

**Berea College Appalachian Music Fellowship  
Final Activity Report  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

The following report contains a general account of the work I have achieved during the three months of my fellowship work in the Berea College Sound Archives. It assesses how my initial goals for this research were accomplished, and it provides a timeline for the remainder of the work involved in the project. It also includes some general conclusions about the fellowship overall.

## **COMPLETED WORK**

### Sound Sources

I began my work in the archive by listening to each of the twenty plus *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* programs in the Berea College Sound Archives. Apart from getting a general aural awareness of the type of music on each program, I also made notes on the range of instrumentalists and singers involved in the program over the years, on the individual structure and format of the programs, and anything else unusual or of interest which these sound recordings revealed about the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*.

### Manuscript Sources

I then moved onto the archive's printed sources. Trawling through the John Lair Papers and the John Lair Oral History Collections, I contrasted the initial sounds of the recorded program with printed program scripts, with correspondence with sponsors and advertising agencies, and with general Renfro Valley business letters and materials. While going through this work, I began constructing a program database which collated the available information on radio programming in the Berea archives.

This database included a detailed appendix of *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* radio programs, personnel, musicians, and part-transcriptions of programs, and it cross-referenced each individual program with its respective records – recordings, scripts, music cue sheets, etc. This database will help make clearer for future researchers which physical archive sources correspond to each individual program date. After the construction of this database, I was able to monitor changes in the program structure and format changed over the years, to assess how certain performers, songs and tunes gradually achieved their fixed roles in the program line-up.

When the database is more complete and ready to be uploaded onto the Berea College Website, it will also fulfill the second goal of my fellowship proposal, the website dissemination.

### Published Sources

In order to make sense of the events these recordings and printed sources documented, however, I needed to be able to put them in context of developments at the time. Without access in Ireland to many of the most important books and academic discussions about the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*, the history of American radio, or the history of American music, I was delighted to avail myself of the Berea College Library's excellent books and materials covering these subjects. Each new archived and published source which I accessed provided extra facts and details to enrich the story of the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* – its audiences, the life and work of the Renfro Valley producer, John Lair, and the history of American barn dance radio. I began to compile a

chronology of the most important events from these histories which touched the Renfro Valley Barn Dance radio program. I also compiled an accompanying discography and bibliography of Appalachian music.

This chronology, bibliography and discography will form reference materials for a third-level music introductory course on American folk music and particularly on Appalachian music, all the more essential since there does not exist, as yet, a thorough history of the music of Appalachia. I was able to contrast developments in the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* to changes both in national American barn dance programs (for example, the *National Barn Dance* from Chicago and the *Grand Ole Opry* from Nashville) and to changes in folk music across America. Through the source texts of the Berea College sound and print archives, and the contexts outlined by the Hutchins Library books, I was able to form a clearer picture of the remit and purpose of the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* radio program in general.

### Places

In order to make the most of the knowledge and expertise located in Berea College itself, as well as that possessed by the people living in its environs, I made sure to engage in discussion about my project with as many people as possible. Some of the key locations and events I visited during my fellowship include:

1. The settlement and tourist park at Mount Vernon, Kentucky from where the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* radio program was broadcast, and where the modern Renfro Valley Barn Dance show is performed
2. The Berea College Appalachian Center. I visited the center regularly to view their educational installations, chat with staff, and to participate in discussions with students and faculty there about images of Appalachian culture and identity as part of the Center's exhibit lunch summer presentation series.
3. The Appalachian String Band Music Festival, Clifftop, West Virginia (July).
4. Swannanoa Gathering Festival -Celtic Week and Old-Time Week, North Carolina (July).
5. Old-time Music Revival, Goldbug, Whitley County, Kentucky (August).
6. Bus-tour of Historical Black Berea, (August).
7. The Appalshop radio station and Media Center, Whitesburg, Kentucky (August).

### People

The fifth main goal of my fellowship period was to instigate a continuous discussion and consultation of my subject with staff of Berea College Hutchins Library Archive. Apart from this, I was delighted to have had regular meetings with some of the wider faculty of Berea College, and, over the course of the summer, numerous key historians, radio broadcasters, and musicians of old-time and Appalachian music. I recorded many of these interviews, and am halfway through the work of transcribing them:

1. Ron Pen (University of Kentucky, Musicology and American Studies Associate Professor – Lexington, Kentucky).
2. Phil Jamison (Warren Wilson Appalachian Studies Staff / Swannanoa Gathering Old-Time week co-coordinator – Asheville, North Carolina).
3. Lewis Wills (Old-time musician and radio broadcaster -Asheville, North Carolina).

4. Wayne Erbsen (Old-time musician and radio broadcaster -Asheville, North Carolina).
5. Loyal Jones (Appalachian Studies historian, former head of Berea College Appalachian Center, Activist -Berea, Kentucky).
6. Ralph Marcum (old-time fiddler, Berea, Kentucky).
7. Hugo Freund (Folklore scholar and Union College Faculty -Barbourville, Kentucky).
8. Susan Isaacs (Literary Scholar and Union College Communications Faculty – Barbourville, Kentucky).
9. Deborah Thompson (Berea College Appalachian Center Staff / University of Kentucky doctoral candidate – Berea, Kentucky).
10. Christie Burns, Chattanooga, TN. (Diverse American folk musician and researcher.
11. Erynn Marshall, British Columbia. (Old-time fiddler and scholar - Clifftop, West Virginia).
12. Stephanie Coleman (Old-time fiddler – Clifftop, West Virginia).
13. Suzanne Savell (broadcaster and traditional music co-coordinator, Appalshop Media Center, Whitesburg, Kentucky).

### Music

In addition to talking with people about American music, I knew that a good way to understand the structures, the similarities and the differing styles of American folk and traditional musics, was to try and learn to play it myself. For this reason, I submerged myself in the diverse musical experiences offered by the town of Berea and its surroundings. Some of these experiences, through informal participation and more formal performances included:

1. Morris music: Providing the music for the Berea Nonesuch Dancers at the Renaissance Fair, Eminence, Kentucky, 29th June and at the Berea Crafts Fair, Indian Fort Theatre, 12th July).
2. Contradance Music: Sitting down to play with contradance musicians after the regular monthly “Au Contraire” Berea contradance (this was supplemented by some personal learning of contradance tunes from the Portland Dance Tune book), June 28th.
3. English Country Dance Music: I was invited to join a quartet of Berea English Country Dance musicians for a local dance event at Berea College, July 12th.
4. Gospel Music: I visited the Thursday night Berea ‘Pickin’ on the Porch,’ event, which involves much gospel music, on several occasions, and another local gospel event.
5. Old-time, and Old-Country Music: I enjoyed regular tune-swaps and discussions with many local Berea Old-Time musicians, and at other old-time music occasions in nearby states, such as Asheville (NC) -July, Chattanooga (TN) -July, Clifftop (WV) – August. I have planned some also for Columbia (MO) and Chicago (IL) in the first two weeks of September before I return home to Ireland.
6. Bluegrass Music: I enjoyed many discussions about bluegrass music with Jim Miller, Richmond “old bluegrass” musician and singer, including visiting the Red Lick bluegrass festival in July. I also enjoyed several bluegrass jams with Al White and his family.

7. Scots/Irish: As I am primarily an Irish traditional music, I was excited to experience the traditional Irish musical scene in Kentucky and the eastern United states, and I participated in many sessions, lectures, and discussions with these Irish-American musicians in Asheville (NC), Lexington (KY), Chattanooga (TN). In addition to several informal performances throughout the summer, I also performed as part of Celtic Music Week at The Swannanoa Gathering, Asheville (NC) in July and gave a 2-hour solo concert of Irish and English language singing, button accordion and tin-whistle playing, at the Main Street Café, Berea in August.
8. Appalachian ballad songs: I fell in love with many old-time Kentucky songs after listening to the mother of my host family, Patty Tarter, sing and play the lap dulcimer.
9. Shape-note singing: Participation at local musician's house, Berea, July 6th.
10. Appalachian punk. After an informal, improvised jam session of music with local rock/folk band Mudpi mid-July, I regularly played American folk-rock with them throughout the rest of the summer, guesting at their performance at the annual Clear Creek Festival (August).
11. Miscellaneous American Folk, Traditional, and Roots Musics: Throughout the fellowship period, I was glad to compliment the above musical experiences by making full use of the Hutchins library's extensive audio CD collection, and the CD collections of many Berea and Kentucky musicians.

### Listening Event - Berea College

My first main goal for dissemination of my research was to present a listening event / seminar to a mixed audience of local scholars, musicians, and interested members of the public at Berea College. I did so on the 20th of August in the Hutchins Library. The hour-long event involved a presentation of my research, and a lively questions and answers discussion with the audience. I also performed some tunes which are common to the instrumental music traditions of both Ireland and the region of Appalachia. A bonus of this event was the amount of discussion it stimulated for me about my subject. I received much oral and written feedback from those attending – both directly after the presentation, and through discussions over the remaining days.

### **ONGOING WORK**

#### Audio Documentary

Accompanying the above listening event in Berea College, I am presently (Fall 2008 / Winter 2009) working on a recorded audio documentary version of the presentation which will be accessible to a wider audience by radio broadcast over the world wide web. A pilot version of this documentary was broadcast by KOPN, Columbia, Missouri on the 2nd of September, 2008, at 3pm Central Time. I am continuing to work on this documentary and to extend it into an hour-long documentary. Both Appalshop's radio station in Whitesburg, Kentucky, and the University of Illinois's radio station at Urbana-Champaign have requested to broadcast it over their schedules when it is complete. The radio station of University College Cork, Ireland – Cork Campus Radio [www.ucc.ie/ccr](http://www.ucc.ie/ccr) - has also agreed to help produce and broadcast a version of the documentary for an Irish radio audience after my return home this winter.

#### **Academic Paper**

While I am still processing much of the information I gathered during my research, the third goal of dissemination of this fellowship research, an academic paper for presentation at conference, is in progress. I am part of a panel of three Irish academics who recently (November 2008)

submitted a panel of 3 papers, each focusing on music and radio, to the 2009 Annual Conference of the Irish chapter of the International Council on Traditional Music.<sup>1</sup> My individual paper submission, given below, is wholly a result of the work which the Berea College Appalachian Music Fellowship Grant enabled me to do. Presentation of my research at an academic conference will hopefully invite more comment, feedback and questions from the scholarly community, and will greatly aid the writing of and organizational work towards the fourth goal of my fellowship, the publication of an academic article.

A first draft of this paper is already written, and I felt lucky to have Harry Rice and all the staff of the Berea College Special Collections to discuss this paper with me during my period of research this summer. I have continued to discuss the project with them and with other academics, scholars and musicians of American music on my return home. Finally, I have identified possible journals in which to present the paper, and hope that the process of submitting an article for publication will be well underway, if not completed, by the end of 2009.

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**Paper Title: Access Appalachia: *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* and Kentucky Folk Music**

**Abstract:**

First broadcast in 1937, the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* was the first American ‘barn dance’ radio programme to be performed and recorded in an actual barn, not a radio studio.<sup>2</sup> The weekly Saturday night variety programme drew heavily on themes of nostalgia, family values, and pioneer living, and quickly became a big hit with radio audiences.

Within a few years, the programme became nationally syndicated and its producer, John Lair, began to build up a franchise of radio programmes, all performed and recorded live at his settlement and commercial visitor centre at Renfro Valley, Kentucky. Radio programmes and other events continue to be performed and recorded in the same location today.

Emblematic of Lair’s personal commitment to re-presenting rural, older communities, the Barn Dance was Renfro Valley’s flagship programme. This paper examines the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* over its twenty-year lifespan, drawing on recordings and other sources from the Department of Special Collections and Archives of the Berea College Hutchins Library, and on fieldwork interviews conducted by the author in the Renfro Valley area.

Arguably, radio recordings and their accompanying sources comprise unique barometers of development and change in traditional music experience in the 20th century. This paper explores how the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*, a live show, recorded and syndicated for broadcast by numerous commercial radio stations across the United States, fits the role of barometer for Kentucky, Appalachian and American folk and traditional music in the period 1937-1957.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Society’s Website here: <http://www.music.ucc.ie/ictm/>. The acceptance of papers to this conference in February 2009 is also, of course, subject to competition and peer review.

<sup>2</sup> I use here the Irish spelling of the word “program.”

## **FURTHER OUTCOMES**

Overall, my experience in the Berea College sound archive was a very rich and valuable one, and I am sure that there is many more valuable insights will emerge from further exploration in the archives beyond those which I have been able to uncover during this fellowship period. The wealth of source materials in the archive which focus on this popular radio music program; the quality of cataloguing of the sources; the ease of access to the archive, and above all, the expertise, dedication, and professionalism of its staff, mean that the Berea College sound archive provides a depth of insights about the interaction between traditional and folk music and the medium of radio. I expect to continually refer to my Berea College Appalachian Music Fellowship research throughout my future career and work, and I also plan to further expand this research in the future. This might take the form of another stand-alone conference paper and article which I might publish, or it might easily take the form of a chapter or two of my future doctoral dissertation, as well as a further audio documentary(ies) for radio broadcast in Ireland or the US.

It was only after my work at the archive began that I became aware of the many parallels between my experiences of early American radio and early Irish radio. The similar social and economic conditions of rural Ireland, explored in my Masters' thesis, and the region of Appalachia, explored in this fellowship work highlighted many similarities in the effect which the new technology of radio had on the musical and cultural changes in both regions, especially in the time period of early 20th century. There are, also, many interesting contrasts between the content and context of both these areas of radio research. The main difference between the two areas stemmed from the quality of source materials on the topic – a crucial factor in the success of any research project.

The vast superiority of Berea College's archived radio materials compared to the conditions which early Irish radio recordings experience in the library of the national public broadcaster - Radio Telefis Éireann -in Dublin, Ireland, have made my research here this summer vastly easier, more efficient, and more productive. As Radio Studies as an academic discipline is only emerging, and as the standards of archiving radio recordings have not yet been established, the value of the example which Berea College sets other sound and print radio archives, in maintaining and valuing its radio archive, cannot be stressed enough.

Finally, this summer, I have come in contact with many scholars of American radio and of American traditional and folk musics – many scholars which I never would have had the chance to meet if it weren't for the opportunities with which this fellowship grant provided me. The conversations I have had this summer with the Berea College staff and faculty and with these other scholars and musicians will continue into the future, I have no doubt, and will be an invaluable source for my future work.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

The people of the Berea community were exceedingly generous with their offers of bicycles and lifts and in general I had no problem organizing to get anywhere, given a little bit of notice. However, if I had arranged to buy, or rent a car for my 3 month stay, or even for just one month of my stay, I would have been much more able to visit and co-ordinate interviews with the nearby musicians and people who knew or worked with John Lair and the Renfro Valley performers and employees. As it was, I did manage to arrange meetings with some of these people anyways, but I would generally have been more time-and cost-efficient with my travel had I had the free use of a car. Also, I would have been able to continue with my initial plan of getting involved in a local radio station. As I was surprised to learn on arrival that Berea itself does not have any local radio station, and that the nearest station was in Richmond, fifteen miles away, I could not get to work on my radio documentary sooner on in my fellowship period. To arrange the use of a car is the only recommendation that I would make for future fellows.

## **FINAL WORDS**

My final words are of thanks:

1. To Berea College Appalachian Music Archives Fellowship Program for granting this fellowship, which made it possible for me to leave my home in Ireland for 3 months to travel to Berea to enjoy an incredibly rich and valuable scholarly and musical experience.
2. To my host family, the Tarters, who welcomed me into their home and lives for 3 months, and who generously shared their music and friendship with me throughout that time.
3. To all the staff and student laborers of the Berea College Hutchins Library and Archive, who were all unfailingly enthusiastic and excited about the Appalachian Music Fellowship and the people it brought to Berea.
4. To Harry Rice, who was at all times supportive of my work, sharing of my intrigue with the Renfro Valley Barn Dance, and attentive to every possible detail which could make my time and work in Berea more comfortable, efficient, and enjoyable.