

A Songcatcher in Middle Tennessee

The folksong collection of George Boswell. By CHARLES WOLFE

ONE FALL DAY IN 1949, a dusty red sedan pulled into the driveway of an old farmhouse near New Johnsonville, near the Tennessee River. Out of it stepped a tall, 29-year-old man with a crew cut and a battered briefcase. His name was George Worley Boswell, and though he looked like an insurance salesman or a visiting preacher, he was actually a graduate student at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville. And he was hunting old songs.

"I had been corresponding with this lady about old songs her family knew," Boswell recalled years later. "She was a little puzzled as to why I wanted to write down her songs, but she invited me in and offered me a glass of tea. She lived in a very old house, full of interesting antique furniture. She showed me a three-cornered cabinet that appeared to be made of oak and was pegged together. It had been in the family for as long as anyone could remember, she said. A family history told that dishes had fallen out of it during the great New Madrid earthquake of 1812."

Then it was time for singing. Boswell took out a notebook and a sheaf of music paper, and his hostess began singing:

*'Twas in the merry month of May,
When all the flowers were blooming,
Sweet William on his death-bed lay,
For the love of Barbary Allen.*

Boswell recognized the song at once as a "child ballad"—one of the narrative songs

that English and Scotch-Irish settlers had brought to America generations before. He knew that English writer Samuel Pepys had mentioned it in his diary as far back as 1666; that the poet William Goldsmith mentioned it in an essay; that it was one of Abraham Lincoln's favorite songs as a boy. In these days before tape recorders or digital cameras, Boswell had to transcribe the song by hand, but he was a trained musician, and it was no problem for him to note the music as his informant sang.

"I got several good songs from her," he recalled, "but driving back to Nashville I kept thinking about that old three-cornered cabinet that had shaken in 1812. Her family knew it was an important part of their heritage—and it was. But she also had songs that were far older, and she didn't understand why they were interesting. But the family had kept them alive all those years, so I guess they must have thought they were worth something."

George Boswell never ceased to be amazed at how durable the old folk songs were. In an earlier age, before records, radio, mass media and easy travel, the oral tradition was a major part of American culture. Though the tradition undoubtedly flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries, it had been ignored by academics and journalists. Then, in 1916, an English folk-song collector named

Cecil Sharp traveled into the Appalachians and began to find dozens of old English ballads that were still alive in Tennessee hamlets like Flag Pond and Rocky Fork and at the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky. In the next decade, Americans themselves suddenly discovered the wealth of traditional music, and dozens of song hunters made their way into the mountains, the Deep South and the Midwest. The poet Carl Sandburg was so taken with the voices of these songs that he compiled a best-selling anthology of them in 1925, *American Songbag*.

By mid-century, though, many scholars felt much of the folk-song tradition had become all but extinct, driven out by the radio hits of singers like Hank Williams and Eddy Arnold. What was left, they felt, was still hidden away in the most remote hollows of Appalachia. George Boswell was to prove them wrong on both counts.

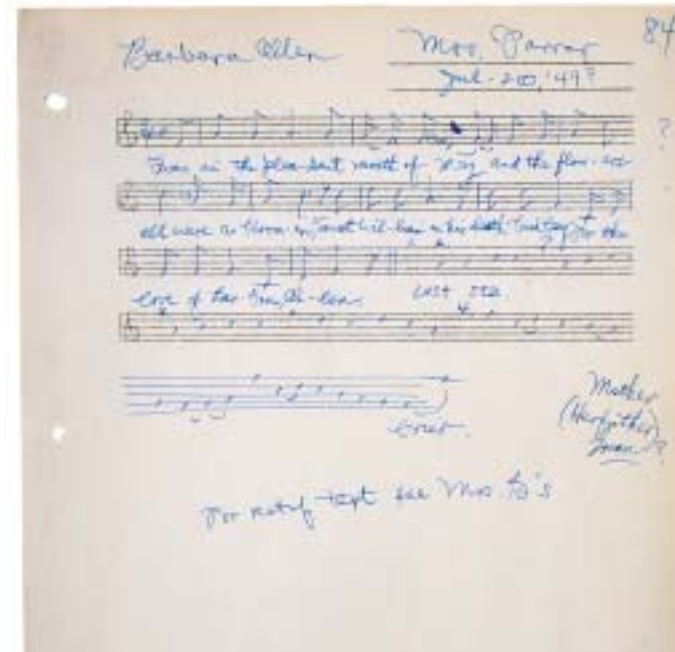
A native of Nashville, Boswell learned to read and write music as a teen at David Lipscomb, and then later studied English literature at Vanderbilt. He got interested in old British ballads from Fugitive poet and critic Donald Davidson—"an unreconstructed southerner and one of the best teachers at Vanderbilt," he recalled. A five-year hitch in the Army interrupted his studies, but he

returned and enrolled at Peabody, where he met two of the nation's best known folk-song experts, George Pullen Jackson and Charles Faulkner Bryan. In the 1930s both Peabody and Vanderbilt had encouraged students to compile collections of folk songs as their theses, and Boswell began talking to Peabody professor Susan Riley about discovering which types of traditional music were still out there.

He soon found that he wouldn't have to travel to the eastern mountains to find his songs; hundreds of them were right under his nose in Nashville and its surrounding communities. One of his best singers was Myrtle Carrigan, a tiny, white-haired woman who lived in a modest frame house on 22nd Avenue North. Like so many residents of Nashville, Mrs. Carrigan had grown up in rural Smith County, Tenn., and moved to Nashville with her husband to find work.

Another prime source, and one of the most colorful, was Jane Snodgrass Johnson, who had grown up in the Sequatchie Valley, and who not only remembered old songs but wrote several books, including a novel called

Easy Money. Another singer was a teacher in Brentwood who would sing to her students old songs her mother learned in Alabama. Yet others were well-known Nashville professionals—physician Sam Clark, historian Stanley Horn, state historian Bob White and judge Albert Williams, who recalled a family ballad called "The Constitution and the Guerriere," which dated from the War of 1812.



The Boswell folk song collection offers a rare look at traditional music in Tennessee. Its holdings range from handwritten versions of popular folk songs to sheet music.



Boswell also traveled to 10 counties outside Nashville and collected more ballads, lyric laments (like "The Blind Child"), rare topical songs (like "Jim Bobo's Fatal Ride," about one of the region's first bicycle accidents), Civil War songs (like "The Downfall of Fort Donelson"), and comic songs (like "Aunt Jemima's Plaster"). His most active years of song collecting were from 1948 to 1952, but after he began his teaching career, which took him to Morehead, Clarksville, and the University of Mississippi, he continued to gather

songs when possible. By the time it was all over, Boswell had amassed more than 1,200 songs, the largest collection in Tennessee.

It was so large, in fact, that when Boswell approached publishers about printing it, most editors took a look at the size and blanched. In the 1930s and 1940s, university presses were willing to commit the time and resources to issue huge collections, but by the 1980s, spiraling printing costs had made such ambition impractical. In his later years Boswell kept his collection in a set of 10 huge notebook binders; some of the songs had been typed and cleanly notated, but most were in their original holograph form, written out by hand and left in the collector's own notation. In 1989 he retired from Mississippi, and he and his wife, Emily (who had helped him gather many of the songs), returned to Nashville. Three years later the University of Tennessee Press agreed to publish a selection of the material, and I began working with George to select songs and gather his memories about his singers.

In 1997 a selection of about 100 songs—less than a tenth of the collection—was published as *Folk Songs of Middle Tennessee: The George Boswell Collection*. Sadly, the collector did not live to see a copy; he died March 22, 1995. Emily Boswell, however, was determined to preserve the collection, and I put her in touch with Marice Wolfe, then the director of Vanderbilt's Special Collections at the Heard Library. Emily was impressed with Marice, her staff and the Vanderbilt archives, and agreed to donate the collection. Today it remains an invaluable resource for scholars, singers, and students of traditional music.▼

Charles Wolfe, professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, is one of the world's most respected and prolific writers on traditional folk and popular American musical genres. Author of more than a dozen books on American music, he has annotated more than 100 record albums and has been nominated three times for Grammy awards.