Mary Wheeler: Collector of Kentucky Folksongs

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Mary Wheeler. Courtesy of Bertha Wheeler Wenzel
Mary Wheeler (1892-1979) was a talented and versatile musician who became one of Paducah, Kentucky's first career women. In an era when genteel young girls were expected to sing and play the piano a little as part of their training in the social graces, she refused to conform to such a limiting musical model. After completing high school in 1908, she left for New York City to become a musician, and spent her professional life as a successful concert singer, music teacher, voice coach, choral conductor, and as a collector of the folksongs of Kentucky. It is in this last genre that she made her most significant contribution to music and to the knowledge of the history and folklore of her native state. An analysis of her published collections, *Kentucky Mountain Folk-Songs* (1937), *Roustabout Songs: A Collection of Ohio River Valley Songs* (1939), and *Steamboatin' Days* (1944), and also of a considerable amount of her unpublished material (of which the public has been unaware until now) proves these to be works of high quality and enduring value, musically and historically. A study of the techniques and skills she used in compiling them, a consideration of how her musical education and experience qualified her for this work, and a comparison of her collections with those of other Kentucky folksong collectors reinforce this judgment.

When Mary Wheeler was born, Paducah was a thriving town of almost thirteen thousand. From her home on Kentucky Avenue overlooking the Ohio River, she, a brother, and two sisters were reared. Her father, Charles K. Wheeler, was a prominent attorney who served from 1897 to 1903 in the House of Representatives from Kentucky's first Congressional district. These six years in Washington, D.C., during Mary Wheeler's childhood undoubtedly afforded her a wider range of cultural opportunities. Whether in Washington or Paducah, her mother, Mary Kirkpatrick Guthrie Wheeler, must have been a major influence on her. Reputed to be a brilliant musician, she had attended the Cincinnati College of Music before her marriage in 1888. Possibly the sacrifice of a promising
musical career to marriage (often an either/or choice then) caused her to encourage her talented daughter’s musical ambitions. At any rate, after attending the Dorian School and Paducah High School, Mary Wheeler started her first serious voice study at the Gardner School in New York and with private coaches there and in Chicago. From newspaper clippings, letters, and data in one of her scrapbooks, there is ample evidence that her singing career, especially in Chicago, was flourishing, and that she had become at least a minor celebrity there. Her repertoire then was a mixture of fairly standard classical songs and the lighter art songs which were popular then.

World War I interrupted and redirected her singing career. Filled with patriotism and a desire to serve her country, she volunteered for foreign service with the American Red Cross. However, for reasons she never understood, she was refused because her brother, James G. Wheeler, was already serving in the Army. Eventually she was accepted, and from November 1918 to July 1919, she sang and entertained convalescing soldiers in hospitals in London and in the province of Lorraine in France. A measure of her disillusionment with the war’s outcome can be seen in an interview, fifty-seven years later, when she expressed her disappointment that the war “to end all wars” had not done so.

After the war ended she continued Red Cross work in Washington and resumed her singing career there. However, her musical ambitions began a gradual change as her interest in teaching music increased. Since this required more formal education, she enrolled in 1925 in the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. She studied there for twelve years (mostly in summer terms) while continuing to give recitals and to teach, privately and in various schools in Kentucky, Georgia, Ohio, and Virginia. Eventually, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in voice in 1933 and a Master of Arts degree in musicology in 1937.

In the fall of 1926 Mary Wheeler took leave from the conservatory to teach music for a year at the Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, Kentucky. This was her first direct contact with the people and the folksong of the Kentucky mountains, although her interest in American folksong, in general, can be traced back to her years in Washington after the war. There she had attended several recitals and lectures on the music of American Indians, sailors’ songs, and sea chanteys. There is no evidence that she included any folksongs in her own concerts, though, until after
Mary Wheeler’s decision to work in the Kentucky mountains came from several sources. When asked many years later why she had made such a daring move, her reply was simply, “It was something I wanted to do.” She admitted there was opposition to the idea, but she went anyway. Also, her professors in Cincinnati urged her to bring back as many mountain songs and information about them as she could. It is safe to assume, too, that the nationwide interest in American folklore and folksong, reaching back into the nineteenth century, influenced her decision. After the Civil War, black spirituals became extremely popular when students from Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes and Fisk University toured the United States giving concerts. Antonín Dvořák also made a powerful impression on American musicians when he taught at the National Conservatory of Music in New York from 1892 to 1895, encouraging them to use black and Indian idioms in their music. Even in 1908, when Mary Wheeler came to New York, his influence lingered. Musicological research among the American Indians by Natalie Curtis, Frances Densmore, and others in the first two decades of the twentieth century also excited considerable activity. Closer to home, two of Mary Wheeler’s friends from Paducah, Harry Gilbert and William Reddick, had gained considerable fame in New York as musicians and composers, at least in part by their arrangements of black spirituals.

The strongest factor that directed Mary Wheeler toward seeking out and preserving mountain music may have been the visits to the United States from 1915 to 1918 of Cecil Sharp, the noted British folksong authority. On his lecture tours in this country, he attracted widespread publicity to mountain folksong, almost all of which could be traced, he said, to English and Scottish origins. Sharp’s visits in the mountains of Kentucky yielded more than five hundred songs. In less than a week at Hindman, he noted sixty-one tunes from twelve informants. All of these were published in 1917, combined with others collected earlier by Olive Dame Campbell, and added to the nation’s fascination with every facet of life in Appalachia.

The Hindman Settlement School was a rural settlement school and was inspired by urban models such as Hull House in Chicago. Its purpose was to provide educational opportunities for mountain boys and girls, and indirectly for their parents. From its beginning in 1902 the school served as a center for folksong collectors. Many
who were daunted by the isolation of the area and the lack of amenities in mountain cabins appreciated using the dormitories of the school as their headquarters.

Katherine Pettit, the idealistic young Lexington woman who was a founder of the school, enjoyed hearing the school children sing the mountain songs, and encouraged collecting efforts. However, only a few collectors preceded Mary Wheeler to the area (in addition to Cecil Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell) to hear indigenous music. They were Josephine McGill, who collected there in the fall of 1914, and Loraine Wyman and Howard Brockway in 1916. May Stone, who became director when Katherine Pettit left to organize the Pine Mountain Settlement School, was still there when Mary Wheeler arrived in September 1926, and was very helpful to her in compiling her collection. Elizabeth Watts, who worked at the Hindman Settlement School for forty-seven years, recalls that May Stone often suggested homes to visit, homes in which there were singers.

What has misled students of folksong in the past concerning Mary Wheeler's Kentucky Mountain Folk-Songs is its 1937 publication date. Although much collecting was still being done in the 1930s and later, most people do not realize that almost all of her collection was compiled in 1926 and 1927 (only a few songs were added in 1932). Actually, she should be recognized as one of the "pioneer" collectors. It is unclear why publication was delayed, since in 1928, while teaching at the Lucy Cobb Institute in Athens, Georgia, she told an interviewer that the songs were being grouped for publication. In 1933 she wrote to Clara Bridge, who arranged the songs for piano, discussing exactly which songs to select for publication. In a telegram from Clara Bridge in June 1935, she learned that the book had been accepted by the Boston Publishing Company, but the delay in publication is a mystery.

Mary Wheeler's Kentucky Mountain Folk-Songs contains only fourteen of the songs she collected in Knott and neighboring counties. This small number has led folksong scholars to regard her as a minor figure. Actually, her "Mountain Notebook" reveals that her collection is far from insignificant, since it contains over fifty songs and ballads as well as many variants. All of them have been traced to their English, Scottish, or Kentucky origins and their sources documented. She was always careful to take down all the verses of each song she heard. Also, since she was living among the people for an extended time, she was able to delve thoroughly into
the music of one area and not simply "skim the cream," as Cecil Sharp was accused of doing when, after spending two days in West Virginia, he left because songs "did not lie so ready at hand as in the other states." In contrast, Mary Wheeler's accounts of her trips, in a wagon or on a mule, up Troublesome Creek to different mountain cabins, and her patient and careful notation of the words and music (no cassette tape recorders then) inspire trust in the authenticity of her collection. Her friendly overtures to the mountain women—she usually brought small gifts such as a packet of needles or a dress pattern—and her genuine interest in them soon overcame their shyness. Thus, she spent many hours in their homes listening to ancient ballads of unrequited love, jealous lovers, or violent murder while the women churned or rocked the baby. Their frequent comment after she sang her written version back was, "That speaks it so plain." "18

Although the students at the Hindman Settlement School were Mary Wheeler's best and most convenient source, problems could arise. For example, an unusual puzzle was presented by a song they sang called "The Keeper." Although May Stone assured her it was one of the old mountain ballads, Mary Wheeler discovered it was probably taught to them by Cecil Sharp when he visited the school. So instead of hearing a song from England that had remained intact in Kentucky for several generations, she heard one that was relatively new to its singers.

The songs the students at Hindman sang were usually unaccompanied, although occasionally one of them would "pick the dulcimore." In fact, Mary Wheeler discovered that in almost every mountain home she visited, a dulcimer hung over the fireplace; so while living in Orchard House, the school dormitory, she learned to play this instrument herself. After leaving Hindman she presented many recitals and radio programs of Kentucky mountain folksongs, accompanying herself on a dulcimer made for her from a walnut tree that had grown beside Troublesome Creek. A picture of her, clad in a homespun woolen dress and scarf, entitled the "Dulcimer Lady," was released by her Cincinnati agent and drew widespread publicity. After 1927 she continued giving entire programs of mountain songs, or at least including some in all her appearances, wherever she was living (the Lucy Cobb Institute in Athens, Georgia; Paducah Junior College; and Southern Seminary in Buena Vista, Virginia).21

*Kentucky Mountain Folk-Songs* filled a demand for practical
editions for people all over America who wanted to sing mountain folksongs. Mary Wheeler's collection was among the most attractive of the singing book type that included little information other than the county where each song was heard. Scholars now who look for complete documentation have not realized that Mary Wheeler studied and analyzed every song she collected (published and unpublished) with thoroughness and careful attention to detail. Her unpublished records provide much valuable and original information and are an important primary source.\(^\text{22}\) Further, she did not have the difficulty of several early collectors like Olive Dame Campbell, who were musically untrained; the scholars were not musicians, and the musicians were not scholars. Nor was this a problem for her arranger Clara Bridge, a Cincinnati Conservatory instructor from 1911 to 1940.\(^\text{23}\) Her piano accompaniments for the folksongs are artistically superior to any of the early arrangements, and they manage this while achieving the harmonic simplicity that the songs require.

Two other distinctive features of *Kentucky Mountain Folk-Songs* are the pictures of mountain cabins, people, and scenes in the Hindman area, and the introduction by Edgar Stillman Kelley. The pictures set the "mood" for the songs and give some idea of the remoteness of the region, which allowed English and Scottish folksongs to survive intact for over a hundred years. The introduction by one of America's most famous musicians of the day must have drawn attention to the collection. Edgar Stillman Kelley had also been on the Cincinnati Conservatory faculty when Mary Wheeler was there. He and Mrs. Kelley, a former president of the General Federation of Music Clubs, had been Mary Wheeler's friends, and Mary often sang on programs for Mrs. Kelley.\(^\text{24}\)

Her move to the mountains to collect folksongs may have surprised many of Mary Wheeler's associates, but her next collecting effort seemed completely logical, for she concentrated on the songs of the Ohio River of the packet boat era. Since she grew up watching these boats passing near her house in Paducah and hearing the songs of the black roustabouts who worked on them, it is surprising she did not begin collecting their songs earlier. Exactly when she did start is a matter of conjecture, but it was probably in 1935, when she was teaching music at Paducah Junior College and could go up and down the river visiting some of the very old black men who, in their youth, had worked on the packet boats before river traffic gave way to modern transportation. By June 1937 she
had collected the words and melodies of sixty-eight songs (plus variants and fragments) and had classified them as to mode (most are pentatonic), form, origin, and source for her master's thesis. This won the Chalmers Clifton award for excellence in musicological research.25

The Roustabout Songs are one of the most delightful and original collecting and arranging efforts imaginable. The songs of this romantic and bygone era were saved from extinction by Mary Wheeler and are unique in being the only collection devoted to the roustabouts of the Ohio River. Much effort has been made to save black spirituals but little to capture this almost equally significant saga of the steamboat hands of the Southern wharf and waterfront. The lore of the river is revealed in the songs the rousters sang as they loaded and unloaded freight, and the songs were invariably of their own coinage. They deal with memorable cruises, sad love affairs, boat races and wrecks, bullies, heroes, hangings, and funerals, and into them were often woven fragments of old plantation refrains or camp meeting hymns.

Ten songs were selected from her collection to go into Roustabout Songs, with settings for solo voice and piano accompaniment. These arrangements were done by William Reddick, who chose the songs he felt would be the most attractive and appealing to singers and the public. He probably was responsible for getting them published since the Remick Music Corporation of New York published many of his own compositions. Either Mary Wheeler or William Reddick could have asked Irving S. Cobb to write his colorful introduction because he had known them and their families in Paducah. It is more probable that William Reddick did, since he had continued to visit Cobb, his wife, and daughter in New York through the years.26

William Reddick's settings, combined with the rhythmic charm, the uniqueness of the words and melodies, and the flavor of a colorful era of American history that they evoked, made the Roustabout Songs extremely popular. Singers everywhere often included one or two in their programs, and at least two composers incorporated some of the songs into large orchestral works. The three most popular songs in the group were probably "John Gilbert," "Ohio River, She's So Deep and Wide," and "Alberta, Let Yo' Hair Hang Low." One song, "The Hanging of Devil Winston," is a ballad of a macabre event of 1897 in Paducah still recounted by people there to this day.27
Mary Wheeler regretted including "Boatman Dance, Boatman Sing" in the *Roustabout Songs*, since she learned after they were published that it was not an authentic roustabout song. Although it had been sung by the roustabouts, its origin was the white minstrel tradition, like Stephen Foster's "The Glendy Burke" or A.W. Mason's "Down the River." It was probably composed by a minstrel singer named Daniel D. Emmett. She most likely discovered her error in 1942 when Carl Carmer's *Songs of the Rivers of America* was published. It contained "Boatman Dance" as an Ohio River example but not of black origin. Elmer Sulzer, in his *Twenty-five Kentucky Folk Ballads*, notes hearing the song in Woodford County, Kentucky. In the 1960s, when Mary Wheeler and William Reddick were considering a new edition of the *Roustabout Songs*, this still troubled her, and she opted for omitting the song. However, when William Reddick died in 1965 plans for a new publication were dropped. Also, the demand for songs of this type was dead, largely because of the impact of the civil rights movement. While the songs accurately recorded the words as they had been sung, they were printed in dialect, and unacceptable in the new cultural climate of the United States. The songs of Stephen Foster suffered, and still do, the same decline.

Two singers have performed these Ohio River songs regularly for many years. Bertha Wheeler Wenzel, Mary Wheeler's niece, recorded several of the songs in 1964. Winifred Smith Breast, whose mother studied voice with Mary Wheeler, has also become associated with songs of the Ohio River. A recording of all the *Roustabout Songs* was made in 1946 by Conrad Thibault.

The culmination of Mary Wheeler's career was the publication of *Steamboatin' Days* by the Louisiana State University Press in 1944. In these she left the singing book tradition entirely, for although the words and melodies of sixty-six river songs form the nucleus of the book, it is more than music. It also contains much of the history of one of the great periods of America's development.

When Mary Wheeler began *Steamboatin' Days*, her plan was to collect the songs and melodies and nothing more, but she soon realized that without some knowledge of the river and river boats the words of many of the songs would have little meaning. Therefore, the book was expanded to include much valuable information on the history of the steamboat on the Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee Rivers. The experiences of ten former captains, descriptions of the luxurious conditions on the upper
decks for passengers and the hard labor without modern equipment below decks where the roustabouts stayed, paint a vivid picture of the contrast between white and black life then.

One fascinating bit of river lore provided in *Steamboatin' Days* is the description of each ship's large, ornate bell (some weighed as much as eight hundred pounds) and whistle. It was a point of pride with people who knew and loved the language of the river to be able to recognize any boat by its whistle or bell, since each one had its own individual tone quality.

One of the most original contributions of *Steamboatin' Days* (other than the music) is the chapter on the leadsmen taking soundings of the water's depth. The report of the leadsmen had to reach the pilot quite a distance away, so loud, musical, chant-like sounding calls developed. The pilots listened hopefully for the "Mark Four" (twenty-four feet) or "No Bottom" soundings. These chants varied slightly, but the version given by Mac Caldwell, a leadsmen on the Ohio, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rivers, is typical. B. A. Botkin, the well-known folklorist and author, quoted at length from *Steamboatin' Days* in his *Treasury of Mississippi River Folklore*, particularly on the soundings of the water's depth.

![Image]

*Steamboatin' Days*, p. 64

When Mary Wheeler collected the songs for this book, it was almost too late. Even in the mid-1930s many of the people who had worked on the boats were already dead, and the ones still living...
were in their eighties and nineties. W. L. Beasley, who took several of the photographs for *Steamboatin' Days*, recalls that in the summer of 1939, when he accompanied Mary Wheeler on some of her collecting visits, he marveled that she could understand some of the old, cracked voices singing songs learned sixty or more years before. Her patience and perseverance confirm that song collecting is an art. To persuade a self-conscious person to sing aloud for the collector was a test of tact, skill, and persuasive power, and Mary Wheeler had the art.

One thing that may have prevented complete accuracy with some of the river songs was the problem of ribaldry. Often when singing the roustaout songs for the collector, the river men were inhibited by the social code of the day and omitted some verses of the river songs; these verses could not have been published in any case in some instances. Also, Mary Wheeler found among the rousters the idea that certain tunes of the river should be put aside as belonging to a period of worldly youth. Therefore, some of the songs may be censored versions.

The songs themselves are grouped according to type, and the most distinctive ones are the work songs and the songs of boats. Since exhausting labor was required of the roustaout, it is not surprising that there is a predominance of work songs in the collection. The hard-driving mate, interested only in getting the freight moved quickly, liked his workers to sing. He would select a song leader who could "raise a song," and then he saw to it that the tempo was kept at a fairly rapid pace. The tempo of the singing was an important factor in the length of time required to handle a cargo. Most of the melodies are in duple meter and were created as accompaniments to the movements of the body and the marching or trotting rhythm that developed naturally during busy hours on the levee. The songs of the boats reveal how important the steamboats were to the river valley. They were associated with romance, trade, and adventure, and much of the business life of the towns centered on the arrival and departure of the packets. To the workers on them, the boats meant hard work, excitement, and what were then considered high wages. The names of boats occur often in their songs, and children were sometimes named after them. Dangers and disasters were usually recorded in song, as when a boat ran aground because of low water, or sank. The most dreaded tragedy was a boat in flames because the cargo of a packet
offered little resistance to fire.

The steamboat era is gone, but thanks to Mary Wheeler, the songs of its workers are preserved. These songs possess more interest to us if we remember their setting—a regal steamboat, carrying both passengers and freight, against the background of the river, with its power and force as a part of the fabric of our national life. Although John and Alan Lomax, Carl Sandburg, and Carl Carmer have given us some of the river folksongs, never before in a single volume have we have such a wealth of authentic river music as in *Steamboatin' Days*.

Mary Wheeler continued to be active in her music career until her death in 1979, but with *Steamboatin' Days* she completed her folksong collecting. Although she often said she hoped to be remembered for her teaching, it is already evident that posterity will remember her as a major collector of Kentucky folklore and music. She was among the first Americans to recognize the importance of preserving the songs of mountaineers and roustabouts, and sensed that their music touches the life and spirit of our country in a way that histories of presidents and generals never can. It is fortunate for the musical history of Kentucky and the nation that Mary Wheeler became fascinated with the music of the mountains and rivers before radio, television, modern communication, and transportation overwhelmed them. Her three collections will survive as valuable sources of our American heritage.

**NOTES**

1. The author wishes to thank Bertha Wheeler Wenzel of Paducah, Kentucky, for her invaluable assistance, and also Dr. Nancy Dye of Lexington, Kentucky.
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