

## **Appalachian Music Fellowship Final Activity Report**

### **Marianne Worthington**

During June, 2009 I spent my month-long Music Fellowship time with the goal of continuing to work on completing a poetry manuscript currently titled *Knoxville Girl*. It is intended to be a reflection of my personal connections to women in country and traditional music and a document of the rich musical heritage within my own family and the southern Appalachian region. The stories of women's contributions to traditional music are still largely unexplored and untold, and poetry is one way to tell these stories and to examine the issues and barriers women continue to face as artists and performers.

#### **Work In the Archives**

I have used the Berea Library's Department of Special Collections and Archives to enhance my knowledge of mountain music in general, to learn about the lives of particular women singers and song collectors in Kentucky, and to study the words and music of the Department's myriad ballad collections.

During my tenure, I posted daily, informal notes from the collections I consulted. I invite readers to see my blog, "Fixing to Shout and Sing" for personal and reflective comments on the contents of the collections I used in my project. (See: <http://marianneworthington.blogspot.com/>. It will be helpful to read the blogs in chronological order, starting with the June 1 post.) In these daily posts, I attempted to organize my thoughts about performers like Lily May Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls, Cousin Emmy, and other radio barn dance performers and their relationships to their artistic expressions, cultures, and audiences.

I documented the tensions between these women and the men who served as their managers, producers, announcers, co-workers, etc. I posted parts of interesting or unique songs, ballads, letters, press releases, interviews, and other documents that proved interesting or helpful to my research. An online post also allowed me to link to sources inside and outside the Archives which has been helpful to me, and I hope will be helpful to any readers of the blog. I also continued to fashion poems for the *Knoxville Girl* collection. Some of these poems are included in the body of this report.

#### **Lily May Ledford**

Specifically, I began my research with the Lily May Ledford Collection and was surprised to find how consistently Ledford told about her life as a traditional musician: she told the same story in nearly every interview.

When I began to read interviews with her family, friends, and co-workers, however, I could see her as a person who struggled with the lack of control she had over her musical career. Her public narrative differed from the private narrative told by her family and friends. I have also benefited from the work of two primary researchers who have interviewed Ledford; both have written graduate theses on Ledford and The Coon Creek Girls. I now understand the time line and chronology of Ledford, the *WLS National Barn Dance*, the Coon Creek Girls (and the changes in personnel over the years), the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*, and the folk revival circles in which Ledford travelled during the mid 1960s until her death in 1985.

I have learned about the cultural, musical, physical, and financial changes that Ledford experienced after leaving the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* in 1957 which adds to my understanding of her rich and complex private and public images. For instance, here is a statement from Lily May Ledford about her “handlers” at the WLS *National Barn Dance* in 1937, specifically John Lair. This is from a transcript of an interview with Lily May Ledford, Rose Ledford Foley, and Minnie (Susie) Ledford, in 1966, Berea, Kentucky, conducted by Charles Faurot and Dave Freeman:

“I’ll tell you about these radio stations. There’s so many producers that you’ve got to do kind of what they say, and they’ll change you in spite of yourself. And you can buckle down and do things the way they want, or you can be out of a job. We’ve all had to do that a lot. . . . Oooh, there was a lot of pressure there (at WLS). They hollered at me all the time. They couldn’t hardly do a thing with me; I was too loud and if they moved me back they lost my voice and the banjo was still too loud, and I had an awful time, and I cried all the time and was unhappy and homesick. . . . But it was good for me, all that discipline. I learned that, that you’ve got to buckle down if you stay there. But I knew that they didn’t know what was best for me sometimes. I did things I didn’t like to do . . . and Mr. Lair wanted me to sing little funny songs. But I didn’t feel funny; I liked lonesome songs.”

Ledford daughter, Barbara Greenlief, confirmed this tightly controlled image when she spoke to interviewer Lisa Yarger in Nicholasville, Kentucky, on April 27, 1996:

“He (Lair) probably wanted them (The Coon Creek Girls) to be perceived as unique, you know, the first women string band, but yet, he did not want them to be perceived as feminists, or someone who would upset the apple cart in their community. . . . he did not want, like on a religious level or a social level, for them to be perceived as people who would go over the line. . . . He wanted them to be spunky on stage, but he didn’t want them to be feminists on stage. And so he controlled that very closely. The kinds of things they said on stage—he didn’t want them to say much. He just wanted them to play. And the things that they said on stage were usually led by men. You know, men were the emcees.”

The contracts signed between John Lair and his *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* entertainers confirm Lair’s need for control. From the John Lair Collection in the archives, contracts like these were standard (First Party is the performer; Second Party is Lair):

. . . whereby first party agrees to name and appoint second party as her sole business representative, manager and booking agent for a period of three years from date and under the following terms and conditions:

FIRST: First party will make no contracts for personal services or performances without the written consent of second party. First party will fill no bookings nor engagements in the entertaining, radio, sound motion pictures, phonographic or theatrical field unless such engagements or bookings are approved by second party.

SECOND: Second party shall write, produce, assemble or otherwise procure and furnish all songs, music, routines, spoken lines or sketches which in the opinion of said second party shall be necessary to the success of first party in the activities hereinbefore referred to in Section One.

Reading the interviews with Ledford, her family and associates helped me understand Ledford's many roles and relationships. Listening to the recordings of the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* broadcasts in 1938 and 1941 reinforced my commitment as a poet to find the meter and rhythm of the words that might translate into constructed poems about this research. I am working on what I hope will be a suite of poems about Lily May Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls.

### **Linda Parker**

John Lair's tight control over other barn dance performers was also evident in the short life of WLS star Linda Parker. Linda Parker, born Genevieve Elizabeth Muenich and reared in northern Indiana, sang with the Cumberland Ridge Runners and as a soloist on the *WLS National Barn Dance* beginning in 1933 as "The Little Sunbonnet Girl." Just four years earlier she had debuted on a rival Chicago radio station as the blues-singing "Red-Headed Rascal." John Lair was in charge of that transformation, changing not only her image but her name, place of birth, and repertoire. At WLS Parker left the blues behind and sang mostly Carter Family songs like "I'll Be All Smiles Tonight" and "Bury Me Beneath the Willow." From a 1933 WLS Publicity Album in the John Lair Collection, we get this description of Linda Parker: "When Linda Parker was a little girl around the old home at Covington, Kentucky, she learned many of the old ballads of the hills . . . You have doubtless detected in her singing that occasional plaintive note, so typical of mountain music. She sings just as her mother and grandmother sang, artlessly, but from the heart."

Linda Parker died at the age of 23 in 1935 because of a ruptured appendix. She was on tour with The Cumberland Ridge Runners in Indiana when she fell ill but it was a couple of days before she got to a hospital. John Lair noted in the obituary/tribute that he wrote for her that she was buried under a beautiful weeping willow. That detail was picked up by the news media and widely circulated as part of her mythology. But that's an invention. There is no weeping willow tree shading the grave of Linda Parker.

Linda Parker and Lily May Ledford and The Coon Creek Girls are just representative examples of how women barn dance entertainers were "groomed" by Lair and other men in charge at WLS. The very strict gender roles, the types of instruments they played, the songs they sang, and the costumes they wore (often sewed up by the women themselves) were part of the "myth of the eternal return" that Lair created at WLS and later at the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*. Early barn dance radio shows and even later popular country music was always built on the idea that the good ole days were less hectic, more pure, simple, traditional, respectful, moral, down-home, more "right."

The religious historian Mircea Eliade theorized that we continually desire to return to this mythical time because we long to escape the linear march of time and change. This philosophy

was certainly what John Lair hoped to achieve in Mt. Vernon, Kentucky when he finally established the physical *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* in 1939. Billed as the place “Where Time Stands Still” Renfro Valley audiences were treated to pretty girl singers wearing calico dresses and hair bows who sang decent “home and hearth” songs, men who sang close family-style harmony in checkered work shirts and dungarees, and funny old characters who dressed up like grandparents from the 19th century and told corny jokes.

The following poem was inspired by Linda Parker’s short life and other women performers who were forced to follow Lair’s guidelines of dress, decorum, and repertoire:

### **The Barn Dance Costume**

Reject the lace petticoats, the ric-rac  
hems. Reject the gingham bonnet’s  
stranglehold, the myth of calico  
for righteousness sake. Forsake  
the man whispering backstage  
your fate, his eyes green  
as dollar bills. Step out  
your high-topped shoes and  
ankle skirts, dye your petticoats  
red and face them with the yellow,  
wail the blue notes that howl  
your heart’s longing. Hop high  
and sing the song about my Lulu Gal  
wearing that red dress from the railroad  
man and those shoes from a driver  
in the mines. Stay in the pit  
with them rough and rowdy men  
and leave your calico behind.

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Here is another poem about the stage names given to women performers, usually by their male managers. All of the names used in this poem are actual names of early barn dance entertainers. The title is borrowed from a Cathy Fink song:

### **Little Darlin’s Not My Name**

It’s not cousin, gal, honey or sweetheart.  
Not little miss, little maid, little jo,  
little shoe, little sunbonnet. Our names  
aren’t sister, girl, lady or aunt. Listen.  
We had to play like one of the boys—cards,  
drinking, jokes—to hold our own on radio,  
at whistlestops, barn dances, school houses,  
church meetings and every blazing county

fair in all the states they used for our names:  
Montana, Louisiana, Texas.

Don't call us bluebird, songbird, nightingale,  
cricket. Not sunshine, moonshine, violet  
or sugar. Not brown eyes, black-eyed susie,  
violet or laughin' lindy. If you want  
us, holler the names our mothers gave us.  
Recollect how we really were: raw-boned,  
ready, pioneer, headliner, legend.  
Does any of that sound little to you?  
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### **Cousin Emmy**

In contrast to the tightly-managed careers of Linda Parker and Lily May Ledford was the free agent, female radio-star Cousin Emmy. She was born Cynthia May Carver near Glasgow, Kentucky, gave herself her stage name, and quickly established herself as a fiercely independent business woman, consummate entertainer, and a favorite with radio audiences. Cousin Emmy began working with members of her family at WHAS Radio in Louisville, and spent most of her career on the road in personal appearances to support her radio work.

In the John Lair collection I found a handwritten letter Cousin Emmy wrote to Lair in 1941. She was working on WNOX's *Mid-Day Merry Go Round* in Knoxville, Tennessee but she could not get along with announcer/producer, Lowell Blanchard. Blanchard favored The Carlisle Brothers and would not secure a radio sponsor for Cousin Emmy. In a letter (handwritten, in pencil, on blue stationery), she asked Lair for a job. She wrote: "I can tell he [Blanchard] had ruther not have me here. But he cant very well fire me with out some reson. He wanted two much of a cut."

Lair wouldn't help her either, perhaps because she had a pretty fiery reputation as an independent, business-minded woman who had developed her own persona, and who watched the financial bottom line as closely as Lair. She was also well-known as the first woman performer to travel around in a Cadillac. Lily May Ledford commented on her knowledge of Cousin Emmy and viewed her as a competitor. This comment is from a 1977 interview with Ledford scholar Ellesa Clay High, and Ledford is speaking about her contract with John Lair to perform on the *WLS National Barn Dance* in 1937 (from the Lily May Ledford Collection):

"I'd never even heard of Cousin Emmy until I had that contract from Mr. Lair. I heard her on someone's radio and everyone began talking about Cousin Emmy, a banjo player and fiddler. And I thought, oh Lord, if they hear her before I can get up there, they will take her instead because she's much smoother and better. But Mr. Lair said, 'We know all about Cousin Emmy. She's been all around the country in radio, and she's much older than you, and she's wearing diamond rings big as hickory nuts and she's got a pair of Cadillacs. She's made plenty of money in the business and recently came to WLS, but they didn't take her.' But she went on over to Wheeling and made a killing there while I was at WLS."

The following poem attempts to show how Cousin Emmy relied on her family to help with touring and is the first in a series of poems about this influential (she taught Grandpa Jones how to play banjo) and mesmerizing entertainer:

### **Cousin Emmy and Her Kinfolks: *Showcar***

My brother-in-law always drove the show  
car, knew how to navigate every pig  
track and back road without a map, could drive  
safe in cities, too. Drop us at the load  
out on time without a hitch. Cheerful he  
was, and good hearted, a big grin to match  
his wit. But Lord, he had enough of South  
Knoxville still in him to park that show car  
at a tilt under Mam's old shed and prop  
the door open, let his hunting dogs flop  
in the back like a doghouse. So if you  
were to come up on it, see that Cadillac  
full of old yallow dogs, you'd think we were  
right trashy. He kept the car shined up for us  
and always tried to clean the seats, but we  
were forever brushing dog hair  
from each other's hind ends before a gig,  
blonde swirls and hanks we picked like strings,  
strummed off quick  
as a drop thumb on the banjo.

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Through the research I conducted as an Appalachian Music Fellow and through my training and experience as a poet, I intend that the poems in my proposed manuscript be an example of one kind of communal communication that can challenge inequities and introduce new perspectives into our conversations in private and public settings. As an artist, I believe I have a responsibility for enlarging the respect for art created by women whose creative, artistic work has been silenced, ignored, or forgotten. I hope that *Knoxville Girl* will recover some of that history and heighten public awareness of and respect for women musicians and their contributions to society.

### **Ballad Collections**

The second primary objective of this project was to consult the Berea Archives for ballad collections. Even though my primary intent was to look at murder ballads, I've come away with a whole new appreciation for mountain ballad singers, their songs, and their songcatchers. The ballad collections I consulted were those of John F. Smith, Katherine Jackson French, Josiah Combs, D.K. Wilgus, Talitha Powell McClure, G. R. Combs, James Watt Raine, Mary Wheeler, and Leonard Ward Roberts. Obviously, I want to write poems about women who are featured in

what the folklorists call “murdered sweetheart” ballads—women like Pearl Bryan, Rose Connoley, Ellen Smith, Omie Wise, and the Knoxville Girl—but I now hope to create some poems based on women ballad collectors like Josephine McGill, Olive Dame Campbell, Maud Karpeles, Katherine Jackson French, or Loraine Wyman.

In reading the contents of Berea's various ballad collections, I re-discovered the stereotyped history of Appalachia and the tendency of outsiders (in this case ballad collectors and their agents) to write of the region and its residents as “the other.” Appalachian scholars generally concur that the popular notions of Appalachia took root in the writings of early travelers, explorers, journalists, and missionaries who passed through the region and wrote colorful or quaint or exaggerated descriptions of the mountaineers.

Ballad collectors at the turn of the last century were generally no different. They were, almost without exception, happy to collect the ballads of the people and then to contribute to the stereotypes of Appalachian people as arrested in time, lonely, ignorant, unclean, violent, etc. Culling through the Archives' ballad collections gives us the songs, yes, but also an anthropological tour of early 20<sup>th</sup> century attitudes toward Appalachia and its inhabitants. Here are a few examples taken from some of the clippings in the ballad collections:

“By far the most surprising revelation was the old English ballads, which have been preserved in these mountain solitudes and passed from lip to lip for hundreds of years. These ballads were sung in a nasal tone and a weird minor key, and accompanied by a home-made banjo, fashioned from a cat-skin.” (Chautauqua program featuring the Berea College Quartette, 1899.)

“In this isolated section, far removed from all activities of modern civilization, the inhabitants are strikingly homogeneous, breathing one unlettered atmosphere . . .” (Katherine Jackson French, ballad collector, 1910.) An interesting side note here is that French was born and raised in Laurel County, Kentucky, in the heart of Appalachia. Most of her ballads were collected from people in and around her home county, yet she never identified herself as a mountain person with Appalachian roots.

“Ballad survivals will inevitably be most sought in the still medieval-minded Appalachians, so akin in speech, custom, and superstition to the folk among whom balladry was common three centuries ago.” (*The Nation*, 1914.)

“This is a rude, rough, and remote region, where civilization has been arrested for a hundred years; where illiteracy is still the rule; and where books and papers of all sorts are still rare. . . . With such ignorance of what lies beyond the limits of their own little world, it is indeed remarkable that these simple-minded mountain folk should retain in their balladry the memory of so much that has long since passed out of their practical knowledge and experience.” (*Harper's Monthly*, 1915.)

“The latest musical find has been made in the mountainous regions of Kentucky, a cultural desert isolated by the 150-mile barrier of Pine Mountain from the civilization that lies beyond.” A caption under a picture of ballad collectors Loraine Wyman and Howard Brockway

singing to an outdoor audience reads: “Loraine Wyman and Howard Brockway invaded the mountainous regions of Kentucky, and entered the most isolated regions, in order to obtain strange folksongs for the delectation of more sophisticated audiences.” (*Current Opinion*, 1917.)

“It should be kept in mind that these mountaineers of the South have not learned their songs from books, for often they cannot read nor write. . . . They are naturally diffident and at first, sometimes suspicious. Once interested in romance and started in their songs of oral transmission, they are like to pour forth a well of literature unguessed of from people so simple.” (*New Jersey Journal of Education*, 1920.)

“The mountain people are the finest of the English and Scotch immigrants caught a century or more ago in the mountains on their way from the eastern seaboard to the Mississippi valley and held there in a lean and hard struggle for existence. The green-covered mountain walls have made them into a lonely and sturdy people.” (*The Peabody Bulletin*, 1932.)

“The singer’s voice was homely as oatmeal.” (*Christian Science Monitor* article about mountain ballads preserved on record at the Library of Congress, 1947.)

Ballad collectors also generally ignored any other type of Appalachian singing since they were only interested in the English and Scottish Ballads identified by American Professor Francis James Child from 1882-1889. This meant that other types of singing were discounted. Worse, it meant that whole populations were ignored. African American, Native American, and immigrant singers were generally avoided by the ballad collectors. The most famous of these, British folklorist Cecil Sharp and his assistant Maud Karpeles, especially avoided any African American communities. We have record in their published diaries that Sharp and Karpeles intentionally avoided African American settlements and singers. The one exception is a 1918 encounter with an elderly African American woman in Nelson County, Virginia who could sing “Barbara Allen.” Sharp wrote:

“Aunt Maria (Tomes) is an old coloured woman, aged 85, who was a slave belonging to Mrs. Coleman who freed her after the war and gave her the log cabin in which she now lives, which used to be the overseer's home. I found her sitting in front of the cabin smoking a pipe. We sang (to) her ... which delighted her beyond anything and made her dub me 'A soldier of Christ'. She sang very beautifully in a wonderfully musical way and with clear and perfect intonation.” (See: Michael Yates’ online articles about Sharp: <http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/sharp.htm>.)

Here is one final poem that imagines the life of a mountain singer, an unnamed woman who has struggled to have an independent identity as a country music artist and that uses phrases from balladry and traditional songs:

### **The Girl Singer**

The A minor chord she strums  
on her signature black Gibson  
sounds lonesome as an old grave.

She knows she never got her due.  
Those men said *we're doing you  
a big favor, honey*. On tours,  
she was one notch above  
the gapped-tooth comic in his  
battered derby and checkered  
jacket, clowning on the upright bass.  
The ghost of their voices rattle  
chains in her sleep: *And now . . .  
here's our pretty little lady*.

Her fans tired of the mournful  
tunes her people sang in North  
Carolina: boots of Spanish leather,  
Irish seafarers with their chilly  
winds, Kentucky miners chasing  
an aggravating beauty, all the Aeolian  
tunes weeping like orphan children.  
Even the cheerful songs with jaybirds,  
sparrows and cuckoos fell on idle  
ears, served her no more. Besides,  
she grew into herself, weary  
of all the women killed in those murder  
ballads—bludgeoned, stabbed,  
drowned—their bodies floating  
downstream to the miller's cove.

Every few years some excited  
musicologist finds her, tries to revive  
her. So she keeps her hair raven-colored  
in case she gets a gig, a folk festival,  
a reunion show. Like tonight  
in the still air of the Bell County  
high school gym, she's buried  
between The Wilburn Brothers  
and Bill Anderson and the Po' Boys.  
She sings: *All men are fools*, the notes  
in her throat sharp as the Silver Dagger.

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### **Communicating Through Poetry**

Because I communicate through teaching and writing nearly every day, I often think of myself as being involved in a profession that literally binds people together in society. I teach and I write because I want to be a member of reading and writing communities and because I want to grow and change. Through teaching and writing, I believe I can offer those transformative

opportunities to others. Specifically, making poems is a humanistic endeavor and a hopeful act in bringing writers and readers together authentically.

As a poet I believe that poets and readers can and do enter a process that can result in change and transformation. Poems can produce attitudes in a reader and can help to shape a reader's worldview because a poem can create a state of alignment or identification in the reader, particularly when poems are intended as invitations rather than as propaganda or a vehicle for dogma. Every poem is (or should be) grounded in the particular for the writer, but I see my job as poet in helping readers experience a poem's concerns as representative for all readers.

A poem can give public resonance to issues, and a good poet moves out from the private to the universal. In this way, poems can effect change because poets have reached their conclusions through dialogue, invitation, and a responsibility and commitment to the reader. By writing and sharing my poems with readers, I can participate in this communal, invitational rhetoric while at the same time drawing attention to certain women artists whose contributions to traditional and country music have been largely forgotten.

On a very personal level, the writing of these poems will force me to grow as an artist and writer, to stretch my poetic vision and sensibilities. Beyond that, I have admired the "girl singers" since I was a child. Julia Alvarez describes this admiration as a type of hunger: "It is a hunger for the connection that comes from learning and sharing what we know, and a hunger so particular to us women for news from women who have gone farther down the road than we have gone. We want to know the story of how they did it, for there is an implicit permission and possibility that comes from hearing that story" (*The Writer on Her Work*, 2000). Through poetry, I have found a way to celebrate and name those women whose gifts of music have enriched my life and whose lives and art paved the way for other women artists.

Finally, I offer my thanks to the Anne Ray Charitable Trust which funds the Appalachian Music Fellowship Program at Berea College. I extend my gratitude to Berea College and to the Special Collections and Archives staff for this fellowship opportunity. Shannon Wilson, Harry Rice, Jaime Bradley, John Bondurant, Grace Sears, and the students in the Special Collections and Archives Department treated me kindly and made me feel that my project was worthy of their time and expertise. Their generous help and personal attention were invaluable to this project.