1997

Folk Music in the Ouachita Mountains

Shayna Rachel Sessler
Ouachita Baptist University

SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

This Honor's thesis entitled

"Folk Music in the Ouachita Mountains"

written by

Shayna Rachel Sessler

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for completion of the

Carl Goodson Honors Program

meets the criteria for acceptance

and has been approved by the undersigned readers

Thesis Director

Second Reader

Third Reader

Director of the Carl Goodson Honors Program

April 15, 1997

My heartfelt thanks to Dr. George Keck,
who gave me the volumes of guidance I needed
but let me figure things out for myself

and to my mother,
who gave me confidence and volunteered to drive

Folk Music in the Ouachita Mountains

Table of Contents

THESIS STATEMENT

The Ouachita Mountain Region of Arkansas, neglected in much formal research, has a rich and active heritage of folk music which should be made accessible.

DEFINING FOLK MUSIC

Folk music. I had visions of mountain men standing out on the porch of a log cabin on summer evenings, playing guitars, banjos, fiddles, harmonicas. Maybe a washtub and a jew's harp thrown in. I thought of "Aura Lee," "Shenandoah," "Froggy Went A'Courtin'," "Barbara Allen," and of course "The Arkansas Traveller."

But what exactly <u>is</u> folk music? Is it really dying out, as some seem to think? What is the difference between a folk song and any other kind of song?

I began my research determined to ignore any definition of folk music I considered to be narrow, academic or "stuffy." I feared that if I didn't use as broad a definition as possible, I wouldn't be able to find any current folk music in my mountains, the Ouachitas. However, because much of my paper was to be historical, I had to consider the writings of some

ballad hunters of the twenties, thirties, and forties.

In 1934, John A. Lomax and his son Alan recalled the opinion of an ignorant man: "Recently a professor of music from Oxford University said in a public lecture at Bryn Mawr College: 'Since America has no peasant class, there are, of course, no American folk songs'."[1] Since we know there <u>are</u> American folk songs, the Oxford professor must have been wrong about at least one of two things: America <u>does</u> have a peasant class, or folk songs don't necessarily have to come from peasants.

The Lomaxes next quoted an optimistic editorial in the New York Evening Post:

> "As with folk tales and dialect tales, we need reassurance that ballad singing is not dying... There probably always will be uninstructed souls enough--sometimes whole communities of them--to keep alive these things that are closest to the heart of man. For all their crudeness, traditional songs are interesting for breathing the mind of the ignorant..."
>
> Although the spread of machine civilization is rapidly making it hard to find folk singers, ballads are yet sung in this country.[2]

According to the editorial, the people who make folk music are ignorant, uninstructed, and unaffected by "machine civilization," and their songs are musically crude. The Lomaxes seemed to agree, but their own explanation of what produces folk music was more complimentary to the musicians:

> A life of isolation, without books or newspapers or telephone or radio, breeds songs and ballads. The gamut of human experience has been portrayed through this unrecorded (at least until recently) literature of the people. These people had no literary conventions to uphold. But they were lonely or sad or glad, and they sought diversion.[3]

The Lomaxes also mentioned a few characteristics of folk songs. The individual author of a song is "so unimportant that he usually is lost sight of altogether."[4] In addition, ballads may be mix-and-match collections of stanzas found in different places; their composition is fluid. Incidentally, the Lomaxes considered collectors of folk music (like themselves) to be the reason folk songs were losing this flexibility:

> Worse than thieves are ballad collectors, for when they capture and imprison in cold type a folk song, at the same time they kill it. Its change and growth are not so likely to continue after a fixed model for comparison exists....
>
> So long as the song is passed from one to another by "word of mouth," its material is fluid, frequent changes occurring both in the words and in the music.[5]

In Folk Songs of the Southern United States,[6] Josiah H. Combs quoted a "splendid definition" for the folk-song given by a Professor Kittredge: "'a short narrative poem, adapted for singing, simple in plot and metrical structure, divided into stanzas, and characterized by complete impersonality so far as the author or singer is concerned'."[7]

Combs considerd Kittredge's emphasis on narration and impersonality too confining: "The term 'folk song,' like many others, must in time lose its restricted significance, and come to be applied to the songs of the folk whether narrative or impersonal or not"[8]. He was talking about looking beyond the ballads for folk music. His statement gave me the hope that even if I didn't find singers of the traditional ballads still

living in the Ouachitas, I would find folk music. There are still "folk," aren't there?

Because it is almost impossible anymore to find Americans who are without the benefits of machine civilization, I have left that criteria out of my definition of folk musicians. People may be found, however, who are uninstructed in classical forms and even in the mass-produced modern "popular" music; who are isolated from cultural centers[9] and mass trends; who have been home-taught, and who swap tunes with other musicians without needing to photocopy the sheet-music. But before I can begin looking for folk music in the Ouachita Mountains, I must accurately locate the mountains.

GEOGRAPHY: OZARKS VS. OUACHITAS

There exists confusion over what constitutes the Ouachitas. More accurately, the confusion seems to be with the Ozark Mountains, which are far more famous. How far east, west, north and south do the Ozarks extend? When folklorist Vance Randolph researched this question in the 1930s, he discovered sources that located parts of the Ozarks in Kansas, Ohio, and Tennessee, as well as in Missouri and Arkansas.[1] While the entire mess was compelling to him, my concern for this paper is only how far south the Ozarks go.

To my knowledge, few eminent collectors of Ozark folk music mentioned the Ouachita Mountains in any of their works. Several, however, swung far south of the Arkansas River in order to interview one woman, the ballad singer Emma Dusenbury, in the Mena area. Vance Randolph included Dusenbury in collections of Ozark folk music; John Lomax refered to Mena as a "town in the southern Ozarks."[2] I take it, therefore, that they did

not recognize a distinction between Ozarks and Ouachitas. It is very possible that if they had made such a distinction, they still would have included Mrs. Dusenbury; she was probably the finest source of ballads to be found in Arkansas.

Did they know? Could they have known? Randolph is the only source I have located who mentions the topic at all. He chronicled his quest to discover the boundaries of the Ozarks in the article "Ozarks, Where Are You?" It was a long and confusing process, and the southern boundary was the most troublesome of all.

In the article, Randolph relates that he was writing a book about the Ozarks, and he wanted to "locate the region definitely in the first paragraph." But all his sources did not agree on the boundaries. He found that the Missouri Geological Report of 1894, the Ozarks Playground Association of Joplin, Missouri, and Webster's dictionary named the Arkansas River as the southern border; however, the U.S. Geological Survey and the chief of the U.S. Board of Surveys and Maps considered the Ouachita Mountains, south of the river, to be part of the Ozarks.

Randolph also found an article in Ozark Life Magazine, July, 1930, in which Otto Ernest Rayburn wrote, "Although the Ouachita section south of the Arkansas river is entirely different in geological formation, it is a part of the greater Ozarks."

"About this time," Randolph says, "it occured to me that

it might be well to interview the people who actually live in the hills south of the Arkansas river, and find out whether they consider themselves Ozarkians." So he wrote to the Chambers of Commerce at Mena and Hot Springs. Mr. V.B. Goddard, secretary of the Mena Chamber, wrote back,

> Mena is not in the Ozarks but in the Ouachitas (pronounced Wash' itas.) The Ozarks are north of the Arkansas River and the Ouachitas south of the river. The regions are somewhat similar and rival each other in beauty and charm. The Ouachitas, however, with the exception of Hot Springs National Park, are not so well advertised as the Ozarks but they are none the less beautiful and interesting.

Although Randolph did not receive an answer from the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce, he noticed that in the 1927 Loumar Souvenir Guide,[3] Hot Springs National Park was advertised as being located "in the foothills of the Ozarks."

No wonder few collectors bothered about boundaries when they went to see Emma Dusenbury. Even towns south of the Arkansas did not agree. By that time, Randolph was tired of "hair-splitting," and decided that to be safe, he would include the doubtful area. The definition of the Ozark Mountains that appeared in his 1931 book The Ozarks placed the southern border at "a point a little beyond Mena, Arkansas."

Have matters changed any since the thirties? I decided to find out for myself. Having less time and more technological conveniences than Vance Randolph, I conducted

a mini-telephone poll of the same towns Randolph chose.

Delores, a volunteer at the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce, thought Hot Springs was indeed located in the Ozarks. But she admitted, "I don't really know where the Ozarks begin..." She referred me to a historian. A worker at the Hot Springs tourist information center was more confident. She told me that the Ozark mountains go north into Missouri and the Ouachita mountains go west into Oklahoma.

"Hot Springs is in the Ouachita mountain range at the base of the Ozarks," she said. She also mentioned that the Ozarks are the tallest mountain range between the Rockies and the Appalacians.

The volunteer at the Ouachita Forest Service was sure that Hot Springs is in the Ouachitas. She also informed me that the Ouachitas start <u>east</u> of Arkansas. Either she was mistaken and she meant "west of Arkansas," or she knows about a portion of the Ouachitas I have never seen.

I grew up in Mena, and I remember being corrected if I used the name "Ozarks" for our region. We were taught in geograpy class that the Ouachitas were south of the Arkansas river, and the Ozarks north of it. I eventually came to resent <u>my</u> mountains being lumped together with those north of the Arkansas. I wasn't sure why, but I knew my mountains were unique.

Joe Nix, an Arkansas geochemist who works at the Ross

Foundation in Arkadelphia, gave me a more professional basis for my feelings. He noted two major differences between the Ozarks and the Ouachitas, geological and cultural.

The major geological differences between the two ranges are age, formation, and chemical composition. The ranges were created by separate geological events. The Ozark Plateau is an older formation created by a tectonic upheaval. This event occurred before two separate tectonic plates clashed and wrinkled each other, forming the Ouachita Mountains. The erosion of the Ozark Plateau that created the appearance of mountains came later. The chemical composition of the mountains is also different. Limestone is found in the Ozarks but not in the Ouachitas.

Nix brought up the particularly significant point that the Arkansas River itself cannot technically be used as a boundary between the Ozark Mountains and the Ouachita Mountains. The ranges are separated by a distinct geologic region, the Arkansas River Valley natural division, which is the area immediately north and south of the river. Nix did note, however, that the river probably constituted a "major barrier" that kept the Ozarks and the Ouachitas separate culturally.

As for those cultural differences, Nix said the regions were similar for quite awhile. Both were remote, rugged, backwoods areas with isolated communities. Then in the

late 1800s, the timber industry discovered the rich growths of pine in the Ouachita region, and the area opened up. About the same time, railroads came through. The "classic hillbilly" died out in the Ouachitas. However, isolated pockets remained in the Ozarks even into the 1960s and 1970s. "Some of those communities were just like they had been for a hundred years," Nix recalled.

There obviously has been confusion about the differences between Ozarks and Ouachitas. If the Ouachitas were thought of as just a southern extension of the Ozarks, that would explain why few researchers made the trip down here for anyone but Mrs. Dusenbury. Why bother with the "foothills" when there is so much action in the mountains proper?

FOLK MUSIC: GENERAL TOPICS

"Foothills" or not, the same folk music topics that are important in the Ozarks are important in the Ouachitas. In the interest of clarity and understanding, my discussion of folk music in the Ouachitas must include an explanation of how ballads and their categorization, instrumental music, shape notes, and shape-note singings figure in folk music generally and Ouachita music in particular.

The author of An Artist in America described the special qualities of folk musicians and their music:

> I have always looked for musicians in the hill country. I like their plaintive, slightly nasal voices and their way of short bowing the violin. I like the modal tunes of the old people and the odd interludes, improvisations, often in a different key, which they set between a dance tune and its repetition... The old music cannot last much longer. I count it a great privilege to have heard it in the sad twang of mountain voices before it died.[1]

Ballad singers were not just those who sang stories; they used modes, vocal ornaments, and a voice quality not found in

any type of formal music in America. Fiddlers were not simply footstomping violin players; their instruments were made differently and held differently.[2] Vance Randolph even believed that fiddlers had techniques in their repertoire that accomplished violinists might never master. In his personal notes, he recalled:

> Andre Polah of Syracuse, N.Y., spent some time on Bear Creek, in Taney County, Mo., about 1940. He was a very good violinist, it seemed to me. The native fiddlers liked Polah, and spoke kindly of his playing so as not to hurt his feelings. But they told me privately that Polah was "a mighty sorry fiddler." Polah spent hours trying to imitate the short bowing of the local musicians, but he couldn't do it. He learned the violin in Europe, where they hold the instrument under the chin, and draw a long bow. He could play some Gypsy dance-tunes from Hungaria, but the "Arkansaw Traveler" was beyond his ability.

In vocal folk music, a good system of categorization seems to be impossible. Josiah Combs devised a system of twenty-one categories for ballads,[3] but four categories classify songs according to their country of origin, three according to historical subject matter, six according to the race or occupation of the narrator, four according to theme (love, humor, etc.), and two according to the use of the song (play, dance).[4] In his system, each ballad would fit at least two categories, and a song could conceivably fit five categories.

In my own research, I came across play-party songs, ballads, hymns and white spirituals, a drinking song, and a few children's songs. Themes covered every part of human existence.

Except for the case of Emma Dusenbury's ballads, I found

more references to spirituals and gospel songs, "country songs," and instrumental music in the Ouachitas. In instrumental music, fiddles were popular, of course, but other instruments abounded. Mary Bain,[5] wife of the Ouachita Mountain fiddler Ruel Bain, told me that her three brothers all played instruments, "just about any kind of stringed instrument. My oldest brother, he's a real good fiddler," she said. "I guess that would be his favorite instrument, but he's also a good rhythm guitar player, plays banjo, and whatever he takes a notion to. My second brother, he picks a guitar. And the other one, he favors mandolin." She also mentioned an instrument called the "dobro," which is "something like a guitar, only they lay it in their lap and play it with a steel, and pick it." For rhythm, there was the invaluable washboard.[6]

Gospel songs were often sung using shape notes; shape notes were taught at singing schools, which were held periodically in the mountains. Mary described the schools as being like a Vacation Bible School that taught only music. "They'd have a singin' school teacher. Usually it was someone local. They'd have it about a week," she recalled, "they had lessons and they taught the music and the shape of the notes and we sang the notes."

Shape notes are exactly what their name implies: a system of musical notation using shapes instead of numbers or positions on a staff. The shapes indicate intervals. Often, shape note music is written on a five-line staff, but the staff is not

needed to read the music.

The author of An Artist in America "mentions three old men who sang from an old hymnbook called The Harp of Columbia:

> They sang three-part songs with odd changes and long holds. Even after I had learned to read the peculiar notation system, with its signatureless staff of moons and crescents, squares, stars, and triangles, I could not find reasons for the changes of tone and the long holding of particular notes which occurred often in the middle of a phrase. They insisted that they sang what was written, but I do not believe it was so.[7]

Most often used for hymns and gospel music, shape notes are featured in hymnbooks like The Sacred Harp. Different systems, featuring different shapes, are used in different books. The Sacred Harp uses squares, triangles, and circles.

A shape-note singing was a social gathering, a fun time. Mary Bain described her experience, "We older girls, we went everywhere in walking distance, we went to all the singings. They had singin' every Sunday night, and Saturday nights.... [at] the church houses and the school houses. Just get together and sing. That was mostly gospel, hymnbooks."

At a singing, the singers sat in a square formation, facing the middle, with sopranos on one side of the square, altos on another, tenors on another, and basses on the final side. The song leader stood in the middle and served to pitch the song and set the tempo. At the beginning of each song, after the pitch was set, the group would "note" the song, or sing the melody using the syllables do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, and ti. Then they sang the words.

Often the books were not needed, for the singers knew the songs by their numbers in the songbook or by the melody name ("Finlandia" or "Ebenezer," for example). If someone called out a number, the rest would know exactly what to sing. A shape-note singing could go on for hours, or even for an entire day with a picnic break at noon.

MINI-BIOGRAPHIES OF COLLECTORS

Another general topic important to my research is that of the folk music collectors who worked in Arkansas. My investigations began with their works, and most of my information on the singer Emma Dusenbury came from them. I have found no evidence that these early collectors were interested in the Ouachitas (or the "southern Ozarks," as some thought), even for fiddle tunes, except as Dusenbury's home. The ballad hunters came, gathered what they could from Dusenbury, and went back to their genuine Ozarks or wherever they were collecting at the time. If they had been forced to comb the hillsides looking for some elusive ballad singer, they would have discovered other folk musicians living there; but Dusenbury was well-known, and they were able to go right to her. The following are several mini-biographies of prominent collectors who visited Dusenbury or dealt with her songs.

JOHN AVERY LOMAX AND ALAN LOMAX

John A. Lomax was born in 1867 in Mississippi to a family whose social status, he said, was on the high end of "white trash."[1] The family soon moved to Bosque County, Texas, where Lomax learned to love the songs of the cowboys who passed through.

When he went to college, Lomax took a manuscript of some of the cowboy songs he had scribbled out. A professor at the University of Texas called the songs "tawdry, cheap, and unworthy."[2] However, when Lomax spent a year at Harvard Graduate School in 1906, professors Barrett Wendell and George L. Kittredge were more encouraging. The moment Kittredge expressed an interest in Lomax's "bundle of cowboy songs," Lomax wrote, "was the real beginning of my connection with the Archive of American Folk Song, established many years later in the Library of Congress. I began immediately to plan the best means of increasing my stock of ballads."[3]

Lomax wrote a letter describing his project of collecting "the native ballads and songs of the West," and mailed it with an endorsement from Wendell and Kittredge to a thousand newspaper editors in the West. The tactic succeeded. He wrote, "Letters poured in to my Cambridge address and for a long time followed me on to Texas. Even twenty years afterward a few still trickled in."[4]

That project began his life as a ballad hunter. Besides cowboy songs, Lomax collected sea chanteys, spirituals, work

songs, and songs of penitentiary blacks. He made about 300 records in Arkansas for the Archive of American Folk Song.[5] In 1936, Laurence Powell, whom Lomax called the "Music Professor,"[6] took him to see Emma Dusenbury, and they spent two days recording over eighty of the woman's songs.[7] Lomax and his son Alan included four of the songs in their 1941 book, Our Singing Country.

Alan Lomax was also a ballad hunter. He made several recording trips for the Archive of American Folk Song.[8] In 1939, Alan Lomax sang folk songs and played guitar on a CBS radio broadcast. This broadcast was expanded to a regular program in May 1940, and in June of that year, he signed a contract with RCA to produce records of "old songs."

The younger Lomax was concerned with the disappearance of those songs. In a letter to Vance Randolph dated June 23, 1942, (during the time Lomax was Assistant in Charge, AAFS) he stated, "I fear that there will be little work for us folklorists to do after this war is over--people dead, singers broken-hearted, communities scattered. Everything that can be got down now, especially the older material, will be that much saved from the wreck."

JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

In contrast to Lomax's humble beginnings, John Gould Fletcher was born to a prominent Little Rock family in 1886.[1] In 1907 he dropped out of Harvard and went to Europe, where

he lived for twenty-four years.

In 1933, Fletcher returned to the United States to live. He married writer Charlie May Simon two years later. They built a home on the Arkansas River outside Little Rock. From that time, Fletcher's poetry and correspondance concentrated on Arkansas and Southern themes.

Fletcher's high-brow lifestyle was textured by his interest in folk topics. Between 1933 and 1938, Fletcher visited Emma Dusenbury several times. Vance Randolph reported that Fletcher had "a manuscript collection of 70 texts which he wrote down from Mrs. Dusenbury's singing."[2] The composer Laurence Powell accompanied Fletcher at least once, and Fletcher and Powell corresponded frequently on matters concerning Dusenbury and their plans to publish a book of her songs.[3] Fletcher edited the texts of some of the songs Powell transcribed and notated. Fletcher included a ballad of Dusenbury's in his 1947 book Arkansas. Also, five of Dusenbury's songs appeared in Powell's An American Rondo,[4] an event Robert Cochran thought "must rank as the state's most spectacular instance of high culture/low culture exchange."[5]

Fletcher received the Pulitzer Prize in 1938 for his Selected Poems, the first Southern poet to be so honored. A promoter of fine arts for Arkansas, he was particularly pleased that the award was given to an Arkansas native.[6]

Fletcher died May 10, 1950. His body was found in a pond near his home.

VANCE RANDOLPH

Although Randolph was born in Pittsburg, Kansas (February 23, 1892), he spent 60 years of his life in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri and Arkansas.[1] His extensive work with Ozark mountain people established his reputation as an expert on the dialect, customs, folklore, and music of the Ozarks.

Randolph took very thorough notes on people he met, things they did and stories they told,[2] and he tried to convince an initially reluctant society of the importance of his type of research. The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture notes, "Randolph's methods and definitions were often in advance of their time; he included, for example, discographical references to 'hillbilly' music in his four-volume folksong collection Ozark Folksongs (1946-50) at a time when many scholars found such recordings unworthy of notice."

Randolph was the assistant state supervisor for the Federal Writers Project in 1936-37 and a field worker for the Archive of American Folklore, LOC, from 1941 to 1943.[3] He published over twenty collections of Ozark folklore, speech, music, and customs as well as many other books dealing with languages and science. He was also a free-lance writer most of his life.

Randolph died in 1980.

SIDNEY ROBERTSON COWELL

Robertson was born Sidney William Hawkins in San Fransisco in 1903.[1] In 1924 she married Kenneth Robertson. They were

divorced in 1934, but she kept the name.

When Robertson became interested in folk songs around 1936, she visited the Archive of American Folk-Song at the Library of Congress. Soon thereafter, she became assistant to the director of the Music Unit of the Resettlement Administration's Special Skills Division. She accompanied John Lomax on a recording trip through North Carolina and Alabama and then began to making her own recording trips "throughout the South and Midwest."

In 1937, Sidney Robertson recorded Arkansas folk songs for the Special Skills Division. On that trip, she spent several days in Mena and recorded forty-three of Mrs. Dusenbury's songs.[2] Laurence Powell included thirty-three of the songs Robertson recorded, as a supplement to his manuscript of seventy-two Dusenbury songs.[3]

Robertson was probably the only woman folk music collector of her time. Very little formal information exists on her life and career.[4]

Robertson married Henry Cowell in 1941. As of 1994, Sidney Robertson Cowell was still alive and living in New York State.

Emma Dusenbury in front of her home in Rocky. Photo by Vance Randolph for Ozark Folksongs.

songs at a time during visits to Dusenbury. Lomax and Powell recorded eighty songs, and Sidney Robertson recorded forty-four.[3] Lee Hays, a Little Rock native who later was part of the popular folk quartet The Weavers, wrote down over 100 songs for Commonwealth College[4] between 1937 and 1940. A Fayetteville woman, Ethel Sure, wrote down fifty-two.

Dusenbury was born Emma Hays in the Georgia hill country in 1862;[5] ten years later, her family--Emma, her parents, two brothers, and two sisters--moved to Arkansas, crossing the Missisippi River by steam ferry at Memphis. In the following eight years, the family lived in Crittenden County (just northwest of Memphis), then Batesville, Gassville, and Yellville in northern Arkansas. Emma married Ernest Dusenbury in Yellville in 1880, and their daughter Ora was born in 1882.[6]

In 1884, a fever left Emma Dusenbury blind and in frail health. In 1907 they moved from Kansas City to the Mena area hoping to improve Emma's health. There Mr. Dusenbury suffered an accident that crippled him; Emma told Sidney Robertson, "I gained my health as he lost his."

Robertson's notes paint a bleak picture of Dusenbury's life after her husband's death. By the thirties, when folk music collecters had begun to take an interest in her, Dusenbury and her daughter were living in a shack in the mountains west of Mena.

The little place was lonely and barely accessible. Lomax described the trip to the Dusenburys', "We... had turned off

from a fourth-class highway at a mailbox marked 'Mrs. Emma Dusenberry.' Some wagon tracks marked a dim trail through the woods."[7] He recalled some concern that his car would not make it over the rocks and stumps in the road. When John Gould Fletcher gave Laurence Powell directions to Dusenbury's house, he recommended simply getting a guide.[8] Robertson recorded, "Their nearest neighbor is a long quarter of a mile away; their nearest friendly neighbor, a good deal farther than that."

The cabin was in poor repair. Visitors reported that there was no glass in the windows and that cracks in the wall were papered with newspaper and flour paste to keep out the wind. Mrs. Dusenbury and Ora were able to live there rent-free because, as "Mrs. Dusenbury said tartly, 'It would cost good money to fix it up to rent.'"[9] Robertson also noted, "One of their absorbing worries concerns the health of their 'landlady,' for their free lease on their house is only for her lifetime. Experience has not led the Dusenburys to think so well of the world as to expect a long lease of life for anyone who does well by them."

The Polk County relief allowance was $1.50 a month per person, and Emma Dusenbury received a widow's pension of twelve dollars a month. Robertson believed that because of the publicity surrounding Dusenbury's singing, the neighbors assumed that she and Ora were cared for and didn't give them "the small services ordinarily rendered two women living alone."

Before the collectors discovered her, Emma Dusenbury often

sang for the students of Commonwealth College near Mena.[10] Professor F. M. Goodhue of the College, who personally contributed a few of Dusenbury's songs to Randolph's anthology Ozark Folk Songs, alerted John Gould Fletcher. That got the recording equipment rolling; Fletcher visited Dusenbury several times between 1933 and 1938, taking Laurence Powell with him at least once. Powell took John Lomax in 1936 (the trip Lomax described in his autobiography), and Robertson visited in 1937. Several other researchers visited Mrs. Dusenbury and recorded her songs, but these are the four from whom any recordings or manuscripts survive.

In 1936, the occasion of Arkansas' centennial provided an exciting event for Dusenbury: she was asked to sing at the Centennial Music Festival in Little Rock. On October 25, 1936, Dusenbury stood before a damp crowd (it was a rainy day) and sang "Abraham's Proclamation," "The State of Arkansas," "Poplar Creek," and several other songs.[11]

By that time, Powell had taken a personal interest in Dusenbury.[12] He wrote his friend Fletcher, "Mrs D is being given a $50 fee for coming to sing and all expenses paid," but doubted that Dusenbury would actually see the $200 promised for expenses.[13] She did get the fifty dollars, which she intended to save for her daughter Ora, but she had to spend all of it on supplies that winter.

Although Powell, Fletcher, and Robertson all took an interest in Emma Dusenbury's welfare, there is no evidence that

they were successful in helping her materially. Powell intended to publish a cheap, paper-backed book of thirty of the best Dusenbury songs "that lend themselves to mob singing,"[14] paying small fees to Fletcher (for editing) and himself and directing all the royalties to Dusenbury. He wrote, "My conscience tells me this is only fair: especially since Mrs D fully expects to get something out of her songs." The book never materialized. For his part, Fletcher apparently felt Dusenbury should have been given per dollar a song, but it was merely a thought. Robertson wrote a long letter--the source of much of the specific information in this section--to an unidentified person describing Dusenbury's circumstances, possibly to solicit aid for the woman. If that was the purpose, the letter was not successful.

Emma Dusenbury died May 5, 1941. The second World War was raging. In Polk County the strawberries were at their peak, and in Clark County the Ouachita River was in flood stage. She was buried beside her husband in Rocky Cemetery[15] west of Mena. Her obituary appeared in the May 8, 1941 edition of the Mena Weekly Star as follows:

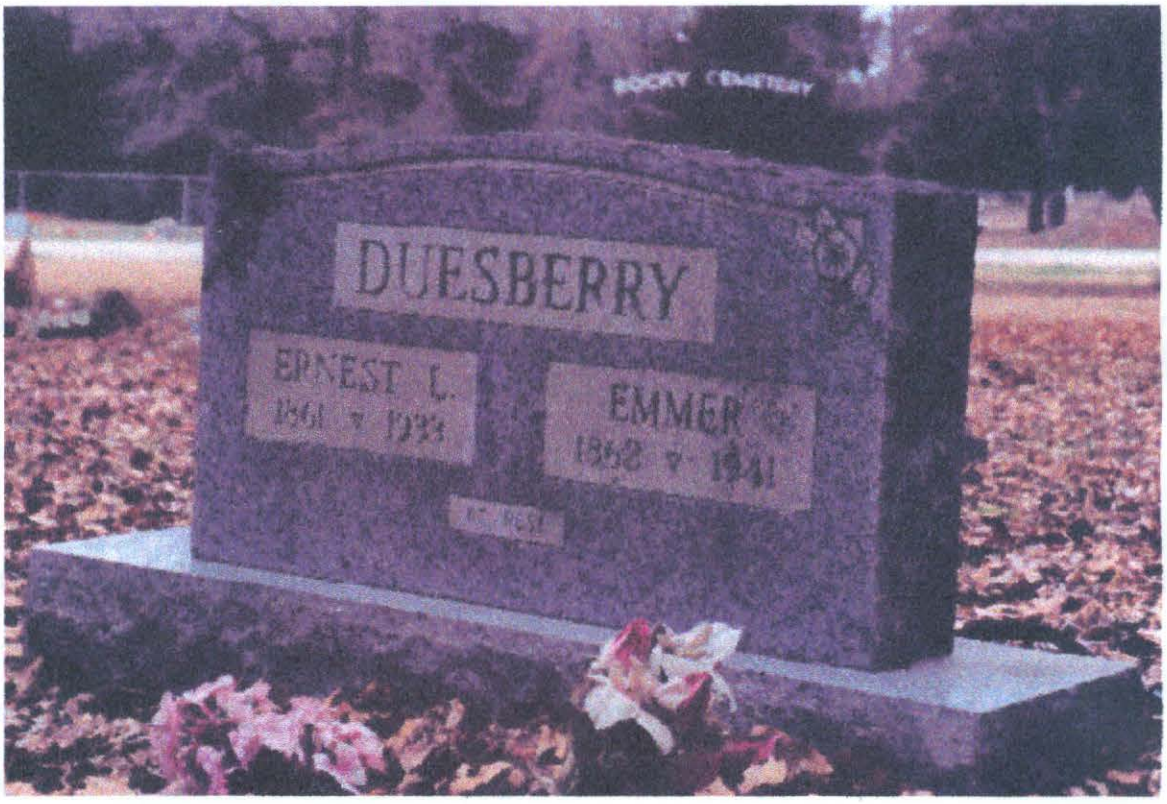
> Mrs. Emma Dusenbury, longtime resident of Freedom township west of Mena, died about 7:45 o'clock Monday night at a local hospital. She had been in ill health for some time and her passing was not unexpected.
>
> The body was moved to the Beasly-Wood Funeral Home and prepared for burial. Funeral service was held Wednesday morning at 11 o'clock at Rocky with Rev. Adam Deck officiating.
>
> Mrs. Dusenbury was 79 years of age. She was a native of Georgia, however

had lived in Polk county [sic] since 1907, coming here with her husband from Baxter county. Blind since 27 years of age, Mrs. Dusenbury had a wondervul memory of happenings and particularly did her mind retain the words and tunes of early day folk songs. It was this memory of old ballads which brought her a measure of fame in 1936 when she was "discovered" by Vance Randolph, the author, John Gould Fletcher, the poet and Laurence Powell, the musician....

Also in 1936, Arkansas Centennial year, Mrs. Dusenbury took part in the Centennial music festival at Little Rock at Fair Park on Octover 25. Special arrangements were made to take her ot the festival and she pleased the vast audence with her early day ballads. This was one of the bright spot in her declining hears.

Mrs. Dusenbury's husband preceded her in death in 1933 and she is survived by the daughter Ola, with whom she made her home in the Rocky community.

Rocky Methodist Church. In the background is Rocky Cemetery, where the Dusenburys are buried.



The Dusenburys' headstone in Rocky Cemetery. The names were spelled exactly as they were pronounced: Emma as "Emmer" and Dusenbury as "Duesberry."

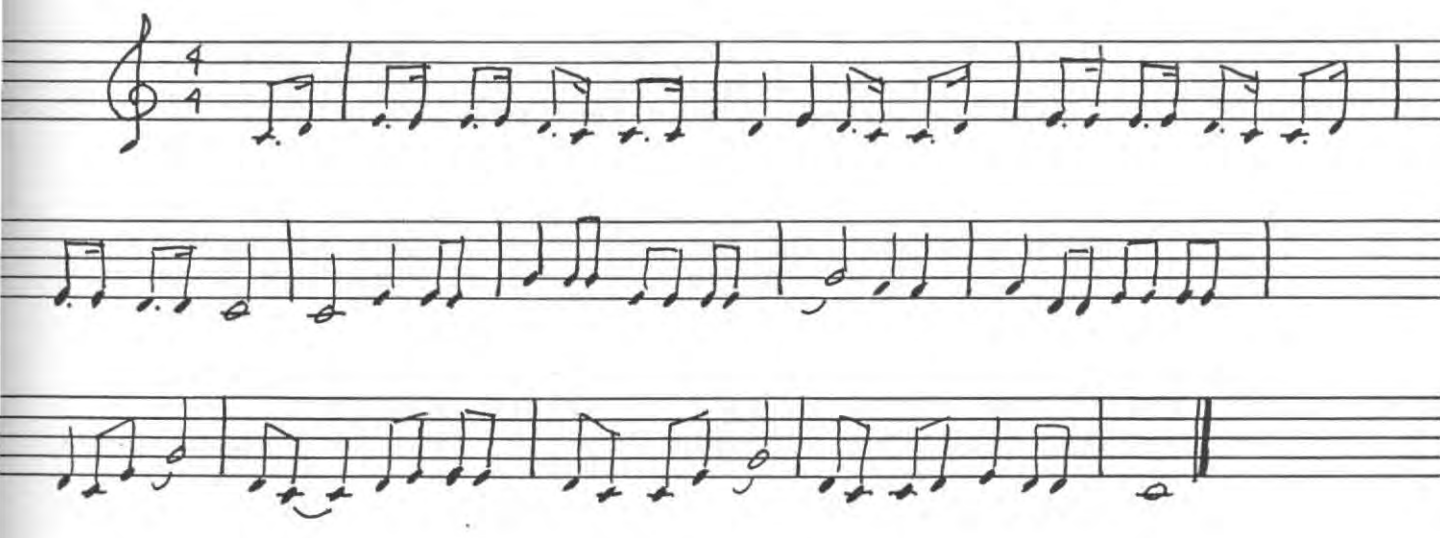
EMMA DUSENBURY: SONGS

Despite the conditions of her life, the tone qualitiy of Emma Dusenbury's voice, even at age seventy-four,[1] was remarkably clear and almost childlike. She had good control and rarely wobbled or let the pitch wander, even after singing seven or eight verses of a song unaccompanied. Her voice tended to be slightly nasal when she set the pitch too high; she often pitched songs in the upper part of her range. Her texts on quality recordings like Sidney Robertson's are easy to understand.

Dusenbury did not tend to interpret the songs dynamically or with variations in rhythm. She sometimes stretched a syllable, but if her tempo slowed it was most often because she was unsure of the words. For a folk singer, Dusenbury used relatively few ornaments. Any ornaments or tempo variations are woodenly consistent, indicating that Dusenbury probably sang the songs as she had learned them from different people, without adding many creative touches of her own.

Sidney Robertson's Dusenbury recordings are the best and most extensive ones housed in the Library of Congress. Laurence Powell transcribed and notated several of them and even used a few in his "American Rondo." The following songs are also from the Robertson recordings.[2]

THE DODGER SONG



Oh, the candidate's a dodger
Yes a well known dodger
Yes the candidate's a dodger
Yes 'n' I'm a dodger too
He'll meet you and treat you and ask you for your vote
Look out boys, he's a-dodgin for your note
(CHORUS) Yes we're all dodging
Dodging dodging dodging
Yes we're all dodging
That's the way to the world[3]

Yes the lawyer he's a dodger
Yes a well known dodger
Yes the lawyer he's a dodger
Yes 'n' I'm a dodger too
He'll plead your case and claim you as a friend
Look out boys he's [a for a bend][4]
CHORUS

Yes the merchant he's a dodger...

He'll sell you goods at a double price
When you go to pay him, you'll have to pay him twice
CHORUS

Yes the doctor he's a dodger...
He'll doctor you and cure you for half you possess
Look out boys, he's dodging for the rest
CHORUS

Yes the preacher he's a dodger....
He'll preach you the gospel until you're off your [kines]
Look out boys, he's a-dodging for your dimes
CHORUS

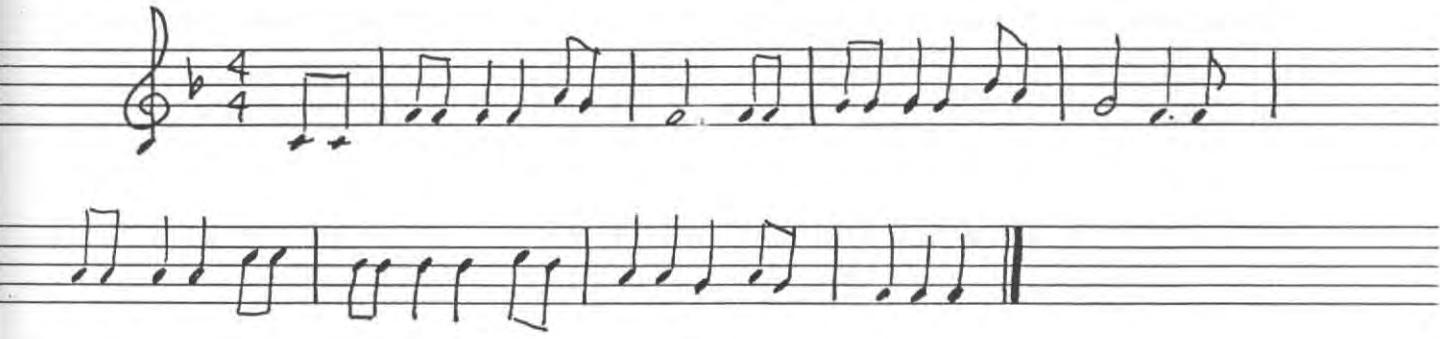
Yes the farmer he's a dodger....
He'll plow his cotton, he'll hoe his corn
He'll make a living just as sure as you're born
CHORUS

Yes the lover he's a dodger....
He'll hug you and kiss you and call you his bride
Look out girls he's a-tellin you a lie
CHORUS

Mrs. Dusenbury ended this particularly pragmatic song by commenting, "'at's all o' that dodger! Bud Allen learnt it to me... Don't know where it come from or nothin' about it; Bud Allen, he sung it, and I learnt it from him."

Dusenbury sang the next two songs almost entirely without ornament. The tempos may have been so fast as to make ornamentation impractical.

DRINK HER DOWN



Here's your good old whiskey boys, drink her down
Here's your good old whiskey boys, drink her down
Here's your good old whiskey,
It'll make you mighty frisky,
Drink her down, boys, down,
Drink her down down down

Here's your good old lemonade, drink her down
Here's your good old lemonade, drink her down
Here's your good old lemonade,
Then you needn't be afraid,
Drink her down, boys, down,
Drink her down down down

Here's your good old brandy, boys....
Here's you good old brandy boys
And--[5] make you mighty merry
Drink her down, boys, down,
Drink her down down down

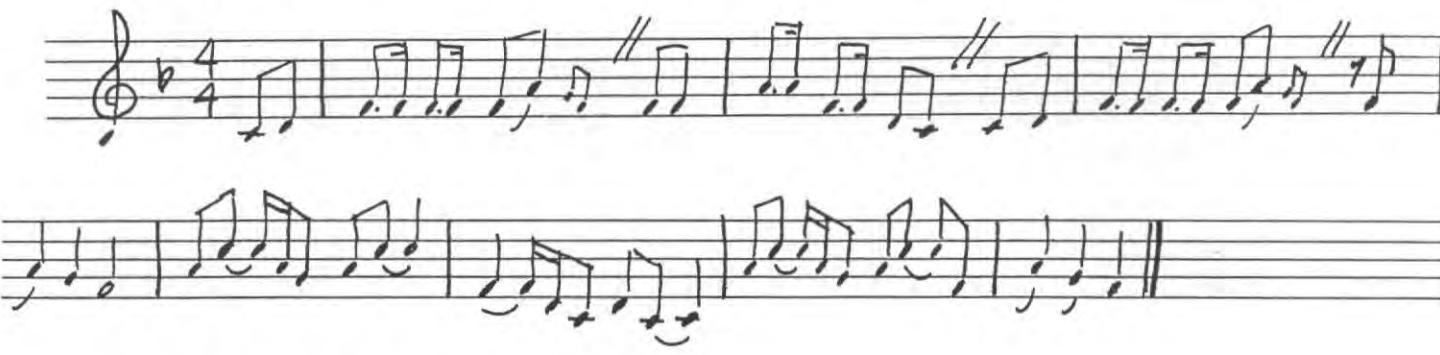
Here's your good Tom and Jerry....
Here's your good old Tom and Jerry
It'll make you mighty merry
Drink her down, boys, down,
Drink her down down down

Here's your good old lager beer....
Here's your good old lager beer
And you needn't have a fear
Drink her down, boys, down,
Drink her down down down[6]

Here's your good old gin boys....
Here's your good old gin
It'll make you laugh and grin
Drink her down, boys, down
Drink her down down down

Immediately after the rousing drinking song, Dusenbury launched into this spiritual, "We Will Camp Upon the Mountain."

WE WILL CAMP UPON THE MOUNTAIN, OH ISRAEL



We will camp upon the mountain
We will camp upon the mountain
We will camp upon the mountain
In that great day
(REFRAIN) Oh Israel, oh Israel
Oh Israel, in that great day

We will see our fathers rising
We will see our fathers rising
We will see our fathers rising
In that great day
REFRAIN

We will camp upon the mountain...
REFRAIN

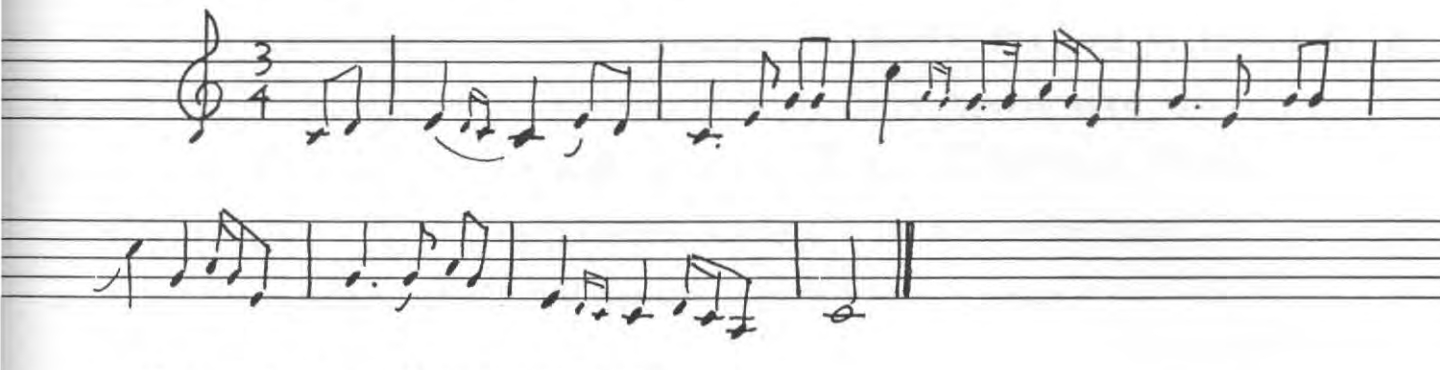
We will see our mothers rising...
REFRAIN

We will camp upon the mountain...
REFRAIN

We will see our brothers rising...
REFRAIN

After the "mothers" stanza, Dusenbury stopped singing and asked, "That as far as you want me to go?" She then went ahead and sang "brothers." Presumably, the song goes on to include sisters as well.

ONE DAY IN A LONESOME GROVE



One day in a lonesome grove
While on my head sat a little dove
And for his mate began to coo
It makes me think of my love too

Oh little dove, you're not alone
For once like you, I had a mate
But now like you I'm desolate

Consumption seized my love so dear
And freedom had for one long year
At length just at the break of day
My poor Mary hit did slay

Her sparkling eyes, her blooming cheek
Must wither like the rose and die
Her arms that once did embrace me around
Lies mould'ring now under the cold ground

The death toll [dealt] did not stop there
I had one child to me most dear
Death like a virgin came again
And took from me my little Jane

But praise the Lord, his words are given
Declaring babes are [they's] of heaven
Where ceased my heart to mourn for Jane
For my great loss was her great gain

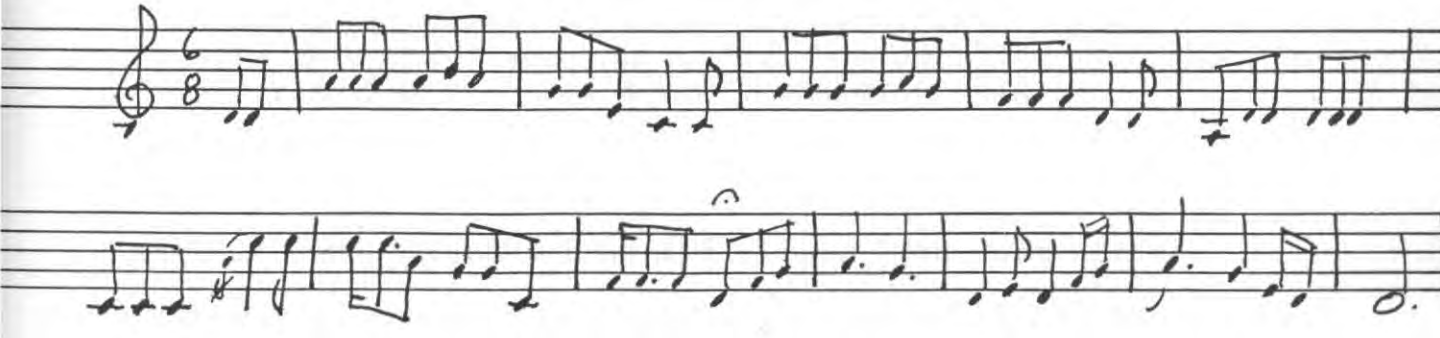
And hasten on that happy day
When I shall leave this house of clay
And so re [...] plan
To meet my Mary and my Jane

Having performed the entire song in a key that reached just above her range and having used many more ornaments than usual, Mrs. Dusenbury cleared her throat and commented, "That's

hard to sing!"

The next song is another pragmatic "that's the way to the world"-type ballad. Mrs. Dusenbury must have known more than these six stanzas; at the end, she asked the collectors, "That enough of it?" It was apparently enough for Robertson and Powell. Dusenbury used few ornaments in "Hard Times."

HARD TIMES[8]



When young ladies gets married [their parder is done]
[They do til all comfort and] trouble comes on
Their husbands to scold them, their children to scorn
Makes many fair faces grow withered and old

REFRAIN A
And it's hard times, girls, oh girls
And it's hard times girls

When young men goes courting they dress up so fine
To court the girls, that's all their design
But when they get there, they'll flatter and lie
And keep the girls up til they're ready to die

REFRAIN A

Well, the girls'll get sleepy and to theirselves say,
"Oh boys, oh boys, I wish you'd go away"
But they'll [laugh and to] scorn
Before they'll go home, they'll sleep in the barn

REFRAIN B
And it's hard times boys, oh boys
And it's hard times boys

Next morning so early they will rise
Brush off the straws, rub up their eyes
And the way home they will ride
Like all false lovers, puffed up with pride

REFRAIN B

When they get home, they'll stagger and reel
"God bless those girls, how sleepy I feel,
I'll go not a-courting, I'll not marry at all,
For happy is the man who keeps bachelor's hole"

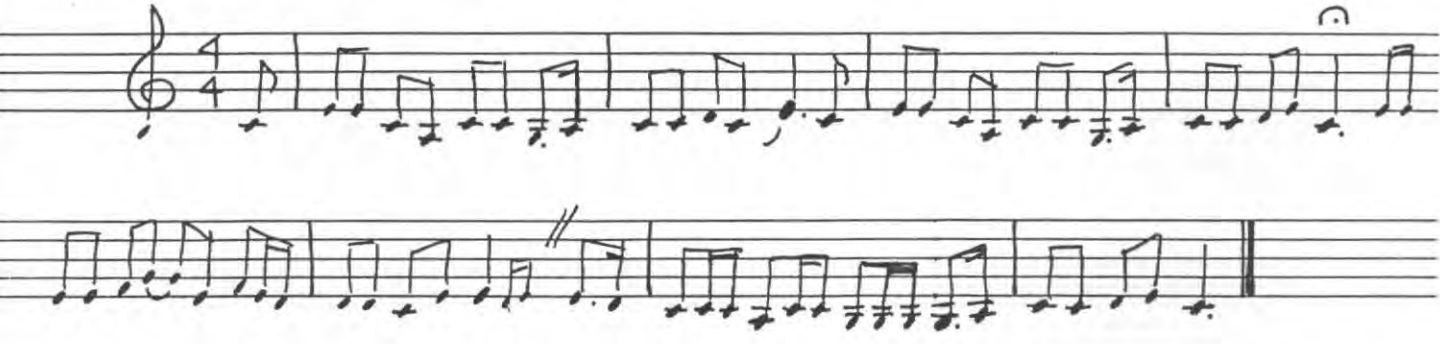
REFRAIN B

A bachelor's life, I'm sure it is the best
Be drunk or be sober, go home, take your rest
No wife to control you, no children to squall
So happy is the man that keeps bachelor's hole

REFRAIN B

Another song "learnt" from Bud Allen, "The Farmer's Boy" has a rare happy ending. Dusenbury held out the final syllables of the last two lines in each stanza (for example, "-one" and "-ploy" in the first stanza) and then sped up the tempo on the refrain, making the song sound playful.

THE FARMER'S BOY



The sun went down beyond yon hill
Just o'er the dairy mow
When up the lane this lad he came
To be a farmer's boy
Can you tell me of anyone
That will give me employ?

(REFRAIN)For to reap, for to mow, for to plow, for to sow,
To be a farmer's boy

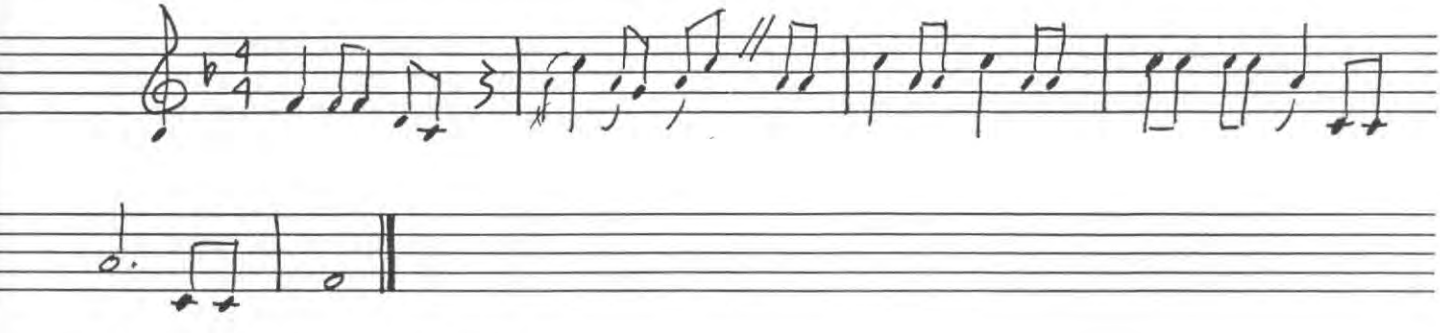
My father's dead, my mother's left
With us four children small
But the [worst ain't for] the mother yet
I'm the oldest of them all
But young I am [I keer not work]
If you will give me employ
REFRAIN

I'll try this lad, the farmer said
No longer let him weep
Oh yes, the [kind sir's] daughter said
While tears rolled down her cheek
His hear you know for one
To weep and seek for employ
REFRAIN

This farmer's lad grew up a man
And the good old farmer died
He left to him the farm that he had
And his daughter for a bride
In peace and pleasure every day
They [joked] and smiled with joy
REFRAIN

Though the subject matter of the next song was as morbid as that of the usual folk ballad, I imagine "Who Killed Poor Robin?" being a children's song.

WHO KILLED POOR ROBIN?



Who killed poor robin?
Who killed poor robin?
It was I, said the sparrow,[10]
With my little bow and arrow
It was I, it was I

Who seen him die?
Who seen him die?
It was I, said the fly,
With my little teensy eye
It was I, it was I

Who laid him out?...[11]
It was I, said the raven,
Just as straight as I could lay him
It was I...

Who made his coffin?...
It was I, said the crane,
With my little saw and plane
It was I...

Who made his shroud?...
It was I, said the eagle,
With my thimble and my needle
It was I...

Who dug his grave?...
It was I, said the crow,
With my little garden hoe
It was I...

Who hauled him over?...
It was I, said the lark,
With my little horse and cart
It was I...

Who let him down?...
It was I, said the crane,
With my little silver chain
It was I...

Who covered him up?...
It was I, said the duck,
With my big splatter foot
It was I...

Who preached his funeral?...
It was I, said the owl,
Just as loud as I could howl,
It was I...

The tyranny of rhyme caused the crane to have two tasks--or perhaps the crane was just more prepared than the other animals. "Who Killed Poor Robin?" is also interesting

because it shows the immediacy burials must have had for rural people before funeral homes took over the "dirty work."

The next song contains the honest, heartfelt testimony of a child of God whose spiritual fire has died down.

THE BACKSLIDER'S SONG

I once did have a glorious view of my redeeming Lord
He said I'll be a God to you, and I believed his word
But now I have an aching void this world can never fill
I've left, I've strayed, and know not how the light from me's withdrawn

I once rejoiced the things to me, to me they was most dear
I then could stoop to wash their feet and share their joyful tear
But now I meet them as the rest and with [them darlin stay]
My conversation's [very bliss] or else I have nought to say

I once could mourn o'er dying men and long their souls to win
I traveled for their poor children and warned them of their sins
But now my heart's so careless grown although they'd [road invite]
My bowels o'er them have ceased to yearn, the tears have left mine eyes

Afoul I go[12] [in beauty's way] but cannot find him there
Then backward on the road I stray but cannot find him there
On the left hand [we read owes work] among the wicked crew
And on the right they'll find him not among the favored few

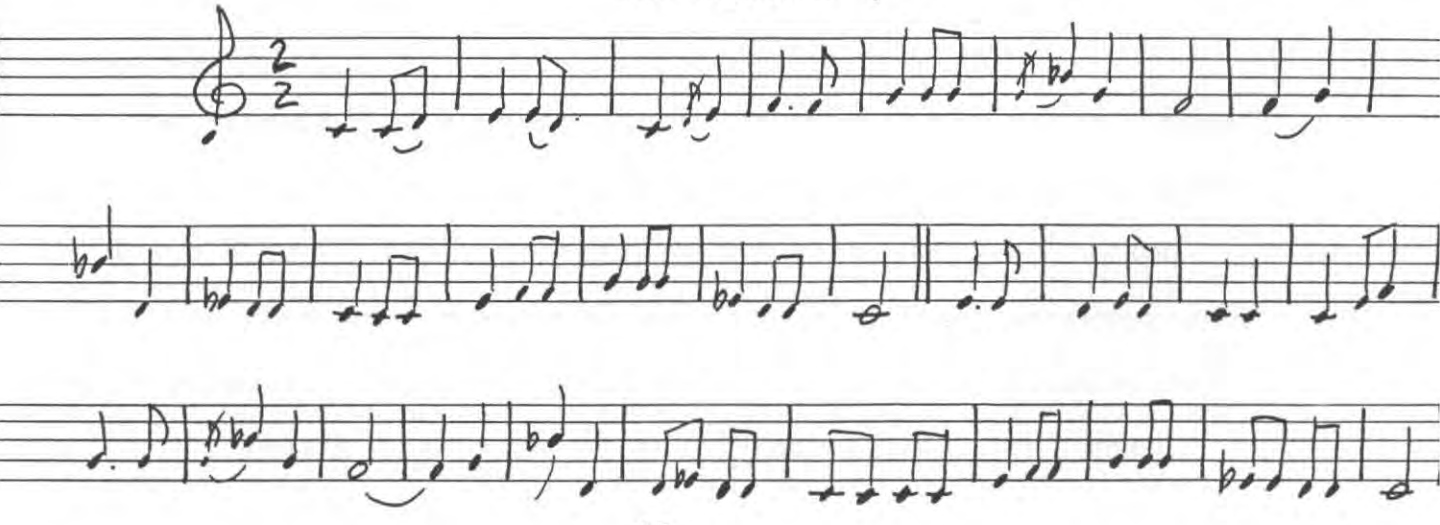
What shall I do, shall I lie down and sink in deep despair
Will he forever wear a frown or hear my feeble prayer
No, he will put the strength in me, he knows the way I've strowed
And when I'm tried so patiently, I shall come forth as gold

My favorite of these Dusenbury songs, "The Mermaid" (Child 289), is a unique one. Dusenbury may have been the only folk singer in Arkansas to know a complete version of Child 289. Randolph wrote, "'The Mermaid' is, I think, the only traditional ballad ever collected in the Ozark region which is not adequately represented in my collection."[13]

Robertson wrote that when Dusenbury sang the song for her,

> Mrs. D--- said: ".....jolly sailor boys a-climbing up the mask
> And the landlord a-lyin' down below, below, below,
> And the landlord a-lyin' down below." I said, "Mrs. Dusenbury, what in the world was a landlord doing in that song!" and she said promptly, "Oh---asleep, I reckon." ('Lying down below.')[14]

THE MERMAID



I sailed out one Friday night
I was not far from land
When I spied a pretty girl a-combing out her hair
With a comb and a glass in her hand

CHORUS
And the sea is a-roar, roar, roar
And the stormy winds may blow
While us four sailor boys a-climbing up the mask
And the landlord a-lying down below

Up stepped the captain of our gallant ship
A well-spoken captain was he
Saying
That'll sink to the bottom of the sea

CHORUS

Up stepped the mate of our gallant ship
A well-spoken mate was he
Saying
That'll sink to the bottom of the sea

CHORUS

I have a wife and children three
This night they're looking for me
They will look, [they will] wait till the cold water rise
And [a-look] to the bottom of the sea

CHORUS

I have a mother and sisters three
This night they're waiting for me
They will look [ ] wait till the cold water rise
And [will look] to the bottom of the sea

CHORUS

The presence of a landlord on a ship and the use of "mask" for "mast" testify to the interesting things oral transmission can do to a song. In this case, generations of land-locked balladeers must have passed between the seafaring composer and Emma Dusenbury. Dusenbury said when she finished singing the ballad, "I learnt that from my Aunt Fanny Hays... Oh, when I

was in m'teens, I don't know exactly whereabouts, fifteen or sixteen years old."

PLAY-PARTY SONGS

It is evident from both the Lomax-Powell recordings and the Robertson recordings that quite a few of Dusenbury's songs were play-party songs. The play-party song, a combination of song, dance, and game, was common in the Ouachitas. Mary Bain remembers play parties: "That was a big thing back in my day." She explained, "'Bout the only difference in a play party and a dance is that they sang, instead of playing music. But they danced and went through the same deal."[1]

Each song had its own dance or game, usually involving pairs of boys and girls and often resembling an choreographed chase that ended in a kiss. A 1935 article in the Kansas City Times[2] called them "kissing games backed up by home-made music.... The young people sang as they danced. They played games which were built around songs."

Sometimes the words of the song provided directions for the dance. James Ade, author of the Kansas City Times article,

quoted one song:

> Go to the east; go to the west;
> Go to the one that you love best;
> If she's (he's) not here to take your part,
> Choose another with all your heart
> Down on this carpet you must kneel,
> Sure as the grass grows in the field;
> Salute your choice and kiss her sweet
> And then you rise up to your feet.

Bain remembered another:

> Chicken in the bread pan
> Peckin' out dough
> Granny grab yer pardner and do-so-do
> Hurry up boys
> And don't fool around
> Grab you a pardner and truck on down

Ade took a nostalgic view of "old songs":

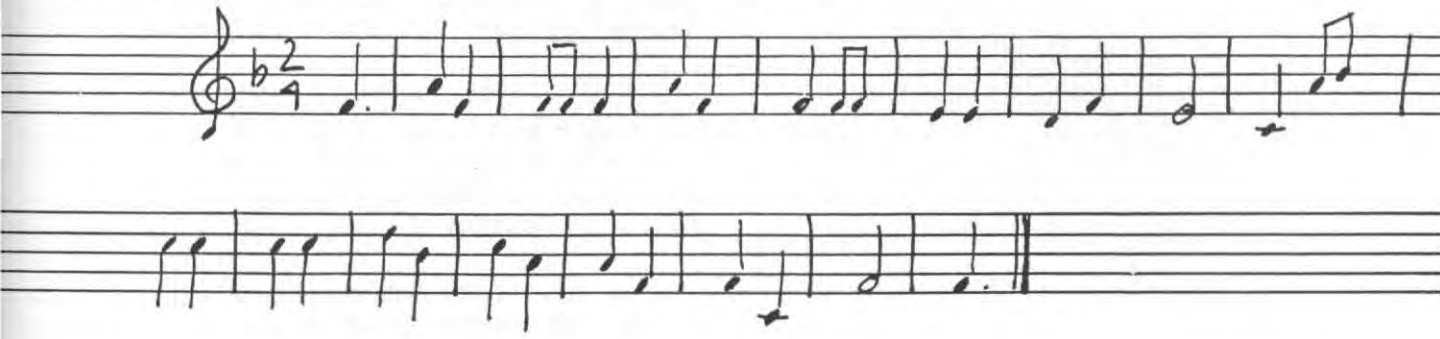
> In the old days a song didn't wear itself out in a few weeks. It wasn't done in a talking picture in one month, tortured to death by radio entertainers for another month and tossed into the discard during the third month. It was preserved and handed down from one generation to another. If it made good music for dancing it promised to be everlasting.

That is why, Ade wrote, songs like "Old Dan Tucker" and "Turkey in the Straw" are still popular.

Some of the songs may still be popular, but even in 1935, Ade believed, "The kissing game is just a pleasant memory." However, when collectors for the Works Project Administration (WPA) Federal Writers' Project fanned out across Arkansas in the thirties, they found quite a few people who knew the songs and directions for kissing games.[3] Many of those people were in the Ouachitas.

Maggie L. Leeper collected songs in the Hot Springs District. She found E.A. Shakleford, a "farmer and radio

entertainer on barn dance programs," in Pearcy, about twelve miles east of Hot Springs on state highway 70. Shakleford sang "Weevily Wheat"[4]:



Oh Charlie is a neat young man,
And Charlie is a dandy,
And Charlie's head, it is so red
It looks like homemade candy.

Chorus:
And I won't have none of your weevily wheat
And I won't have none of your barley
It takes some flour and half an hour
To make a cake for Charlie

Charlie's here and Charlie's there
And Charlie's on the ocean
And Charlie says he's coming back
When e'er he takes a notion

The racoon he's a pullin' up corn
And the possum, he's a' hawlin'
I left my dog to mind the gap
And he's killed himself a bawlin'.

The higher up the cherry tree,
The riper grow the cherries.
The sooner a young man courts the girl
The sooner they will marry.

Way down yonder in the maple swamp
The waters deep and muddy
There I spy my pretty little girl
There I spy my honey.

How old are you, my pretty little girl?
How old are you my honey?

She answered me with a smile on her face
"I'll be sixteen next Sunday."

Will you marry me, my pretty little miss,
Will you marry me, my honey?
She answered me with a "Ha, ha, ha,
You'll have to ask my mommy."

*Another version[5]
For Charlie is a nice young man,
For Charlie is a dandy.
Charlie loves to kiss the girls
Because it comes so handy.

Won't have none of your weevily wheat
Won't have none of your barley
Won't have none of your weevily wheat
To make a cake for Charlie.[6]

The directions for playing "Weevily Wheat" are included.

The boys choose partners. Boys form one line, girls, another. The two lines face one another. The first couple (one at head of line) holds hands and dances up and down beween the rows as the first verse of the song is sung. The boy escorts his partner to the lower end onf [sic] the line. She swings the boy on the corner as her partner skips back to swing in the middle of the circle. They skip back and swing the next boy and girl respectively. This continues until everybody has been swung. Partners all swing and then promenade. The first couple falls to the foot of the line. This keeps up in rotation until everybody has been "head couple". [sic]

Leeper's source for "Black Eyed Susie" was Cecil Wright of Mt. Ida, also known as "Rowdy Wright the Jolly Cowboy" on a Hot Springs radio station.

BLACK EYED SUSIE

Chorus:
Oh my pretty little Black Eyed Susie
Oh my pretty little Black Eyed Susie

Verse:
Some get drunk and some get boozy
But I went home with Black Eyed Susie

Additional verses:[7]
All I want in this creation
Pretty little wife on a big plantation

All I want to make me happy
Two little boys to call me pappy

Black dog, white dog, little black nigger
Good-bye boys, I'm goin' to see the widder

Miss Maurine Wright, also from Mt. Ida, gave Leeper the directions for "Little Brown Jug." Miss Minion Glass, a teacher from Hot Springs, provided "Go Bring Me Back My Darling," and Barney Benedict gave Leeper "Old Dan Tucker" and "Turkey in the Straw." Other play-party songs Leeper collected include "The Irish Tart," "Sent My Brown Jug Downtown," "Join Heart and Hand," "Going to Boston," "Can't Jump Josie," "Marching Round the Levee," "Roxy Anne," "Sugar Lump," "The Miller Boy," "Buffalo Gal," and "Shoot the Buffalo."

When John Lomax and Laurence Powell recorded Emma Dusenbury in August 1936, she sang at least two play party songs for them. The Library of Congress recordings include conversations between Dusenbury and one of the men, whom I believe to be Lomax,[8] in which Dusenbury gave the directions for playing "The Chimney Sweeper" and "Hog Drovers." The quality of the recording is very poor, and some of the words are barely intelligible. The conversation about "The Chimney Sweeper" is the clearer, and Mrs. Dusenbury's humor at the end of the exchange is obvious.

MAN: This is one of the play party songs, isn't it, Miz Dusenbury?
DUSENBURY: Yes sir.
MAN: Well, how d'you play it?
D: They seated the [girls] around the room, and the one young man would get a broom, and have

another young man folla him, and they march around the room and sing, and then this young man that was followin' the one with the broom in his hand, would go and choose a girl, and then they'd join their right hands and step over the broom, and then they'd kiss.

MAN: Did you ever play that game?

D: I played the game, but I... [THE WORDS ARE NOT CLEAR, BUT SHE SEEMS TO BE TELLING ABOUT A TIME SHE PLAYED THE GAME WITH A PARTICULAR BOY.]

MAN: What was that boy's name?

D: Sam.

MAN: Was Sam a nice boy?

D: Oh yes, he was a nice boy.

MAN: One of your sweethearts?

D: Yes sir.

MAN: Did you have a good many sweethearts when you were young?

D: Yes sir, I had one for every Sunday in the month! [LAUGHTER IN THE ROOM]

Ade pointed out that the play-party dances, which he called "kissing games," were really quite tame. When a couple got to a prescribed kiss like the one Dusenbury described, "The whole performance was safe, sanitary and harmless. It was devoid of sex urge and wasn't really meant to excite love's young dream."

Ade continued, "The kissing games were tolerated in private homes at a time when church 'discipline' forbade young people to dance, play cards, or go to the theater." Whether the church tolerated the games sometimes had no bearing on the workings of a young person's conscience, however. Bain was stricken in this way.

"I went to the play parties until I was saved," she said, "and I went to one play party after I was saved, and I just felt so condemned and out of place there, I just felt that wasn't any place for a Christian to be, so I just never did go back

to any more." She found nothing specifically wrong with the words of the songs or the actions of the dances. "It didn't seem that bad or anything," she remembered, "I just felt like I shouldn't be there." That's okay. Gospel music was Bain's favorite, anyway.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Before I interviewed my neighbor Mary Bain, I had not personally encountered play-party songs or any other type of vocal folk music; I had only known fiddling. I used to think that when Mary's husband Ruel Bain died in [1989], the last of the Ouachita Mountain fiddlers had gone away. The interview encouraged me to rethink. Name after name came up casually in our conversation: "Oh, my oldest brother's a pretty good fiddler," Mary would say, or, "Loyd Schoolfield, he plays out at the American Legion every Friday night." I believe dozens of Ouachita fiddlers could have told--can still tell--stories similar to Ruel's. Still, Ruel's fame and beloved skill were unsurpassed in my experience.

Ruel was born August 17, 1915 in Board Camp, east of Mena. Always interested in music, he once went to a dance against his father's expressed wishes so that he could hear the fiddler. "He said when he was a kid, a fiddler just fascinated him,"

said Mary. "He'd always get right up by the fiddler and just listen to the fiddler. It just fascinated him. And he said that was the last whipping his father ever gave him. He just couldn't resist that fiddler."

When he was fifteen, Ruel traded his .22 rifle for a fiddle in poor condition. He made his own bow from a peach branch and some of his mother's sewing thread. He and his younger brother (on guitar) taught themselves to play, practicing evenings in the barn until they were confident enough to play at social gatherings.

Eventually they performed at fiddle contests. Mary's first memory of Ruel was at a contest in Mena in 1939. "He and his brother were stunt playing," she recalled. "Ruel was noting the fiddle and picking the guitar, and his brother Frobin was noting the guitar and playing the fiddle."

The same year, Ruel traveled with Dick Ellison and the Lum and Abner Show. They played in eleven states. In 1950, Ruel did another on the radio when his band, "Ruel Bain and the Arkansas Ridge Runners,"[2] performed the first live show to air on local radio station KENA. That show ran for seven months. They played "just--country music," Mary said. "And back then, it was customary, they always had at least one hymn in a program."

In addition to playing contests and radio gigs, Ruel played in bars and at dances--until Mary came along. "When we started going together," she said, "he was playing in the bar every

weekend, and he invited me, but I told him, 'No, I've never been in a place like that, and I don't aim to start now.' So it wasn't long until he quit." There were plenty of alternative gigs. "We went into the gospel music," Mary assured me. "[He'd] play in the nursing homes and schools and churches and any worthwhile cause."

Later, Bain taught fiddle lessons in his home, mostly to children. "He had students coming and going all the time," said Mary. There were more enthusiastic parents than interested children, but "he always told them, 'Now I can show you how, but I can't do it for you.' If they didn't have any interest in it, he just didn't waste his time."

Did this occasional lack of interest among the young folk indicate that Ruel's type of music is declining? Mary does not think so. She pointed out the stacks of fan mail: thousands of letters Ruel received, some bearing overseas postmarks.

Ruel also made fiddles and bass fiddles.[3] He did not keep many of the homemade ones; he preferred to play what Mary called the "fancy" fiddle, one with a mother-of-pearl "tree of life" design inlaid on the neck and carved designs on the back. "Yeah," she said, "he liked to play on the fancy fiddle, but the Stradivarius sounded best."

I nearly choked. "He had a Stradivarius?"

Yes, she said, it had been left to Ruel by a friend in Florida when the friend died. "That's a nice fiddle," she sighed.

For several years during the late 1980's, Ruel performed in Queen Wilhelmina State Park. The park is at the top of Rich Mountain north of Mena. Ruel went to the lodge, the park's center of activities, often taking Charles Ott, a dobro player, to "second," or play second part. "They would go up there of an evening along about four, five o'clock and just set down there in the lobby and start playing, and a crowd would begin gathering in, and they liked it so well they just kept it up," remembered Mary. A park superintendant and a ranger eventually joined the Bain and Ott, the ranger playing banjo and the superintendant on washboard and train whisles.

"Any kind of song with a train, most any of them are fiddle tunes," said Mary. She remembers "Orange Blossom Special" and "Wabash Canonball." Ruel also played bluegrass and waltzes, "most anything. 'Westphalia Waltz,' that was my favorite," Mary said. "And he liked to play 'Cotton Eyed Joe,' especially for the children. It was a peppy song, and he would holler in it."

Also in the 1980s, Mena artist Monta Philpot painted Ruel as part of her exibit, A Ouachita Portrait. The exibit was intended to portray people who exemplified the Ouachita mountain way of life. "His picture was the first she painted," said Mary. "When she'd have her pictures around on tour, she liked for her subjects to go around and pose by their paintings. We've been to Little Rock and Tulsa." The exibit also toured in Washington, D.C.

From the time he couldn't resist sneaking to a dance to hear the fiddler, Ruel's interest in fiddling never declined. His wife testified, "He loved it more and more and more. Never tired of that.

"A lot of times he'd just sit out there on the porch swing and fiddle. I still miss that."

Harrison Sullivan of Wickes, south Polk County, represents another kind of music still alive in the Ouachitas: the old gospel music. Sullivan learned to sing in a one-room schoolhouse where the teacher devoted the last hour of school every Friday to music. When he was eleven or twelve, he attended a singing school held at night at "the old Baker church." That singing school was taught by a traveling teacher; when the man came back several years later, Sullivan attended again. "He taught harmony that time," said Sullivan.[4] He went to three more singing schools as an adult.

The singing schools taught gospel music using shape notes. "Everything was in shape notes," Sullivan said. "I can't read the round notes real good." He leads the choir at the Nazarene Church in Wickes; although most hymnals use the "round notes" now, his church ordered him his own hymnal, one with shape notes.

Sullivan recalls that the Stamps Music Company, which published all the songbooks he used as a child, "used to put on a thirty-day singing school every summer" in Dallas. "On the last day, they always had an all-night sing. I was never priviledged to go to that," he said with regret.

He seems to be making up now for what he missed then. Besides leading music at his own church, he helps five churches in the small communities around Wickes with their Decoration Sunday services every year.[5] "They don't all have it on Memorial Day," he said. "They have it from the first Sunday in May to the first Sunday in June," one church each week. "In the morning, they'll have their preaching, and then we sing all afternoon."

Sullivan favors the "old-time gospel songs" like "I'll Fly Away," "Amazing Grace," and "Precious Memories." He said, "All those songs are very precious to me because I've sang at a lot of funerals. I wouldn't be far off saying I've sung at well over a hundred funerals in my lifetime." In a region of small, close-knit communities, he has no trouble organizing friends of the deceased into choirs to sing at the funerals.

Although the most important instruments in gospel music are the voices ("I sing soprano and bass," Sullivan said), piano and guitar often accompany. Sullivan's long-time friend Alvin Baker accompanies him often. Baker can play both instruments, and he sings second tenor. As for the rhythm section, "My mother went to a Holiness Church," Sullivan said. "They <u>always</u> used a tambourine."

Though tattered shape-note songbooks can still be found in the pews of a few country churches, as Harrison Sullivan testified, more people read round notes than read shapes. However, the old partner of gospel music, the formal shape-note

singing, is being revived, making it possibly the most current type of folk music alive in the Ouachitas today. At shape-note singings, also called "sacred harp singings" for the name of several of the songbooks, nobody needs round notes.

Eddie Huckaby is a member of the Ouachtia Headwaters Sacred Harp Singers, a group that meets in Mena twice a month. "There's been a resurgence in sacred harp singing in the last twenty years or so," Huckaby said.[6] He knows of groups meeting in Los Angeles, Denver, Boston, Washington, D.C., and "a very large group in Chicago. It's getting where sacred harp singing can be found in just about any state," he said.

Though the Ouachita Headwaters group was organized through a community service class at Rich Mountain Community College, several of the twelve regular members knew shape notes before. "Many of them had sung using shape notes of the seven-shape type," said Huckaby. They were members of congregations such as Primitive Baptists or Church of God. The group sometimes meets other groups at weekend conventions which Huckaby humorously described as "a sort of a stamina contest. Sometimes a loudness contest."

During the spring of 1996, I attended a singing in Mena. The group had gathered in the local electric co-op meeting room. Benches and metal folding chairs had been arranged in a square. When I walked in, about twenty-five people (it was a special meeting) were singing lustily in four-part harmony. I sat down in the nearest empty chair, and someone shared a book with me.

However, a sharp-eared woman soon detected the fact that I was singing the alto part, and she promptly beckoned me over to the alto side of the square.

Several people, both men and women, took turns standing in the middle to lead the singing. Songs were chosen by request, and requests were taken in order around the room until everyone's choice had been sung. Two of the leaders urged me to stand in the middle during one song. "It sounds totally different from here," they said, "you can hear everything." Indeed, I could. The harmony was good and the singing energetic. These people really enjoy themselves; I could see why, to the mountain settlers, this was enough fun to last a month. Sitting on the couch watching television seems very dull in comparison.

I began this project very hopeful and relatively naive. "The Ouachitas must be an undisturbed gold mine of folk music," I thought, because I found nothing in the books about the Ouachita folk music. "Folk music isn't dying out, it's just changing faster than those stuffy academics can keep up with it," I thought, because the pronouncers of folk music's doomsday seemed in some way to be laying the blame on my generation and my parents' generation, and I was offended.

In the process of research, I was often discouraged. First, sources were meager. The only written records of primitive folk music in the Ouachitas revolved around Emma Dusenbury, with a few play-party songs thrown in. At times, it was easy to believe that the collectors were interested exclusively in Emma Dusenbury because she was the only interesting thing in the Ouachitas.

Second, I found nothing that actually set Ouachita music apart from Ozark music. Because the Ouachitas "opened up" to the outside world earlier than the Ozarks and because so little

was recorded before they did, I may never discover the differences. Anyone who might have possessed the elusive evidence I need died years before I started this project.

Third, I didn't come across many young people interested in the "old music." To find folk music being made by young people in the Ouachitas today, I would have had to stretch my definition of folk music, making it more and more liberal until the theme songs from "The Brady Bunch" and "Gilligan's Island" could be called current folk songs.

A passage Vance Randolph gleaned from An Artist in America expresses melancholy acceptance:

> There is much traditional music in the hills, but... it does not seem to survive industrialism. Movie halls, phonographs and radios wreck the old free play with music. Young singers, with the references of canned music always at hand, sing in the standardized fashion of the cities.

Indeed, the "old music" is gone. The Child ballads are a memory stored in books. The music specific to rural places, mountains, other isolated places, is mostly gone because the mass media have taken away the "specific" and the special. The necessary isolation and ignorance are nearly impossible.

And yet these "failures" do not discourage me as I thought they would. I discovered that the fact that folk music was hardly collected in the Ouachitas did not mean it was not here; in fact, it was probably so common that no one thought it remarkable enough to write down. Also, although the traditional music is seldom passed down the way it was for generations, I am learning it. The music may cease to be "traditional" when

it has to be relearned from books and recordings, but here it is, anyway.

I plan to sing some of Emma Dusenbury's songs to my children. The "free play" and the evolutionary nature of the music have been sacrificed, but I am comforted by the fact that neither my children nor I will have had to be isolated and illiterate in order to learn those songs.

NOTES

DEFINING FOLK MUSIC

1. Lomax, John A. and Alan. American Ballads and Folk Songs. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934, p. xxv.

2. Lomax, p. xxvi.

3. Lomax, p. xxvii.

4. Lomax, p. xxviii.

5. Lomax, p. xxxv.

6. Combs, Josiah H. Folk-Songs of the Southern United States. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1967.

7. The man is George Lyman Kittridge, a professor of English at Harvard University during the early part of this century. The quote was from his Introduction to the abridged edition of Child's English and Scottish Popular Ballads, p. xi. In Combs' book, it appears on p. 23.

8. Combs, pp. 23-24.

9. When I was fourteen and living in the Mena area, I worked as the videographer for a state-funded summer program that taught children about drama, art, and creative writing. One of the program's criteria was that the children come from a "culturally deprived area." Because Mena has a Little Theatre and a high school concert band and because when I was eleven my father took me to see Don Giovanni sung in English in Texarkana, I assumed that I was not culturally deprived and therefore not eligible. Then I learned that for the purposes of that program, the state considered anyone from my area of Arkansas "culturally deprived."

Therefore, by "cultural centers" I mean urban areas or college towns which are home to groups such as symphonies, operas, and professional drama and dance companies; and which can host similar touring groups. For Arkansas, a few of these places would be the greater Little Rock area, Fayetteville, and West Memphis. Nowhere in the western Ouachitas is within two hours' drive of a cultural center.

GEOGRAPHY: OZARKS VS. OUACHITAS

1. My information is from a copy of Randolph's original MS for the article "Ozarks, Where Are You?," which I found in the Library of Congress. Regrettably, I have not discovered whether

the article was published.

2. Lomax, John Avery. Adventures of a Ballad Hunter. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947, p. 247.

3. I have not seen a copy of this souvenir guide; I rely solely on Randolph's testimony as to its contents.

GENERAL TOPICS

1. The excerpt was quoted by Vance Randolph in a collection of notes or manuscript and stored in a folder labeled "Shape Notes." The only only information he gave about the book was that the author was named Benton and the excerpt came from pages 113-114. Vance Randolph Collection, LOC.

2. In Randolph's "Dances and Fiddle Tunes" folder were many notes gathered from friends and personal observation. He observed several technical differences between fiddles and violins. Violins are strung with gut, but fiddlers use wire. Where the bridge of a violin is rounded, the bridge of a fiddle is flat so that the fiddler can touch all four strings with the bow at the same time. Also, "very few fiddlers tuck the instrument under the chin as the violinist does." Vance Randolph Collection, LOC.

3. Folk Songs of the Southern United States. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967.

4. That adds up to nineteen. I omitted one category, and the other was "Miscellaneous."

5. Personal interview, 6 January 1997, at Mary's home in Potter, south of Mena.

6. The washboard seems to have required more skill and creativity than I expected. Mary described a washboard player who sounded as if he could have replaced the entire percussion section of a marching band with ten thimbles, two cowbells, a hairbrush, and a train horn.

7. Benton, 111.

LOMAX

1. Lomax, John A. Adventures of a Ballad Hunter. New York: MacMillan, 1947, p. 1.

2. Lomax, p. 32.

3. Lomax, p. 34.

4. Lomax, pp. 35-36.

5. Randolph, Vance. "Ballad Hunters in North Arkansas." Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 7, Spring 1948, p. 6.

6. Lomax, p. 247.

7. Library of Congress, LWO 4872, Reels 60-63. An archivist at the LOC told me that the "portable machine" Lomax used to make his recordings weighed 400 pounds. The quality of the recordings themselves is poor; the discs were cut on acetate, and most of the lyrics are unintelligible, although the melodies and Mrs. Dusenbury's voice quality are clear enough.

8. Library of Congress, Alan and John A. Lomax Collection. Alan's correspondance with Harold Spivacke, head of the Music Division of the Library of Congress in the 1930s, contains evidence of the many times he wired the LOC for money to extend his trips. One Western Union telegram dated September 28, 1937, read, "MACHINE RUNNING WORK BOOMING BUT POCKETBOOK EMPTY SPEED VOUCHERS OR WIRE MONEY --ALAN"

FLETCHER

1. Biographical information obtained from "The John Gould Fletcher Papers," a pamphlet published by the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville for the University Libraries Special Collections Division.

2. Randolph, Vance. "Ballad Hunters in North Arkansas," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Spring 1948, p. 6.

3. Fletcher's extensive correspondance is contained in the John Gould Fletcher Papers, a special collection in the archives of the UA-Fayetteville University Libraries. A large part of the correspondance is between Fletcher and Laurence Powell, a composer who lived in Little Rock and conducted the Little Rock Symphony Orchestra for a while. The two were great friends. They often signed their letters to one another Giovanni (Fletcher) and Lorenzo (Powell).

4. "This RONDO has for its melodic material five folk-songs collected by the composer from the singing of Mrs. Emma Dusenbury in the Summer of 1936 at Mena, Arkansas. These tunes, in the order of their appearance are:

Tarry Rinkum Rarey
Weevily Wheat
See that dark cloud arising
Lonesome scenes of winter
Georgie Wenlock"

--inscription of the inside cover of Powell's MS for An American Rondo. Special Collections, UA-Fayetteville Library.

Robert Cochran refered to the work as An Arkansas Rondo. Possibly Powell changed the name before the Rondo was published.

"Weevily Wheat" and "Georgie Wenlock" appear in the Lomax-Powell recordings made in August 1936, but the other three songs must have been aquired on a separate trip, possibly one made with Fletcher.

5. Cochran, Robert. Our Own Sweet Sounds. University of Arkansas Press, 1996.

6. "Death Closes Story of John Gould Fletcher." Arkansas Gazette, May 11, 1950, front page.

RANDOLPH

1. Wilson, Charles Reagan and William Ferris, eds. Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989, p. 791.

2. This is part of the reason Randolph's papers occupy six linear feet in the Library of Congress archives.

3. "Vance Randolph." Contemporary Authors, Vol. 105, 1982.

ROBERTSON

1. Kerst, Catherine Hiebert. "Sidney Robertson and the WPA Northern California Folk Music Project." Sonneck Society for American Music Bulletin, Fall 1994.

Because this collector's name was Sidney Robertson during the time she was "most active as a folk song collector," I will follow Kerst's lead in designating her as Robertson.

All biographical information on Sidney Robertson is from Kerst's article.

2. These records are housed in the Library of Congress (LWO 4872, Reels 214-215) along with the Lomax-Powell records.

3. MS P87, Items 400 and 401, Special Collections Division of UA-Fayetteville University Libraries.

4. See Note 1. Kerst noted that until joining that staff of

the American Folklife Center, she had never heard of Robertson's career as a folk music collector. She wrote, "I would expect that my ignorance of Robertson is similar to that of others, unless they have researched the folk music projects supported by the government during the New Deal era or examined in detail the lives and careers of such figures as Alan Lomax, Charles Seeger, or Henry Cowell."

DUSENBURY: BIOGRAPHY

1. In the nineteenth century, Harvard scholar Fancis James Child compiled the most complete collection of English and Scottish ballads known, about 300 songs. Child numbered each ballad. Because titles and first lines can change drastically from singer to singer, ballads of British origin are identified by these numbers (for example, "Child 45" or "Child 116").

2. Laurence Powell wrote John Gould Fletcher (June 10, 1934): "If Miss Dusenbury can sing 200 folk-songs I don't think she'll go to the devil if she does kick the bucket before we can get at her."

3. Randolph, Vance. "Ballad Hunters in North Arkansas." Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 7, Spring 1948: 6-7.

4. A socialist college that moved from Louisiana to the Mena area in the 1920's. Commonwealth College was forcibly closed in 1940.

5. "Somewhere's--I don't know where [in Georgia]," said Emma Dusenbury, according to Sidney Robertson Cowell's interview notes. The notes, are housed in the University of Arkansas archives.

6. Cochran, Robert. Our Own Sweet Sounds. University of Arkansas Press, 1996: 73.
General biographical information came from this source.

7. Lomax. Adventures of a Ballad Hunter, p. 247.

8. "[She] lives up Mill Creek Road, west of Mena--turn off highroad just before coming to Gunn place--better ask at office of Mena Star for guide by name of Berry--who will recall me." --Post script of a letter dated 5 July 1934. All letters written by Powell and Fletcher are from the John Gould Fletcher Collection, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

9. Sidney Robertson Cowell interview notes, U of A Library archives.

10. Randolph, "Ballad Hunters in North Arkansas."

11. Hudgins, Mary D. "Composer Laurence Powell in Arkansas." Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 31, Summer 1972: 186.

12. In a letter to Fletcher dated August 18, 1936, Powell described a recent recording trip, "thoroughly enjoying the whole day and my admiration for the old lady rising all the time. She's a marvel."

13. Letter to Fletcher, September 27, 1936.

14. See Note 12.

15. The Dusenburys' gravestone is a few feet from the grave of a Confederate Army veteran. Located in the tiny rural community of Rocky, the cemetery contains some grave markers that are simply flat stones stuck upright in the ground. The woods are creeping up on the edges of the cemetery. To look at the Dusenhburys' marker, I had to stand with my back pressed against vines and underbrush.

DUSENBURY SONGS

1. Sidney Robertson and Laurence Powell recorded her in December 1936. The recordings are in the Library of Congress.

2. The transcriptions of the following melodies and texts are mine. I used a copy of the Robertson recordings from the Archive of American Folksong, LOC.

3. In Laurence Powell's transcription, the last line of the chorus reads, "Our way through the world." The Powell-Dusenbury Collection of 72 songs collected between August 27, 1933 and August 10, 1936, Special Collections, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

4. Words or phrases in brackets indicate portions that were garbled or unclear. I have simply given my best guess as to the actual words.

5. Here Dusenbury paused very briefly, as if she had forgotten the words. Evidently, though, keeping the song going was more important than coming up with a rhyme for "brandy," because she rolled right on through the rest of the stanza.

6. After this stanza, Dusenbury said, "Wait a minute if you can, I'll think of some more of it maybe." Then she addressed Ora, "What is it in there that makes 'em laugh and grin, you recollect?" Ora supplied the missing word, and Dusenbury went

on to sing the final stanza.

7. Here Dusenbury skipped the third phrase (which is a repetition of the second phrase) of the melody. Since this is the only stanza with just three lines, I believe she skipped the third line of text as well.

8. This song is sometimes called by its first line, "When Young Ladies Gets Married."

9. The phrase is abbreviated; Dusenbury may have left out a few words.

10. "Sparrow" and "arrow" were pronounced "spare" and "air."

11. Dusenbury sang only the first two verses on the Robertson-Powell recordings. I found the text for the additional verses in Laurence Powell's manuscripts in Special Collections, UA-Fayetteville Library. Robertson, who took down the text, called the song "Who Killed Poor Robbin?"

12. Here Mrs. Dusenbury paused, and Ora could be heard supplying the bungled phrase, "Afoul I go." This happened several times in the recordings of the few songs documented here, leading me to believe Ora may have been as adept as her mother at remembering songs.

13. Letter (February 21, 1938) to Powell asking permission to print the song in an article. Vance Randolph Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, LOC.

14. Letter (January 1938) to Randolph. Vance Randolph Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, LOC.

PLAY-PARTY SONGS

1. Personal interview, 6 January 1997.

2. Ade, George. "The Old-Fashioned Kissing Games Were Really Pretty Tame Affairs." Kansas City Times, 8 July 1935. LOC, Vance Randolph Collection.

3. LOC, Manuscript Division. In a letter dated December 4, 1947, Dallas T. Herndon of the Arkansas History Commission told Vance Randolph, "I remember about the WPA Writers Project having sent off its files for preservation in the Library of Congress, I believe, as you say, and I remember that I thought it ill-advised that a copy was not placed in the Archives of the History Commission, where it might be easily accessible to the people of Arkansas, as those most concerned. However, it was not a

matter that I could change."

4. Ade quoted "Weevily Wheat" in the Kansas City Times article. Emma Dusenbury also knew the song.

5. It is not clear whether Leeper got this version from Shakleford or from another source. Perhaps Mary D. Hudgins inserted it herself.

6. After the second version, Mary D. Hudgins noted, "The ballad must be rural America superimposed upon an English folk song. 'Charlie's here and Charlie's there'--and 'The higher up the cherry tree' have a distinctly Elisabethan flavor. Yet 'The racoon he's a pullin' up corn' could be nothing but deep south U.S.A."

7. Supplied by Barney Benedict, a member of the KTHS Barn Dance variety show of Hot Springs.

8. The man speaking has a strong Southern accent that might well be Texan. Also, Lomax was the more experienced collector and would have been more accustomed to speaking to his sources.

CURRENT SITUATION

1. January 6, 1997.

2. The Ridge Runners included Allen Whitehouse, Clem Clements, Albert Gray, Grady Putman, Lloyd Schoolfield, A.V. Pirtle, and Sam Varner. Accordign to Mary Bain, Schoolfield and Varner are "about the only two left that was in the band."

3. "I'll tell you what a lot of 'em were made out of, Shayna, was grape boxes from the grocery store," Mrs. Bain told me. "You know those little boxes that they ship grapes in, that's white pine from Chile." She kindly showed me one of the "grape-box" fiddles. It was beautifully made, of unstained white pine.

4. Telephone interview, 9 January 1997.

5. The communities are Grannis, Baker, Duckett, Crystal Hill, and Overturf.

6. Telephone interview, March 13, 1996.