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## The Library Associates [v. 5, no. 1]

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## The Library Associates

### *Dedication of the Papers of Gov. Lawrence W. Wetherby*

On Saturday, 8 October 1983, members of the Library Associates attended the dedication of the papers of Gov. Lawrence W. Wetherby, Kentucky's chief executive from 1950 to 1955. Guest speaker Gov. Bert Combs praised Gov. Wetherby for his integrity and strong leadership during a difficult period in the state's history. He noted particularly that it was during the Wetherby administration that the U.S. Supreme Court handed down, in 1954, its then controversial desegregation decision in the case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, and that Gov. Wetherby's firm commitment to equal rights insured Kentucky's compliance with the law. Professor John E. Kleber, professor of history at Morehead State University, spoke on the significance of the Wetherby papers. Prof. Kleber is the editor of *The Public Papers of Governor Lawrence W. Wetherby, 1950-1955*, published this year by the University Press of Kentucky in the series "The Public Papers of the Governors of Kentucky." The dedication program also included a multi-image presentation on the career of Gov. Wetherby, prepared by Terry L. Birdwhistell of the Oral History Program in the Department of Special Collections and Bruce A. Smith of the Office of Instructional Resources. An exhibition from the Wetherby Papers, organized by Modern Political Papers Coordinator Bill Cooper, was mounted in the Library Gallery. A reception honoring Gov. Wetherby and special guests took place in the Department of Special Collections.

### *Hill Shine Memorial Fund*

At the annual awards and honors program of the Department of English on 27 April 1983 a check for some eighteen hundred dollars was presented to the libraries in memory of Professor Hill Shine, a longtime member of the department. The special memorial fund, which has since been augmented by continuing gifts, was donated by friends and colleagues of Professor Shine and will be used for the purchase of materials relating to Thomas

Carlyle, his chief scholarly interest. Professor William S. Ward gave an affectionate reminiscence of Professor Shine as a devoted teacher, an able researcher, and a man of great integrity both personally and professionally. Robert Hemenway, chairman of the Department of English, presented the check to Paul Willis, who responded on behalf of the libraries with fond memories of Professor Shine as a user of the collections.

*Marsha Norman 1984 Prichard Lecturer*

Marsha Norman, awarded the Pulitzer Prize in April of 1983 for her play *Night, Mother* will address the Associates at their annual meeting on Friday, 30 March 1984. Ms. Norman is a native of Louisville. She was Writer-in-Residence at Actors Theatre of Louisville, where several of her works have premiered. Her first play *Getting Out* proved a critical success both in Los Angeles and New York and was named one of the outstanding plays of the 1978-1979 New York season. Her Kentucky-based drama "It's the Willingness" aired on PBS television in January of 1980. She has also worked on various other screenplay projects, including an adaptation of Gay Talese's *The Bridge*. Ms. Norman is now preparing a musical drama set in Shakertown. More information concerning the annual meeting will reach members of the Associates in the near future.

—James D. Birchfield

## John Jacob Niles

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*The Kentucky Review* is pleased to share with its readers a portion of the remarks made by Barry Bingham, Sr. at the dedication of the Niles Collection on 28 April 1983.

. . . Johnnie was of course a native of Kentucky, born in the old Portland neighborhood of Louisville. He flew the European skies in World War I, and fell to European earth in one near-fatal crash. He studied in France, he performed all over the world, but always he came back to his Kentucky roots. His personality combined all the conflicting elements of the Kentucky nature—imagination contrasted to earthy realism, humor wed to dogged perseverance, crotchety cussedness shading right off into sweetness as genuine as home-grown honey.

I don't need to expound on Johnnie's remarkable accomplishments to any person in this room. You know the whole story, from his days as a "youngling" through all the years of composing and performing in his own inimitable style. The record extends right up through his last concert appearance at Swannanoa, North Carolina, when he was eighty-six years old. And through all the years, that amazing male alto voice of his remained a perfect instrument—right up to the end.

Johnnie was like Kentucky itself in that he was a rare bundle of contradictions. You know how our state is variously seen as a hovel of hillbillies or as a pillared mansion of Bluegrass blue bloods. Johnnie could be equally at home in worn blue jeans at Boot Hill Farm or in white tie and tails at Carnegie Hall. He could describe himself as "just a Boone County boy," yet fully justify what Charles O'Connell of Red Seal Records called him, "the unique American troubador."

Johnnie was so wonderfully unstuffy, so sassy. He could laugh in the face of solemn musical pundits, yet outdo them in feeling for the classical composers. He often wore irreverence like a jaunty old cap pushed back on his head. At the same time, he could collaborate with Thomas Merton on deeply-felt songs of the spirit.

He never bothered about being conventionally consistent. He was always faithful to himself in everything he did and wrote and sang.

Johnnie did so many things well that he hardly had time to switch from one bravura performance to another. Bryan Woolley, writing for *The Courier-Journal* some years ago, caught some of the protean quality when he described Johnnie at home: "Niles walks on cobblestone floors that he laid, hangs oils that he painted on brick walls that he built, eats Bibb lettuce and asparagus that he grew and country hams that he smoked, opens doors on which he carved messages to his wife, the world, and God."

The wife to whom he addressed these messages was one of the triumphs of his life. It took more than luck to marry such a person as Rena—it took a power of sensibility that amounted to genius. And with all the successes of his long career, I doubt if any gratified him so richly as having begotten two such sons as Tom and John Ed.

Of course, Johnnie was a great actor as well as a great singer. Who can forget the high drama of "Hangman, hangman, slack your line, slack it just a while." It makes my scalp tingle to think of the way he used to sing it. There was also his dramatic way with a dulcimer, which he made into a theatrical prop, a hidden voice, a person in its own right. David Burg has caught to perfection that magical aspect of a Niles performance. "He made love to his audiences," Burg wrote, "as he did to his dulcimers. He tenderly plucked their strings, eliciting the desired response from both." And of course there was the voice itself. It was essentially a rare gift of nature, like the cool, clear water from a mountain spring. A London critic sought to describe the high notes this way: "When Mr. Niles trills, it reminds me of the voice of a lazy nightingale." But this was not the warbling of what Oscar Hammerstein sentimentally described as "a lark that is learning to sing." The Niles voice was expertly trained, rigorously controlled, a work of art as well as a natural phenomenon.

When Johnnie Niles was first collecting songs in a serious way, he was bothered by people who thought he was, in his own words, "quaint and cute." That disarming boyishness served him well, all the same. He had by nature the "common touch." He knew how to talk to all kinds of men and women. He could draw truth, and even unconscious poetry, out of shy and inarticulate people. That quality inspired people to trust him and open up to

him. It enabled him to unearth so many hidden treasures as he traipsed the hills of Appalachia, sometimes with the gifted photographer Doris Ullman, sometimes on his lonesome own. Hill people produced for him fragments of song and verse that he pieced together as another kind of artist assembles the glowing colors of a mosaic. All of that richness went into the book of Niles ballads published by Houghton, Mifflin in 1961.

He could reproduce with his perfect ear the Appalachian way of speech. He found one of his priceless sources in the lock-up, when he went for an interview with a man who described himself as "jail-hampered." The prisoner in his stifling cell complained to Johnnie: "I'm as uncomfortable as a stewed witch." When he questioned an old woman in Perry County about the accuracy of calling the ballad hero Robin Hood by the name of "Robber Hood" in a song she sang, she replied with flawless logic: "He were a robber, were he not?"

His acquaintances in the mountain hollows gave him open leads on ballads he could trace to their sources in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, and in some cases all the way back to the Middle Ages. They presented him, too, with nuggets of folk wisdom. Aunt Dodie Netherly of Trade, Tennessee, was one such source. "I want you to know," she advised him, "that hit takes a liar to grow gourds."

All of us who fell under the spell of John Jacob Niles have tried in our various ways to explain his fascination. He was an "original," yes. He was a "character," yes. He was, as I have tried to suggest, the quintessential Kentuckian. What nobody has quite captured is the effect his music had on listeners. Perhaps no one will come closer than an old man he talked to on a hillside near McKee, Kentucky. "Music," he explained to Johnnie, "does two things to a feller. It pleasures him, and it saddens him." I think that John Jacob Niles might have welcomed this as a sort of epitaph. He was the man who brought that kind of pleasure, and that kind of sadness, to whole generations of human "fellers."



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Each year the Associates organize a number of activities for the public and the membership. They also sponsor in part the publishing and teaching programs of The King Library Press, the hand press in the Department of Special Collections. Publications of the Press are offered to members at a twenty-percent discount. A subscription to the Associates' journal, *The Kentucky Review*, is provided free to members.

Membership is open to anyone contributing annually fifteen dollars or more (five dollars for students) in cash or library materials. For further information write The Secretary, The Library Associates, University of Kentucky Libraries, Lexington, KY 40506.

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