

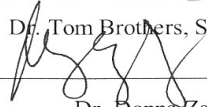
Curious Tales and Captivating Voices:
The Ballad Singing Tradition of the Southern Appalachians
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Date: April 22, 2014

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A project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program
in the Graduate School of
Duke University

2014

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Final Project April 2014

**Curious Tales and Captivating Voices:
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On a cold night in the fall of 2012, a group assembled at the Friedle building on Duke University's campus for a gallery opening. The exhibit featured the photographs of Duke students coupled with middle school students from Madison County, North Carolina. This rural county in the mountains of western North Carolina boasts steep hills, remote mountain communities and a strong heritage of traditional music. As part of the event's entertainment, Madison County ballad singers Debbie Chandler, Denise Norton O'Sullivan and Joe Penland sang. We informally gathered around, some of us sitting on the floor and others standing in small groups. The singers' unaccompanied voices, both raw and strong, delivered a profound experience for the crowd. Joe Penland sang an excruciating immigrant's lament called "Pretty Saro," about the experience of traveling to a strange land and missing a loved one, knowing you will never see her again. Debbie Chandler shocked and saddened us with her rendition of "Young Emily," about a woman whose father kills her lover in order to steal his gold. Denise Norton O'Sullivan expertly delivered a poignant song about love called "Black is the Color." The women told stories about learning the songs before they could read and about the strong connection they felt with their "Granny Dell" (Dellie Chandler Norton) who taught them the family tradition.

These songs overflowed with emotion but were delivered without an overtly maudlin

tone. As a member of the rapt audience, I felt as though the singers channeled stories from another time and place. These haunting tunes conjured images of many generations lifting their voices to the hills of North Carolina. As I heard these strange songs, I began to wonder about their origin and about how this music could still affect us so profoundly, even while the tales concerned experiences so unlike my own. I wondered why and how these songs had persisted, and what these modern singers made of delivering songs about murder, ghosts and other topics which seem so out-of-step with the popular music of our time.

Through that experience with the Madison County singers and their fascinating music, I set off to learn more about this musical tradition and its literature. I wanted to know the origin of the songs and the relationship of the oral tradition to the written word. What do we know about this tradition and why has this tradition flourished into the twenty-first century in Madison County? What influence, if any, has the world outside the Southern Appalachian mountains had on the tradition? How do current singers experience their role within the literature itself? Do they still teach their children the songs? Do they feel it is important to continue the tradition, and if so, how might this preservation be done in the face of modern media inundation that we all experience?

As I researched, I learned the story of a tradition whose roots stretch back as far as the Middle Ages. Since that time, many of these songs have fluctuated from oral forms to written and back again. European settlers brought these songs with them as they made the Southern Appalachians their home. In turn, those settlers then created their own stories in song, building on old traditions to commemorate events around them. The ballad tradition has lingered in Madison County specifically as the result of a unique combination: initially isolation--and later, interest from outside of their community, which sparked just in time to keep the embers of this

tradition from dying out. Through learning about and speaking with current-day ballad singers and experts, I have determined that the tradition has developed and changed, but will ultimately endure. This endurance, I believe, partly results from the versatility of the tradition and its continued relevance in our modern times.

In this Project, I will first discuss the history and development of the ballad tradition in the British Isles and the United States, looking in particular at the influence of two phenomena— isolation and the interest of outsiders—on preservation and change in traditional ballads. I will then survey the contemporary culture of ballad singing, relying primarily on interviews with ballad singers that I conducted during the month of November 2013. We will see that, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, both isolation and outside interest continue to play a role as ballad singing moves from being a private pursuit as part of everyday life to being an art form maintained by public performance and recording. In addition, we will observe that these old songs and their ballad forms continue to have relevance in our modern media environment.

Part 1: Background

In this section of the Project, I will first discuss the ballad as a specific genre and some of its characteristics. Then I will discuss the migration of these ballads from the British Isles to the Southern Appalachian mountains. Scholars generally divide the types of ballads in the United States into two categories. Those songs termed “traditional” ballads originated in Europe and migrated with settlers to the nascent United States. These traditional ballads are sometimes referred to as “Child ballads,” named for Harvard professor of English Francis James Child, who created the first comprehensive study of this literature. Early settlers built on this tradition, creating their own songs which fall into the second category; what we call “native” ballads. “The Ballad of Tom Dooley” and “Omie Wise” provide two examples of songs in this category. These songs memorialize true events of murder and brutality that took place in their new home. In addition to creating completely new songs surrounding current events, settlers to the Appalachian mountains sometimes modified the traditional ballads to reflect their new surroundings. For example, an old song entitled “The Wexford Girl” has transformed in the United states to “The Knoxville Girl,” another brutal story of a man who kills his lover (Penland interview). People of western North Carolina refer to these ballads, whether traditional or native, as “love songs” in order to distinguish them from religious songs, which they termed “meeting house songs.”

What characteristics qualify a song as a ballad? While most people define a ballad as simply a story told in song, ballad scholar Eveylyn Wells provides a more nuanced definition in

The Ballad Tree:

As we understand it today, the traditional ballad is “a song that tells a story,” in simple verse and to a simple tune. It is the product of no one time or person; its

author, if ever known, has been lost in the obscurity of the past and in the process of oral tradition. Its medium is word of mouth rather than print. It goes its way independent of literary influences, carrying for a while the accretions of this or that day and singer, but sloughing them off as it passes to the next. It has no one original text, being freshly created by each successive singer as he makes his own version. (5)

Although Wells characterizes the ballads as songs that are transmitted by “word of mouth” only, in fact, the ballads have a long tradition of interplay between being written down and being passed on orally. One source for some of the songs from the Old Country is the “broadside.” These cheap publications in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries laid down, in verse, news on diverse topics including politics, social commentary, romance and public events, be they truth or rumor. These sheets were printed for sale, and sometimes featured ballads (Wells 211). For example, the song “Little Musgrave and Lady Bernard” (Child #81) appears as a broadside in the seventeenth century, and is said to have been sung before this early printing (Child v.2, 242). The ballad, often known today as “Mathy Groves,” is consistently listed as one of the favorites among performers for its adaptability to a quicker tempo (Penland interview).

While modern musicians frequently accompany these songs with traditional instruments such as guitar, banjo or dulcimer, early settlers usually sang the traditional ballads unaccompanied. Some modern-day “purists” assert that ballads should remain unaccompanied in order to preserve this traditional aesthetic. To that, modern day ballad singer Joe Penland wryly answers, “Ballads were unaccompanied because there wasn't any damn thing to accompany with!” He adds, “Most of the time, I find the purists don't know shit about nothing” (personal interview). I believe Penland here alludes to the interactive and changeable nature of traditional music, which has always adapted to the technology and customs of the people who participate in it. Attempting to isolate and arrest the development of a musical tradition is akin to trying to

“lash the wind.” It is true though, that in the Southern Appalachians few instruments existed in a world where people eked out a subsistence living. Thus ballad singing adapted well to its sparse environment. Singing the ballads did not require a skill on an instrument. And because almost everyone has a voice, the ballad provided a “democratic” artistic outlet, as well as a means for entertainment before radio and television, for people who were often illiterate. Even the literate had little access to books in remote mountain communities.

The traditional ballads, which often feature between ten and fifty verses, require great memory and concentration from their performer. These songs also portray stories with universal appeal. For example, unrequited love or romance gone wrong often form the basis of the tales. While the modern listener easily recognizes these themes from the pop-music tradition, the ballads may shock us by portraying murder, brutality and even gore. Although these topics seem to have been commonplace in their original setting, listeners today are often puzzled, or even made uncomfortable, by these themes.

In order to discuss some of the characteristics of the traditional ballad, it will be helpful to examine a specific example. Below lies a transcription of Sheila Kay Adams' recording of “Young Hunting,” from her album *My Dearest Dear* in 2000. Adams, a seventh generation ballad singer, hails from Madison County, NC, and learned her craft from previous generations of her family in that locale. This particularly evocative rendition opens the documentary film *The Madison Country Project*:

Young Hunting (Child #68, Sharp # 15)

1
 Come in, come in, my old true love
 And spend this night with me
 Fer I have a bed, it's a very fine bed
 I'll give it up fer thee, yes I'll give it up fer thee.

2

It's I can't come in, no I ain't comin' in
 To spend this night with thee
 For I have a wife in the old Scotland
 This night she waits for me, me, this night she waits fer me.

3

It's and she drawed out her little penknife
 It a-bein' both keen and sharp
 She step-ed up to her own true love
 And stobbed him through his heart, heart she stobbed him through his heart.

4

Woe be, Woe be, Lady Margaret he cried
 Woe be woe be to thee
 For there ain't no wife in the old country
 that I loved any better than thee, thee, that I loved any better than thee.

5

Be still, be still, my old true love
 One hour or two or three
 And I will send for a doctor near
 to save the life of thee, thee, to save the life of thee.

6

It's I can't live, no I won't live
 From the wound you've given me
 No doctor's hand only God's own hand
 could save my life fer me, me, could save my life fer me.

7

It's she cried out to her servant maid
 This thing I'll promise thee
 If you'll help me on this dark night
 My gown I'll give to thee, thee, my gown I'll give to thee.

8

It's she took a-hold of his long yeller hair
 And the other took up his feet
 They throwed him into the old dry well
 Which was so cold and deep, deep, which was so cold and deep.

9

Lay there, lay there, my own false love
 'Til the flesh rots offen your bones
 And the little ol' wife in the old Scotland
 Shall mourn for your return, turn, shall morn for your return.

10

Up spoke, up spoke, a pretty little bird
 All from the willer [willow] tree
 There weren't no gal in the old Scotland
 That he loved any better than thee, thee, that he loved any better than thee.

11

Fly down, fly down my pretty little dove

And perch upon my knee
 I'll give you a cage of the purest gold
 Sure beats that willer tree, tree, sure beats that willer tree.

12
 I won't come down, no I ain't comin' down
 To perch upon thy knee
 For you just murdered your own true love
 The same you'd serve to me, me, the same you'd serve to me.

13
 It's I'll go and get my arrow and my bow
 My arrow and my string
 And I'll shoot you through your tender little heart
 You never more shall sing, sing, you never more shall sing.

14
 While you go to get your arrow and your bow
 Your arrow and your string
 I'll fly away on my two little wings
 Forevermore I'll sing, sing, forevermore I'll sing.

Traditional ballads tell stories, but usually not through the first person narration that we are accustomed to in modern music. In this example, we see classic ballad style story telling: a conversation-driven narrative and a third-person narrator who relates the tale. Most of the story unfolds through Lady Margaret's conversation with her “old-true love,” and her exchange with the bird. Through this approach, the narrative unfolds objectively. That is to say, the narrator relates the action, but provides no instruction as to how we should feel as the story unfolds. This distanced narrative is rather typical of the ballad stories. In fact, often the tale provides no overt moral. In this song, we understand what we need to know about Lady Margaret through her conversation with her servant as well as the bird: She is accustomed to receiving what she wants through pecuniary coercion. As the story progresses, this spurned woman emerges as a spoiled, perhaps petulant, wealthy lady. She persuades her servant to help her by offering her a valuable gift of a fine gown. Furthermore, Lady Margaret hopes to silence the bird by offering it a golden cage. These propositions seem out-of-touch. Why would a bird, who would rather fly free and

who has no need for gold, desire a golden cage? In the same way that Lady Margaret kills her lover, when she cannot control the bird's actions, she decides she will kill it. However, the bird escapes to be forever free.

These ballads offer complex stories which often leave a lot of questions unanswered. For example, if this man's wife waits for him in Scotland, why does he appear at another woman's door, presumably an ex-lover at that? When were these two previously lovers? Why doesn't she know he has married? And what is to become of Lady Margaret after committing this crime?

A linguistic curiosity also arises in this song: Many of the lines begin with "It's." For example, the line "It's I can't come in no I ain't coming in" serves as a distinctive and somewhat typical device which emerges specifically in the ballads that have survived into the Appalachians. This method of using the contraction "it's" to introduce a phrase may mark time for the singer and provides a short hand for the set up of a third person-narrative scene. We don't see this approach in the old versions of the songs from England (Child *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*). Perhaps this practice developed as the result of Appalachian speech patterns which may have come about after English speakers settled into their mountain environment in the New World.

As listeners, what are we to make of this story? Because of the distanced narration, we are each free to make that choice. Not all ballads project a clear moral. In fact, most provide no moral at all. In the case of "Young Hunting," we can't really say that the message of this song warns against the dangers of adultery, for here, the "old-true-love" tries to avoid this ill-advised encounter. He makes the upstanding choice, but loses his life nonetheless. Instead, several other messages emerge in this tale. For example, the story may mean "We can't always hide the bad things we do. No matter how deep the well where we deposit the evidence, a 'little birdie' will

always turn up to reveal our deeds, so we should be careful with our actions.” Or perhaps the song offers us the idea that “Money can't buy you everything you want.”

In the end, we are left wondering if this bird is real, or if instead, we are witnessing Lady Margaret's conscience playing tricks on her. Perhaps earlier generations of listeners would have perceived this tale as animistic—this talking bird knows more than we do. But a modern listener might see the bird as Lady Margaret's conscience, which will always threaten to give her away. This variety of interpretation provides some of the beauty of the ballads and may explain why these songs have endured. Not unlike other timeless literature such as Shakespeare or King Arthur Legends, each listener and each generation may interpret, re-imagine and adapt the story as they see fit.

Many versions of this ballad have been collected over hundreds of years. In the early twentieth century in the Southern Appalachians, Cecil Sharp published six versions of “Young Hunting” in his collection *English Folksongs of the Southern Appalachians*.¹ In *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, first published in 1896, Francis James Child provides eleven versions of this song. Child reports written evidence of the ballad as far back as the early eighteenth-century, but this song likely circulated orally long before it was put on paper. These different versions of this song highlight one of the most interesting aspects of the ballads: the variety. For example, the versions in Child's collection end differently from those collected in the Southern Appalachians by Sharp. In the Child versions, the man's dead body is found, in some cases at the bird's behest, and Lady Margaret is burned for what she has done (v.2: 142-155). Curiously, no such comeuppance appears in Sharp's versions in the Southern Appalachians. In those renditions, as well as the example above, the bird always has the last say, which leaves the listener

¹ One of these versions was sung by Mrs. Jane Gentry at Hot Springs, NC (located in Madison County), August 25, 1916.

wondering what will become of the villain. Will she ever pay for this brutal act? The common motif in all versions though is the murder, inspired by a rejected lover, and a talking bird which threatens to reveal all. It is difficult to say why these differences in versions exist, whether it could be from conscious choices of the people who passed the song down, or by simple memory errors or omissions, but the variety in each of these songs keeps the tales alive and sparks the imagination of the singer as well as the listener.

Why should we care about these old ballads? There is a reason these songs have endured—why people have returned to these same subjects, altering them as best fit their needs and interest. In studying these works, we may see what endures in our human nature. The universal themes of love and betrayal, passion and despair, form an essential part of our make-up and our human experience. If nothing else, these stories still entertain us and spark our imaginations.

If these songs were to vanish, we would lose a link to crucial elements of our past and the evolution of Western society. As an example of this link, Joe Penland, a Madison County, North Carolina modern-day singer relates a story about the song “The Lady of Carlisle.” In this ballad, which harks back to the literature of courtly love, a lady throws her glove, or a fan in some versions, into a lion's den. She will choose the man who is brave enough to retrieve the object. Penland sang this song in a festival and afterward, a woman from England, who was studying German, approached him and mentioned that the story seemed familiar. Months later, Penland received a letter from this woman, in which she had enclosed a German poem. After its translation, Penland realized that this was the same story as the “Lady of Carlisle,” but in a German poem from the fifteenth century. Penland explains in true story-teller color, “...it's the same story...lady tosses her glove into the lion's den. There weren't no goddamn lion's dens in

England!...And to think a person is foolish enough to jump off down there...and go get it” (personal interview). In some versions of the story, true love wins out. In others, it doesn't. Penland continues, “So you never know how these things come about and who's version is what, but ...it shows us that there's a continuity in our...existence...And to think that we have this common link with people...Everyone thinks that we are so different but our heritage is so intertwined” (personal interview). This song was not only sung on porches or in the fields for hundreds of years, but it has been recorded by modern artists such as Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead. Renowned ballad singer Dillard Chandler from Madison County also recorded this song, but with a major modification. In his version, the “Lady of Carlisle” has been changed to the “Carolina Lady” (Chandler).

For the story of “The Lady of Carlisle” to endure, there must be some draw, that we would still find this entertaining, so far from a time or place where there were lion's dens and women wore gloves or carried a fan. Is it the universal appeal of peril? Or of the romantic idea of true love? Singer Bobby McMillon's version of this song presents an interesting ending in which the victorious suitor rejects the woman because she has asked him to put himself in such danger:

Up spoke this bold sea captain
 He seemed like a man that was troubled in mind
 Through these lonesome woods I'll wander
 Where no man can there me find.

Up spoke this brave lieutenant
 I would not have you for my wife
 Oh I see by your actions that you care nothing for my life
 That you care nothing for my life. (McMillon 29 Jan)

In this version, perhaps the joy of justice or comeuppance is what gives us pleasure. Or maybe the versatility of the song, which allows it to have so many meanings, is what has allowed it to

endure. Current-day ballad singer Sheila Kay Adams says that her teacher and relative Dellie Norton used to say that ballads gave us the “best way to learn about life without living it” (Interview). While that may have been true years ago in the Southern Appalachian mountains, we now have plenty of opportunities to “learn about life” through school, books and other forms of media. Nonetheless, these stories and their universal themes remain relevant and can still shed light on the human condition.

How the tradition came to the Southern Appalachians:

The traditional ballads do exist in different part of the United States where English speakers migrated. However, the Southern Appalachians provided some of the most fertile ground for the preservation and even evolution of these songs. The Southern Appalachian mountains refers to an area of about 1200 miles from Pennsylvania down to Northern Alabama (Rehder 33). People from the British Isles and Germany settled this region when the land became available. The dominant group, the Scotch-Irish, followed a circuitous route to the Appalachians by way of Northern Ireland, Ulster Plantation. Their journey began with their migration from Scotland and England, to Northern Ireland.

In order to understand the journey of the Scotch-Irish, we must first explore the political climate in the British Isles in the seventeenth century. In 1603, upon the death of Queen Elizabeth I, King James VI of Scotland inherited the thrones of England and Ireland. This change resulted in a single ruler for the British Isles. However, Ireland proved difficult to govern. Needing a way to pacify Ireland, King James I confiscated lands of two great Irish chieftains who had fled to France in the wake of James' ascent to the throne. James I created the Ulster Plantation from this confiscated land, and encouraged people from Southern Scotland and

northern England to move there and help create a stabilizing influence in the region. These people, mostly Presbyterians, were willing to give up their land in hopes of greater prosperity (Blethen and Wood).

James I's scheme did not accomplish his goal of stability and after a generation or two, unrest again ruled the land. The Scotch-Irish grievances stemmed from two major sources: Religious persecution and economic and trade issues. England had designated Anglicanism the religion of the land, but many of the Scots who migrated to Ireland belonged to the Presbyterian church. They suffered discrimination due to penal laws imposed on those who were not members of the Anglican church. Furthermore, the Ulster Presbyterians were "distrusted by those who governed and hated by the native Catholic population" (Blethen and Wood). In addition, the Presbyterians were excluded from any role in government or the professions. As a result, the Presbyterian churches became instrumental in the migration from Ulster Plantation. In some cases, entire congregations migrated to the colonies (Blethen and Wood).

In addition to religious persecution, economic grievances contributed to unrest in the Scotch-Irish community. Rising rents and low prices for goods, plus crop failure made the economic environment untenable. England's trade policies contributed to the challenging economic situation as well. For example, in order to prevent competition from Ireland, England forbade Ireland to export any livestock or livestock products to England, with the exception of wool. Not only that, but Ireland was allowed to export wool only to England and no other country (Blethen and Wood).

Land availability also became a point of contention in Ulster. In the eighteenth century, land became scarce as Catholics were increasingly allowed to serve as tenants, thereby competing with the Presbyterians. Previously plentiful and cheap, real estate became scarce and

expensive after such a large migration. Land leases were usually written for “three lives” or in many cases, for 21-31 years. Land leases that had been granted in 1690 expired, leaving settlers vulnerable to higher rents. Landlords auctioned off leases to the highest bidder, a practice known as “rack renting” (Blethen and Wood). Thus, when land became scarce and rents rose, settlers simply could not survive in Ulster, and so chose to move on to the colonies in the New World.

After enduring religious persecution and economic hardships at the hands of harsh policies, is it any wonder that Ulster Scots wished to migrate to a country where they would be free to own their own land and where they would be independent? It stands to reason that when they finally did settle in their new homes in the Southern Appalachians, many of them might have wished to stay put, even isolated, for hundreds of years after.

Between 1717 and 1775, these Scotch-Irish immigrated to the Americas by way of Philadelphia and Charleston (Rehder 54). Once again, the availability of land soon became a challenge as the areas around these major ports of entry began to fill up. This pressure forced those who came later to move into open lands to the west and south of Pennsylvania, and west and north from Charleston. These settlers followed wild game trails, native American hunting trails and horse and foot trails established by the European settlers. This settlement pattern created what cultural geographer John B. Rehder calls “an arc of Scotch-Irish and German settlement in colonial America” (64).

The Great Wagon Road proved one important route for settlers coming from Philadelphia. This route stretched eight-hundred miles from Philadelphia via Roanoke, Virginia to Augusta, Georgia (Rehder 65-66). It deposited immigrants into the Piedmont of North Carolina between the Yadkin and Catawba rivers. This migration from Pennsylvania lasted two to three generations, with each subsequent generation going farther (Rehder 67). Another

important route, The Wilderness Road branched off from the Great Wagon Road, south and west from Roanoke, Virginia. This road connected settlers to the Cumberland Gap, which granted access through the western mountains, and into another hub for Scotch-Irish settlements in northeastern Tennessee (Rehder 68).

Those settlers who entered the colonies through Charleston, South Carolina pushed into the South Carolina uplands and southwest into Georgia or northwest into the North Carolina Piedmont. From the Piedmont, Daniel Boone, James Robertson and John Sevier led settlers across the Blue Ridge Mountains into Tennessee. From South Carolina, people also moved north through the Blue Ridge Mountains through Saluda Gap, into the Asheville Basin and eventually into Tennessee (Rehder 70).

In the eighteenth century, approximately two-hundred and fifty thousand Scotch-Irish came to the nascent settlements of the Appalachian mountains. Nearly that many Germans arrived as well, as did other groups of English speakers (Drake 36-37). The Scotch-Irish people of the eighteenth century spoke an old dialect of English. This dialect remains strong in many of the mountain areas to this day. We may still observe this old language through the ubiquitous drops of the “g” at the end of words like “commencing” or “going.” But this speech characteristic is not unique among southerners. Further characteristics are words like “there” pronounced “thar” or “fire” as “far.” Often an “h” proceeds a word, for example “hit” for “it.” Appalachian scholar Richard B. Drake further explains that all of these characteristics “attest to the ancient form of English established in the Appalachian Mountains in the late eighteenth Century” (37). These speech characteristics appear in the music of the mountains, and unusual speech patterns emerge throughout the old songs.

During the process of settling the Southern Appalachians, many of the Scotch-Irish

families had been moving for generations. These people had to abandon their homes and belongings each time they moved, from England to Ulster, from Ireland to the colonies and then through the migration trails to the Southern Appalachians. Perhaps in this environment, the settlers held on to their songs so fiercely because they had given up so much else. Their ballads might have proved the best means for carrying a sense of home with them on their difficult journeys and through the hard work of carving out an existence on the steep hills of the Southern Appalachian mountains.

Part 2: Scholarly Interest

Such poetry...is in its essence an expression of our common human nature, and so of universal and indestructible interest (Child qtd. in Spencer 7).

In this section, I discuss how the ballad tradition as a whole has been preserved through the attention of outside scholars who documented the tradition as it existed in the British Isles and Southern Appalachians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the period when the pioneers of the Southern Appalachians settled the mountains and created subsistence farms, their culture and their songs remained relatively isolated due to poor roads and lack of communication. In the late nineteenth century, American professor Francis James Child became interested in the old English ballads from the British Isles. His seminal work, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, became the model and basis for future scholars on the topic. Scott B. Spencer asserts in the essay “Ballad Collecting: Impetus and Impact” that “...most of the collectors, ideas, institutions, and general fervor for the collection, study, and publication of ballads began with the pursuits of Harvard professor Francis James Child” (5).

Child's interest in the ballads stemmed from years of scholarly work on the English language. Before he embarked on his ballad study, he had edited the series “British Poets” and had written a treatise, “Observations on the Language of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales” which proved extremely important for future Chaucer scholars (Kittredge xxvi). Child was born in Boston in 1825, experienced a modest upbringing and graduated from Harvard in 1846 at the top of his class (Spencer 5). He then continued on to graduate work in Germany, studying English drama and German philology. In 1851, he returned to Harvard, where he taught for fifty years

and eventually received the Professorship of English position.

In *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Child hoped to amass every English ballad, in as many versions as he could find, into one collection. While these ballads had indeed been passed on orally, some songs had been written down in manuscripts and in some cases published. Child intended to “include every obtainable version of every extant English or Scottish ballad, with the fullest possible discussion of related songs or stories in the 'popular' literature of all nations” (Kittredge xxvii). This colossal undertaking required him to find every manuscript in existence for each of these ballads. He knew that his task required firsthand examination in order to include the most accurate information. Some of these manuscripts were tucked away in private collections, which added to the challenge. George Lyman Kittredge, his student and protégé who later became a ballad expert in his own right, explains the enormity of the task this way: “In writing the history of a single ballad, Mr Child was sometimes forced to examine hundreds of books in perhaps a dozen different languages” (xxviii-xxix). Furthermore, Child's work required an intuitive understanding of the literature in order to distinguish between an authentic piece of verse as opposed to a counterfeit (Kittredge xxx). In addition to locating written works, Child also hoped to find ballads as they were still sung in the United States and the British Islands. Through this scholarship, Child ultimately hoped to locate one original version of each ballad, which would then provide insight into the origins of this poetry and its relationship to the written and spoken word. For Child, these ballads represented man's urge to express himself. He writes, “Whenever a people in the course of of its development reaches a certain intellectual and moral stage, it will feel an impulse to express itself, and in the form of expression to which it is first impelled is, as is well known, not prose, but verse, and in fact, narrative verse” (qtd in Spencer 7). Child did not view the publication of *English and Scottish*

Pop Ballads as simply an academic pursuit. He explains, “Such poetry...is in its essence an expression of our common human nature, and so of universal and indestructible interest” (Child qtd. in Spencer 7). Thus, to Child, his undertaking might provide future scholars a better understanding of the relationship between human nature and the evolution of literary art.

In 1882, Child began printing of the work (Kittredge xxviii), but died in 1896 while working on a glossary, indexes, a bibliography and an “elaborate introduction on the general subject” which would have comprised the final volume (Kittredge xxix).

The English and Scottish Popular Ballads provides with each ballad a description of written evidence of each song, the dates, and other background information. For example, for the ballad “Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight,” Child provides thirty-eight pages for six versions of this ballad alone (v1, 23-61). This song was later collected by Cecil Sharp in Allenstand, Madison County, NC in 1916, as well as Clay County, Kentucky (Campbell and Sharp 3-8).

While Child’s work provides essential information about English literature, he examined the ballads as literature only and ignored the musical aspect. Many criticize this omission, but given the enormity of the task, Child did the English language and the world of folk study a great favor. He provided a scholarly, formal study of a previously obscure subject upon which further folklorists could begin their work. Bertrand Harris Bronson later studied the tunes in his collection *The Singing Tradition of Francis James Child*. In the meantime, Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp discovered, took down and published these ballads, this time including the music, in the Southern Appalachian mountains.

Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp—Song Catchers:

Around the turn of the twentieth century, ballad collecting began to gain momentum as

folklorists came to realize the impending threat to the ballad singing lifestyle brought on by “progress.” Child's work placed Harvard, which became known as a center for folklore studies, on the map of such scholarly pursuits. And while many followed in Child's footsteps, the next major development in the preservation and study of the ballads came with American Olive Dame Campbell and Englishman Cecil Sharp. Both of these people came to study the ballads as outsiders to the Southern Appalachians. Campbell realized quite by accident the value of these songs and the fragility of their existence, while Cecil Sharp had made his career studying folklore in the British Isles and collecting ballads as they were sung there.

Olive Dame Campbell (1882-1954) married her husband John C. Campbell and then accompanied him on a work trip with the Russel Sage Foundation. On this journey, she happened to hear the ballads sung and knew immediately the cultural value of these songs. Although she had not trained as a folklorist or even as a musician, the result of her efforts was later deemed by Cecil Sharp to be excellent work. I would argue that had she not been a woman and in the Appalachians in support of her husband's work, she might today be as well known for collecting these ballads as Cecil Sharp later became. As it is, she deserves much of the credit for preserving these ballads because Sharp came to the Appalachians at her behest. Had she not contacted him, years may have gone by before creating a record of the ballads from there areas. And in those years, countless songs would have been lost as the older generations passed on.

Olive Dame Campbell's journey with her husband began in 1908. As director of the Southern Highland Division of the Russel Sage Foundation, John C. Campbell's work encompassed gathering data about service organizations, such as schools and social programs in the mountains, and then facilitating their collaboration (Wells 262). Olive Dame Campbell did much of the record keeping and assisted her husband in his work (McCarthy 71). December

third, 1908, at the Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, Kentucky, she was struck by the performance of “Barbara Allen” by one of the students, Ada B. Smith. Although Olive Dame Campbell already knew the song, she was surprised by the unique modal, pentatonic tune unlike any she had ever encountered (McCarthy 69-70). She describes her impressions in *Appalachian Travels: The Diary of Olive Dame Campbell*:

Shall I ever forget it? The blazing fire, the young girl on her low stool before it, the soft strange strumming of the banjo—different from anything I had heard before—and then the song! I had been used to sing “Barbara Allen” as a child, but how far from that gentle tune was this—so strange, so remote, so thrilling. I was lost almost from the first note, and the pleasant room faded from sight; the singer only a voice. I saw again the long road over which we had come, the dark hills, the rocky streams bordered by tall hemlocks and hollies, the lonely cabins distinguishable at night only by the firelight faring from their chimneys. Then these, too, faded, and I seemed to be borne along into a still more dim and distant past, of which I myself was a part. (85-86)

Olive Dame Campbell's words indicate the effect that this “strange” tune had on her, so much that it evoked in her an image and a connection with the very essence of the mountains themselves. Not only that, she feels an immediate connection with a “more dim and distant past.” Campbell continues:

Of course, I would not rest until I had learned this new, fascinating “Barbara Allen”—quite an undertaking, I found, for the new intervals were subtle. Later I was to learn much about “gapped scales” and “modal tunes” and the special characteristics of these “old-timey song-ballets or love-songs,” the ballet or ballad being the words, the “song,” the melody. I was attracted by both words and songs, but it was the melodies that especially intrigued me, and I began at once to pursue them whenever I had an opportunity. The search, continued over the years, has proved one of the most illuminating and rewarding experiences of my life, leading, as it has, into the realms of pure and lasting beauty and opening the way into many related and inexhaustible fields—folk hymns, folk games, folk dances, folk tales, folk arts, folk material in general, here and abroad. (86)

The day after the fateful performance of “Barbara Allen,” Olive Dame Campbell asked this student to sing for her again, so that she could take down the notes. Remarkably, her

untrained ear accurately translated the song to the written page. As she continued to live and travel in the mountains, she took down more songs in much the same way. By 1915, she had taken down between fifty and sixty ballads “notated as sung, in each singer's own rhythm, mode and key” (McCarthy 72). Ballad scholar William Bernard McCarthy lauds Campbell's importance in preserving the tradition in this way: “...she was one of the first to realize the vast extent of the heritage and the unique value of the musical aspect of that heritage. And in taking down songs herself and then inviting Cecil Sharp to complete what she had begun, she found uniquely efficacious means to ensure that this heritage, musical and textual, would be documented competently” (70).

While Olive Dame Campbell accomplished a great deal on her own, she also understood that a scholarly study of the ballad called for a professional's methods. Cecil Sharp (1849-1924), a folklorist from England who had collected ballads and dances in his home country, was working in the United States in 1915 because of the interference of World War I on his work in England. With the help of William Langdon of the Russel Sage Foundation, O. D. Campbell contacted Cecil Sharp. She traveled from Asheville to Lincoln Massachusetts where Sharp was staying while incapacitated by gout. Olive Dame Campbell writes about this meeting:

I explained that I had to learn each song from the singer, getting him to repeat again and again until I knew the tune, and had written down the words. I would then hunt down a piano or organ—by no means always available—and set down the tune as well as I could. I was, of course, no musician! ...”Don't you know that this is very unscientific?” was the uncompromising comment. “I had felt sure,” Mr Sharp explained, “that there must be such survivals current in America.” People had brought songs to him, but only now he found any trace of what seemed genuine. (*Life and Work* 420)

Although Sharp criticized Olive Dame Campbell's “unscientific” method, he later praised her accomplishments in a letter to a Mr. Glenn, who shared it with Campbell. Sharp wrote:

I have found that the value of the material that she has already harvested is even

higher than I had estimated. To me it is quite wonderful that anyone so far away from, and so little in touch with, any work of the kind that has been done elsewhere should have set herself such a high standard, and in effect reached it. She has just the combination of scientific and artistic spirit which work of this kind needs if it is to be of any use to posterity. Handicapped she is, no doubt, and avowedly, so far as musical technicalities go, but, nevertheless, owing to a very retentive memory and natural gift for music—particularly for melody—even where she has been unable to write the tunes down correctly she has been able to sing them to me—I am sure with great accuracy.

What she has so far accomplished is of great value, but I gather that it is after all only the beginning. The field that has yielded what she has harvested must be a very rich one, and its exploration must be thoroughly done as soon as possible, for I gather from her that present conditions are rapidly undermining and destroying the traditions.” (qtd. in O.D. Campbell, *Life and Work* 477-478)

In this excerpt, we see the extent of Olive Dame Campbell's skill and talent, but the warmth and grace of Sharp's personality also becomes apparent. He is free with his praise for Campbell and gives her all the credit she deserves. We see more of this generous response in a letter he writes to her later, saying, “But please understand that I do not wish for the world to queer your pitch, so that I shall not move on the matter any further except with your complete concurrence. Indeed, it would be quite impossible for me or anyone else to do the work without your good help” (O.D. Campbell, *Life and Work* 421). In other words, eager as he was to take on the work, Sharp did not wish to take over her project and diminish any of her accomplishments. This humble and respectful attitude would prove important for Sharp in his endeavors in the mountains on his collecting expeditions. John C. Campbell himself knew that the project would have to be handled with some delicacy. He writes “...temperament—or personality, perhaps is a better word—is essential in any phase of this mountain work. If scholarship could be coupled with the right personality, then one has the ideal” (qtd. in O.D. Campbell *Life and Work* 423).

Cecil Sharp, along with his assistant Maude Karpeles, took up Olive Dame Campbell's cause, and the resulting work, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, proved to be one of the most influential collections of its kind against which all future collections would be

measured. Ballad scholar Dorothy Wells explains, “In the scrupulous care with which he studied every text and collated it with its kin, in his search for parallel treatments in other forms of literature, and in his critical discrimination, he ranks with Child. His study of the music of the songs, moreover, makes him so far indisputably the 'Child' of the ballad tune” (263).

Sharp and Karpeles spent forty-six weeks collecting songs. In that time, they gathered a total of 1612 tunes, or about thirty-five a week. This figure should especially impress us when we take into account the challenging conditions under which he worked, the difficult travel and the requirements of breaking into closed, mountain communities.² Furthermore, ballads are lengthy stories, and he most likely had to listen to the same singer perform the same song multiple times in order to take down the entire piece. They often had to walk long distances to find their elusive sources. Sharp suffered from asthma also, which left him at times quite incapacitated (Wells 266). Much of Sharp's success stems from his warm and humble personality, which John C. Campbell characterized as necessary for such a task. Dorothy Wells writes about Sharp that “His approach was always without any tinge of patronage, with a respect for the dignity of the singer and with an evident love of the song” (267). For example, when Sharp met Jane Hicks Gentry, a singer in Hot Springs, NC, he hoped to make her feel more comfortable in singing for him by offering to sit in another room (Smith 68).³ In one case, Sharp and Karpeles paid for the school clothes of a young girl, Emma Hensley, who had sung for them in the Hot Springs area (Karpeles 152).

² It was rumored in several of his collection locations that Sharp and Karpeles were German spies (Karpeles 165). The United States Government leased the Mountain Park Hotel in Hot Springs, NC as a German internment camp for German officers and crews of German commercial ships seized in war-time (Smith 47).

³ Gentry's sharp wit comes through in her reply to Sharp: “If you can stand to look at me, I can surely stand to look at you” (Smith 68). Gentry had spent time with outsiders before. Writer Irving Bacheller became fascinated by her on a trip to Hot Springs. In fact, he wrote a book about her. Unfortunately, this treasure burned in a house fire in 1917 before publication (Smith 55). Gentry is known not just for ballad singing, but also for her masterful renditions of the “Jack Tales.” These American renditions of European fairy tales seem to come from the Beech Mountain area of North Carolina, an area that Gentry's family settled before moving to Madison County (Smith 58).

Sharp has been given credit for bringing these songs and their heritage in the Appalachians into the light of scholastic study. Ballad scholar Evelyn Wells describes Sharp's influence this way: "Elsewhere in the mountains, where there was no recognition as yet of the value and beauty of native songs, he was able to stir a spark that never died out. Today, all over the Southern Appalachians, the folk movement embraces a recreation program which emphasizes its local riches, largely because for three years a man traveled through the mountains with a divining rod which tapped the wellsprings of native music" (67).

While Sharp's work created an enormous impact on the ballad tradition, his results also inspired criticism. D. K. Wilgus, author of *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*, claims that Sharp's work contains "a few unexplained collations and emendations" which should have been made known to the reader (172). Wilgus levels another complaint on Sharp, saying that he "ranged widely but not deeply" (171). Furthermore, Wilgus complains that while Sharp did include a few native ballads in his collection, he focused mostly on Child ballads and left out the nineteenth century "sentimental songs." As a result, Sharp's collection may present a rather skewed view of the repertoire of these singers. By example, Wilgus points out that Karpeles admits omitting sentimental examples like "The Little Rosewood Casket" saying "It is not a good song; it is not good music...I did not bother to record it" (qtd in Wilgus 171). Wilgus charges Sharp and Karpeles with "esthetic bias" and "musical purism" (171).

From Wilgus' criticisms, we may gather that though Sharp's collection is extensive, it may not fully represent the breadth of the singing tradition in the mountains. The singers did not categorize their songs as non-Child or Child or hymns—they simply sang what they were used to singing and what they personally liked. The value of Sharp's work, though, depends on the goal of the research. If his aim were to understand and report the breadth of the repertoire in the

Appalachians, perhaps Sharp falls short. However, he focused on capturing the old songs and the tradition that had grown out of it in order to preserve the songs for future generations, a goal I believe he accomplished resoundingly. As he could not publish everything he came across, Sharp had to exercise his judgment.

Other influences on Sharp's collection may have included weather events and religious outposts. Modern-day Madison County ballad singer Joe Penland points out that, in July of 1916, when Sharp visited Madison County, NC, Western North Carolina had experienced a five-hundred year flood which washed out railroad tracks, bridges and roads.⁴ This event severely limited Sharp's access to remote areas. Because the damage affected Hot Springs much less than other areas, it was more accessible (personal interview). As a result, Sharp succeeded in collecting seventy songs from Jane Gentry there—a significant part of his collection. In addition, Penland points out that the singers Sharp found, in most cases, were chosen by Presbyterian missionaries⁵ who might have done their own editing of the songs, leaving out what they felt was inappropriate (personal interview). Regardless of the short-comings, weather or human influences involved in Sharp's publication, we are lucky for the work he did, which gives us an extensive picture of the traditional ballad in the places he visited, at a time before the tradition had completely died out.

As an outsider to the Appalachians, and as a professional folklorist who had previously worked in the British Isles, Sharp's observations lend us a unique comparison between the singing practices of the Southern Appalachians in the early twentieth century and the singing tradition in the birthplace of the songs. In particular, Sharp identified a style in the Appalachians, which he termed a “vocal peculiarity.” That is, singers displayed a “habit of dwelling arbitrarily

⁴ Karpeles also refers to this weather event in her book *Cecil Sharp: His Life and Work*, page 143.

⁵ Confirmed in Karpeles 145.

upon certain notes of the melody, generally the weaker accents” (“Introduction” x). This vocal style, he believed, lent the songs an improvisational quality and a “freedom from rule which is very pleasing” (“Introduction” x). Sharp also noted a difference in the age population among the singers. He writes, “Instead...of having to confine my attention to the aged, as in England where no one under the age of seventy ordinarily possesses the folk-song tradition, I discovered that I could get what I wanted from pretty nearly every one I met, young and old” (“Introduction” vii-viii). From this description, we may conclude that the ballad tradition was already dying in England by the early twentieth century, and yet, in the Southern Appalachians, it still thrived.

Not only were the songs sung by old and young alike, but Sharp found that the singing tradition in the Appalachians underscored and pervaded all aspects of daily life. He explains, “I found myself for the first time in my life in a community in which singing was as common and almost as universal as speaking” (“Introduction” viii). Sharp contrasted this pervasive quality of the singing with what he had experienced in the British Isles, where he observed that singing was done for the entertainment of others by a “professional caste of specialists.” In contrast, Appalachians sang daily “with the avocations of everyday life” (“Introduction” viii). In other words, while singing had become an art form suitable only for those with special training in the British Isles, singing became an integral part of the fabric of life for the Appalachians. The New World singers did not perform their music in hopes of effecting a certain reaction from an audience, but rather, concentrated more on the song, the story, and the expression of the music itself.

But what is the significance of the work of Olive Dame Campbell, Cecil Sharp and Maude Karpeles? We can say of course, that the written legacy will indubitably assist us in preserving the tradition. Karpeles herself, while not an impartial observer, writes in 1967:

Practically all Cecil Sharp's...singers are now dead, but in the Appalachian Mountains of America there are several who have had the joy of re-learning the words of a forgotten song from Cecil Sharp's printed collection. A daughter of one of his best singers said: "I do not keep mother's songs in mind as I used to, but I know I have only to look at them in Mr. Cecil Sharp's book and they will come back to me just exactly right." (195)

In this way, Cecil Sharp as an outsider to the Appalachian tradition, helped not only to document the tradition, but also may have helped those within the tradition to preserve it and foster a renewed value of the material to those who may have taken their heritage for granted. Sharp's work serves as another vital episode of this crucial give-and-take between the oral ballad tradition and the written word.

Part 3: Madison County North Carolina and “That Ol' Hollerin’”

In this section of the project, I will discuss how the ballad tradition has been preserved in the Southern Appalachians through a unique combination of initial isolation and later, interest from outsiders. In general, geographical isolation of a culture protects a tradition from alteration or dilution through the influence of other cultures. Yet isolation alone is not enough to sustain a heritage inevitably. That isolation may eventually lead to a tradition's being unknown to the larger world. If the population that sustains the tradition is small enough, the tradition is also in danger of fading away as an older generation dies. This threat can be magnified when progress offers a younger generation other forms of entertainment, especially if a given culture doesn't understand the value of its tradition. In this case, the tradition may be taken for granted or even shunned. Outside interest in a tradition, like what we have already seen through Cecil Sharp and others like him, can preserve knowledge for posterity, and at the same time also increase perceived value of a tradition to modern members of the previously isolated culture.

This dynamic played out in Madison County, North Carolina beginning in the nineteenth century and continues today. Years of geographical isolation protected the culture which nurtured and preserved the ballad tradition there. When the area did open up, interest from outside of their community inspired residents to realize the value of their heritage and reinvigorated the interest in the ballad tradition. As a result, this area, which remained extremely isolated until recent times, continues to serve as a stronghold of the ballad tradition today. In the previous section of this Project, I discussed the ballad collecting efforts of Olive Dame Campbell, Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles. Sharp and Karpeles in particular spent much of their collecting effort of 1915 and 1916 in Madison County, NC. Situated just north of Asheville, those hills, hollows and

laurel thickets have fostered at least eight generations of ballad singers. But why has this tradition persisted in Madison County specifically? Some would simply say isolation, which indeed factors into the longevity of the tradition there. However, I would argue that it is the combination of isolation followed by outside influence and interest which has allowed the ballad tradition to persist in Madison County in the face of cultural development and modern day threats. A wider audience for the traditions of this rural community arrived at just the right time to inspire county residents to value their tradition and take steps to preserve it.

Cecil Sharp might have served as the first indication to the Madison County residents that their music held special value. It is difficult to say whether other mountain communities in the early twentieth century were as important to the tradition as those in Madison County, but we should take Sharp's enthusiasm for collecting in the area as an indication of its significance. As a knowledgeable and experienced collector, Sharp would not have stayed there long if his work had not yielded good results. During his collecting expeditions, he noted other locations where he remained only a few days because he didn't find what he considered useful (Karpeles 166). In addition, he observed other Appalachian communities where "progress" had eroded the ballad singing tradition, causing people to "soon drop their old-fashioned ways and begin to ape town manners" (Sharp qtd in Karpeles 159). But Madison County proved fertile ground for his collection. In 1916, between July and August, Sharp and Karpeles collected 163 songs, simply by staying in Laurel Valley and walking to the surrounding areas of Allenstand, Allegheny, Big Laurel, Carmen and Rice's Cove (Wellman 143). In the fall of 1916, Sharp and Karpeles collected two-hundred-fifty-nine songs from Madison County communities alone. Mrs. Mary Bullman Sands of Allenstand proved a treasure-trove of music by providing an impressive twenty-five songs. (We will learn more about this remarkable source later in this paper.) Three

days in Carmen, NC yielded thirty-five songs from the Hensley family. Jane Hicks Gentry in Hot Springs, also Madison County, gave Sharp nineteen ballads in two days—songs that Madison County author Manly Wade Wellman labels “manifestly important to scholars” (144). Gentry later sang more for Sharp, giving him a total of sixty-four songs for his collection (Wellman 143).

Because of its isolation and challenging geography, Madison County had provided the perfect conditions for a ballad sanctuary from the time of its European settlement in the 1790s to the early 1900s. Most of the musicians who sang for Sharp in Madison County seem to be descended from one settler, Roderick Shelton. Of the thirty-nine singers who contributed to Sharp's collection, twenty-eight descended directly from Roderick Shelton, three were spouses of his descendants and five had family members who married his descendants (Smith 74). Even now, a significant number of Madison County natives are related to each other in one way or another, through marriage or by blood. Current Madison County resident and ballad singer Sheila Kay Adams believes that it was this isolation and the resulting intermarriage that played a large role in preserving the tradition. She explains, “There were four families –the Nortons, Rays, Chandlers and Wallins, that intermarried, until that music tradition, gene, whatever it is, got passed down...Out of [my] seventy-two first cousins, over half of 'em play an instrument or sing” (interview). In addition to family bonds which strengthened the tradition, Madison County's isolation and rural atmosphere contributed to their style of singing. Adams explains that her relatives often sang out-of-doors, in a style which she says Inez Chandler termed “off-the-porch-strong” (interview).

These Madison County residents remained relatively isolated long into the twentieth century. Madison County musician Joe Penland explains that proper roads to many of the

Madison County communities did not even exist before the 1990s. Even as late as the 1960s and 1970s, roads to the village of Sodom, where singer Sheila Kay Adams still lives and where Joe Penland used to go each weekend to learn the music, weren't more than what he calls "wagon ruts" (personal interview). These conditions are all changing now due to general progress and specific road projects. For example, in 2003 the Interstate 26 project, the largest and most expensive road building scheme in North Carolina's history, carved out a route through Madison County, connecting Asheville, North Carolina with Johnson City, Tennessee. This project moved an enormous twenty-six million cubic yards of earth (Amberg interview). Not only did the construction move rock, it also dislocated forty-two families, some of whom had owned their land for five generations. In addition, several churches and cemeteries were also moved.⁶ Unsurprisingly, these circumstances caused controversy. Gladys Lance of the NCDOT explains, "These were the most difficult negotiations we ever had. No one wanted to move, though not everyone was opposed to the road itself" (Amberg, box 25, folder "I-26 Research and Notes"). Although Interstate 26 signaled progress for Madison County, plenty was lost in terms of land, community and culture. Along with this project has come gated communities and retirement destinations. A place that used to be known as "Bloody Madison" due to its reputation for violence and to the legacy of a Civil War massacre, now euphemistically calls itself "The Jewel of the Blue Ridge" (Amberg lecture).

So many transplants have recently arrived in Madison County, that long-time residents notice the cultural and demographic shift in the community. Singer Joe Penland, who has lived in Madison County all his life, describes the transformation of his hometown saying, "I grew up around here in a predominantly Madison County culture. That's not what we have now. When I

⁶ It should be noted that Madison County residents take special care of the graves of their ancestors. Each year, families observe a "decoration day" when they gather at the grave sites, tend the landscaping there, and honor the lives of their loved-ones (Amberg *Sodom Laurel* 159).

was growing up here, ninety percent of the people who live here were born here. And now, less than fifty percent of the people that live here were born here...It constantly dilutes our...cultural heritage ” (personal interview).

But before Madison County's hills and hollows opened up, the ballad tradition thrived as residents sang for work and pleasure. Not long after Sharp mined Madison County for its musical treasures, one “insider” to the mountain culture became convinced that a wider audience would help to preserve their precious traditions. This insider, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, was born in 1882 in Madison County, but later became a long-time resident of nearby Buncombe County. His learned family instilled in him a value of education. A shrewd businessman and salesman, Lunsford was skilled in many fields, but his talents as a performer and his interest in the music of the region led him to collect folk songs. His love for the musical and dance traditions of the area inspired him to call attention to these practices from outside the mountain communities (Thomas 289). He hoped to bring mountain traditions out of the hollows and into the light of a larger arena. In 1928, the Asheville Chamber of Commerce asked Lunsford to organize the music and dance portion of the Rhododendron Festival, a gathering in Asheville held to capitalize on the growing automobile tourist market (Thomas 291). (The city of Asheville experienced much growth in the early twentieth century. At the same time, many of the communities of Madison County, while geographically close to Asheville, remained difficult to access by car and therefore, did not necessarily experience the same type of growth.) By 1930, the festival's popularity allowed it to branch off into its own entity, the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival (Thomas 292). This festival, which continues to be held in Asheville, has been instrumental in keeping the folk traditions of music and dance alive. Another festival, the Bascom Lamar Lunsford festival has been taking place at Mars Hill College in Madison County

for forty-six years (“October 4, 2014 47th Bascom Lamar Lunsford”). This festival, which regularly features dance, traditional music and ballad singing, is one that many current ballad singers seem to gravitate towards. Although Lunsford believed that appreciation by a wider audience would invigorate local mountain traditions, he applied strict regulations to the acts that he would allow in his festival, accepting only the music he deemed “authentic” to be performed (Thomas 295).

Because Lunsford survived into the early 1970s, he must have witnessed the bloom of the national folk music movement which gave rise to his dream for a wider audience for mountain traditions. His vision proved correct, for this outside interest proved critical to continuing the ballad tradition, particularly in Madison County. In the 1960s, internationally known groups like Peter, Paul and Mary and the Kingston Trio created popular hits from either traditional English ballads or native ballads that had emerged from mountain communities in similar styles. During this time, the popularity of the folk music genre inspired singer-songwriters to create their own songs and perform solo, accompanying themselves on acoustic guitar. National performers such as Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell participated in this trend. Music festivals featured this genre and lent a tremendous amount of energy to the traditional music scene. The ballad singing tradition was swept up with the wave and in turn, the overwhelming popularity of the ballad tradition brought reverence for the tradition from its own participants. For example, present-day Madison County ballad singer Lena Jean Ray grew up around traditional music. Her father was the renowned fiddler Byard Ray. However, she strayed from the tradition in her teenage years and later, as a young woman, moved to New York City where the folk music revival was thriving. This outside interest in her own heritage ultimately drew her back to her roots in Madison County (Thomas 281). Even Cecil Sharp's assistant, Maude Karpeles, writing in 1967,

understood the importance of the renewed interest in the ballad tradition. She writes, “The folk-music tradition is dying’ is an almost universal cry...Yet it never has died. In fact, in some ways the traditional practice of folk song in the present day is more vital than it was in Cecil Sharp’s life time. For tradition is more sensitive to public opinion and the present popular revival of folk music has led to the restoration in the minds of country people of songs that had been lying fallow for many years” (195).

Madison County singer Joe Penland also credits the folk music revival with sparking his interest in learning the old songs. While his own father disparagingly termed ballad singing “that ol’ hollerin’,” Penland’s generation regained a love for the tradition. In his words,

...during that time, there was this craze--a folk music craze going on in America...So people were taking the ballads and singing the ballads--people were actually taking songs that were recorded by people we knew and making national hits out of them...Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan...one after the other that took these songs and made ’em popular with the new culture...the revolutionary culture...Luckily, there were people coming here, like John Cohen, who were interested in collecting these things. And they collected from our friends, and made them sort of celebrities, which made them want to sing and tell the stories more. Because I think there was a time, after the radio, that people quit singing the songs. (personal interview)

Here, Penland highlights another aspect of the ballad tradition’s struggle and ultimate survival. On the one hand, technology, in the form of the radio and recordings, for a time adversely affected the tradition in Madison County through an influx of music from other places. By contrast, through the radio and recordings, the nation also became aware of the strength of the folk tradition and gave the singers a wider audience. Now, the internet plays a similar role, providing distractions in terms of our attention, but at the same time, giving a forum for teaching, learning and ultimately preserving the songs. The usefulness of the internet for these purposes will be discussed in more depth later in the paper.

As this folk music revival garnered a general interest in the songs and the lifestyle available in the still remote Madison County, properly motivated outsiders arrived there eager to learn from long-time area residents. Traditional musician Peter Gott came to Madison County in pursuit of its music. Gott explains that he was searching for a place where he could hear and learn traditional banjo music. He found Madison County had exactly what he was looking for. He happened to hear a recording of Madison County banjo player Obray Ramsey playing “Pretty Polly” (Sharp #39 “The Cruel Ship's Carpenter”) and traditional tune “Little Maggie.” He says, “I thought it was the best thing I'd ever heard in my life. I didn't study for finals or anything--I just listened to those records” (*The Madison County Project*). Gott, in turn, inspired musician and filmmaker John Cohen to come to Madison County. Cohen's interest in the singers of Madison County inspired him to produce a film entitled *End of an Old Song* about the legendary Dillard Chandler (1907-1992). Chandler, one of a long line of ballad singers, is said to have had one of the best voices for ballads in the world. Chandler manifested the oral tradition by reportedly knowing hundreds of ballads, despite his illiteracy (Penland interview).

During this time, John Cohen became focused on making recordings of the singers in Madison County. In the documentary *The Madison County Project*, he describes Dillard Chandler's bewilderment when, in 1963, Cohen asked if he could record him singing ballads. “There was this big wall of silence--not resistance...I was there an awfully long time trying to explain to him why he should sing for my microphone...There's something about this music--it would be so good if other people could hear it” (*The Madison County Project*). From this account, we can see that clearly, Dillard Chandler had never anticipated the interest in his singing from a wider audience. Cohen further explains the significance of his films and recordings:

All the years before, all the ballads were done by classically trained people or a few Library of Congress singers of ballads but the songs...were rightfully in front. But here, to see these people in their setting and they're such interesting people that I thought that should be communicated on film...It wasn't just the song, it wasn't just the text. Mostly ballads have been studied for their texts, this variant and that variant...I was always trying to put a human face to the music...I was making films and recordings of people who weren't interested in making films and recordings. They hadn't desired to go out. They hadn't desired to be on film. And maybe that's what made it interesting. (*The Madison County Project*)

Cohen's wish to document the people who actually sang the songs, rather than the songs on their own, seems to mark a turning point in the study of the ballad tradition. Singer Joe Penland, who learned the music directly from the musicians in the film, doesn't share Cohen's enthusiasm for the "human face" presented in the films. He explains, "I've seen John Cohen's film and they're all just sitting there like they're scared to damn death! And most of 'em are thinking about 'How much money is he gonna give me?' It's useless as a tool, other than seeing their face" (personal interview).

Regardless of the value of Cohen's film and field recordings, in this case, this outside interest in the people of the ballad and traditional music scene eventually led to some unfortunate misunderstandings about the use of the recordings. As singers began to perform for festivals, strangers told them about seeing or hearing a recording of them. This revelation led to the belief that others were making money from their talent, without sharing in the financial benefits. Sheila Kay Adams explains, "Wherever they would go, somebody would inevitably come up to them and say, 'I heard you on this record that John Cohen put out.' To them, it started to sound like there were millions of these records out there because people would say, 'Oh look, here I've got this record with your picture on it'" (*The Madison County Project*). In fact, while Cohen's work may have given the Madison County singers much deserved recognition and external respect, his efforts were focused on the documentary aspect of this culture and its

traditions, rather than on reaping commercial profits.⁷

The singers' misconceptions continued to build. Singer Doug Wallin one day said to John Cohen, "That record you made of my parents [Lee and Berzilla Wallin]--that's all over the place...it's probably all over the country in jukeboxes everywhere, and you're keeping our money." The conflict finally came to a head in one incident. Peter Gott and John Cohen frequently spent time at Doug Wallin's house. One day Doug explained to them that they were welcome to come, but that he didn't want any more recording. In Gott's words, "Well, John wouldn't take no for an answer and kept begging until finally, Doug lost his temper and took a swing at him. And he said, 'Get outta here and don't ever come back! And that goes for both of you!'...For me it was the end of a beautiful friendship not just with Doug but with his whole family. I never went back" (*The Madison County Project*).

Despite the pain that his work may have caused, John Cohen nonetheless maintains that his efforts in Madison County provided a gift to the greater world. He insists,

I feel very good that the record did something. It got the word out about Madison County and that these were a good bunch of singers and then came in and did more with it and did more and more and that made the local people more interested in what they already had. It also made them proud and they started getting invitations to go to festivals and sing here and do something with the state and do something with the national endowment and get these rewards and awards and get a reputation...I don't think that would have happened if Peter and myself hadn't done what we did. (*The Madison County Project*)

Ballad singer Bobby McMillon agrees with John Cohen's assessment. He says, "I think John Cohen's contribution is, and Peter Gott shares some of the spotlight on this, if it hadn't of been for them, these people's lives would've been played out and nobody would ever have known" (*The Madison County Project*). McMillon elaborates, "So much of what we know about the old time people and the old time ways would be dead if Yankees hadn't come into the South and

⁷The idea of receiving monetary rewards does not seem to have occurred to Cecil Sharp's singers. At least, I came across no evidence of it.

recorded it. Just think of all them people that came to the South to talk to people personally that have taken it down and kept record of it at a time when the Southerners themselves either were livin' in it and wasn't aware of what they were doing" (Interview 19 Nov). I agree with Cohen and McMillon, despite the hard feelings that may have arisen from these misunderstandings. These conflicts were unavoidable growing pains which allowed the tradition to be preserved at a time of extreme peril for them, when the older generation would have been disappearing and their songs with them.

Other projects by outsiders to the tradition have allowed an understanding of the people who sang the songs and lived the lifestyle. Though not necessarily focused on music, documentary photographer Rob Amberg's *Sodom Laurel Album* displays photographs and stories of his experiences with singer Dellie Chandler Norton and her family. In addition to the photographs, the book also provides a compact disc of the singers and interviews with them. Amberg focuses on the personalities of these singers and their rustic lifestyle in the hills of Madison County. Through this work, he documents and preserves for us a lost way of life in the mountains of North Carolina, much closer to those early settlers who brought the songs than to the rest of the United States.

Outside interest like that of Rob Amberg, John Cohen, Peter Gott and the followers of the folk music revival came at just the right time to preserve the heritage of the ballads. Without this timing, the tradition might have dwindled as the older generation died out. If all of these performers had been discovered twenty years later, it might have been too late for them to share their heritage with a wider audience. I speculate that it is possible to lose an oral tradition within a single generation. Furthermore, without a wider audience, the old songs would have been like the proverbial tree falling in the woods without anyone to hear it. At least one of the elders in

Madison County, Dellie Chandler Norton, at some point began to understand the importance of carrying on this tradition and what it would take to do so. One of the tradition's most prominent spokespersons, Sheila Kay Adams, explains here how Norton instilled in her an understanding that this tradition would be lost if a special effort weren't made to preserve it:

I remember one time Granny [Dellie Chandler Norton] and I went to a round robin. [An event where singers gather and take turns singing ballads in a circle.] I was seventeen, and I had driven all the older ladies to the singing. After they got into this big circle, it was announced that one of the singers had recently passed away. I was out in the lobby...and Granny sent for me...So I sat down next to her, and she leaned over and put her hand on my knee. She told me that she had been looking around at all the people in the circle, and she realized how old they were, and she had thought, "If we don't get some young folks to singing these old love songs, it's all gonna all be gone! When these folks here are gone, every song they know will be gone too, unless somebody young learns them." She appointed me. (Fussel and Kruger 154)

Robert Amberg, who lived with and photographed Dellie Norton, reinforces Adams' comments, writing, "At her core, Dellie was a teacher, and she understood the importance of passing on those ballads, family histories, and knowledge of the land to new generations" (Amberg "Introduction" xxii).

Today, Sheila Kay Adams continues Dellie Norton's mission to promote the tradition to the younger generation. Adams inspired another eighth-generation ballad singer, Denise Norton O'Sullivan and her sisters Dee Dee Norton Bucker and Donna Ray Norton. Adams encouraged O'Sullivan to learn the ballads when O'Sullivan was as young as thirteen. O'Sullivan also learned the songs from Dellie Norton, her great-grandmother, but Adams reinforced that tradition. Adams encourages all of the younger generation to keep the songs going by explaining that they need to adapt the tradition to their everyday lives. She says, "...if you can take it and make it a part of you and a part of your everyday life...whether Denise sings to her little boy...driving back and forth to soccer practice like I used to do with mine or whether she's sitting on the porch over

at Granny's, what difference does it make as long as this next generation grabs hold of it" (*The Madison County Project*).

As the ballad tradition of Madison County found its wider audience, awards and opportunities for its musicians followed. In 1976, a group of singers from Madison County was invited to go to Washington, DC to sing in the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival. The festival usually lasts for two weeks in the summer as part of the Fourth of July holiday but, in 1976, it was extended for three months as part of the United States' Bicentennial celebration ("Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Mission and History"). For most of the Madison County singers, this would be their first experience with plane travel as well as their first exposure to a national audience. The group included Dellie Norton and her sister Berzilla Wallin, Cas Wallin and Sheila Kay Adams. The group also attended the North Carolina Folklife Festival that same summer at the Eno River state park in Durham, NC (McMillon Interview 19 Nov). Eighth generation ballad singer Denise Norton O'Sullivan explains how impressed she was when her great-grandmother Dellie Norton sang for the World's Fair in Knoxville, TN in 1982. "Now that was cool." she says, her voice brimming with reverence for her older relative (*The Madison County Project*). The accolades continued to arrive for Madison County singers. In 1990, the North Carolina Arts Council awarded Dellie Norton a North Carolina Folk Heritage Award. Her nephew Doug Wallin had received one as well in 1988 (Amberg *Sodom Laurel* 149).

The ballad tradition persists in Madison County because of this unusual combination of years of physical isolation and later, fortuitous external influence, which occurred at just the right time in history to preserve and prolong the ballad tradition there. Madison County's isolation and its resulting inter-marriage created a kind of "royal family" of ballad singing. Modern day singer Donna Ray Norton summarizes this family's role in the county's history this

way: “Some people's family are...lawyers or they're doctors or they're police officers or firemen, but this is *our* family thing...this is what we were given. And I'm an eighth generation ballad singers so...that's a long time” (“Songs of Appalachia”). Now, with outsiders realizing the physical beauty and other benefits of Madison County, and as roads have increased its accessibility, it remains to be seen how this influx will affect the tradition. Will it erode the cultural heritage, as Joe Penland maintains, or will it inject an unforeseen vitality into its already strong musical traditions?

Part 4: One Eye on the Past and One on the Future

In studying the ballad tradition, I also spoke with present-day ballad singers. During the months of November 2013 through March 2014, I conducted interviews with Denise Norton O'Sullivan and her sister Dee Dee Norton Buckner, Joe Penland, Bobby McMillon and Patrick and Kay Crouch. Questions included how they learned the ballads, if they thought the ballad tradition would survive, what, if any, efforts they made to preserve the tradition and what songs in particular they chose to sing. Most of these singers learned the music through family influence or through exposure from their surrounding community. Many of them also expanded on their original training and studied the ballads through their own scholarly pursuits. Each of these musicians reflects a variety of influences and paths to the ballad, and have been influenced within and without the tradition. These singers show us that the ballad tradition does not exist in a pure state, but that singers always mix genres, be it sacred and secular, or country and popular. Through interacting with these singers, I gained an understanding of how they personally became involved in the tradition and what songs they actually sing. I wanted to know where they believe the tradition is going and if they believe the ballad tradition will survive. While some are ambivalent about its survival, it appears that the ballad tradition endures, but in a different capacity, as it has always interacted with the technology and the times around it.

The most striking trend in the ballad tradition today is its transformation from a private pursuit to a public, performance-oriented activity. In the early twentieth century, Cecil Sharp noted that singers in England performed the songs for an audience, while the people he met in the Southern Appalachians sang as part of everyday life. In the introduction to *English Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*, Sharp describes singing in England this way, "With us, of

course, singing is an entertainment, something done by others for our delectation, the cult and close preserve of a professional caste of specialists. The fact has been forgotten that singing...can be practiced without any preliminary study or special training; that every normal human being can sing just as everyone can talk” (“Introduction” viii). In the Southern Appalachians, however, Sharp encountered singing as part of work, home life and community gatherings. This practice seems to have continued for many years after Sharp's visit. But by 2014, nearly one hundred years after Sharp's journey, it appears that the ballad tradition in the Southern Appalachians has gone the way of England in the early twentieth century. That is, singing in the Southern Appalachians has transformed into a performance-oriented activity and shifted away from being a part of everyday practice. Even though the singing tradition has changed in this manner, the ballads continue to thrive, sometimes as part of a newer tradition, and continue to interact with the world around them.

Traditionalists and Revivalists

Before presenting the musicians themselves, it will be helpful to discuss some terminology. Dr. Kara Rogers Thomas lays out the following schema for understanding the ways that traditional musicians have come to and perpetuated their craft. These musicians usually fall into two camps: *Traditionalists* or *Revivalists*. Traditionalists grew up around traditional music, whether through family connections, geographical exposure, or both. Traditionalists often are either Continuous Traditionalists, those who participate in their tradition throughout their lives, or Non-continuous Traditionalists, musicians who took a break from music between growing up within the tradition and returning to their roots.

By contrast, *Revivalists* grow up outside the tradition but then seek out traditional music. Usually, Revivalists are either “rural” or “transplanted.” Rural Revivalists physically move into

an area in order to participate in a specific musical tradition, but they also embrace the lifestyle of their new surroundings by participating in community activities and adopting the local customs. By contrast, Transplanted Revivalists move into an area to participate in traditional music, but form their own community, do not mix with the locals and don't subscribe to the lifestyle of their new community. Tension and conflict sometimes arises between the Revivalists and the Traditionalists surrounding strong opinions about what constitutes “authentic” forms of traditional music. (277).⁸

The musicians I interviewed all fall into the Traditionalist category. They were brought up within the traditional music community, sometimes exposed to the ballads in their families, and other times sought out other ways to pursue their craft and interest. While all musicians cannot belong fully in one category or another, this terminology provides a short-hand way of describing the manner in which different musicians have come to their craft.

The Musicians:

Denise Norton O'Sullivan, her sister Dee Dee Norton Buckner and their families:

On November 20th, 2013 I spoke with these sisters at the Madison County Library, which perches high in the hills above the town of Marshall, NC. Denise Norton O'Sullivan, a Madison County native and eighth generation ballad singer, began singing the ballads before she could read. She was born into the Madison County “royal family” of ballad singing. Her great-grandmother, the legendary Dellie Chandler Norton, taught her the songs, as did the well known

⁸ See Joe Penland's comment about the “purists.”

singer, Inez Chandler (“Denise Norton O’Sullivan” blueridgeheritage.com). Although O’Sullivan was born in the early 1970s, she well remembers the rustic conditions of the remote areas of Madison County at that time. She fondly describes going to “Granny Dell’s” [Dellie Norton] house and washing dishes in a tub because there was no running water. “But we loved it!” she insists. As a young woman, O’Sullivan lived with Dellie Norton in 1991 and 1992 and remembers the way of life there using a ringer washing machine and cooking on a wood stove. She recalls the gatherings of relatives and neighbors, where they sang and picked together, or held dances in an abandoned building in Sodom, NC.

Though O’Sullivan’s relatives taught her the ballads, they taught her religious songs as well. As with most singers, her music was not restricted just to the ballad tradition alone, but O’Sullivan sang popular music, rock and roll and country as well. She remembers “performing” “Ruby, Don’t Take Your Love to Town” accompanied by the jukebox at Sodom’s country store, using a pool table as her stage.

While she always loved the ballads, O’Sullivan did not sing in public for a number of years and therefore qualifies as a Non-continuous Traditionalist. The ballad singing tradition proved resilient in O’Sullivan. Although she moved away from Madison County in her early twenties, she realized years later the importance of the ballad heritage. She explains, “I noticed...Sheila’s [Kay Adams] getting older and mom’s getting older and all of ‘em’s getting older and I wasn’t never hearing nothing about ballads again and Sheila had been wanting to get in touch with me because she had been after me to start back singing since I was back in high school...she knew that I had a love of the ballads.” When O’Sullivan did return to singing at age thirty, she performed at the Bascom Lamar Lundsford festival in Mars Hill, North Carolina. She describes the dramatic scene of her return to singing this way:

...my husband...that was the first time he'd ever heard me sing out in public. He'd heard me with the radio, but it was the first time he'd ever *really* heard me sing. And he was standing back stage and I went off stage and he was a-cryin'...He said, "I knew that you could sing,...but I didn't know you could do *that*." ...And, you know, that meant a lot to me.

O'Sullivan feels a responsibility to pass on her tradition to the ninth generation of ballad singers in her family. Her son Joey seemed to have an affinity for the ballads from an early age. She explains, "When he was a baby, he didn't like normal lullabies so I had to start singing ballads to him. And his favorite one to go to sleep by was 'Fine Sally'...I could sing that and that child would pass out! It was amazing that he would do that. O'Sullivan reports that, as with many young children, Joey prefers the funny songs such as "Four Nights Drunk" (Child #274) or "The Burglar Man." He sings often in church and is familiar with many religious songs from singing at home. O'Sullivan doesn't know if her son will sing the ballads as he grows up. "It's just got to develop...I don't want to force him."

O'Sullivan's sisters Donna Ray Norton and Dee Dee Norton Buckner both sing ballads and have attempted to pass on this tradition to the ninth generation as well. Buckner's daughter, Amanda Southerland, debuted in a ballad performance which is captured in *The Madison County Project*. Buckner's younger daughter, Sarah, age twelve, plays banjo and says she would much prefer to listen to music than to watch television (Buckner). Like her cousin Joey, Sarah's favorites include the funny songs, but she also likes "Little Margaret" and "Jerusalem Mourn" (Buckner).

Denise Norton O'Sullivan received the Basom Lamar Lunsford Youth Award in 2005 ("Denise Norton O'Sullivan" blueridgeheritage.com). She has released two Compact Discs, *Little Margaret* and *Black is the Color*, both recorded on her computer in her home. In 2006, the Country Dance and Song Society invited her to participate in their two week conference in

Boston. There, she taught a class called “Ballad Traditions of Sodom Laurel, North Carolina” and met people from “all over” who were interested in her experience with the ballads and the lifestyle she experienced along with them (O'Sullivan).

Ballad singers often express that they feel a strong connection with their ancestors as they sing. O'Sullivan reports this experience as well, saying that her ancestors are constantly present with her when she sings. She explains:

...singing the ballads, like when I'm on stage closing my eyes, I can picture 'em, Granny and Mammie and Evelyn and all them, I can just picture 'em and just see 'em up there. It's amazing to have that kind of connection. 'Cause to me...it's in our blood, it's in our souls, this stuff. It is part of us and there are some people that they like it so much that they start studying, but it wasn't a matter of studying for us...it's embedded in our DNA.

Bobby McMillon: Continuous Traditionalist

On November 19th, 2013, I spoke with Bobby McMillon in his home in the small community of Celo, NC, which lies in the shadow of Mount Mitchel. McMillon's humble demeanor and soft voice belie his astounding memory for names, song lyrics, and stories, as well as his prominence within the ballad and story-telling traditions. This singer, story-teller and folklorist, who has been called “one of the foremost living authorities on the subject of traditional mountain music” (Fussel and Kruger 122), became involved in the ballad tradition through family connections as well as through more formal study. His background and consistent involvement in traditional music place him in the Continuous Traditionalist category. McMillon explains his interest in story-telling and ballads as part of his wish to “understand what life is” (qtd in Patterson, Ch 1). In his formative years, McMillon learned hundreds of religious songs

through his Primitive Baptist upbringing (Patterson, Ch 1).⁹

Born in 1951, McMillon grew up in the Kings Creek area of Caldwell County, not far from the location of the legendary murder of Laura Foster. This murder was immortalized in the native ballad “The Legend of Tom Duley,” made famous by The Kingston Trio. McMillon grew up hearing this tale and its accompanying ballad. In addition, he spent much of his childhood with his grandparents in Kona, North Carolina, in Mitchell County, not far from the location of another legendary murder turned ballad. In 1831, eighteen-year-old Frankie Silver murdered her husband Charlie. The event shocked western North Carolina not simply because a woman murdered her husband, but because she allegedly dismembered the body with an ax in an attempt to destroy the evidence. This gruesome event inspired another song, “The Ballad of Frankie Silver.” Though Frankie Silver's hanging occurred in 1833, this tale still thrives and joins the fabric of everyday life for McMillon and for other area residents. For example, people tell tales of hearing screams near the location of the murder and a descendant of the half-brother of the murder victim runs a museum commemorating the crime. McMillon grew up in the shadow of the tale, being afraid of Frankie Silver's ghost and other supernatural manifestations of the crime (Patterson, Ch. 1). In this way, this tale and its resulting ballad continue to literally haunt the Kona area.

McMillon's earliest memories include local tales, especially those turned into song. As a young boy, McMillon had an unusual fascination with traditional mountain music. His grandfather's console record player proved an important companion and resource. These recordings first exposed him to the music of the Carter Family (McMillon Interview 19 Nov), who partly owe their success to taking the old ballads, adding a chorus and making the songs

⁹ Primitive Baptists do not use instruments and so must memorize a lot of religious melodies (P. Crouch).

more accessible for radio play (P. Crouch).¹⁰ When McMillon was twelve years old, his mother bought him his own record of the Carter family and he began to notice that others in his community around Lenoir, NC also sang those songs. McMillon observed the variety of the words and details in some versions of the songs that he heard. He stumbled across the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, a five volume collection of songs, stories and games, in the Caldwell County Library, and began to study the ballads in more depth. He was fascinated by the many different versions of the same song cataloged in the collection, much like the Child collection of the late nineteenth century.¹¹

Soon after finding the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, McMillon began asking relatives and friends if they knew any of the old ballads. People of western North Carolina called these ballads “love songs” to distinguish them from religious “meeting house songs.” McMillon explains, “They weren't called “ballads” unless they were wrote on paper.”

McMillon's relative by marriage, Mae Phillips, or “Maw Maw Phillips” as he called her, proved a huge influence on his musical education. She lived in the same community where McMillon's father grew up in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. From Phillips alone, McMillon learned over one-hundred songs, including “The Two Butchers” (Sharp #50) and “The House Carpenter” (Child #243/Sharp #29) which he understood at the time to be “hundreds of years old” (McMillon interview 19 Nov). As is the case with many other singers in this study, Maw Maw Phillips sang the ballads but mixed them in with old country songs as well as gospel and meeting house songs.

¹⁰ During the first early radio and recordings, musicians searched for songs which didn't require any royalties to be paid, so the ballads were often used as a cheaper way of performing music. In addition, some of these songs were already familiar to the early radio audience, which encouraged recognition (P. Crouch).

¹¹ Frank C. Brown, a professor at Duke Universtiy, created a five volume collection of folklore of North Carolina. Oddly, Brown and his assistants did not go to Madison County to search for material. Perhaps they felt that Sharp had already tapped out the information there.

McMillon traveled around Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee to collect and learn songs from anyone he could find. He often made these connections through family or friends. McMillon says of the first time he heard his third cousin, William Nathan Gourtney, sing a Child Ballad, “I liked to fell off my chair” (qtd. in Patterson, Ch 1). This revelation occurred on a collecting trip to a relative in Yancey County where he took along his new RCA tape recorder. McMillon explains that his relative was “singing and about that time I got to hearin' her husband [William Nathan Gourtney], who was not known as a singer at all. He was in the house a-shavin', singing something about lords and ladies. I stopped immediately...The song was “Fair Ellender” [Lord Thomas and Fair Eleanor, Child #73] which Gourtney said he “learned...from his pap. He remembered pretty much all of it” (McMillon Interview 19 Nov).

These grand tales and the images from the songs enthralled McMillon. He explains specifically about Gourtney, “His people before him had never seen the ocean for two-hundred years, and yet sing about knights and lords and ladies, it made me feel like I could go down the road and see a castle or something...and know that they'd never learned it from a book or anything, like it just really happened. That's what brought 'em alive to me and maybe that's what the singers used to feel like...that sang those types of songs” (Interview 19 Nov). What McMillon refers to here is one of the specific aspects of the ballads which originally astonished me. That is, how people continued to sing these songs about oceans, ships, lords and ladies when these concepts played no concrete roll in their everyday experience. These songs continued to spark the imaginations of the people even when they could not have seen pictures or read books about these ideas. The imagination, the universal themes and the music, kept these songs relevant when their living circumstances did not.

In the late 1960s, McMillon's hobby as a folklorist and song collector received a boost

from his English teacher at Hibriten High School in Lenoir, NC. Louise Adderholt knew of McMillon's interest in collecting the ballads and she took McMillon to meet Dr. Cratis Williams, well known folklorist and professor at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. Williams explained to McMillon the proper method of taking down the songs in order to preserve the information systematically. After the relationship between Williams and McMillon developed, McMillon began speaking for groups when Williams could not attend. These performances boosted McMillon's recognition, which led to even more engagements.

McMillon's connections grew from that time. He sang at festivals and became friends with the Carter family, whom he had admired so much as a boy. He attended community college for a time, but did not finish, preferring instead to visit a friend who was studying at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and spend weekends studying folklore in the library there. McMillon's friend introduced him to a professor of folklore there, Dr. Daniel Patterson, who in turn asked McMillon to sing for his class to demonstrate a real example of the rich culture of Western North Carolina. From this encounter, McMillon went on to assist Patterson with his book *A Tree Accurst*, about the legend of Frankie Silver. McMillon has also appeared in a documentary called *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* in which he sings the song and tells stories about the murder that have been passed down through his family about the legend (Patterson, Introduction).

McMillon has been honored many times for his contribution to folklore. In 1976, he performed, along with the singers from Madison County, at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, DC that was organized as part of the United States' Bicentennial celebration. He also performed at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville. The North Carolina Folklore Society gave him the Brown-Hudson Folklore award in 1995. In 2000, the

North Carolina Arts Council gave him a Folk Heritage award (Patterson, Introduction).

When I asked McMillon if he has tried to pass the songs and the stories on to the next generation, he tells about the pinnacle of his professional life. Although he spent most of his career making a living in the furniture factories of Western North Carolina, McMillon spent between 1978 and 1989 working in public schools as part of the Artist in the Schools and the Visiting Artists Programs, which was sponsored by the North Carolina Arts Council (Patterson, Ch 1). In McMillon's case, government-sponsored programs helped him to pass the tradition on to the youth. In this capacity, he organized projects for the children to take down stories and oral traditions from their own homes, so that they might learn more about their own oral culture and its value. McMillon describes an example of the impact of that work.

I guess my biggest goal in working in the school especially has been of value for that...when I first went to St Paul's, NC [as a visiting artist], I'd been there about a month and the nurse come to me and she said, "I want you to sing me that song about that man that come home drunk every night ["Four Nights Drunk"]...My little kindergartener grandson sung me that song word-for-word...he just really took away with that." And *that's* what I was looking for...to pass it to somebody. For all I know, he might know it today. (Interview 19 Nov)

Unfortunately, the North Carolina Arts Council discontinued the Artist in the Schools program, which put an end to McMillon's formal means of passing on the ballad tradition. He continues to sing for festivals when he can and is always willing to take time to teach others about the ballad tradition.

McMillon credits Revivalists with keeping the ballad tradition alive. He says, "If it wasn't for the Revivalists, and if it wasn't for the Yankees, I think we would have lost four-fifths of all this music. I have to put that on the record" (Fussel and Kruger 123-124).

Patrick and Kay Crouch: Continuous Traditionalists, with a twist.

I spoke with Patrick Crouch and his wife Kay on November 21, 2013 in their home in the hills surrounding Lenoir, NC. Patrick serves as a great promoter of traditional music by creating hundreds of recordings of local, Caldwell County musicians in the studio in his home. Patrick was born in 1955 (Crouch e-mail) and spent his formative years in Caldwell County in Western North Carolina at the foothills of the Appalachian mountains. In addition to the musical influences in his family, he was exposed to traditional music through other connections in the area. While he was growing up, his parents worked at Hayes Cotton Mill in Hudson, NC, and the mill village provided access to many local traditional musicians around them. His family lived in the same house with two of his uncles, their families, and his grandparents. Crouch revered one of these uncles, his Uncle Cole, who Crouch characterizes as a very talented Chet Atkins/Merle Travis “finger style” guitar player. He says, “...I worshiped Uncle Cole and a lot of other local musicians did too because he was so accomplished and he was playing music that was beyond most folks around here. Not only could we not play it, we couldn't even imagine it at that point in time.” In addition to his family's influence, Crouch's friends joined him in learning traditional music. Also, older musicians in the community provided instruction and jamming opportunities. Crouch continues to live in Caldwell County, but spent four years in Boone, NC while completing his music and education degree at Appalachian State University. The Boone area boasts strong musical traditions as well. In 1980, Crouch became a band director and public school music educator, but he continued to play and study traditional music.

Crouch has studied many of the folk traditions in the United States and makes frequent trips to Ireland to perform and to immerse himself in the music there. As a band director and public school music teacher, he always made an effort to bring in a guitar and sing some of the

old songs for the edification of his students. He doesn't necessarily differentiate between the Child ballads and the native songs, but sees the ballads on a continuum of traditional and country music, and emphasizes the role that the ballads have played in the emergence of the country and bluegrass musical genres.

During his trips to the British Isles, Crouch has experienced the unaccompanied singing that is still done there in pubs. He states, "In Ireland, they really know how to do that." He explains that everyone falls silent, lowers his head, folds his hand in his laps, and listens respectfully to the singer without looking up. "Now in America, that won't happen. I wish it would."

Crouch fully believes that the ballad tradition will live on. From his experience, he knows that people always want to hear familiar music. Old tunes have been used in new capacities over and over specifically for their recognition. Furthermore, he explains that when his band plays for square dances, people prefer to dance to recognizable tunes. In the past, when his band has tried to innovate and expose their audience to different songs, they are met with disapproving looks from the dancers. Another reason that Crouch believes the ballad tradition will survive is because he has lived through several trends which he felt threatened traditional music. He explains, "And I think that's why, like our string music and the ballads...it's always gonna be around. I don't see that going away...Disco was the threat that I lived through. Another threat that I lived through was of course, Rap. On a certain level, you know, everybody's going, 'Oh my gosh, we're not gonna sing anymore! We're going to stand here and talk.' And that was scary for me." He continues, "It's like peanut butter and jelly. Probably that was a good sandwich a hundred years ago. Well it's a good sandwich today. To me, that's how traditional music is. It was good, and it's still good."

While Crouch doesn't focus exclusively on the ballad tradition, he does perform these songs interspersed within a larger repertoire. As a performer, he understands that he must focus on the audience and what they will find entertaining. He and his wife Kay perform together with their band, "Strictly Clean and Decent." They often accompany their ballads with traditional instruments, but sometimes his wife Kay performs them a capella. They include in their shows songs such as "Four Nights Drunk" and "Willow Garden," a native ballad about a man who murders his lover, presumably because she is pregnant. Other favorites include "Little Margaret" (Child #74 "Fair Margaret and Sweet William"/Sharp #17)¹², "The House Carpenter" (Child #243/Sharp #29), "Barbara Allen," "Lord Randall" (Child #12/Sharp#6), "Mathy Groves" (Child #81 "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard"/Sharp #20), "Geordie" (Child #209/Sharp #28) and "The Golden Vanity" ("The Sweet Trinity" Child #286/Sharp #35). While this list seems large, compared to the pantheon of available traditional songs, it's a somewhat small representation. The drive for audience interest requires a variety of music in a performance and somewhat restricts the breadth of the repertoire of ballads that these musicians can perform, although ballad singers have always chosen music that appealed to them, rather than restricting themselves to a specific genre.

Patrick Crouch emerges as an example of the versatility and variety that traditional musicians enjoy. For example, in 2013, the International Bluegrass Music Association selected Crouch's song, "The Carolina Waltz" to be debuted at their conference. Crouch has produced and recorded Caldwell County area musicians on a series of projects. He passes on his knowledge through projects such as these, as well as by teaching individual lessons in traditional music.

¹² This song was given to Sharp by Mary Bullman Sands. See section on Joe Penland, *The Mary Sands Project*.

Joe Penland: Non-Continuous Traditionalist

Musician, music teacher, singer and songwriter Joe Penland boasts deep roots in Madison County, NC. His family arrived there among some of the first European settlers in the 1770s (Penland interview). Born in the 1940s, Penland grew up in the county seat of Marshall, a tiny town which stretches one city block deep between the French Broad River and a steep, granite slope. The town's cramped real estate forces the Presbyterian church on Main Street to squeeze up against the mountain's sheer rock face, leaving just enough room to open its back door. Furthermore, when the town built the school in Marshall in 1925, they had to construct it on a natural island in the middle of the French Broad River (Fussel 149). Despite Marshall's literal and figurative small town atmosphere, Penland resides in a beautiful, almost metropolitan, loft apartment, converted from retail space in the building where his grandfather was once a business owner and merchant. I spoke with him there on the morning of November 20, 2013.

Previous generations of Penland's family played music, but his musical background reflects a frequent conflict between religion and music that existed in many households of Western North Carolina. Penland's maternal grandfather, William Henry Wright, was a great musician and a cousin of Bascom Lamar Lunsford. Although he played seven instruments, Wright became a preacher, and many devout people believed in the incompatibility between religion and the old "love-songs." As a result of this judgment, the old-time songs were not passed down to Penland's mother, nor to him.

Instead of direct family influence, Penland credits his friend Jerry Adams with helping him to learn traditional mountain music as well as ballads. Adams' relatives lived in the remote areas of Madison County or, as Penland calls it, the "laurel culture." As teenagers, he and Adams would travel the rough wagon roads each Saturday with Jerry's father into the Sodom area of

Madison to see Adams' relatives and learn the songs from those who lived there, including the legendary Lee and Berzilla Wallin, previously mentioned in this paper.

So while Penland did not learn the old ballads from his own home in Marshall, geographic availability as well as personal connections allowed him opportunities to soak up and carry on the traditions. In addition, in Penland's home his father played the radio and Carter Family recordings, which reinforced and widened the folk and country music influence on his repertoire.

While Penland enjoyed learning the ballads and other traditional music, he never exclusively played this music. He performed rock and roll and country music as well, adjusting his musical style as appropriate to his venue and audience. As he raised a family, Penland chose other means to support them and thus took a break between playing the music as a young man and his ultimate return to it. In recent years, he has produced several recordings of his own songs as well as the old ballads, and performs in festivals, ballad swaps and other venues.

Through his work, Penland has one eye on the past and one on the future. He speaks of the ballads as providing a cultural bridge between our modern culture and our European ancestors. In much the same way, he himself bridges this gap through his stories, performances and recordings. His *Mary Sands Project* recording provides one interesting example. Mary Bullman Sands sang for Cecil Sharp in 1916 and proved to be one of his most prolific sources. Furthermore, she was by all accounts, a remarkable woman. When Sharp came to Madison county, Mary Sands was forty-five years old, eight and a half months pregnant, and walked four and a half miles one-way to sing for him. Recently, Penland took advantage of a North Carolina Arts Council grant and other donations to research Mary Sands' life and record the first of three volumes of the songs that she sang for Sharp, along with some of her own originals.

Penland's inspiration for the *Mary Sands Project* stems from two sources: A desire to reflect the songs that he learned in Madison County, and a wish to leave this repertoire for his progeny in his own voice. Mary Sands' half-brother, Mitchel Wallin, belonged to the aforementioned “royal ballad family” of Sodom, NC. This family's influence formed the basis for much of the music Penland learned. He explains, “Ninety percent of the tunes that I learned, whether it be from a Norton, Chandler or a Wallin or a Ramsey in Sodom were songs out of this twenty-five song repertoire that she [Mary Sands] sang for Cecil Sharp...My part of the tradition, and Sheila's [Kay Adams] also, is just so locked in to what one woman sang.” Penland, in turn, wants to pass this music down to his own grandchildren. A bout with a serious illness in 2002 inspired him to action. He explains, “...the prognosis was not good and I started to clean things up. Now they call [it] a bucket list...One of the things was, I wanted my children, and if I had grandchildren, to be able to hear some of those songs that I learned in the way that I would remember them. So it would be *me* singing the songs—maybe it meant something more to them than listening to a recording of Lee and Berzill or Dillard Chandler or somebody else.” Through *The Mary Sands Project*, Penland commemorates the legacy of Cecil Sharp and Mary Bullman Sands. At the same time, he secures his own link in this long musical heritage that he learned from his elders in Madison County.

Penland hopes to complete two more volumes of this project, but monetary and time requirements create challenges to doing so. Of the difficulty of the first volume, Penland says, “It took forever because I could remember the verses, remember the words, but I couldn't hear the voice...I worked diligently for about six months. I'd go almost every day to the studio I built and sing. It always sounded just like they would if somebody else did them on the radio. And I knew that wasn't right. I was just about to give up, and one day I went up there and made the

whole first record in a couple of hours because it just seemed like it came to me.”

Other ways that Penland encourages the old music in the next generation is by teaching individual lessons and by participating in the Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) program. This organization encourages children to play traditional music through providing opportunities for them to play instruments together. The JAM program does not solely promote the ballads, but the legacy of their tunes and traditional music make the songs relevant in that context. Through learning to play together, children will be adding the traditional as well as native ballads to their repertoire.

Penland also carries on the ballad tradition by performing in the United Kingdom. Recently he traveled to England and by chance began singing the ballads in pubs there. He performed each day for twenty-two days, while being driven around by a couple he met there who were enthralled with his repertoire. Penland has been back for several trips since that time. In the United States, he sings for ballad swaps and other performances, but when he performs, his aim is not to “educate” his audience about the ballads specifically. Instead, he hopes to expose the songs and inspire interest in them. He explains, “As far as saying 'I wanna get up here and tell you how important these songs are because they've been sung for five-hundred years—I never start out with that...I want people to understand why the songs are important to *me*. And hopefully they'll have some spark of interest.” In 2005, Mars Hill College gave Penland the Bascom Lamar Lunsford award for his role in preserving mountain music and culture (“Joe Penland” blueridgeheritage.com). In April 2014, he will be singing ballads and telling stories with Sheila Kay Adams at MerleFest, an Americana music festival held each year in Wilkesboro, NC in memory of guitarist Merle Watson, the great Doc Watson's son.

Long Live the Ballad Tradition: Current and Future Trends

After interviewing these musicians, I was struck by the fact that the ballads have come to be incorporated as part of a performance culture. I have noted how the people of the Southern Appalachians used the ballads, whether native or traditional, as a form of entertainment when little else was available. Furthermore, the songs helped liven the chores in an otherwise unending cycle of work. For example, Sheila Kay Adams explains that Dellie Norton used “Young Emily” as her “cow milking song,” which she would sing each day as she carried out this chore (interview). The legendary, and still living, singer Bessie Eldreth from Ashe County sang constantly: to her children, with her church, and while she worked (Sawin). In fact, Eldreth says she could sing while she was churning butter because her hands were busy (Greene). But most people now don't churn butter or milk cows. Family and work environments have transformed from the original circumstances in which the ballads thrived. Singer Sheila Kay Adams explains, “The old love-songs...are endangered...And not so much because there's not young folks that are singing them...but they're out of context now...they don't belong anywhere. There's not a culture that nurtures 'em and sustains 'em” (interview). Joe Penland also notes this change of culture. He remembers spending joyful times in the laurel culture where people sang songs, tested each others memory of song lyrics, or teased each other about whose version of a ballad was “right.” He underscores Adams' observations, saying, “The social aspects of singing the songs is gone. We wouldn't have anything else to do but to shuck corn or shell beans and sing songs as a test to see who can remember...or who can get through it or whose version is right—today we play the radio, we buy our stuff at the store. Playing music on the porch--porch picking--that's what everybody did...Every Saturday night we ate supper at somebody's house and we got together

and played music and laughed because we didn't have anywhere else to go” (personal interview).

As Adams and Penland describe here, Appalachians sang the ballads as a communal activity, each person perhaps taking a turn to sing for a gathering. Or, they sang individually as they went about their work. Occasionally, singers still participate in ballad swaps: gatherings where singers sit in a circle and take turns singing the songs. However, these events seem to be rare. None of the singers I met had plans to sing at a ballad swap in the near future. Furthermore, there are challenges with this form of entertainment. Each singer must sing a song in its entirety, and may not repeat a song another singer has already chosen--a difficult request for most people. Furthermore, if there is an audience at such an event, it is important to provide a moderator who will keep interruptions at bay, for singing ballads requires the utmost concentration--almost as though the singers are channeling the song from an unconscious state of mind. An interruption can completely derail a singer from the completion of a song (Penland interview).

What we are seeing then, is that the change in orientation to performance has been a necessary one as a result of the transformation in lifestyle. That culture has disappeared and now too many distractions vie for our attention. So now that singers must perform and please an audience, how does this shift affect the repertoire? Singer Joe Penland makes certain to pepper his gigs with a few ballads interspersed with other, more upbeat songs. He explains, “I always do ballads and some stories, but then I do some more modern music, things I've written, because it's hard to keep people for an hour and ten minutes to be interested in...a capella ballads—I don't care how great the singers are” (personal interview). In other words, even those like Penland himself, who are interested in the ballads and their history, understand that these songs, no matter how good the stories or the melody, can't hold the attention of a modern audience for long periods of time.

Penland has made other adjustments for the sake of exposing the ballads by shortening the songs and adding musical accompaniment. He says, “They get a lot more air-play if you can keep them short and have music mixed with them...You perpetuate the song...as long as they hear the songs. If you're never exposed to it, how are you gonna like it?” (personal interview)

While the ballad singing tradition must now deliver a performance, that is not to say that previous generations of musicians did not care about entertaining an audience. Some of the greats who passed on the tradition in the 1960s inherently understood the importance of putting on a show whether for the public or on the porch. Lee Wallin, one of Penland's teachers, deliberately found ways to engage the young people who were learning from him. Penland describes Lee Wallin's performance strength and how his example has affected Penland's own performance style:

We were just mesmerized by him. He knew when we were bored...He would sometimes break a ballad in two. He would tell the story. One of the things I do that most people don't do is tell about it [the song]. You can tell when you get to the part that's not about sex or violence that people were pretty well turned off by thirty verses...He would take the rest of the story, which could have been fairly boring, and turn it into a live story about people who just lived there, like it was happening—these things happened just now...Eventually when the ballad would get interesting again and he knew that we were interested—in the parts that we were interested in, which was the violence and the sex, mostly, he would start singing it again...He'd get us to the point where and he...had these great dramatic endings usually. A lot of them were the same but when you're fourteen or fifteen and you're not exposed to television or any of those things...or even interesting reading, that was something we really grabbed hold of.

Penland adds that Wallin's personal style resulted in an even greater interest in the ballad tradition for him and his friends. He elaborates, “So we would start singing the songs and would start looking for other songs and find other ballads...that would have been banned if our parents had heard us sing the lyrics of those bawdy ballads...So we really got interested in that culture.”

In other words, Penland's teachers also entertained, thereby inspiring further growth and

interest in the culture of traditional music. All the same, we can't ignore that Penland mentions the lack of entertainment available in the 1960s, such as television and even books. Wallin and others like him indeed inspired and entertained, yet did not have to compete with the plethora of media choices available to today's youth.

Although previous generations of musicians may have had some inherent understanding about performance, the commercial and performance culture has transformed the genre. This transformation presents challenges to continuing the tradition. When the songs were sung as a group activity, with each person taking his turn, or when sung around the house, the activity becomes naturally more interesting to the participants, and encourages further involvement from community members. Children become involved organically and learn to sing the songs in a low pressure atmosphere. For example, Sheila Kay Adams expresses the ease with which she learned the ballads, saying “It was such a casual thing...It wasn't like, 'Ok now, we are going to have our music lesson.' They would say, 'Now drag a chair over here and I'll learn you one of them ol' love-songs...They would sing a verse, and I would sing it back to 'em. Then they would sing a second, and I'd have to sing the first *and* second back to 'em” (interview). For her, learning the songs was an intimate and relaxed time shared with loved ones, which naturally encouraged her to learn.

Another challenge to the ballad tradition that performing presents is the problem of stage fright. Madison County singer Denise Norton O'Sullivan serves as one example of this obstacle. Although she sang at festivals from the age of seven, she became self-conscious performing on stage as a teenager. As a result, she turned away from the stage between the ages of thirteen and thirty. She explains, “Because I was basically a shy young'un. I got the feeling that people were looking at me...in a way that made me feel insecure. I got to where when I got up to sing in front

of people, I could *not* catch my breath. I got so scared that I couldn't breathe. And so I quit singing in public....I was just so insecure.” Her great-grandmother Dellie Norton tried to coach her through this stage fright, telling O'Sullivan simply to close her eyes, rare her head back, and let the songs come out. Despite this mentoring, O'Sullivan's anxiety nearly caused her to drop ballad singing altogether, which would have been a great loss to the tradition and its perpetuation. O'Sullivan learned the songs in the rural environment and at her great-grandmother's side. Nonetheless, the community and family gatherings had become less frequent by the time she was growing up. Had she had more time to learn in a less pressured environment, she might not have lost those years to anxiety. Fortunately, O'Sullivan has come into her own now and presents a serene and confident air on stage. Experiencing stage fright does not seem to be specific to O'Sullivan alone. In other performances, such as the festival performances shown at the end of *The Madison County Project*, several of the younger singers exhibit the obvious nerves and anxiety that often accompany public singing opportunities.

The showmanship requirement of the ballad tradition also affects the repertoire that is being sung. For example, from the people I spoke with, it seems that children, and other audiences, are understandably most interested in the funny songs like “Four Nights Drunk.” This song also seemed to be the most consistently listed as one that the singers would perform, probably because it appeals to audiences. These amusing songs may provide a way in for audiences and youth, but it would be a shame for the tradition to miss out on the full and rich experiences that the other ballads provide.

But do these changes of repertoire and performance culture necessarily indicate an end to the ballad tradition? Singer and ballad expert Bobby McMillon feels ambivalent about the tradition's survival. He believes that human nature compels us to tell tales and pass down songs

and stories, but that now, people don't "consciously pass it along anymore like they used to." He continues, "People always have traditions...In schools, I find that children still tell jokes and riddles and things...It's people's inclination is to have some kind of oral verbiage...that they tell...There'll always be some traditions of a type that's carried along" (personal interview 19 Nov). In McMillon's opinion, however, technology now hampers the perpetuation of these oral traditions. He maintains, "We're just overwhelmed with technology and with instant communication. That's what's ruinin' it...But we've got iPads and computers and Xboxes ...so much of instant communication and 'gratification' [sic] that...it's down to a very few [who perpetuate traditions]" (personal interview 19 Nov).

Singer Joe Penland seems similarly torn on the subject of technology. He talks about the importance of learning songs "knee-to-knee," rather than the more current method of "ear-to-CD" (personal interview). He asserts, "Sheila [Kay Adams] and Bobby [McMillon] and I really are the last ones to learn ballads from a human being." But Penland has come to understand the importance of learning the songs through recordings. About this practice of learning "ear-to-CD" as he calls it, Penland says, "...that used to piss me off." However, he continues, "...now that I think about it, I'm just so happy that we have those resources and no matter where the people get the ballad from, if there's any interest in learning them then I want that to happen in whatever form it's going to happen. The chances of people coming here every weekend and we're gonna sit in chairs singing those songs are very slim. I taught my daughter some songs like that but nobody else has the time or patience for it" (personal interview).

In this way, technology may prove to be the saving grace for preserving these songs. One only has to type in the title of a particular folksong and immediately receive instruction and lyrics. For example, musician Shane Richards on YouTube tells the story of "Mathy Groves,"

provides guitar instruction, and discusses different versions of the song. Even singers who have been brought up in the tradition, Donna Ray Norton for example, admit to using recordings and videos to learn the songs (Norton "Songs of Appalachia"). In fact, Joe Penland's *Mary Sands Project*, that he recorded to honor Mary Sands' contribution to Cecil Sharp's work, obviously would not have been possible without technology. Recordings of the older generation of Madison County singers, as well as the documentaries, do serve a purpose to provide us with some idea of what past generations sounded like and what songs they chose to sing.

Regardless of the challenges to the tradition, the ballads continue to resonate and relate to a modern audience. Singer Sheila Kay Adams describes her experience of singing the ballads, with their dark themes and sometimes gory content, for audiences this way, "You can tell there's kind of an uncomfortable feeling there at the start...and then all of a sudden it's like, 'Oh, it's a story! This is not just a song, it's a story!' They start paying attention to the story" (interview).

These ballads are still being recorded within and without the Southern Appalachians. For example, in 2013 musicians Anais Mitchell and Jefferson Hamer, two song writers in their thirties, recorded an album of seven Child ballads. They created their own melodies for the songs, because Child did not provide them in his collection. Furthermore, they changed some of the lyrics so that a modern audience may easily comprehend the story. English Folksinger Martin Carthy, who has been singing folk ballads for fifty years, says "I could not have imagined in 1961 ...what people would be doing with these songs now we're in 2013," he says. "But the big thrill is that it still works...It still excites people" (Carthy qtd in Coleman). Perhaps a folk-music revival is once again on the horizon.

As far back as Child and Cecil Sharp, collectors have gathered the ballads in order to stave off the loss of this proud and colorful tradition. This loss is indeed a threat in our mass-

media times. However, I believe that the songs and the tradition still dialogue with the world around them and remain relevant. Not only have the songs formed the basis of the bluegrass and country music genres, as Patrick Crouch points out, but other forms of art have recently used the ballads to relate to contemporary life. The universal appeal of the stories along with its basis in music attest to the relevance and the adaptability of the ballads.

Author Sharon McCrumb provides one example of the ballad's adaptability to other artistic genres. She has written a series of historical fiction novels based on the the ballad stories. In *The Ballad of Tom Dooley*, a historical novel about Laura Foster's murder in Wilkes and Caldwell Counties North Carolina, McCrumb examines the historical record and attempts to solve the mystery of this nineteenth century crime. Another of McCrumb's books in this series, *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, examines the aforementioned murder case of Frankie Silver, an eighteen-year-old woman who allegedly murdered her husband and chopped him into pieces to hide the evidence. As she relates the story of this gruesome event, McCrumb places the murder within its time, but contrasts it with a modern-day murder story. She uses the historical setting along with the contemporary one to comment on capital punishment, as well as the tensions, both political and cultural, that still she exist in North Carolina around different settlement patterns and the conflicts of eastern and western North Carolina cultures.

Modern comments on the ballad tradition are not only restricted to the written word. Visual artist Julyan Davis has recently created a series of paintings using the ballad stories as settings. "Dark Corners: The Appalachian Murder Ballad" features images from traditional ballads alongside traditional and native ballads. The scenes unfold in a decidedly and deliberately contemporary environment. For example, the painting "She looked east, she looked west," which is based on the traditional ballad "Barbara Allen" (Child #84), portrays an image of

a woman in high heels, seated on an abandoned sofa by railroad tracks with an approaching train. In “Pretty Polly,” Davis provides a graffiti covered, abandoned warehouse as the backdrop for Polly's impending murder. Davis articulates the timeless quality of the songs that these paintings represent this way: “These stories are old, but one only has to pick up a newspaper to see they remain fully contemporary. Lovers still fall prey to despair and suicide, or end up in the crime report. These paintings are set very much in the present, but nothing taking place in them is new” (*Julyan Davis*). While the details of Davis' paintings differ at times from those in the songs, these modern scenes still effectively convey the dark mood and the evident despair which permeate many of the ballads.

Through showing his paintings, Davis himself has discovered the importance of the musical aspect of the songs. Davis describes the response to this series as “tepid,” but only at first. After adding live musical accompaniment to the paintings, Davis noticed a greater connection and enthusiasm for his work. He describes the atmosphere of marrying the music with the paintings by saying, “The place was packed and everybody, finally, completely, understood where I was coming from. They connected the poetry of the ballads to the image” (interview). In my opinion, this reaction to his work underscores the importance of the music's role in telling the story and creating a human connection. The lyrics and resulting images, while imperative to telling a tale, require music to bring the scene to life. Much like a movie soundtrack which helps a film to fulfill its potential and heighten emotional reactions, the music brought the scenes alive to those observing the paintings. And it is through the music that these stories have endured, establishing a melodic footprint through which the story may unfold and linger through the minds of the generations.

Perhaps the future of the ballad tradition is through this multi-media approach. We have

become accustomed to visual cues through movies and photographs. If you glance at a work of art, you can take in the whole tale and then examine the details. With a song, however, you must listen to the song in its entirety to understand the story. Most of us simply don't have that kind of attention span or leisure time anymore. Some films have recently injected life back into the ballad tradition by bringing certain traditional songs back into the popular consciousness. For example, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou* brought a tremendous amount of attention, and even a lawsuit, to the song "Oh Death," also known as "Conversation with Death" (Penlan interview).¹³ Perhaps going forward, integrating different kinds of media with the songs will prove to be one method for strengthening interest in the tradition.

These examples provide evidence that the ballad tradition genre remains relevant in modern times. As Dellie Chandler Norton maintained, these songs may, in fact, be a good way of learning about life without experiencing it. Ballad singer and music teacher Mary Greene insists that the children she encounters in the Watauga County public schools become excited about hearing the ballads when she teaches them. After being exposed to the songs, her fourth graders meet her at the door each day and exclaim, "Sing one of those story-songs to us!" (personal interview 31 March) Furthermore, the youth in Watauga County continue to write songs about events, whether pleasant or even tragic, that happen around them. For example, one teenager wrote a ballad about the murder of Jenni Gray, a death that shocked Western North Carolina in 1989.¹⁴ Greene also points out that many young people are becoming "intensely hooked" on this kind of music (personal interview 24 Feb). She explains, "All of these forms are somewhat dead

¹³According to Joe Penland, the popularity of this song led to a legal case over the rights. This dispute resulted in a ban on the performance of the song in Madison County. Lloyd Chandler's family claimed he wrote the song in the early twentieth century after awakening from a bender and turning his life around. Others maintain it is a "traditional" song, and thus, requires no royalties. For more information, see article "Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler," where Carl Lindahl argues that Chandler indeed wrote the song. The incident proves Patrick Crouch's theory that if you make money from recording a song, "they" will find you (personal interview).

¹⁴According to Greene, Jenni Gray was picked up on the road as she jogged. She was kidnapped and killed.

but yet they have a life in this little alternate stream. There are all these young people coming along that associate this music with a life that is more meaningful...If you are in the middle of this tiny stream it is very active and alive. If you're in the mainstream you don't even know its alive" (personal interview 24 Feb).

The ballad tradition lives on, responds to its environment, and remains relevant to modern life. People will continue to sing the songs either for their entertainment value or because their universal themes resonate with us. Singer Mary Greene adds her voice to the chorus of those who believe the ballads are here to stay. She states, "The way we transmit these ballads may change but the fact that they entrance us is not changing. A story is a story" (personal interview 31 March). Ballad scholar Evelyn Wells, writing in 1950, expresses her faith in the survival of the tradition this way, "The traditional ballad has always maintained this balance [between tradition and innovation], building on its past and changing with its present. The end is not yet. As long as men love a story and their senses respond to the rhythm of sound and movement, the ballad tree, rooted in the past, living today, will send forth its branches into tomorrow" (9). Francis James Child seems correct when he wrote about the "universal and indestructible interest" of the people's poetry. Even if the ballad tradition ends up looking very different from what it once was, the original wisp of creativity and artistic expression of the songs will endure.

Afterward:

Special thanks to Kay and Patrick Crouch, Bobby McMillon, Joe Penland, Denise Norton O'Sullivan, Dee Dee Norton Buckner and Mary Greene who generously shared their knowledge and their time to contribute to this project.

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