

John A. Lomaxⁱ ©1936.

Transcribed from the article published in the *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, April 5, 1936
Traveling 200,000 Miles in Hunt for Elusive American Folk Song

Not many men have traveled 200,000 miles with a single object in mind. Even that distance is far short of the journeys I have made in search of the folk songs of America. As a very small boy, riding Selim, my bay pony, I began by making trips to hear cowboys back from the trail sing songs of the range.

Before that time (I cannot tell when were the first beginnings) I would lie awake at night and listen to cowboys as they rode the circle in the darkness singing to the sleeping cattle. For my father then lived near the Chisholm Trail and big herds of Longhorns, Kansas bound, often bedded down for the night near our home. Thus began my love for folk songs, the songs of the people that have no author, many of which to me are as simple and sweet as the perfume of prairie flowers.

When I went to the University of Texas no one there cared for my little roll of cowboy songs, written out in a boyish scrawl with a lead pencil, tied with twine string and kept with my few other treasures in the bottom of my trunk. Always I shall remember, after one of the professors had told me that my collection was worthless, how one day back of Brackenridge Hall I threw my manuscripts into the fire and sadly watched them burn.



John A. Lomax. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

A Traveling Fellowship

Once, years afterward, Prof. Barrett Wendel of Harvard University found some interest in scraps of rhymes from cowboy songs which I used in an essay. He and Prof. George Lyman Kittredge, a great folklorist yet teaching in Harvard, had me appointed to a Sheldon traveling fellowship for the collection and preservation of American ballads. I held this fellowship for three years, traveling all over the West with a cheap recording machine on which I secured in crude fashion the tunes of the songs. This work brought me invitations to lecture in colleges throughout the country during my vacations. Everywhere I went I asked for help of my student audiences.

The two books of cowboy songs and cowboy verse were published, and afterward the folk song project lagged over a period of some years, though material continued to flood in by mail. A growing family needed support and there was no money in folk songs.

The types of these so-called ballads are known as railroad songs, levee camp songs, chain gang songs, songs of Negro bad men, songs about white desperadoes, songs from the mountains, cocaine and whiskey songs, the Negro blues, songs of creole Negroes, Negro reels, minstrel types, breakdown and play party

songs, children's songs, songs of the Mexican vaqueros, cowboy songs, songs of the overlander, songs of the miner, songs of the shanty boys, Erie Canal songs, songs of the Great Lakes, songs of sailors and sea flights, white spirituals, songs of wars and soldiers, and Negro spirituals.



*John A. Lomax making a recording using the equipment he carried in the trunk of his car.
Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

I had always felt that not enough attention had been paid to the secular songs made up by the Negroes describing in intimate detail their loves, hates, sufferings, despair and merriment, songs about their daily life on earth rather than what was to happen in the afterlife so beautifully treated in Negro spirituals. To secure these songs I knew we would meet with the active opposition of Negro ministers, teachers and the educated class who objected to the crude phraseology of the words and the barbaric strain in the music of these songs. I felt, too, that the best place to find them was in thickly populated Negro country communities or in other places where the Negro is least influenced by his contact with white people. One source would be the penitentiaries of the Southern States. So to the penitentiaries of Texas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina I went in 1933, visiting also, as the journey progressed, many remote Negro communities as well as mountain districts of Virginia and Kentucky.

My son and collaborator, Alan, and I left Dallas early one summer morning of that year and made our first stop and our first recordings at Terrell. Our car was loaded with heavy electrical machinery for making the records, bedding (including a mosquito net put together by Mr. and Mrs. Walter Sharp of Forest Hills, Dallas), for we planned to camp out, cooking utensils, etc. Our final destination was Washington, since all the records were to go into the music division of the Library of Congress. These records are flat aluminum discs and the costly and delicate machine was furnished by the Rockefeller Foundation, though our principal sponsor was the Carnegie Corporation. An unusual journey, a unique enterprise, a couple of pioneers:

*"The sun is sorta sinkin' an' the road is clear
An' the wind is singin' ballads that we got to bear."*

The results of that trip we have since put into a large book. We have made journeys and have worn out three automobiles, leaving behind plenty of materials for those who may come after us. We have deposited in the Congressional Library several hundred records, each containing from three to six songs. Students of music are free to visit the library and study them. The phonograph at one time and now the radio have proved to the skeptical that American like their own rough folk song stuff. The hill-billy and cowboy groups are probably quite as popular to the masses as John MacCormackⁱⁱ, when, as and if they are brave enough to sing real ballad tunes in simple style, and not the cheap imitations of Broadway composers. At least we are beginning to discover that America has produced its own folk tunes set to words that have sprung from our own soil.

A journey of 200,000 miles is not made without incident, especially when the traveler is meeting daily unconventional people who don't wear white collars, whose education has come from what they hear rather than from what they read. When their suspicions are once allayed, they become like a group of children, frank and open-hearted as the sunlight.

Fort Spunky Folks

I first met **Henry Zweifel** when I walked into his office in the Aviation Building in Fort Worth to volunteer my services in his efforts to elect Orville Bullingtonⁱⁱⁱ Governor of Texas. During a month's close association in that campaign he often invited me to spend a week end at his country home at Fort Spunky. "It's in Abby Bend, north of George's Creek," he explained, "just across the Brazos River from Comanche Peak." But we never could spare the time to go. As we later discovered the job we had on hand was too much, even for the energy and resources of Henry Zweifel.

More than two years after that busy summer, I drove out the highway leading from Glen Rose to Cleburne until I reached a certain filling station. There I turned north over a bumpy country road which dipped down every little while into the beds of numerous creeks running out of the hills into the Brazos River. Finally the "fork hand" side roads grew so numerous that I stopped and inquired of a lady who sat on the back porch of a house blackened by age. "Keep straight ahead fur about a quarter," she called back; "then turn to the left fur a mile and a half; then take the right hand and keep on goin' as fur as you kin." I drove on across tow creeks with "living water" into a sandy country, through post oak woods, next a gate, two more square turns, then past an unfinished driveway on by a white stone house. High up above the second story on the side of this house next to the road glowed a large, crimson Neon light sign, "Bar Z." I knew this was the end of my journey; I had reached Henry Zweifel's ranch headquarters.

Henry was not at home. Instead, I was met by Will, the white-jacketed Negro houseboy, who greeted me with faultless manners and in words of welcome phrased in English almost as faultless. The big high-ceilinged living room into which he ushered me, with five –foot oak logs crackling in the wide fireplace, made me realize why Henry Zweifel loved his home. It became for me a sort of second home.

From the windows of my room upstairs I could see the lights shining from the numerous log dwellings of his men and their families, set back in the trees. I caught the gleam of white curtains in some of their windows in contrast to the dark post oak logs chinked with straight white lines of cement. And just outside of these windows tall flowering cosmos swayed in the wind. Fort Spunky seemed near to fairyland to me that night.

Henry came in for supper, after which he sent for his people to sing for the Library of Congress collection of phonograph records of folk tunes. Some few of his visitors were descendants of old residents of the Brazos Bend country, though many more belonged to the drifting tenant farmer class caught in the eddy of Abby Bend.

The big comfortable living room was filled with the men and their families and Henry Zweifel was a cordial and genial host. He was good enough to start off the evening by consenting to be the first performer before the microphone. He also introduced the singers. All that was said went down on the records so that they would give the whole effect of the evening's entertainment.

Henry began in his deep voice, as if lecturing his crowd:
"Way on in the wee hours of the morning, after you have lost \$3 in a poker game, here's the way you feel:

“(Henry sings.)

*“ I went up on the mountain
And I give my horse a blow,
I told ‘em I was comin’ back,
But I was comin’ slow.’*

“After the game broke you get your old horse and buggy and start home; you go drivin’ up to the water trough an’ here’s what happens:

“(Henry sings.)

*“ I drove my horse to the water trough
And he wouldn’t drink and he wouldn’t back off,
That worries me,
Oh, that worries me.”*

“Then in the morning you go up on the hillsides to do a little huntin’ and you sing:

“(Henry sings.)

*“ My old fiddle, tuned up good,
Is the best old fiddle in the neighborhood’.”*

“That was rotten,” said Henry as the crowd laughed and agreed with him. But the ice was broken as I played back his talk and singing. All were eager to help.

We began by making records of calling dogs, hog calling and cattle calling. Henry acted as interlocutor and introducer:

“You get outside the cowlot gate and start calling like this:

“ Sook calf, sook calf, sook calfie,
Sook calf, sook calf!
And the the little calf comes runnin’
Out of the brush down to the barn.’

“Then when you want to call the old cow up late in the evening just before dark, you say, to call her a short distance:

“ So-ok, so-ok, co-ok, cow.’

“If she’s off a little farther away from the barn you’ll say:

“ Whoo-oh, whoo-oh, who-oh.’

“Then if she’s clear out of sight, or off in the meadow somewhere, you’ll get your voice a little higher.” Here Henry let his voice out on the “whoo-oh” call until the dogs outside began to bark. Then came the others anxious to excel their boss.

“All right, David, you call the cows up for salt.” And David came through in fine style repeating the last call with variations.

“Now, Dan, you call them cows up like you do when you go to feed ‘em that cake early in the mornin’.” And Dan did his part.

“All right now, Jess, you call the cows like you call them when you go down into the pecan orchard or the Bermuda patch and want to call them up for salt to find out if there is any worms among them or find out if there’s anything needed to be done to take care of the range cattle.” (Jess Wylie is ranch foreman and Jess showed off his longer experience.)

“All right, Mr. Roberts, call up the hogs. (On the Zweifel ranch there are about 300 who get fat in the fall on pecans and acorns.)

Shouted Mr. Roberts in a voice to admit no rival:

“Pig-oo, pig-oo, pig-off, who-oo
Pig, pig, pig
Pig-oo-oo-oh, pig-oo-oo-oh,
Pig, pig!”

Henry again led off in the dog-calling contest by talking to his shy pup, Spot, calling him the “finest little dog in the Abby Bend country.”

“Now, Mr. Roberts, I want you to call your dogs up from a distance and tell the folks how you get ‘em to you and how you get ‘em ready to go hunting.”

“He-ah, he-ah, he-ah, heah-heah,” repeated and ending in a long “he—ah—ah.”

“Now, Mr. Jonathon, you just call your dogs from under the floor like you are going to get ready to go off in the woods squirrel hunting and tell the folks how you get ‘em out from under the house and how you start ‘em off.”

Mr. Jonathon added to the regular “heah” some cajoling admonitions, “Git to ‘em over there! Go on! Git to ‘em.”

“Mr. Wylie, you call your dogs from under the floor and send ‘em down to the potato patch and get them hogs out.”

Sharper and more urgent calls followed that would move the laziest hound pup.

“All right, now,” said Henry, “we’ll give you an imitation of the dogs goin’ out into the woods and strikin’ a coon’s trail.”

Pandemonium, each man and boy imitating the cries of a pack of hounds in a hot chase.

I afterward recorded from this company a group of folksongs, including the American versions to two long old English ballads. This is the full list:

The Gol-Darn Wheel, Natural-Born Rancher, Cotton Picking Song, Billy Barlow, the Brown Girl, Mollie, The Drunkard's Dream, The Blackbirds on the Rush, That's the Way with the Texans, Hog Drovers, Pretty Little Pink, If One Won't Another Will, Old Man Bugger, Old Blue, High Loping Cowboy, Two Breakdowns, Truthful Bill, Green Corn, The Rambling Boy.

Bud Wylie, the foreman, sang in concluding this delightful evening, a song for children that I never before had heard. With its pretty tune it deserves wide circulation.

"Let' go huntin'," says Risky Rob.

"Let's go huntin'," says Robin-de-Bob.

"Let's go huntin'," says Dan'l and Joe,

"Let's go huntin'," says Billy Barlow.

"What shall we hunt?" says Risky Rob.

"What shall we hunt?" says Robin-de-Bob,

"What shall we hunt?" says Dan'l and Joe,

"What shall we hunt?" says Billy Barlow.

"Go hunt rats," says Risky Rob.

"Go hunt rats," says Robin-de-Bob,

"Go hunt rats," says Dan'l and Joe,

"Go hunt rats," says Billy Barlow.

"How shall we kill 'em?" says Risky Rob.

"How shall we kill 'em?" says Robin-de-Bob,

"How shall we kill 'em?" says Dan'l and Joe,

"How shall we kill 'em?" says Billy Barlow.

"Go borry a gun," says Risky Rob.

"Go borry a gun," says Robin-de-Bob,

"Go borry a gun," says Dan'l and Joe,

"Go borry a gun," says Billy Barlow.

"How shall we haul 'em?" says Risky Rob.

"How shall we haul 'em?" says Robin-de-Bob,

"How shall we haul 'em?" says Dan'l and Joe,

"How shall we haul 'em?" says Billy Barlow.

"Go borry a cart," says Risky Rob.

"Go borry a cart," says Robin-de-Bob,

"Go borry a cart," says Dan'l and Joe,

"Go borry a cart," says Billy Barlow.

"How shall we divide 'em?" says Risky Rob.

"How shall we divide 'em?" says Robin-de-Bob,

"How shall we divide 'em?" says Dan'l and Joe,
"How shall we divide 'em?" says Billy Barlow.

"I'll take shoulder," said Risky Rob,
"I'll take side," said Robin-de-Bob,
"I'll take ham," said Dan'l and Joe,
"Tailbone mine," said Billy Barlow

"How shall we cook 'em," says Risky Rob.
"How shall we cook 'em," says Robin-de-Bob,
"How shall we cook 'em," says Dan'l and Joe,
"How shall we cook 'em," says Billy Barlow.

"I'll boil shoulder," said Risky Rob,
"I'll fry side," said Robin-de-Bob,
"I'll bake mine," said Dan'l and Joe,
"Tailbone mine," said Billy Barlow.

ⁱJohn Avery Lomax was born in Holmes County, Mississippi, in 1872. The next year his parents moved to Bosque County, Texas. In 1892, at the age of twenty he spent a year at Granbury College, and he afterwards taught English in the preparatory department of Weatherford College. (Texas)

ⁱⁱJohn Francis McCormack was born on June 14, 1884 in Athlone, Ireland and died in Dublin on September 16, 1945. He was a renowned Irish tenor, and was one of the most popular singers of his time. (Dowd)

ⁱⁱⁱOrville Bullington was the Republican nominee for governor in 1932. (Kelly)

Resources for End Notes

Dowd, Hartson. "John McCormack - an Irish Legend, Then and Now." n.d. *Irish Culture and Customs*
<http://www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/AMusic/JMcCormack.html>. 18 October 2015.

Kelly, Louise. "BULLINGTON, ORVILLE." *Handbook of Texas Online* (n.d.).
(<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fbu18>), accessed October 18, 2015. Uploaded on June 12, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

Texas, The University of. "John Avery Lomax." *The University of Texas Record, Volume X, No. 1* (April 15, 1910): 203.