
Chapter 40

Saving the Sounds of Tradition

Program 40 Performances

1. Bob Mathiowetz, "Concertina Gallop."
2. Agnes Sullivan, "The Queen of England."
3. Ted Ashlaw, "Driving Saw Logs on the Plover."
4. Charlie Patton, "Pony Blues."
5. Dachauer Bauern Kapelle (Dachau peasant band), "An der Moldau."
6. Warde Ford, "Keith and Hiles Line."
7. John Hermundstad, "The Waltz the Devil Danced Himself to Death With."
8. Matt Radosevich, "Mladi kapetani."
9. Al Kolberg, "Lauterbach."
10. Einard Maki, "Orpo pojan valssi."

Pioneer Field Recordists

Thomas Edison's cylinder recorder was a scant thirteen years old in 1890 when Jesse Walter Fewkes, a Harvard anthropologist, recorded songs and stories from the Passamaquoddy Indians of Calais, Maine (Hickerson 1982). And, by the early twentieth century, commercial recording companies like Edison, Victor, and Columbia were issuing the music of traditional performers on cylinder and disc. Anthropologists, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, record producers, electronics buffs, and enthusiasts have been capturing traditional music ever since.

Frances Densmore was the first to make field recordings of traditional music in the Upper Midwest. Born in Red Wing, Minnesota, in 1867, she was inspired by Alice C. Fletcher's pioneering work, *A Study of Omaha Indian Music* (1893). In 1907, equipped with a bulky Edison Home Phonograph, Densmore commenced recording the music of her region's native peoples: first among the Ojibwa on reservations in White Earth, Leech Lake, and Red Earth, Minnesota, and Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin; then among Wisconsin's Menominee and Winnebago peoples. Her Ojibwa recordings alone number nearly five hundred songs (see Densmore generally and Vennum 1989).

Densmore's work was supported by the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and was part of the Bureau's broader effort to document the "fading" cultures of native peoples. Beyond recording a wide array of courting, hunting, healing, gambling, war, and dream songs, Frances Densmore took photographs of musical instruments, singers, and events, set down performers' biographies and details about the use and meanings of their songs, and carefully described nonmusical aspects of Woodland Indian life. Her *Chippewa Customs* (1929) remains a classic.

While the anthropological impulse and institutional sponsorship spurred Densmore, a passion for poetry and an artist's wanderlust moved Franz Rickaby. Born in Springfield, Illinois, in 1889, Rickaby, the descendant of musicians and teachers, was a violin-playing dance band leader and published versi-

fier while in his teens (D. Greene 1968). In 1917, after graduating from Knox College and earning an M.A. from Harvard, Rickaby took a position in the University of North Dakota's English Department.

Harvard had been the seat of American ballad study since the mid-nineteenth century, so it was not surprising that one of the first courses Rickaby offered was "Balladry: English and American." His journal of 1919 reveals a particular fascination with the works of another Harvard graduate, John Lomax.

February 4 . . . I have become enamored of the ballad! The condition began with a hasty survey I began some weeks ago of Lomax's "Cowboy Songs."
(D. Greene 1968:325)

That summer Franz Rickaby went "auto-tramping" across the northern reaches of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan in search of lumber-camp ballads. Although he garnered but a few examples, he persisted and, prior to his death in 1925, recorded the fifty-one texts, tunes, and variants that comprise *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-Boy* (1926).

Rickaby's book is especially valuable for the first full portrait of a composer of lumber-camp ballads, William N. Allen of Wausau, Wisconsin. Allen was born in St. Stephens, New Brunswick, in 1843 to Irish immigrant parents and traveled with them to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and then Wisconsin in the 1850s. At seventeen young Billy apprenticed to a timber cruiser in Green Bay, and at twenty-five he was cruising in the Wausau area where he remained.

About 1870 he began composing songs and poems of logging life, drawing upon traditional tunes, language, and verse structures. He also performed his logger ballads in lumber camps and several entered oral tradition, including "Driving Saw Logs on the Plover," with its admonition that farming is a safer occupation than logging.

Allen was still active in 1928 when eleven of his poems were published under the pen name "Shan T. Boy" in Lake Shore Kearney's *The Hodag*. While all treat logging and the woods, a few political ditties reveal the sharpness of Allen's Democratic wit. "I Do Not Choose to Run" pillories President Calvin Coolidge for fishing on an oil magnate's Brule River estate while shunning the lumberjacks who are kept outside with a "ten pound padlock." Playing upon Silent Cal's oft-quoted decision not to seek another term, Allen places the GOP leader in the path of a legendary woods beast, the dinosaurlike Hodag.

When Calvin roams the northern wood,
On Lake Superior's shore,
Should [he] meet a Hodag seeking food
And hear his awful roar.
He'll throw away his fishing rod,
His reel and fancy gun
And whisper to himself, "My God,
I think I choose to run."

The Wisconsin Chair Company

While Calvin Coolidge, the man who said "the business of America is business," found his way into a folk poet's verses, upper midwestern businessmen preserved folk music through commercial recordings. In 1915 the Wisconsin Chair Company of Port Washington expanded its product line to include "phonographs and phonographic records." Soon it was issuing recordings on Puritan and Paramount labels (Calt 1988). Both labels featured second-rate pop performers that the bigger recording companies had rejected, but Puritan, in keeping



Czech sheet music at the home of Clara Sveda, Ashland, 1981 **Photo: Jim Leary**

with the immediate area's large German population, offered a string of recordings by German male choruses and peasant bands. In 1921 Paramount also provided record-pressing services to Milwaukee's fledgling Polonia Phonograph Company, but their product was defective and resulted in a suit.

The inability of the Wisconsin Chair Company's subsidiaries to command stellar pop artists and to provide a product of consistent quality for the region's ethnic musicians resulted in a shift in orientation to black artists and audiences who would consider low pay and technically shoddy records better than nothing. As Otto Moeser, the Chair Company's president from 1935 to 1955, blithely recollected: "We could not compete for high class talent with Edison, Columbia, and Victor, and we had inferior records; so we went to race records." Nonetheless Paramount was responsible for recording some of the finest Delta blues players, including the legendary Charlie Patton, who traveled from Mississippi to Wisconsin in May 1930 to record such classics as "Pony Blues" (Palmer 1981:82-83).

Since the pioneering efforts of Frances Densmore and Franz Rickaby, and the serendipitous blundering of the Wisconsin Chair Company, others have sought to preserve the traditional music of the Upper Midwest's diverse peoples. Sometimes supported with government funds, equipment, and a sense of mission, sometimes embarked upon their own self-financed vision quest, sometimes driven to turn a profit, they have all contributed to saving the sounds of tradition.