

## *Anglo-American Folksong Collecting and Singing Traditions in Rural New York State*

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The eastern and southern sections of upstate New York were settled during the 17th and 18th centuries primarily by British Isles immigrants and Anglo-Americans from New England who came to New York seeking land and opportunity. Once here, they intermarried with descendants of Dutch, Scots-Irish, German and later Irish immigrants to form a population with a similar ethnic and cultural background to that found throughout the Appalachian mountain chain. Among the cultural treasures brought and preserved by these early New Yorkers and their descendants was a rich tradition of songs and ballads.

Ballads are folk songs differentiated from lyric songs by their storytelling function. Anglo-American ballads are usually related from a third-person point of view; the narrative frequently begins in the middle of the tale and moves swiftly to a dramatic conclusion. The Anglo-American ballad is related to a much wider pan-European ballad tradition of great antiquity, but documentation before the late Middle Ages remains sketchy. Other ballads were developed more recently, either in the British Isles or in North America. Examples of older ballads (e.g. "Sir John Randall," or "Gypsy Davy"), as well as newer ballads composed in North America (e.g. "Jam at Gerry's Rock" or "Jack Haggerty"), have been collected in New York and many continue to be sung today. Ballads, like other forms of folk music, are written by individuals, but the composers' identities are usually quickly forgotten as their songs are adopted and reshaped by other members of their communities.

Ballads attracted the attention of scholars as early as the Renaissance, and during the 18th and 19th centuries, a concerted effort was made by individuals to collect and document them. In the United States, a young Boston-born Harvard professor named Francis James Child (1825-1896) undertook a life-long project to document and catalogue all known Anglo-Celtic ballads. In his landmark publication, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882), Child presents numerous versions or "variants" of 305 ballads.<sup>1</sup> Child's work was based exclusively on written texts rather than on his own field collecting. He culled texts both from earlier manuscript



collections and from his voluminous correspondence with British and American scholars. A number of Child's correspondents sent him materials collected in New York State: including W.W. Newell, a folklorist best known for his studies of American children's games, and Dr. Huntington, Methodist Bishop of Central New York, and various amateur collectors throughout the state (see, for example, Child 1882, IV: 72, #200K). It should be noted that Child was more interested in ballads as texts than as living folklore; he rarely included the tunes to which they were sung, nor did he discuss performers or performance practices. This precedent was followed by other American collectors in the early 20th century, who followed Child's lead in their concern with the study of ballad *texts*: including Henry M. Belden in Missouri, Louise Pound in Nebraska, W. Roy MacKenzie in Nova Scotia, and Frank C. Brown in North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> But it was the field collections of English scholars Cecil Sharp and Maude Karpeles in small Anglo-American communities in the southern Appalachians during 1916-1918 that captured the public's attention.<sup>3</sup> Although many of the same Child and broadside ballads they recorded in the southern mountains could also be found throughout the Northeast and Middle West, their field work led members of the public to mistakenly associate balladry traditions only with the southern Appalachian region.

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*Early field work led to the notion that balladry was uniquely southern Appalachian. The rich traditions of New York State were neglected.*

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In addition to "Child ballads," *broadside ballads* were also popular in New York State. This term is used to describe composed narrative ballads that flourished in 17th and 18th century Britain and later in America. Often written by songwriters of varying talents, and set to well-known tunes, these versifications of local and national news were printed on single sheets of paper (i.e. broadsides) and sold to the public for a nominal fee. They tended towards the sensational — replete with accounts of murders, outlaws, battles and tragedies, often rendered in doggerel. Because of their relatively recent origin and their evolution from a single printed source, broadside ballads texts have remained fairly stable compared with those of the Child ballads.<sup>4</sup> Important scholarly work on American broadside ballads was done by Tristram P. Coffin in *The British Traditional Ballad in North America* (1950), and G. Malcolm Laws in *Native American Balladry* (1950) and *American Balladry from British Broadsides* (1957).<sup>5</sup>

In addition to Child and broadside ballads, non-narrative or "lyric" songs were also popular in Anglo-American communities. Still later, comic songs, patriotic songs, vaudeville and theatre songs, and sentimental "heart" songs entered the repertoire of traditional singers.



### New York State Collections

That old saying that folklore occurs primarily where folklorists spend their spare time is applicable to a discussion of New York State's traditional ballads. Although some fine early collections of New York materials were undertaken, the publication of Empire State materials, especially prior to the 1970s, was sparse enough to support Simon Bronner's (1977) assertions that the State "has not received the folk cultural appreciation reserved for New England [and] . . . remains inadequately represented in folklore collections."

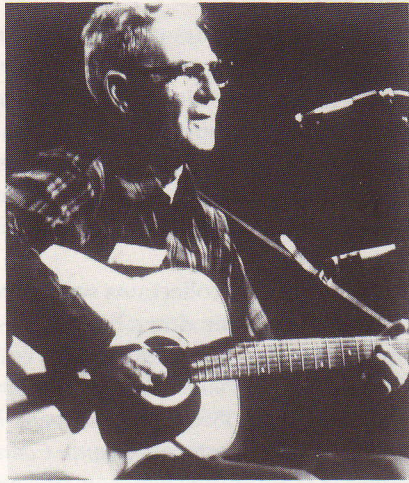
The first New York State ballad collections were private songsters, personal collections of song texts written down by one person or a succession of people within one family. Five such manuscript collections from New York State have been published: *A Pioneer Songster* (Cutting 1952), containing texts compiled between 1841 and 1856 by the Stevens-Douglass family in Wyoming County; *The Civil War Songster of a Monroe County Farmer*, (Gravelle 1971), compiled by James Polk Edmunds between 1863 and 1865; *A Schoharie County Songster* (McNeil 1969), based on a small chapbook kept by Ida Finkell of Argusville from 1879-1883; *A Delanson Manuscript of Songs*, (Oster 1952), found in a Delanson antique shop; and *The Curtis Collection of Songs* (Thompson 1953), which includes both traditional and popular material from after the Civil War. These collections provide a look at the repertoire sung by traditional musicians in rural New York before 1900, and offer a clue to the songs popular with the parents and grandparents of today's older traditional singers.

While Cecil Sharp and Maude Karpeles were gleaning songs from the Appalachians, Emelyn Elizabeth Gardner was beginning one of the earliest studies of New York State's traditions. *Folklore from the Schoharie Hills* (1937), based on field work she conducted between 1912 and 1914, contains the music and texts to twenty-nine songs, including Child and broadside ballads, lullabies and children's songs.

Thirty years later, Harold Thompson's students from Albany Teachers' College collected ballads and verbal lore from their families and neighbors. Thompson's book, *Body, Boots and Britches* (1940), which contains a large number of ballads and songs, was based on his students' field research, and is still the best known collection of New York folklore.

In 1944, Edith Cutting, one of Thompson's star pupils, published *Lore of an Adirondack County*, a collection of material from her native Essex County which included twenty-one Anglo-American ballads and five local songs. During the following decades, Cutting was a regular contributor to *New York Folklore Quarterly* — the ancestor of the present journal — and her collected materials as well as her exceptional documentation of the contexts in which traditional music was performed and their function in rural communities, make her work particularly significant. Two of Cutting's song collections were published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*: "Peter Parrott and His Songs," (1947), which documents the repertoire of a Franco-American





*Lawrence Older (1912-1982) was an important woods singer, raconteur, and fiddler. He was descended from eighteenth century English immigrants to northern Saratoga County. His repertoire includes a number of Child ballads and many American ballads catalogued by Laws. Older was recorded by Folk Legacy Records. He appeared, as did Sara Cleveland, at the National Folklife Festival and at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. Photo courtesy of George and Vaughn Ward.*

singer from Redford, Clinton County; and "Farmers' Songs," a section in her important special edition on "New York State Farm Lore" (1951).

From 1941 to 1970, Marjorie Lansing Porter assiduously collected folklore in the central and southern Adirondack Mountains. She was especially interested in ballad singers. Cassette recordings of her original soundscriber discs are available for study at The Porter Collection of Adirondack Folklore in the Special Collections, Feinburg Library of SUNY/Plattsburg.<sup>6</sup> Although Porter's notable collection sadly remains unpublished, her informants sang for other collectors whose works are more easily available: Lily Stokes Delorme sang for folklorist Helen Hartness Flanders; "Yankee" John Galusha for Anne and Frank Warner; and Lawrence Older for Sandy Paton. While most other collectors concentrated on the most active, or the most outgoing, singers within a family, Porter was unique for her time in her attempt to record *all* the singers within a single family. This allowed her to make hypotheses about family repertoire and about the aesthetic choices of individual singers. (See Porter 1953.)

The 1950s and '60s produced a number of collector/performers who were interested in recording and presenting material from what was increasingly a declining tradition. Their work has often served to renew interest in traditional Anglo-American songs within rural communities. For example, folklorist Ellen Steckert collected from and performed with singers from Catskill lumber camps; George Ward collected and presented the



ballads, songs and tales of Adirondack communities; Pete Seeger worked with and presented local songmakers from the Catskills and the Adirondacks; Margaret MacArthur collected and performed songs from families who were involved in Helen Hartness Flanders' earlier research; Kenneth Goldstein documented the repertoire of traditional singer Sara Cleveland and issued well-annotated recordings of her performances.

In recent years, an increasing amount of research has been done on New York's traditional music. In the 1970s, Robert Bethke collected songs and stories of St. Lawrence County woodsmen. Published as *Adirondack Voices: Woodsmen and Woods Lore* (1981), the work contains a wealth of anecdotal, biographical and contextual materials relating to the area's traditional singers and their songs. Bethke's publication includes the texts and music for twenty-four ballads.

Two "lifework collections" were published in the 1980s. The first of these, Cazden, Haufrecht & Studer's *Folk Songs of the Catskills* (1982) includes 178 traditional ballads and songs collected between 1941 and 1962 under the auspices of Camp Woodland. Of these, 9 are local variants of Child ballads, 37 are Laws variants, and most of the rest can be traced to Irish or turn-of-the-century popular sources. A few, however, are locally produced and commemorate local events and characters, including not a few skirmishes with the law. This richly annotated collection is the only work on New York State songs that contains a good comparative study of tune formation.

A second recent retrospective, Anne Warner's *Traditional American Folk Songs from the Frank and Anne Warner Collection* (1984), makes available some important New York State examples collected over the space of forty years by the author and her husband. Following a method established by Bethke in *Adirondack Voices*, the collection is organized by artist rather than by song content or country of origin. The Warners worked extensively with traditional singer "Yankee" John Galusha (1859-1950) of Minerva and collected material from Steve Wadsworth (b. 1895) of Edinburg. The book includes careful musical transcriptions by Jerome Epstein. Entries are meticulously cross-referenced to other published and recorded materials.

### **Traditional Singers and Repertoires**

The number of traditional Anglo-American singers is unfortunately diminishing in rural upstate New York, but a number of prominent exponents of the genre were active until quite recently. For example, Sara Cleveland, a native of Washington County who died in 1987, could sing several hundred songs she had learned from her mother, including a number of rare variants of Child and Laws ballads and some unusually complete versions of British broadside ballads.<sup>7</sup> Other traditional singers recorded and documented during the 1970s and '80s included Grant Rogers, a Catskill songmaker; Lawrence Older (d. 1982) from Saratoga County; St. Lawrence County woodsmen Ted and Eddie Ashlaw; and Otsego Coun-





*Sara Creedon Cleveland (1905-1987) carried more than four hundred songs, many of which were brought by her Scots-Irish and Irish ancestors to Hartford, Washington County. She sang her mother's songs at home until — in her fifties — she came to the attention of Kenneth Goldstein and Sandy Paton, who recorded most of her extensive repertoire. Mrs. Cleveland's variants of ancient ballads were usually complete. Several important local ballads — especially local accounts of Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 — were in her repertoire. She was known among other singers for her performance of the complete, 72-verse "Ballad of Lake Chaplain." Although she was blinded in an auto accident in 1973, Mrs. Cleveland continued to perform until her eightieth year. Photo, c. 1968, by Sandy Paton.*

ty's Ken Kane. Today, St. Lawrence County's Bill Smith is one of the few traditional singers actively performing the Anglo-American vocal repertoire. Given the richness of these few performers, one wonders what Cecil Sharp might have found had he come to upstate New York before the tradition of ballad singing began to wane during the years following the Second World War.

Based on 19th-century song collections, it seems likely that at one time more than half of the songs and ballads sung by the "folk" in New York were imported from the British Isles or evolved from 19th-century American popular songs. This corresponds to Gardner's earlier findings: British Isles and American popular songs made up a bit more than half of those she collected between 1912 and 1914. Forty years later, when the songs of "Yankee" John Galusha were documented by the Warners and Mrs. Porter, slightly more than ten percent of the songs were of British Isles origin, while nearly two-thirds were of North American and pre-1900 minstrel show provenance.<sup>8</sup> During the 1970s and '80s, research by other New York State collectors, including George Ward, Robert Bethke, and myself, has found similar results.



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*Many New York State songs are neither from British nor popular music origins; they are local songs set to local tunes.*

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Many New York State songs are neither from British Isles nor popular music origins; rather, they are local songs created along traditional models and nearly always set to tunes in local circulation. Although these songs were not usually printed and sold as broadside ballads, they may be seen as an extension of the broadside tradition of topical songmaking.<sup>9</sup> Local ballads in New York follow the pattern described by folklorist Edward D. Ives. They are, he writes, "ballads and sentimental pieces [based] on the imported models . . . [and] are part of the cultural landscape wherever traditional songs are sung" (Ives 1983: 208). For example, "The Ballad of Blue Mountain Lake" or "Bert LaFountain's Packard" (which a bootlegger from the town of Gabriel's is reported to have sung during Sunday morning sessions at his speakeasy), remain popular because they contain local names and references.

Any study of material collected after 1930 must take into account the influence of records, radio and early locally-produced television. In the 1930s, radio stations in upstate New York began to broadcast programs featuring national touring artists such as Bradley Kincaid and Vernon Dalhart. Both these artists collected songs from traditional musicians, sang them on their programs, and distributed them in songbooks to promote their shows, often claiming copyrights for their own. An example is Bradley Kincaid's "Favorite Mountain Ballads and Old Time Songs" (New York: Southern Music Pub., 1938). Although Kincaid claimed a southern origin for many of his songs, he had a summer home near Stafford's Bridge in upstate New York. Traditional singer Dick Richards tells of visiting Kincaid when he was twelve or thirteen and "He'd [Kincaid] give me a chicken for every song I could sing for him that he didn't already know . . . I always went home with a couple of chickens swinging from the handle bars of my bicycle."<sup>10</sup> During the 1940s and early 1950s, when traditional artists such as Richards, the Blodgett family band, and Jimmy Hamblin, appeared regularly on local radio programs, it became increasingly difficult to sort out regional traditions from more general rural influences being aired by the media. It is interesting to speculate how many southern and western songs played over early airwaves merely overlaid or redistributed material already traditional in the northeast.

The movement from home or neighborhood gatherings to public performance as well as the influence of radio and popular records, has encouraged a compression of the texts and stories of older ballads. Very long narratives, which were the test of skill for the previous generation, are





*[Left to Right] Mike Spence, West Hebron; Jim Cleveland, Brant Lake; and Colleen Cleveland Thompson, Brant Lake. Mike Spence and Jim Cleveland both learned their songs from their mothers. Spence's mother and Cleveland's grandmother both grew up in an Irish settlement near Hartford in Washington County. Mike Spence sings several ballads catalogued by Laws and Child, and a large number of turn-of-the-century vaudeville and minstrel show songs. He is a veteran of the local grange minstrel show circuit, which was a venue for the performance of traditional songs through the 1950's. Jim Cleveland and his daughter, Colleen Thompson, are heirs to the Cleveland family repertoire and singing style. They are performing here in the "Songs My Mother/Father Taught Me" workshop at the Folk Arts Festival at the Washington County Fair, 1988. Photo by Matt Kelly.*

usually performed today in considerably shortened versions. Although Child and Laws ballads are performed much less frequently than they once were, they have been replaced largely by 20th century country songs, which like their predecessors are narratives. The sentimental themes and values expressed by these more modern compositions can also be seen as a possible extension of the earlier Anglo-American values embodied in older songs and ballads.

Singer Lawrence Older remarked to me on a number of occasions that the woodsmen he knew sang and listened to ballads with their eyes closed, and that the song sessions were a private time when tough, scrappy men allowed their emotions a release. The ballad, wrote Willa Muir (1965: 197) "made a culture for ordinary rural people . . . exercising in this way a basic human gift of imagination which gave them much satisfaction and



fun." Sharing family songs, some of which are variants of ballads brought by early Anglo-American immigrants, allows the descendants of New York's earliest rural settlers this same satisfaction.



*Al and Kathy Bain, West Hebron, are area country music stars. Al is descended from the original Scots-Irish settlers of West Hebron, Kathy from the pre-Revolutionary settlers of West Fort Ann. The Bains have been awarded an apprenticeship from the New York State Council on the Arts, Folk Arts Program, to learn the song repertoire of Clarence "Daddy Dick" Richards of Corinth. Richards, who is probably the most important living source of regional song traditions, learned his music from both of his parents and from loggers working on the Sacandaga Reservoir. Monthly meetings of organizations such as the Al Bain Fan Club are the present-day context for the sharing of family songs. Photo by Matt Kelly, 1987.*



## NOTES

1. Drawing on a plan developed by Svend Grundvig in *Old Popular Ballads of Denmark* (1853), Child arranged ballads by their stories or "tale types," and then assigned each ballad story a number. This was done since it is more common than not for a ballad to exist in numerous "variants," some more complete than others, but often bearing widely different texts and titles and sung to completely different tunes than the other variants of the same ballad. Today, scholars working with Anglo-American ballads frequently use Child's cataloging numbers when referring to a ballad — for example, the well known ballad "Gypsy Laddie" would simply be referred to as "Child #200."
2. See Henry M. Belden, *Ballads and Songs Collected by the Missouri Folk-Lore Society*. Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Studies, XV, 1940; reprinted 1955. Belden, *A Partial List of Song-Ballads and Other Popular Poetry Known in Missouri*. Columbia, MO., 1907. Louise Pound, *Folk-Song of Nebraska and the Central West*. Lincoln, Neb.: Academy of Science Publications, IX, 3. 1914. W. Roy MacKenzie, *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*. Cambridge, MA, 1928. *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. Newman Ivey White, Paul F. Baum, et. al., ed. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1954. Gavin Greig, *Folk-Song of the Northeast*. 2 vols. Peterhead, 1914. Gavin Greig and Alexander Keith, *Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads and Ballad Airs*. Aberdeen, 1925; Cecil J. Sharp, *Folk Songs of England*, 5 vols. 1908-1912. Cecil J. Sharp and Rev. Charles L. Marson, *Folk Songs from Somerset*. 5 ser. London and New York, 1904-1909; H.E.D. Hammond, *Folk Songs from Dorset*. London: Novello, 1908. Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Folk Songs from the Eastern Counties*. London: Novello, 1908.
3. See Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1925). Maude Karpeles ed. 2 vols. London: Oxford University Press, 1932.
4. For example, in the 1960s, traditional singer Lawrence Older from Saratoga County recorded a version of the broadside ballad "My Bonny Black Bess" that was almost identical to the 18th century version printed in England, now in the collection of the English Dance and Song Society.
5. The latter author established a classification system similar to Child's that is now used for American ballads. The previously cited "My Bonnie Black Bess," for example, is referred to as #L8.
6. Porter's material on traditional singer "Yankee" John Galusha is in the private collection of Porter's friend and protégée Lee Knight.
7. Examples of Cleveland's singing are found on "Ballads and Songs of the Upper Hudson River Valley: Sara Cleveland of Brant Lake, New York." (Folk Legacy) Notes by Kenneth Goldstein.
8. I am indebted to Simon Bronner and to Anne and Norm Cohen for this system of repertoire classification.
9. For an in-depth discussion, see Ives 1983, Sawyer 1954, Studer 1971, and King 1955.
10. Interview with Dick Richards, April 1988, at the home of Al and Kathy Bain, West Hebron, New York.

## ARCHIVES

Much of the material collected on New York balladry and ballad singers remains unpublished. The following archives are particularly rich in Empire State materials:

- Archive of Folksong. U.S. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., The Older, Halpert, Warner and Cleveland collections are deposited here, and a bibliography of New York materials is available upon request.
- Louis Jones and Harold Thompson Archives of New York State Folklore. (Special Collections) New York State Historical Association Library, Cooperstown, N.Y. Contains field work undertaken by students in Jones' and Thompson's classes. Open by appointment.
- New York State Folklife Archive. New York State Historical Association Library, Cooperstown, N.Y. Contains the work of students in the now defunct Cooperstown Graduate Program in American Folklife. Sound recordings of all NYS material deposited in the Library of Congress before 1975 are available here. The Sam Eskin collection also contains some NYS materials. Open by appointment.
- New York State Broadside Collection. Library of the State of New York. (Special Collections) Albany, N.Y. Broadside ballads. Archival assistance available by appointment.
- Marjorie Lansing Porter Collection of North Country Folklore. State University of New York/Plattsburg, Feinburg Library. (Special Collections) Plattsburg, NY. Cassette tapes of Porter's original Soundscriber discs. Open by application.
- Early Ballad Collection. Vassar College Library. (Special Collection) Poughkeepsie, N.Y.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF NEW YORK STATE & RELATED MATERIALS

Key: NYF — New York Folklore  
 NYFQ — New York Folklore Quarterly  
 JAF — Journal of American Folklore

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#### RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Many fine recordings of New York State materials are available. This listing includes only recordings of traditional singers.

Lawrence Older of Middle Grove, New York. Notes by Peter E. McElligott. Sharon, Conn.: Folk Legacy Records (FSA 15), 1965.

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Sara Cleveland. Notes by Kenneth Goldstein. [North] Ferrisburg, Vt.: Philo Records, 1975.

Brave Boy: New England Traditions in Folk Music. Notes by Edward D. Ives. New York: New World Records (NW 239), 1978. (Despite title, contains some rare New York State field recordings.)

Lumbering Songs from the Ontario Shanties. Coll. and ed. by Edith Fowke. New York: Folkways Ethnic Library (FM 4052), 1961. (All but one example were sung on both sides of the border.)

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