbury, conducted in Mena, Arkansas with assistance from Laurence Powell, were an important exception. Between December 22 and 24, Robertson recorded twelve discs of Dusenbury's unaccompanied singing, which included forty-three individual songs and — apart from a few instances in which her daughter "Ory" prompted her to remember texts or melodies — featured Dusenbury alone. This unusual focus on a single musician was prompted by Seeger and RA assistant director Robert van Hyning, both of whom repeatedly insisted that Robertson seek her out at whatever cost. More importantly, though, it

¹²⁴ "Recording with Lunsford at Asheville."

also reflected the status Dusenbury and her repertoire had acquired among collectors of folk song in the southern United States. As one of the rare instances during the southern mountain expedition in which Robertson sought to record a singer who had already been recorded by other folklorists, the Dusenbury recording sessions offer some insight into the ways in which Robertson's field techniques differed from those of her peers, especially with regards to the issue of fieldworkers' social responsibilities towards their informants.

Born in Georgia on January 7, 1862, Emma Dusenbury (nee Hays) had lived in Arkansas for nearly sixty years before her "discovery" by Vance Randolph in 1928. Her family had been impoverished long before the beginning of the Depression, and Dusenbury herself spent much of her life working in cotton fields even after being blinded by illness.¹²⁵ By December 1936, the elderly widow lived with her daughter in what Robertson described as an "abandoned shack" near Mena in the Ouachita Mountains.¹²⁶

Their poverty, however, belied the relative fame that Dusenbury had recently gained as a ballad singer. During her youth in the Arkansas foothills, Dusenbury acquired a vast repertoire of more than one hundred songs, many of them Child ballads and other traditional English songs. Her lifelong project to "learn all the songs in the world" eventually caught the attention of Ozarks folklorist Vance Randolph in 1928, whose amazement with her voice and memory led him to return again two years later.¹²⁷ Arkansan author John Gould Fletcher followed Randolph in 1934, publishing an account of his visit as "The Ozark Singer" in T.S. Eliot's literary review

¹²⁵ Robert B. Cochran, "All the Songs in the World": The Story of Emma Dusenbury," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1985), 8.

¹²⁶ Sidney Robertson, "Mrs. Dusenbury," Box 6, Folder 19, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹²⁷ Cochran, "All the Songs in the World," 5, 8.

The Criterion, and Little Rock-based musician and song collector Laurence Powell came in turn the following year.

By 1936, Dusenbury had gained such recognition that she was invited to perform at the Arkansas Centennial Music Festival in Little Rock as a representative of the state's folk music tradition.¹²⁸ Meanwhile, word of her impressive repertoire reached the Archive of American Folk Song in Washington, DC, where John A. Lomax developed a plan to bring a recording machine to Mena to record her singing for preservation in the Library of Congress. In August, Lomax traveled to Arkansas and, with Powell's assistance, conducted a grueling two-day recording session with Dusenbury that produced nineteen discs containing more than eighty distinct songs.¹²⁹ Among her repertoire were numerous play-party songs, whose accompanying actions she painstakingly described on the recordings, as well as hymns and political songs like "The Dodger." The bulk of her repertoire, however, consisted of ballads of English origin, including what historian Brooks Blevins deems "the greatest collection of Child ballads ever recorded from a single singer."¹³⁰

The close relationship between the Archive of American Folk Song and KL meant that Seeger, Robertson, and other RA music staff were both aware of and keenly interested in Lomax's recording trip. Even before Lomax returned to Washington, the KL administration was already planning to incorporate songs from the Dusenbury recordings into its music program.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁹ These discs are currently housed in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress as AFS 847–849, 857–859, 863–867, and 869–876. Also included are three recordings of what Robert Cochran refers to as "animal calls" meant for livestock. See: Cochran, "All the Songs in the World," 11.

¹³⁰ Brooks Blevins, "'In the Land of a Million Smiles': Twentieth-Century America Discovers the Arkansas Ozarks," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 29.

Robertson's memo of August 22 listing fifty-two proposed song sheet titles includes four spaces designated for "one of Mrs. Dusenbury's songs."¹³¹ Dusenbury's repertoire and her established status as a respected tradition-bearer seem to have made her particularly attractive to the RA's purpose. On the one hand, her expansive knowledge of canonical Anglo-American ballads lent her repertoire a kind of respectable authenticity in the eyes of both traditional folklorists and more progressive collectors. On the other hand, the specific repertoire she had shared with Lomax included several songs whose satirical messages seemed tailored to the RA political agenda, among them "The Dodger" (whose implications for the RA's progressive politics I discussed in the previous chapter). Her regional affiliation, too, made her a particularly attractive source of material. While Dusenbury technically lived in the Ouachita Mountains, the attention paid her by folklorists like Randolph had made her virtually synonymous with Ozarks, a region underrepresented in most collections of American folk music. Given that the RA operated four relief communities in Arkansas, Dusenbury's songs would have been of particular value to RA field representatives looking for regionally-specific music.

In spite of Lomax's success recording Dusenbury that summer, it was generally suspected that she had not shared her full repertoire with him. For this reason, the RA team in Washington was especially eager for Robertson to follow up with her during her trip to the region. In his correspondence with Robertson during her travels, Seeger repeatedly urged her to make the Dusenbury recordings a priority.¹³² Interest in the Dusenbury material ran so high that Robert van Hyning, assistant director of the RA, sent an urgent telegram to Robertson on

¹³¹ "Proposed List of Songs for Publication in Song Sheet Format."

¹³² See, for example, his letter dated 17 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

December 4 instructing her to “make every effort to make complete the Dusenbury recordings.”¹³³

Whether Robertson decided to record Dusenbury of her own volition or not, she nevertheless seemed convinced by the end of November of the value of visiting Mena. In a letter dated November 29, she confirmed to Seeger her intention to follow up with her, a decision based both on her boss’s instructions and on her conviction that her more personable field methods could help her succeed where Lomax had not:

It seems that Mrs. Dusenbury knows still more songs! some of which she avoided offering to JAL, whom she didn’t like; others he waved aside and refused to record or, sometimes, to hear! So, all in all, it seems a good idea for me to go to Mena.¹³⁴

Her good working relationship with Lawrence Powell, who had worked with Dusenbury before and had helped Lomax in his previous work with Dusenbury but had been put off by Lomax’s attitude that he had “cleaned up Arkansas and that there wasn’t much of anything around here anyhow,” further convinced her that her official status as an RA representative put her in the best position to handle this follow-up recording.¹³⁵

Robertson had originally planned to visit Mena before relocating to Missouri for the final leg of her trip, but heavy rains the first week of December made the roads to Dusenbury’s home unpassable, forcing her to put off her visit until later in the month. In the end, Robertson’s illness in mid-December worked to her advantage, as the extra time granted her permitted her to spend

¹³³ Robert van Hyning to Sidney Robertson, telegram, 4 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹³⁴ Sidney Robertson to Charles Seeger, 29 November 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

two days recording Dusenbury during the week she was originally slated to depart.¹³⁶ She finally made the trek to Mena from Springfield on December 18 and, with assistance from Laurence Powell and Dusenbury's daughter Ory, recorded twelve discs of Emma's singing on the 22nd and the 24th.

While Dusenbury's legacy has hinged on her reputation as a singer of Child ballads, her forty-three items on Robertson's 1936 recordings showcase a much broader repertoire. Seven of the songs were repeated from the Lomax–Powell sessions¹³⁷, including the “Dodger Song,” Dusenbury's version of “Barbara Allen,” and a tobacco prohibitionist song titled “Tobacco Union” evidently composed in Missouri nearly fifty years earlier.¹³⁸ The remaining thirty-six represented new material, songs which Dusenbury had either refused to offer Lomax or which Lomax had not wished to hear on his earlier visit. (See Appendix 2 for complete song list.) Many were sacred songs, like the hymn “Prodigal Son” from the shape-note hymnal *Christian Harmony*; others, like the English folk song “Who Killed Poor Robin?” or the bawdy “Little Ball of Yarn,” were decidedly more secular.

Robert Cochran — whose efforts to piece together the details of Dusenbury's life and legacy resulted in what is still one of the most complete accounts of her life — has noted the irony of the singer's position. Lauded nationally for her singing and recognized as one of the

¹³⁶ Seeger remarked in a letter on the 22nd that he hoped that she “really [had] not succumbed but use[d] the convenient excuse so as to stay out there and get some of that undoubtedly fine material.” Charles Seeger to Sidney Robertson, 22 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹³⁷ Cochran, “All the Songs in the World,” 12.

¹³⁸ The song's text was in circulation among tobacco prohibitionists as early as 1889, appearing (for instance) in the “Tobacco Column” of apiculture magazine *Gleanings from Bee Culture* in August of that year. The column's editor attributes the text to a J. H. S. Black from the Ozarks town of Willow Springs, Missouri. See: *Gleanings from Bee Culture* 17, no. 15 (August 1889), 641.

region's foremost tradition-bearers, she nevertheless "lived on in the same bonegrinding poverty until she died forgotten" in 1941.¹³⁹ This discrepancy did not go unnoticed by the folklorists who visited her, many of whom took note of her poverty. Some, like composer and song collector Laurence Powell, suggested plans to aid to Dusenbury and her daughter through royalties from proposed publications of her songs, though these never came to fruition. More often, Dusenbury's visitors accepted her poverty as a mark of authenticity. In an account of his experience hearing her sing in the early 1930s, author John Gould Fletcher romanticizes her "leaky-roofed, decaying cabin" and "flour-sack clothes," her abject poverty and disability making her performance all the more "magical."¹⁴⁰ As historian Ben F. Johnson notes, Fletcher's approach was typical of modernist artists' representations of rural life, which often sought a kind of "authentic life" in their subject's misfortunes.¹⁴¹

Compared against other contemporary accounts of Dusenbury's singing, Robertson's report on their recording session stands out for her relatively non-patronizing tone and for her concern for the singer's immediate welfare. Her description of the Dusenbury residence presents a stark contrast to Fletcher's romanticized account of their poverty:

There is an old lady 75 years old named Mrs. Dusenbury who is living in this house in the mountains near Mena, Arkansas. She has recorded 120 songs for us¹⁴², a kind of treasure she began to collect as a girl when she undertook, she said, to learn all the songs in the world. She has been blind for the past 28 years and her frail and sickly daughter, Ory, has never done anything but take care of her mother, their cow, their chickens, and

¹³⁹ Cochran, "All the Songs in the World," 15.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Cochran, "All the Songs in the World," 3.

¹⁴¹ Ben F. Johnson, *Arkansas in Modern America, 1930–1999* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 35.

¹⁴² Here Robertson refers to her recordings as well as the earlier ones by Lomax.

their dog. [...] They were allowed to move into this abandoned shack, rent free, because, said Mrs. Dusenbury tartly, 'it would cost good money to fix it up to rent.' One of their absorbing worries concerns the health of their 'landlady,' for their free lease on their house is only for her lifetime. Experience has not led the Dusenburys to think so well of the world as to expect a long lease of life for anyone who does well by them.¹⁴³

Robertson goes on to describe their financial problems in detail, noting that their monthly income from Emma's widow's pension put them in the unenviable position of having too much money to qualify for relief assistance yet too little to live on in such a remote location. And while she does praise her musical "treasures," she also makes clear that Dusenbury's newfound fame had not been as unequivocally beneficial as her folklorists had assumed. The fifty-dollar stipend given earlier that year for her performance at the Arkansas Centennial celebration may have helped the Dusenburys survive the winter by "deed[ing] them on cornmeal, sowbelly and beans," but this good fortune came at the expense of their neighbors' goodwill:

[The Dusenburys] have a good stove but must pay to have their wood cut. It seems that the publicity given Mrs. Dusenbury's singing has cut them off completely from the small services ordinarily rendered two women living alone, because the neighbors assume they have money and should therefore pay cash.¹⁴⁴

Between such incidental expenses and the rampant fraud they encountered at local banks when attempting to cash Emma's checks, efforts by folklorists to promote her music translated into modest material benefits at best.

As noted above, Robertson was far from the first song collector to propose a plan to help the Dusenburys. Her suggestion, however, was among the more practical. In her report back to

¹⁴³ Robertson, "Mrs. Dusenbury."

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

KL, she pinpoints the most immediate threat to the family's survival: the poor condition of their house, which she estimated would be unlikely to offer them much protection against the impending winter weather. She acknowledges the impossibility of moving the family to an RA homestead, as their main difficulties stemmed mostly from the lack of an able-bodied family member and therefore disqualified them from the program's rehabilitation-oriented services. Instead, Robertson proposes that the KL staff take it upon themselves to raise fifteen dollars for the Dusenburys, enough money to "pay a man's labor for three days" to fix their ceiling and put a glass pane in their window. Noting that she herself had "left them a month's supplies" worth fourteen dollars, she expresses her hope that her suggested donation would be enough to give Emma Dusenbury a real chance of surviving the winter while also being small enough that the department could feasibly get the money together quickly.

It is unclear whether this effort actually succeeded. Seeger indicates in a letter dated December 28 that her proposal might run into administrative roadblocks, and in all likelihood it was abandoned (accidentally or otherwise) during the restructuring of the RA over the turn of the new year.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the pragmatism of her plan and her apparent interest in helping to alleviate Dusenbury's suffering instead of benefiting from it speak to Robertson's convictions about the ethical responsibilities of collectors in the field. The issue of compensating musicians for participating in field recording work is a recurring theme in ethnographic writings both by Robertson and by other fieldworkers. Robertson herself adopted different approaches during her RA tenure, sometimes paying musicians for their time and sometimes convincing them to perform for the sole benefit of preserving their musical traditions.¹⁴⁶ But the responsibility she

¹⁴⁵ Charles Seeger to Sidney Robertson, 28 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹⁴⁶ Chonghaile, "In Search of America," 184.

seemed to take for the well-being of the Dusenburys suggests a deeper concern with collectors' ethical obligations towards their subjects. As she remarks at the end of her report, a field recorder working with poorer populations may not be able to assist every person they meet, "but on the other hand one has no choice but to try, at least, to help the urgent need one sees."¹⁴⁷ Unlike many of the culture workers who had historically ventured into the southern mountains, Robertson evidently recognized that the task of preserving and continuing folk traditions was not necessarily an unequivocal social good but carried with it a responsibility to assist the bearers of these traditions on their own terms.

Case study 3: Collaborating with May Kennedy McCord in Springfield, Missouri

Known during her lifetime as the "Queen of the Ozarks,"¹⁴⁸ May Kennedy McCord (1880–1979) was born in Galena, Missouri, where she was exposed from an early age to the local folk culture which would later become her main preoccupation.¹⁴⁹ She learned to sing and accompany herself on guitar from her mother, and by the time she moved to the larger city of Springfield in the early 1920s she had long been an active storyteller and ballad singer. Over the course of her first decade in Springfield, McCord positioned herself as an expert in Ozarks folklore. By the 1930s, local newspapers were regularly publishing her articles on folk songs; by 1942, she had turned her successful column "Hillbilly Heartbeats" into a radio show, which she would continue into her eighties.

¹⁴⁷ Robertson, "Mrs. Dusenbury."

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, "Hillbilly Queen of the Ozarks Recalls Customs of Hills," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1941.

¹⁴⁹ Norm Cohen, "Ballad Collectors in the Ozarks," in *The Ballad Collectors of North America: How Gathering Folksongs Transformed Academic Thought and American Identity*, ed. Scott B. Spencer (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 45.

That McCord was a performer, an Ozarks folklore specialist, and a journalist meant that she was uniquely well-positioned to assist Robertson in her Springfield recordings, able to put her in contact with a large network of local musicians as well as serving as a helpful informant herself. While McCord's own agenda did not always line up precisely with Robertson's, their collaboration nevertheless offers an illuminating counterpoint to Robertson's earlier attempts to work with local folklorists. Moreover, McCord's connections in the press makes the Springfield recording sessions a particularly interesting case study as the press they generated offer rare insight into the reception of RA recording projects by the broader public.

While McCord's work never gained the status of fellow Missourian Vance Randolph's, in part because she never published her collection of folk songs, her extensive knowledge of the region and her efforts to promote Ozarks traditional culture earned her recognition as "the outstanding authority on Ozark folk lore, dialect and ballads" even in scholarly publications like the *Missouri Historical Review*.¹⁵⁰ In addition to her media work, McCord was actively involved in both local and national efforts to popularize Ozarks folklore, performing at events like the National Folk Festival (NFF) and serving at various times on the National Advisory Committee for the NFF¹⁵¹, as a founding member of the Ozarkian Hillcrofters, and as supervisor for various annual celebrations like the Festival of the May Apple.¹⁵² She also collaborated extensively with Randolph in his work on Ozarks folklore, both as an informant and as co-author; in addition to recording her renditions of traditional ballads, Randolph incorporated many of McCord's

¹⁵⁰ Gordon Hudelson, "May Kennedy McCord: Mirror of the Ozarks," *Missouri Historical Review* 37, no. 1 (October 1942), 110–11.

¹⁵¹ George O. Carney, "The Ozarks: A Reinterpretation Based on Folk Song Materials," in *Sounds of People and Places*, 3rd ed., ed. George O. Carney (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1993), 47.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 110.

anecdotes into his *Ozarks Magic and Superstitions*, and the two collaborated on at least one article published in the *Journal of American Folklore*.¹⁵³

McCord's expertise and willingness to serve as intermediary between collectors and performers made Springfield one of Robertson's primary destinations from the beginning. In an October 28 letter outlining her prospective itinerary, she establishes her intention to work with McCord, expressing optimism about her ability to contribute to the recording project if also some skepticism over her writing activities:

I have a swell contact in an old gal named May Kennedy McCord in Springfield, Mo., and I would expect to go there from St. Louis and spend several days... Mrs. McCord edits a column in a local paper called "Hill-Billy Heartbeats" which is beyond words — but if I want to know what current music is like in the Ozarks that's a good place to find out, so I'm told.¹⁵⁴

For her own part, McCord seems to have been eager to help Robertson. The Missouri native had written weekly about Ozarks folk culture since 1932 in her column for the *Springfield Leader & Press* (and, later, the *Springfield News*), her fascination with the subject stemming from her own upbringing in the mountains. As folklorist Norm Cohen notes, McCord's column was one of several such "old songs columns" printed in weekly newspapers in the region; Lucile Morris (of the *Sunday News and Leader's* "The Old Songs") and Ray Wood (of the *Southwest Times Record's* "That Ain't the Way I Heard It") both published similar columns during the 1930s in Springfield, Missouri, and Fort Smith, Arkansas, respectively.¹⁵⁵ McCord, however, seemed to

¹⁵³ See: Vance Randolph and May Kennedy McCord, "Autograph Albums in the Ozarks," *Journal of American Folklore* 61, no. 240 (Spring 1948), 182–93.

¹⁵⁴ Sidney Robertson to Joe Jones, 28 October 1936, Box 6, Folder 5, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹⁵⁵ Cohen, "Ballad Collectors in the Ozarks," 44–45.

find particular success, gaining a reputation as a local expert in spite of her lack of academic credentials and eventually bringing her column to radio in 1942. Her intermediary position between the region's musicians and its folklorists made her a particularly helpful resource for Ozarks song collectors like Robertson and, later, Randolph.

Robertson's status as a government "song-catcher" made McCord especially eager to work with her. While she and colleagues like Randolph had devoted years to documenting their region's folk culture in local publications, McCord was keenly aware that the Ozarks had not received the same degree of public recognition as their sister mountains to the east. After hearing that the Library of Congress had sponsored recordings of Appalachian ballad singers in Kentucky, she began to campaign for a similar project to be undertaken in her native part of Missouri. Therefore, when Robertson contacted her about the possibility of collaborating on recordings for the RA, McCord eagerly accepted the invitation, offering not only to put her in touch with local musicians but also to let her use her home in Springfield for the recording sessions. For McCord, Robertson's work represented an opportunity to preserve this repertoire for posterity by granting it the highest honor she could imagine: putting the records in the Library of Congress. Robertson confirmed as much in a letter to Seeger written during her Missouri fieldwork:

It tickles me to see the motives behind peoples' action: Over the telephone, when I first talked to [McCord], she talked miles around the subject and then suddenly said: "I would certainly like to make some records to put into the Library of Congress. You know Jean Thomas sent in some from Kentucky; but we've got ballad singers in the Ozarks too."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Sidney Robertson to Charles Seeger, 14 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

That Robertson was actually working for the RA, not the Library of Congress, seems to have made little difference to her.¹⁵⁷ As long as the records they made eventually found their way to the Archive of American Folk Song, McCord seemed to have felt the project could help her gain wider recognition for the music of the mountains she held dear.

In a “Hillbilly Heartbeats” column published during Robertson’s visit that December, McCord wrote proudly of her contribution to Robertson’s recording project:

You know how I have been harping about Kentucky and a few regions of the Appalachians having records made of their old folk ballads by their traditional singers, and putting them in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, for generations which follow. Well, out of a clear sky it happened! The woman in charge of that very thing for the re-settlement department [sic] came here to see me and get me to help her get some of these old ballads. It has been a great experience. The recording instrument and mike and reproducing too, has been set up in my home, and at all hours of the day or night, almost, singers have come, and fiddlers, and recorded these old ballads. Some of the very rare old English ones in our Ozarks have been sung by Benjamin Rice of this city, and David his son. The only regret is that the lady can stay so short a time and cannot get all these people who sing such splendid ballads, and which she would like to get. For several days now I have lived in a world of tradition and old days and old songs.¹⁵⁸

McCord somewhat exaggerated the scope of Robertson’s work in Springfield. While musicians may indeed have been dropping by “at all hours,” Robertson only spent four days recording out of the three weeks she was in town, her productivity stymied by her illness and the need to reschedule her trip to Mena. Nevertheless, Robertson did spend the most time in Springfield of any town during her expedition, a fact reflected by the scope of the recordings she did make there: twenty-five discs featuring fourteen musicians performing more than eighty unique songs,

¹⁵⁷ In fact, Robertson hints later in the above letter that McCord may have applied to work for the RA herself, though she was never given a position with the agency.

¹⁵⁸ May Kennedy McCord, “Hillbilly Heartbeats,” *Springfield Leader-News*, undated (December 1936), in Box 6, Folder 27, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

rhymes, and dance tunes. As McCord noted in her column, Robertson recorded forty songs by the father-son duo of Benjamin and David Rice, who not only sang ballads in the English tradition but also songs with specifically American origins like the Homestead Act song “Uncle Sam is Rich Enough to Give Us All a Farm”:

Then come along, come along, make no delay;
Come from every nation, come from every way.
Our lands, they are broad enough — don’t be alarmed,
For Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm.

The song’s chorus seems tailor-made to support New Deal-era resettlement, though it was originally composed more than seventy-five years earlier to encourage settlement in western territories. The records also feature an unusually high number of instrumentalists including Roy, Jim, and “Mrs.” Denoon, members of a Scotch-Irish family of string players who claimed ties to an American Indian tribe in northern Missouri. McCord herself performed a number of “rare” items as well including a series of campaign songs remembered from the 1896 presidential election.

In spite of this diversity of repertoire, however, Anglo-American ballads like those collected in Child dominate the Springfield recordings. As with the other local experts Robertson worked with in the field, McCord’s own priorities largely dictated the kinds of musicians and musics she encountered. While McCord’s experience as a performer may have encouraged her to broaden the scope of what she considered “Ozarks folk music,” the ballad was still her primary concern. Certainly much of her interest in the English ballad tradition stemmed from her own experience hearing and performing this music in her youth; as much as academic folklorists like Frank Brown imagined this repertoire as a musical fossil record, it nevertheless continued to be

an important and dynamic part of musical life where it was still performed in the southern mountains. Yet McCord also seems to have been aware of the high status of this music among her scholarly counterparts. Her determination to preserve Missouri's folk music was driven in part by her feeling that ballad collectors had unjustly passed over the Ozarks in favor of the Appalachians, as discussed above. And while she lacked the academic training of professional folklorists like Frank Brown, she, too, was driven in part by a desire to map the history of English culture in her mountains. As Gordon Hudelson noted in an article on McCord in 1942, her desire to make a career of Ozarks folklore was spurred in part by the publication of Harold Bell Wright's novel *The Shepherd of the Hills* in 1907, whose fictionalized account of life in the region led her to believe "that the original Ozarkian was the true Anglo-Saxon."¹⁵⁹

But if McCord's influence meant the Springfield recordings ultimately included a heavier emphasis on "old" music than she had hoped, Robertson's correspondence from the latter part of the trip nevertheless shows more enthusiasm than resentment about her help. Robertson evidently shared McCord's regret that she could not spend more time recording in Missouri. As she remarked to Seeger after her first day of recording in Springfield, she found the music she heard there "perfectly marvelous stuff," all the more so because it was mostly "untouched" by other collectors.¹⁶⁰ A meeting with Randolph on January 5, 1937, confirmed her suspicions about the value of the repertoire she had recorded:

I played over most of my Springfield material for him this afternoon and he expressed the opinion that it was thoroughly representative and [contained] much valuable material. This pleased me, because I've done the first recording of traditional materials that has

¹⁵⁹ Hudelson, "May Kennedy McCord," 110.

¹⁶⁰ Sidney Robertson to Charles Seeger, 14 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

been done in Missouri, apparently — and, except for Lomax[’s] foray to Mena, anywhere in the Ozarks. I could spend a great deal more time here...¹⁶¹

While Robertson initially expressed some reservations that McCord’s busy schedule and tendency to stray from the point might make it difficult for her to “get anything to speak of” before her planned departure in late December, she ultimately seemed genuinely thankful for the older woman’s assistance, praising her generosity in sharing “her” field contacts and noting that McCord had offered to put her in contact with more than twenty other musicians in Missouri and Arkansas.

Perhaps because of McCord’s newspaper connections and local fame, Robertson’s work in Springfield garnered more public attention than most of her other RA work. In addition to McCord’s column, two other articles on the recording project ran in Springfield newspapers during her stay in the city, both published on December 16 and apparently based on two separate interviews with Robertson herself. Taken together, they offer some insight into the way Robertson represented the RA’s music project to the broader public as well as the mixed responses generated by the agency’s use of folk music.

Titled “Ozarks Ballads for Posterity?”, the short article run in the *Springfield Daily News* frames Robertson’s recording as public good. Stressing that the records made there were “to be filed in the Library of Congress for preservation,” the article focuses on the project’s potential to stave off the disappearance of Ozarks folkways by recording “real Ozarks ‘hillbillies’” singing “genuine Ozarks ballads.”¹⁶² Competing quotes by McCord and Robertson question the extent to

¹⁶¹ Sidney Robertson to Robert van Hyning, 5 January 1937, Box 6, Folder 9, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹⁶² “Ozarks Ballads for Posterity?,” 16 December 1936, *Springfield Daily News*, in Box 6, Folder 27, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

which this tradition was in fact vanishing, with McCord confirming that the old ballads were indeed “being forgotten” and Robertson marveling at the persistence of the tradition even in the “metropolitan city” of Springfield, but both women seem to confirm that the project’s primary goal was the documentation of this music for future generations:

“It is the desire of the government to preserve the folk songs of all sections of this country.” Mrs. Robertson explained last night. “It wants the original songs of each section as sung by the actual inhabitants. That is what I’m getting here. In the short time I have to do this I will not be able to complete it but hope to return to finish this study in the near future.”

The second article, however, takes a more critical stance on the government’s foray into song collecting. Not content with the explanation that the discs were meant for the Library of Congress, the author of “Old Ballads Resettled” questions why an agency like the RA would bother with folk music at all, a question Robertson was apparently unwilling to answer:

Asked what relation there is between resettlement and collecting old ballads, Mrs. Robertson said she “wouldn’t dream” of explaining it; explained that she is definitely instructed not to discuss the program.¹⁶³

Robertson’s reluctance to talk about the ultimate goal of the project — the collection of folk materials to be used on resettlement homesteads to promote cooperation — speaks to the controversial nature of the RA’s experiments in cooperative living. It also illuminates a possible reason for the conflict between the official rationale for the collecting project and the emphasis Robertson put on preservation when talking with potential collaborators. Recording folk songs to preserve them for posterity could be applauded as an inoffensive public good; but revealing the

¹⁶³ “Old Ballads Resettled,” 16 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 27, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

political and social rationale for the project could dissuade more conservative folklorists and musicians, to whom the project's use of folk music might seem to smack of communism.

The latter suspicion, held by prominent Republican politicians, would contribute to a major restructuring of the RA in early 1937, resulting in the agency's formal dissolution and the absorption of its activities into the Farm Security Administration. According to Seeger, the KL administration had already been aware of the possibility for some time, noting in a letter dated December 22, 1936 that they "expect[ed] to go under Agriculture in a very short time."¹⁶⁴ These changes were already coming into effect by the time Robertson returned to Washington on January 9. She would spend much of the next two months participating in conversations with Seeger, Adrian Dornbush, and other RA personnel about the best ways to fold KL's work into broader national recreation projects. Finally, in late March, she was re-assigned to the Great Lakes region as a "regional representative," a stopgap position designed to combine the role of music representative with general administrative duties for all resettlement communities in the region. While Robertson would continue her song collecting work with great success in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Illinois, her administrative responsibilities would prevent her from undertaking such an intensive field recording expedition again until she relocated to California the following year.

¹⁶⁴ Charles Seeger to Sidney Robertson, 22 December 1936, Box 6, Folder 8, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

CONCLUSION

History has not proven kind to the RA music program. Although the RA's arts projects were taken over by its successor, the Farm Security Administration, after the former's restructuring in 1937, its music program rapidly dissolved over the course of the year and largely ceased to exist by 1938. Warren-Findley has deemed the music program an outright failure, observing that its utopian social agenda was foiled not just by external pressures but also by its own "unworkable" assumptions about the political efficacy of music, the willingness of field representatives to take on activist roles, and the receptivity of homestead residents to the RA's social engineering.¹⁶⁵ Even Seeger later acknowledged that most of the RA's residential music work had been ineffective at best, failing to create real social change on the homesteads. Of the first cohort of musicians hired after the music program's creation in 1935, Margaret Valiant alone succeeded in fostering a thriving music program at her assigned homestead in Madison, Florida. The other nine, Seeger remarked, "scarcely made a ripple in the situation":

They simply couldn't do what they were supposed to do. They were supposed to get out and learn how to sing the songs that the people sang in the community, and they didn't do it. There was one man who gave a recital of Italian opera arias, in spite of the rule against such a thing."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Warren-Findley, "Musicians and Mountaineers," 106–07.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in footnote, Seeger and Valiant, "Journal of a Field Representative," 42.

In the end, the RA music program faded into obscurity, relegated for decades to a footnote in accounts of Seeger's career and all but ignored in most historical accounts of New Deal-era music projects. But if it ultimately failed to accomplish its goal of social change through music, the RA program (and especially its song collecting activities) nevertheless offers illuminating insight into the conflicts and continuities which characterized this formative period in the history of American folk music and folklore studies. In the hands of progressive song collectors like Robertson, the music program's field recording initiative functioned as a sort of laboratory for novel ideas about vernacular music and its documentation.

After her dismissal from what was left of KL in late 1937, Robertson returned to her native California, where she would put her new skills and professional contacts to further use in what would become her most substantial field recording project: the WPA California Folk Music Project, a massive folksong collection documenting the music of diverse cultural groups in northern California. Exclusively directed and organized by Robertson, the California Folk Music Project opened in late October 1938 with support from the WPA, the Library of Congress, and the University of California, Berkeley. For the next four years, Robertson and her employees strove to create a project which would not only meet the needs of scholars of California's history and folk culture, but which could also function as a model for future large-scale collecting projects. Peter Gough and others have commented on the "groundbreaking" nature of the program's broad scope; roughly two-thirds of its thirty-five hours of folk music recordings are in languages other than English, and the program is widely credited with being one of the earliest to document Slavic and Middle Eastern music in the United States.¹⁶⁷ The program's field methodology — in which workers were encouraged to supplement audio recordings with

¹⁶⁷ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 180–81.

photographs, drawings, and written descriptions — as well as its policies regarding fieldworkers’ interactions with musicians were similarly revolutionary:

The [WPA California Folk Music Project] distinguishes itself both by its openness to recording all kinds of musical forms, as well as the progressive (some have even argued overly protective) stance [Sidney Robertson] Cowell took in defending the rights of the various musicians... Cowell describes the songs and musicians within a cultural and social context, never patronizing the subjects she recorded, and she encouraged her employees to also develop a personal rapport with the musicians.¹⁶⁸

As remarkable as the California project was for its time, however, the seeds of its innovations had all been planted during Robertson’s RA tenure. The difference was primarily one of degree; with complete control over the planning and execution of her own project, Robertson was able to build on the most successful aspects of her earlier work and direct others to do the same.

If the RA has been left out of prevailing narratives about folk music, folklore studies, and comparative musicology in the United States, Robertson’s work for the administration left her doubly marginalized by virtue of her gender. As musicologist Suzanne Cusick argues in her account of Ruth Crawford’s exclusion from the 1930 founding of the American Musicological Society, music scholarship in the United States has sidelined women’s voices and experiences since its inception, a marginalization stemming in part from fears that the field’s legitimacy could be compromised if it were seen as “women’s work.”¹⁶⁹ Such an observation could also be made about the fields of folklore studies and ethnomusicology, which have similarly privileged male voices in their own canons of foundational scholars and scholarship. While Robertson’s

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 183–84.

¹⁶⁹ Suzanne G. Cusick, “Gender, Musicology, and Feminism,” in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 471–77.

ideological and methodological innovations in the late 1930s anticipated later developments in these fields, her contributions have rarely been brought into conversation with these broader intellectual trajectories, even in cases where her work intersects with that of “canonical” figures like Alan Lomax.¹⁷⁰

The trajectory of Robertson’s career after 1940 sheds some light on reasons for her marginalization. In the years following her marriage to Henry Cowell, her field recording activities gradually dwindled as she increasingly took on the role of “composer’s wife,” handling ever more of her husband’s publishing activities and correspondence.¹⁷¹ After his death in 1965, the maintenance of Cowell’s legacy became her full-time occupation, leaving little time for her earlier pursuits at the same moment when the field of ethnomusicology was beginning to come into its own. To accept this as the full explanation for Robertson’s exclusion, however, is to ignore the ways the importance of her work was downplayed even while she worked with the RA. In a particularly illuminating letter from August 1937, Robertson expresses frustration with Seeger’s habit of taking credit for her field recordings:

I can't make up my mind what to do about this recording business. I don't want to make an issue of it with Charlie, but several people have written me to express resentment at his unwillingness to acknowledge that I had any hand in it. Perhaps I don't fully grasp just what the role of an assistant is. I've been on the verge of writing him a letter to say that you can't brag one minute about your assistant's ability to initiate and carry through

¹⁷⁰ As Leary notes, Robertson’s collecting work in the Upper Midwest in 1937 crucially laid the groundwork for Alan Lomax’s recordings in the same region the following year. See Leary, *Folksongs of Another America*. Robertson and the younger Lomax would collaborate again in 1942, jointly publishing a regional bibliography of American folk lore. See: Alan Lomax and Sidney Robertson Cowell, “American Folk Song and Folk Lore: A Regional Bibliography” (New York: Progressive Education Association, 1942).

¹⁷¹ Nicole Saylor, “About the Collector and Her Life,” *Folk Music of Wisconsin: 1937*, Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures, University of Wisconsin, web, accessed 5 July 2016, <http://csumc.wisc.edu/src/collector.htm>.

varied undertakings without bothering you, and the next moment imply that she exists only as a sort of 'ghost' for yourself.¹⁷²

Elsewhere in the same letter, she bemoans the overtly sexist attitudes she encountered in Minnesota and Wisconsin from male colleagues who were “so darned disdainful of women in jobs of any responsibility.”¹⁷³ With her colleagues so determined to minimize her work even before she started to turn away from folk music studies, it is difficult not to see Robertson as another “woman excluded from the room.”¹⁷⁴

In re-positioning Robertson’s RA work within the broader narrative of folk music scholarship in the United States, I have aimed to offer a corrective to conventional accounts of the field which minimize both her contributions and those of female folklorists more generally. The reconceptualization of field recording as a political act central to Robertson’s work for the RA song collecting project broke with established understandings of collecting as a purely “scientific” enterprise, an attitude which Robertson would carry into her later projects as well. More research remains to be done on these later recording efforts, however, especially regarding the California Folk Music Project and the varied projects she undertook sporadically during the late 1940s and 1950s, as well as on her position within larger networks of folklorists and musicologists past the late 1930s. By including Robertson and the lesser-known folk music project in which she participated in the historical narrative, we stand to expand our understanding of the motivations and approaches of American culture workers during the New Deal.

¹⁷² Sidney Robertson to Grete, 20 August 1937, Box 6, Folder 12, Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Cusick, “Gender, Musicology, and Feminism,” 472.

APPENDIX 1: CONTENTS OF SELECTED FIELD RECORDINGS FROM THE JULY 1936 RECORDING TRIP CURRENTLY HOUSED IN THE AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

Record number	Date(s) of recording	Location(s) of recording	Performer(s)	Item titles
AFS 836	July 18, 1936	Boone, NC	Anonymous (“negro convicts”)	Can’t Sit Down; Hiking Jerry; Oh, You Miners, Don’t Go to Raleigh; Sister, an’ I Do Love the Lamb
AFS 860	July 18	Boone, NC	James McIven, Louis Crosby, James White, and Newman Winstead.	Can’t Sit Down; Jesus Christ; Truly, Truly Children; Where My Lord Went to Pray
AFS 861	July 18	Boone, NC	Albert Sheperd with group; John Lyles, Sterling Mason, Leonard Sykes, and Mosely Wilson	Monday I Was ‘Rested; Pick ‘Em Up; Remember Me (I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say); You Ever Been Down
AFS 862	July 18	Boone, NC	Lee Guest, Eugene Wilson, Matthew Willis, and Booker T. Wilson	Brother, Are You Ready; Jes’ Look at the People; John Was A-Writin’; Stewball

**APPENDIX 2: CONTENTS OF FIELD RECORDINGS FROM SOUTHERN
MOUNTAIN RECORDING TRIP CURRENTLY HOUSED IN THE AMERICAN
FOLKLIFE CENTER**

Record number	Date(s) of recording	Location(s) of recording	Performer(s)	Item titles
SR 1	Nov. 9, 1936; Nov. 17	Ligonier, PA; Leicester, NC	Tink Queer, Franklin Slater, and Bill Fowler; Bascom Lamar Lunsford	Down Yonder; Ragtime Ann; Cindy; My Home's Across the Smoky Mountain
SR 2	Nov. 10	Ligonier, PA	Tink Queer, Franklin Slater, and Bill Fowler	Bully of the Town; Golden Slippers; Turkey in the Straw; Miss isissippi Sawyer [sic]; Old Sharon
SR 3	Nov. 10	Ligonier, PA	Tink Queer, Franklin Slater and Bill Fowler	Widow Dunn; Down Yonder
SR 4	Nov. 14	Marion, VA	S.F. Russell	Song of the Old Bachelor; Good Fat Bacon and a Tub of Kraut; Young People Who Delight in Sin
SR 5	Nov. 13	Marion, VA	J. W. ("Jake") Russell and S. F. Russell	I'll be 14 on Sunday; As I Walked Over London's Bridge
SR 6	Nov. 13	Marion, VA	S.F. Russell	Jesus Born in Bethlea; Water Bound; Turkey in the Straw; Bonaparte's Retreat
SR 7	Nov. 13	Marion, VA	S. F. Russell	Over the River, Charley (Weevily Wheat); Oh, Susanna; Sally Brown
SR 8	Nov. 13	Marion, VA	Robert Russel and J. W. Russell	Down in the Lonesome Valley; Bell Cow; Shady Grove; Battle in the Horseshoe
SR 9	Nov. 14	Marion, VA	S.F. Russell and J.W. Russell; Robert Russell and Viola Russell	Come All You Virginia Girls; Run, Nigger, Run; John Hardy; Careless Love; Look Away Beyond the Blue
SR 10	Nov. 14	Marion, VA	Robert Russell and Viola Russell; Joe Russell	That Lonesome Valley; Put My Little Shoes Away; Froggie Went A- Courtin'. Down in the Valley (Birmingham Jail). General Lee (General Lee's Surrender)

SR 11	Nov. 13	Marion, VA	J. W. Russell, Robert Russell, Worey Rolan	Sourwood Mountain; Cluck, Old Hen; Old Joe Clark
SR 12	Nov. 17	Leicester, NC	B. L. Lunsford	Bonny Blue Eyes; Jinnie Jenkins; Going to Italy
SR 13	Nov. 17	Leicester, NC	B. L. Lunsford	Mole in the Ground; Free as a Little Bird; John Henry
SR 14	Nov. 17	Boyd's Cove, Madison County, NC	I.N. Marlor	Woodstock Town (The Butcher's Boy); (Are You Ready, Yes My Lord) Mourn, Jerusalem, Mourn; When We Get to Heaven
SR 15	Nov. 17	Boyd's Cove, Madison County, NC	I. N. Marlor	Little Silver Cup; Lily White Robe; Young Squire
SR 16	Nov. 17	Sandy Mush Creek, Madison County, NC	I. Nate Marlor	Baptist, Baptist is my name; Little Song Hughes (50 Feathers or Fathoms Deep)
SR 17	Nov. 17	Boyd's Cove, Madison County, NC	I. N. Marlor	The House Carpenter; Betsey
SR 18	Nov. 17	Boyd's Cove, Madison County, NC	I. N. Marlor	Barbara Allen; Young Squire; Climbing Over Zion's Hill
SR 19	Nov. 23	Cumberland Homesteads, Crossville, TN	Mr. And Mrs. Henry Garrett; Carl Garrett	Chinese Breakdown; Little Brown Jug; She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain; Sweet Bunch of Daisies; Will the Roses Bloom in Heaven
SR 20	Nov. 23	Crossville, TN	Ruby and Oliver Hughes	Little Rosewood Casket; Lamplighting Time in the Valley; Song of the Spanish American War ("Once I Had a Sweetheart"); On a Cold Winter Night; Sinking of the Titanic; Old Tom Wilson
SR 21	Nov. 23	Crossville, TN	Henry Garrett; Mrs. Henry Garrett; Carl Garrett	The Striking Miners; 1928-34 or Uncle Sam; Amazing Grace; I Was Born About 4000 Years Ago The Miller Boy; My Brother Jack
SR 22	Nov. 23	Crossville, TN	Carl Garrett and Henry Garrett	The A-Rag; Lost John; Strike at Harriman, Tenn.
SR 23	Nov. 23	Crossville, TN	Henry Garrett	Mother, Queen of my Heart
SR 24	Nov. 23	Crossville, TN	Oliver and Ruby Hughes; Carl Garrett	Lonesome Valley Sally; My Little Home in Tennessee; Little Green Valley; The Miller; Nobody's Darling But Mine

SR 25	Nov. 24	Smithville, TN	Mrs. L. L. McDowell	My Good Husband, Good old Man; Never Court But One; Not Hog Drivers; Wake, O Wake, You Drowsy Sleepers; Oh, the Hair Grow Gray
SR 26	Nov. 24	Smithville, TN	Mrs. L. L. McDowell	Lord Lovel; The House Carpenter; The Orphan Girl
SR 27	Nov. 24	Smithville, TN	Mrs. L. L. McDowell	Time Enough Yet; Barbara Allen; Won't You Let Me Go with You; The Broken Chain
SR 28	Nov. 24	Smithville, TN	Mrs. L. L. McDowell	Hunting Song; Jackie Frazier; The Sailor Boy's Request; Billy Boy
SR 29	Nov. 22	Smithville, TN	Mrs. L. L. McDowell	Barbara Allen; The Lowlands of Holland; Yonders Town (Butcher Boy); The Miller; Time Enough; I Shall Meet My Mother There; Over Jordan (Wayfaring Stranger)
SR 30	Nov. 22	Smithville, TN	Mrs. and Mr. L. L. McDowell, Robert Lassiter, May Lassiter	Lining out of old hymn "Hark from the Tomb the Doleful Sound"; I Belong to That Band; I Have a Mother Over Yonder; Come Along and Go Along; Shout, Shout, We're A-Gaining Ground; Fathers, Now Our Meeting is Over
SR 31	Nov. 22	Smithville, TN	L. L. McDowell	We Are Drinking at the fountain; Mothers Have a Home; Minister's Farewell
SR 32	Nov. 28	Little Rock, AR	Gilbert Fike	Beautiful Brown Eyes; Casey Jones; Meet Yore Partner (dance call); Steamboat Bill; Reel, reel, yore delight; Shoo-li-loo
SR 33	Nov. 28	Little Rock, AR	Gilbert Fike	Boll-Weevil; I Ain't Gonna Be Treated This Away (Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad); Sunny Tennessee; The Girls Won'd Do to Trust (Irene, Good Night); I Wish I was Single Again; Roxey Anne (Shame Them Simmons Down)
SR 34	Nov. 28	Little Rock, AR	Gilbert Fike	Too Poor, Too Poor; Show me the Lady (yodeling); When I was Single (I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again); In That Mornin'; Nobody's Business; Go Along, Mule
SR 35	Nov. 28	Little Rock, AR	Gilbert Fike	Old Ninety-Seven; The Titanic; Jack and Joe; Made My Round; This Old-Time Religion; Lady, Shun that Dark-eyed Stranger (Gypsy's Warning);

				Welcome; I'm Goin to Walk the Streets of Glory; Amazing Grace
SR 36	Nov. 28	Little Rock, AR	Gilbert Fike	When I Was a Little Boy; Down in the Arkansas; Old Joe Clark; Whoa Dar Mule; (Aggervatin' Beauty) Lulu Wall
SR 37	Dec. 1	Clinton, AR	Estelle McNeely and Will Wright	I'm Gonna Tell the World About It
SR 38	Dec. 1	Clinton, AR	Estelle McNeely, Will Wright, Hazel McNeely, Albert Harper, and Richard Harper	I'm A Pilgrim; Them Dry Bones; If You Wanta Get Up in Heaven; He's the Joy of My Salvation; Working for the crown; Come on, brothers, let's go down the wall (And it just suits me)
SR 39	Dec. 1	Clinton, AR	Will Wright; Hazel McNeely, Estelle McNeely	Song of the P. W. A.; Gonna Lay My Head Down on Some Railroad Line; Mr. Roosevelt; The Old Ship of Zion; The Angel Dropped They Wings
SR 40	Dec. 1	Clinton, AR	Estelle McNeely and Hazel McNeely	Wondring Sweetheart; Young Girl's Warning; How Did You Feel; Out in the Cold World A-lone; I'll Be Somewhere; Announcement
SR 41	Dec. 9	St. Louis, MO	Gladys, Mattie, and Juanita Crouch	Down in the Street We Hold Our Demonstration (Siege of the City Hall, St. Louis, 1936); Dickman Song; Rock-A-Bye Baby; Goin T'Lay Down my Sword and Shield; We Shall Not Be Moved (local version); Peace and Freedom (United Front)
SR 42	Dec. 9	St. Louis, MO	Gladys, Mattie, and Juanita Crouch	The Welfare Supervisors' Chant and the Workers' Answer; Struggling
SR 43	Dec. 9	St. Louis, MO	Gladys, Mattie, and Juanita Crouch	The NRA it Cuts Our Pay; Cloak-Makers Union; You'll Get Pie in the Sky by and Bye; Nutpickers' Songs; Bean Song; In the Land of Peace and Plenty (Yahoo Song); Dickman's Song
SR 44	Dec. 10	St. Louis, MO	Gladys, Mattie, and Juanita Crouch	The YCL; Swing Low, Sweet ILD; Dickman Song
SR 45	Dec. 15	Springfield, MO	R. R. Denoon, Jim Denoon, Roy Denoon, Mrs. Denoon;	Root, Hog or Die (I Went Out to California), Old Sally Goodin; Little Old Sod Shanty; The Tom Tom

			“Slim” Clyde Wilson	
SR 46	Dec. 15	Springfield, MO	“Slim” Wilson; Herschel Haworth, Jr.	Barbara Allen; The Drunkard’s Child
SR 47	Dec. 15	Springfield, MO	Mrs. Denoon	On Cloddie’s Banks
SR 48	Dec. 15	Springfield, MO	Lilly Williams, Jim Denoon; Ben Rice	William Hall; Cluckin’ Hen; Jack Strafford (Arkansas); Cacklin’ Hen
SR 49	Dec. 15	Springfield, MO	Cassie Acker; Mrs. Vancie, “Martha” Halworth, “Slim” Wilson	The Jealous Lover (Flo-Ella and Edward); Bury Me Beneath the Willow
SR 50	Dec. 15	Springfield, MO	David Rice; R. R. Denoon	House Carpenter; Old Ned Moore; Risselty Rosslety
SR 51	Dec. 15	Springfield, MO	Mrs. R. R. Denoon; May Kennedy McCord	The Rich Squire (The Happy Farmer); The Butcher’s Boy
SR 52	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice; May Kennedy McCord	Old England’s Shores; Jawbone Song; Buffalo Gals; Tideo; Skip to My Lou; King William
SR 53	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice	Just Before the Last Fearful Charge; Ballad of the Santa Fe
SR 54	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice	I Was Forced on Board to Serve My King; The Tune the Old Cow Died On; Pompey Smash; Uncle Sam is Rich Enough to Give Us All a Farm
SR 55	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	David Rice; Ben Rice	So I Robbed Old Nelse; I Courted a Fair Maid; The Weeping Willow
SR 56	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice; David Rice	Thoughts from Other Times; Lila Lee
SR 57	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	David Rice; Ben Rice	As I Walked Out One Morning (My Pretty Fair Miss); Narragansett Bay; Young Charlotte
SR 58	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice; May Kennedy McCord	Lolly/Rally; Cole Younger; Spelling (from Old Blueback Speller)
SR 59	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	R.R. Denoon, Jim Denoon; “Dad” Frank Hendrick	Old Tennessee; Old Wagoner; Let ‘er Go; Devil’s Dream Reel

SR 60	Dec. 16	Springfield, MO	R. R. Denoon, Jim Denoon; Frank Hendrick	Eighth of January; The Old Irish Washwoman; Hell Against the Barn Door; Mrs. Fogerty's Christmas Cake
SR 61	Dec. 17?	Springfield, MO	May Kennedy McCord	Barbara Allen; Fair Charlotte; Home on the Range; I Have a sister over yonder; Old Shiloh; Lady Mary
SR 62	Dec. 17	Springfield, MO	May Kennedy McCord	Go Tell McKinley; Silver Lion Came Out of the Wilderness; Hurrah, Hurrah for William Bryan. Rye Whiskey; Pretty Polly
SR 63	Dec. 17	Springfield, MO	Paul Holland	Whoa, Mule, Whoa; Shoot the Buffalo; Just a Little Too Small
SR 64	Dec. 17	Springfield, MO	Paul Holland	Joe Bowers; Chicken Pie; Parlor is a Pleasant Place; Whistling Rufus
SR 65	Jan. 4, 1937	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice; David Rice	The Stone That Goes Rolling Will Gather No Moss; The Crooked Song; The Exford Girl (Wexford)
SR 66	Jan. 4	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice; David Rice	Bingen on the Rhine; There's a Boat full of Irish; Ella Ree; I Love You Well
SR 67	Jan. 4	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice; David Rice	Sweet Jane; I Love You Well
SR 68	Jan. 4	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice	Young Johnie; Jacket So Blue; Sam Bass; The Unconstant Lover
SR 69	Jan. 4	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice	Macdonald of Glencoe; Peanut Stand; Pretty Polly; Hear the Nightingales Sing
SR 70	Jan. 4	Springfield, MO	Ben Rice; David Rice	The Butcher's Boy; The Boston Burglar; Lake Pontchartrain; The Wind That Sweeps O'er the Wild Moor
SR 71	Dec. 24, 1936	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	Gilderoy; Long Before the Rising Sun; Shake That Wooden Leg, Dinah-O; Bounce the Cymblin'; Once I Courted a Charming Beauty Bride; Locks & Belts/I Dreamed Last Night of My Own True Love
SR 72	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	What Luck, Young Johnny; One Morning in May; Bought Me A Cat; Paper of Pins
SR 73	Dec. 24	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	I Have a father in the Kingdom (A-Settin' on the Seat with Jesus); The New Jerusalem (Pray, father, pray); The Weak and Ramblin' Blade;

				Tobacco Union
SR 74	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	Oh Fathers, Gits Ready, Let's Go Home; The Back Sliders Song; Thou Hast Wounded the Spirit That Loved Thee; Hog Drovers
SR 75	Dec. 24	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	The Mermaid; Young Man and Maid, Pray Lend Attention (Silver Dagger); Who Killed Poor Robin?; Drink Her Down; We Will Camp Upon the Mountain (O Israel)
SR 76	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	One Day in a Lonesome Grove; When Young Ladies Gets Married; The Sun Went Down Beyond Yon (Farmer's Boy); Dodger Song
SR 77	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	Jealous-hearted Husband; My Parents Raised Me Tenderly
SR 78	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	Going to Georgia; They Have Given Her to Another; We Have Met, 'twas in a Crowd; I Won't Stay in the Wilderness, I Won't Stay Behind
SR 79	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	Marthy and Mary (The Little Family); The Prodigal Son
SR 80	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	Brown Girl; I Was Brought up in Shauffield; Polly Vaughn
SR 81	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	There Was a Lady Lived Abroad; Brown Girl; The House Carpenter; Bad Strip; Fair Charlotte
SR 82	Dec. 22	Mena, AR	Mrs. Emma Dusenbury	Little Ball of Yarn; Barbara Allen

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