

Pompey is Dead

As sung by
Dora Richards
08-19-1940 Platteville, WI

Pom-pey is dead and laid in his grave, laid in his grave, laid in his grave.
Pom - pey is dead and laid in his grave, oh, oh, oh.

Verse 1.

Pompey is dead and laid in his grave,
Laid in his grave, laid in his grave.
Pompey is dead and laid in his grave,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 2.

They planted green apple trees over his head,
Over his head, over his head.
They planted green apple trees over his head,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 3.

The apples are ripe and beginning to fall,
Beginning to fall, beginning to fall.
The apples are ripe and beginning to fall,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 4.

There came an old woman a-picking them up,
Picking them up, picking them up.
There came an old woman a-picking them up,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 5.

Pompey jumped up and gave her a thumb,
Gave her a thumb, gave her a thumb.
Pompey jumped up and gave her a thumb,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 6.

Then the old woman went hippity-hop,
Hippity-hop, hippity-hop.
Then the old woman went hippity-hop,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 7.

There she went up to Strawberry hill,
Strawberry hill, strawberry hill.
There she went up to Strawberry hill,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 8.

Then she sat down and made her a will,
Made her a will, made her a will.
Then she sat down and made her a will,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 9

Maggie shall have the old grey mare,
Old grey mare, old grey mare.
Maggie shall have the old grey mare,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 10.

The saddle and bridle lay under the shelf,
Under the shelf, under the shelf.
The saddle and bridle lay under the shelf,
Oh, oh, oh.

Verse 11.

If you want any more you can sing it yourself,
Sing it yourself, sing it yourself.
If you want any more you can sing it yourself,
Oh, oh, oh.

Critical Commentary

Transcriptions by MB and HST.

HST notes:

In the Professional Papers series:

In the spring of 1944 I played a program of Wisconsin folksong recordings for an eighth grade class at Lakewood School, Madison. They asked for a replaying of "Pompey is Dead." As I left the building after the program, they assembled near the exit and sang all the verses from memory. They took the last line of the song literally - "If you want anymore you can sing it yourself." A few weeks later I received the following letter from one of the members of the class.

Dear Miss Thomas, I am enclosing copies of the verses our class added to Pompey. We have enjoyed singing it so much.

1. 'n Then the old lady she dug her a grave ...
2. 'n Then the old lady she laid down and died ...
3. 'n Then all the children they weeped and they cried
4. 'n Now she is lying by old Pompey's side

"Series of Old American Songs." Reproduced in Facsimile from Original or Early Editions in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays.

[Note: The following three paragraphs may be HST's own writing or notes copied from a source.]

"Pompey" is a child's game of considerable antiquity. The children sing it while enacting the parts of the dead boy, the apple tree, and the little old woman. The terminal vocalizing is delightfully dramatic.

The ballad experts have found versions all over the United States, the name "Pompey" being variously given as "Old Grimes" (New York and Kentucky), "Old Cromwell" (Cambridge, Mass.) "Old Grumpus" (North Carolina and Mississippi), also "Poor Roger", "Poor Johnny", "Poor Tommy", "Sir Roger", "Cock Robin", "old Tommy", "Old Granddaddy", "Old Pompey", and "Old Kramer". It is said that the song is known as a chantey.

The sheet-music, with "words by Mrs. H.B." and "Music by W.R. Dehnhoff", is dated 1878.

Version A sung by Dora Richards, age 69, Platteville, 1940.

This child's singing game was a favorite of immigrants who came to the mining area of South-western Wisconsin from the county of Cornwall, England around 1830-40. I had asked Miss Richards if she knew any Cornish songs and she replied "Well, I'm Cornish and I know a song that I learned from my mother and she was Cornish. My mother learned it from her mother and she was Cornish. So maybe this song is Cornish too." She then sang "Pompey is Dead." Miss Richards' ancestors were among the early Cornish settlers of Mineral Point. They lived at one time on Shakerag Street in the stone cottage now known as Pendarvis House.

Miss Leila Bascom of Madison recalled the song as "Old Grimes is Dead". Charles Dietz of Monroe sang a version "Old Willis is dead."

The children stand in a ring singing the song. As the characters and incidents of the story unfold, the individual children step to the center of the ring to characterize the deceased, the tree, the apple, or the old woman, performing whatever action is described. The story itself is believed to grow out of a popular superstition that the tree planted over the head of the deceased has a spirit connection with the deceased.

Alternate titles/related songs: "Old Grandaddy's Dead," "Bumpy was Dead and Lay in His Grave," "Old Roger is Dead," "The Tommy Song," "Apples are Ripe."

Sources:

Eddy, Mary O., coll. and arr. *Ballads and Songs from Ohio*. Hanford, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin, 1939.
"Old Granddaddy's Dead."

K.G.