



UNRECORDED FOLK TRADITIONS IN PENNSYLVANIA

BY SAMUEL P. BAYARD
Pittsburgh

PENNSYLVANIA at the moment appears to be in danger of losing completely an important part of her many-sided cultural inheritance—a part that also happens to be an element in our entire national culture, which would suffer as well by its loss.

The study of history has concerned itself increasingly in modern times with the life and work of everyday people. In Pennsylvania, historians have studied myriad facts and objects in order to reconstruct substantially the workaday world of our forebears. Students of culture have discussed the development of arts and industries, and regional authors have recorded their impressions of the past and present scene; so that on the whole we can justly claim possession of a rather well-rounded picture of our ancestors' daily pursuits.

But detailed as the picture may be, it still lacks what we may truly call an essential element. Before we can really know well the folk life of our predecessors, or understand what sort of people they were, we must explore still other aspects of the popular culture which they carried to the New World and continued to preserve and develop in their American surroundings. Specifically, we should have an appreciative knowledge of the *oral* literature and art of a people whose lives were often completely cut off from chances of formal schooling or literary and esthetic development.

We now know, indeed, that traditions preserved orally flourished among the people of Pennsylvania as vigorously as in any North American region. In a large and varied body of stories, ballads and songs, country players' dance and march tunes—

created and preserved by the folk for themselves, and constantly undergoing re-creation at their hands—we possess monuments of the traditional art cherished by our pioneers and by preceding old-world generations. These survivals reveal, more clearly than flintlocks and log cabins, the spirit of our forefathers—their interests and tastes, the themes that captured their imagination or moved them to laughter. Folk song, music and story formed a great part of the mental culture of most members of the colonizing races in this country, supplying—as has often been pointed out—journalism and esthetic recreation to numbers who were otherwise cut off from the enjoyment of such things.

Since this folk art embodies the most purely sincere creative work of a people, there is certainly much of the people in it. Since it has comprised so large an element in the esthetic and imaginative life of our folk, we must recognize that its preservation is necessary to an all-round comprehension of our own people both past and present. The fact that it stays alive despite complex changes in the conditions of life is testimony to its intrinsic merit, its popular favor, and its value for a correct understanding of our civilization. It is one of the important “background” elements of social life in early rural America, relieving the daily round of hard work, and adding zest to all other diversions.

In historical accounts of our pioneer days, this traditional lore has received only enough notice to confirm its pervasiveness and prominence in social life. Now it is time that we had a knowledge, as detailed as possible, of its actual content. Such material has been extensively collected during recent years in North America, but much remains to be done. What has been gathered so far in Pennsylvania reveals an excellent tradition and indicates the pressing need to know and recover more.

Over a large area of Pennsylvania the changes wrought by industrialism and specialization have definitely put the old folk culture into the background. Behind the modern front, however, our antique traditions linger on, although the folk songs and their tunes have a much less secure hold on life now than they did two decades ago. Yet it would be hard to point out a territory which should yield more information and insight in return for an extensive collection of its folklore than the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The statement just made is not an outburst of provincial patriotism. It voices the deliberate opinion of the writer after approximately sixteen years of folkloristic field work, combined with a study of the entire British-American traditional song field. To those concerned with the preservation of local historical or cultural monuments, a brief summary of the state of such traditions from the viewpoint of one who has long had first-hand contact with living folk art in Pennsylvania may possibly possess interest.

The memories of elderly people in rural southwestern Pennsylvania go back to a time when the agricultural and pastoral life of the region still fostered folk culture, kept alive by an oral tradition which persisted in great vigor to a rather recent period. Two things are needed for perpetuating oral popular tradition: an active interest in it on the part of the general public, and an active effort by some individuals among the mass to memorize and perform it. We must assume that such individuals are also those in whose hands rests the greater part of the development, and the ultimate fate, of our old folk song and music.

Formerly there must have been a considerable number of gifted and enthusiastic lovers of traditional balladry and music in Pennsylvania, and it is unquestionable that many communities contained certain musically talented families. These groups were the special preservers of the folk art in their respective neighborhoods; they particularly, though probably not avowedly, made it an avocation to learn and transmit songs and music, as well as other lore. And while anyone was free to learn the common cultural heritage, these local musicians were the *de facto* custodians of the tradition, and its insurers against oblivion. While popular lore remains in favor among the people of any community, such persons fulfill the important function of keeping it in memory and handing it down to the next generation—all in the involuntary, almost accidental way that oral tradition has of being perpetuated.

In a great many neighborhoods there was such liking for the old "handed down" songs and airs that they continued to be in this part of the New World what they had been in the Old, a part of daily life, accepted and absorbed like the language. Persons of every sort were apt to sing old ballads, from the prosperous farmer to the poor tenant. Almost anyone might know at

least one or two of them, learned without effort from the singing of family or friends. But among the more casual music-makers moved those with whom learning to sing or play had become a passion, and who treasured in their memories great stores of the local repertory—by which means they became the community's notable traditional artists in one generation and the involuntary teachers of their kindred spirits in the next.

The foregoing outline is no product of an enthusiast's kindled fancy, but a statement of conditions which must inevitably be inferred from what surviving folk musicians tell us about earlier times in Pennsylvania. Reminiscences of individuals concerning what went on in their home communities supply more specific detail to the picture.

In some neighborhoods five dances a week were customary during the less busy seasons. Fiddlers played for fun or money, and were plied with drink and given presents. Dancing frequently went on all night, and between sets the company would sit in circles or semicircles and enjoy other "folk" ways of social diversion. Then the scene described in the story of Caedmon was likely—*mutatis mutandis*—to be reenacted. Various people were called on to sing, and the company would clap hands until the person designated had rendered some traditional song. In this way, naturally, many songs were passed about among contemporaries, besides being learned by younger witnesses of the scene. Apart from dances, there were always likely to be informal "get-togethers" among fiddlers or singers; and whole families visited about during the winter months, driving in sleighs to neighbors' homes and spending a night of music, song and story-telling. "Frolics"—neighborhood gatherings to help in some important farm task during the busier seasons—were occasions for more such diversion. People sang as they worked or travelled the country roads, and the sound of music must have been familiar in the countryside. Neighbors would gather of an evening at the home of some noted local singer, and sitting indoors or on the lawn would be entertained until a late hour with a succession of old ballads and songs. Hired men skilled as ballad-singers would be asked by their employers to perform on various occasions: when there was company, just before bedtime, or during some journey to town or fair. Players and singers attended fairs, and

fifers assisted at pole-raising, national holiday celebrations, funerals, executions, military musters, political parades, and so forth.

Such were the ways in which traditional minstrelsy was perpetuated up to comparatively late times in Pennsylvania. The memories of old folk musicians evoke a social scene which in most sections might have prevailed two centuries ago instead of only sixty or so years—so much have times changed.

Today we find the folk arts of music and song far gone in decline throughout this commonwealth. The momentum-gathering trends toward industrialized and urbanized society have sealed the doom of the old-fashioned life and its lore. There came a time in the very recent past when, due to the accumulation of interests and pursuits different from those of the older, predominantly agrarian life, most of the "growing up" generation simply ceased to pay close attention to the songs of their elders, and consequently failed to remember them. The indications are that this turning point in the fortunes of folk art occurred about forty to fifty years ago in Pennsylvania, during the 80's and 90's of the last century. Since then, the folk arts have simply been "hanging on" until the last of their preservers shall have gone to the grave.

This decline in truly popular culture has affected the various phases of folk art differently. Since such things as "swing orchestras" or their equivalents made their way slowly into the countryside, the rural fiddlers suffered no immediate setback, and their tradition has persisted in considerable vigor right up to the present moment. Although the old-fashioned "air players" and their music are now manifestly on the way out, they are yet better represented in our country districts than other types of traditional artistry. Fiddlers with fine repertoires of old tunes are still fairly numerous in many sections.

Quite different has been the impact of changing manners on the old-time fife and drum corps ("martial bands"). Whereas those who remembered the stirring fife music of the Civil War—nearly all of which must have been traditional—were thrilled to hear such bands play, some present-day listeners unfortunately have been moved to mirth. The Monongahela Valley contained a veritable swarm of fife and drum corps half a century ago; today the region has almost none. A drum corps existing in Pitts-

burgh is a local member of a more widespread organization;¹ but its fife-playing members learn their tunes by note, and play without the melodic variations or decorative "frills" of the genuine, old style, ear-playing fifers, who are well-nigh extinct. Such purely traditional players as survive feel the changed attitude of the public acutely. It can be but a short time until all the folk fifers in Pennsylvania will have been silenced; and their music, needless to say, will disappear with them unless efforts to recover it are made promptly.²

The folk songs and ballads, with their austere and beautiful melodies, have not fallen out of general use with the dramatic rapidity of the fife marches; yet they show a tendency to die out somewhat faster than the traditional fiddle tunes. In their case we may see most clearly how the culture of the agrarian past yields to that of the industrial present, for the folk songs are at once more communal and more intimately domestic in their character and propagation than the instrumental airs. Once sung nearly everywhere, by people of the most diverse types, they now remain in the memories of only a few of our citizens, and are so completely under the surface of daily life that it is often hard to locate them in their last retreats. When a good folk singer is found, however, his repertory proves well worth the task of hunting him up. But for Pennsylvania folk artists of all kinds, singers and players alike, the same statement is probably true: those who now preserve the old song and music traditions are the last who will do so. With them the rich inheritance will pass away.

Turning from the transmitters to the actual material of this tradition, we find reason in what thus far has been recovered for calling it a "rich inheritance." Collectanea from the northern, southwestern and central parts of Pennsylvania, compared with

¹ The Pittsburgh group is "The Pioneers," organized in April, 1930. The larger organization is "The Tri-State Organization of Martial Bands," sponsored by "The Pioneers," and organized in June, 1932. It includes fife and drum corps from Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio; hence its title.

² Great credit is due Mr. Thomas J. Hoge of Pittsburgh, fifer and member of "The Pioneers," for noting down many old southwestern Pennsylvania fife tunes which otherwise would now be completely forgotten; and Mrs. Adda Areford of Carmichaels, Pa., who, as historian of the Tri-State Organization, has compiled a valuable and still growing mass of data about drum corps in the southwestern regions of the state. These two investigators cooperated generously with the writer in his efforts to rescue tunes and material concerning the players from surviving fifers of the area.

similar material from elsewhere in the United States, seem to indicate a mingling of elements, caused apparently by the crossing of traditions characteristic of the Northeast and South. Such mixtures should result in something characteristic for this region, as well as those to which the mingled traditions radiated in further westward migration. But insofar as folk *music* is concerned, Pennsylvania possesses another distinctive feature. In addition to the wealth of traditional melody imported from the British Isles and flourishing until recently in our countryside, this commonwealth early received—and probably helped to diffuse—a vigorous folk tradition brought in from Germany. Quite different from the Anglo-Irish tunes, this German material (which doubtless also preserves elements found all over central Europe and the Baltic areas) has only recently begun to be studied or even recognized.³ Its total influence on our folk music and our musical taste—in Pennsylvania and other regions of German colonization—could be estimated much more accurately after intensive collection of folk music in an area where the two great traditions, British and Germanic, met and blended on some considerable scale. Pennsylvania is such an area.

In regard to the folk songs current, it may be stated on the strength of the writer's field experience that Pennsylvania singers have conserved as great and varied an amount of this material as their fellow-artists elsewhere. Thus far the majority of the songs recovered in other parts of North America have also been found here, though collection has been extremely patchy and inadequate. And admitting that a dictum on quality in any product of art is purely subjective, the writer yet considers that the Pennsylvania material, both textually and musically, will stand comparison with the best recorded elsewhere in the New World. Folk songs command attention in three ways: as social documents, as poetry, and as music. Those of Pennsylvania are profoundly interesting from each of these points of view.

Our folk poetry contains songs of many periods, ranging from those whose origins are lost in the medieval mist to those which

³ The Germanic religious folk music of the Amish is at length receiving some attention: see the article by John Umble, *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 52, pp. 82-95, and the excellent collection from the Kishacoquillas Valley made by Joseph W. Yoder, *Amische Lieder* (Huntingdon, Pa.: Yoder Publishing Co., cop. 1942). Also, a considerable number of well-known fiddle tunes have the unmistakable idiom of German folk music.

could have been composed nowhere but in rural America. Beside a great body of song known in many parts of the country, Pennsylvania has yielded interesting versions of some rare old-world ballads, and a few pieces originating in the state itself; while the local versions of widely-known ballads frequently show special features in the way of textual details and musical associations.

The catholic taste of the singers is evinced by the way in which the most diverse songs, in respect to both age and content, will rub shoulders in one performer's repertory. A singer of good tradition is likely to have a stock of pieces that almost runs the gamut of folk song possibilities, and ranges from the weird pathos of *The Wife of Usher's Well*—

She prayed to the Lord both day and night,
Both morning, night, and at noon,
That He'd send back her three little babes
That night or in the morning soon.

It was about the New Year's time,
When the nights were long and cool,
Who should she see but her three little babes
Coming down to their mother's room. . . .

A marble stone at our head, mother,
Green grass grows at our feet,
And all those tears that have been shed
Has wet our winding sheet.

to the roaring, tavern jollity of *The Jovial Crew*:⁴

The next come in was a mason,
His hammer wanted facin',
He swore he would be dacent
Amongst the jov'al crew;
He slapped his trowel against the wall
And wished that every church might fall,
So there'd be work for masons all
While Jones's ales were new, merry boys,
While Jones's ales were new!

⁴ All quotations are from Pennsylvania folk songs in the writer's collections.

Moralizing pieces like *Wicked Polly*:

She went to frolics, dance and play,
In spite of all her friends could say.
—I'll turn to God when I get old,
And He will then receive my soul,
 Tho' it's awful, awful, awful!

are sung cheek by jowl with songs like:

Eat, drink and be jolly, and care not for folly,
And drown melancholy in a bottle of wine.
Pass it to the boys in full, flowing bumpers,
And play on the fiddle to pass away time.

The statelier ballad-verse conventions of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, such as:

As I walked out one hallow day,
The best day in the year,
I went up to yonders church
The holy word to hear.

Some came from the broad water side,
And some came from the hall;
At length in came Lord Arnold's wife,
The fairest of them all.

She looked high and she looked low,
She looked low and high—
At length she spied little Mathy Grove,
On him she fixed her eye.

You must ride home with me, she said,
You must ride with me this night,
For of all the men that's a-living be
You are my heart's delight—

or:

She mounted on the bonny, bonny brown,
And he on the dapple grey,
And they rode away thro' the merry green woods
Till they came to the banks of the sea. . . .

Lie there, lie there, you false-hearted knight,
 Lie there in the stead of me,
 For you promised to take me to fair Scotland,
 And there you'd marry me!

contrast sharply with lines full of the unmistakable tang of the American scene:

'Twas down at Dan McDivett's on the corner of
 the street,
 There was to be a prizefight; both parties was to
 meet,
 To *makee* all arrangements and see everything was
 right:
 The nigger and McCluskey was to have a finished
 fight.

Both parties was to start in at a quarter after
 eight.
 The nigger didn't show up, and the hour was get-
 ting late,
 When up stepped Jim McCracken and said that he
 would fight:
 He'd stand up rough and tumble if McCluskey
 didn't bite.

War songs, love songs, religious pieces and work songs, murder ballads and fabliaux in verse, with themes that embrace all the elemental human situations, jostle each other in the Pennsylvania songsters' repertoires. They speak out in the most varied tones, from the love-language of the old-world *aube*:

Awake, arise, you drowsy sleeper,
 Awake, arise, it's almost day!
 Go put your head out of yon window,
 And hear what your true lover says.

Oh, who is at my bedroom window
 Disturbing me so long before day?
 'Tis I, your own true loving jewel—
 Arise, my love, and come away!

to the rude but pointed raillery of the rock-drillers' work song:

Last Friday a premature blast went off,
And a mile in the air went big Jim Goff.
The boss says to me, He's gone down high,
So I'll dock him for the time he's up in the sky.
So drill, ye tarriers, drill,
Drill, ye tarriers, drill,
Sure, ye work all day without sugar in your
tay
When ye work in the quarry beyond the
railway,
Then drill, ye tarriers, drill!

Such contrasts in the people's song give us a sidelight on changing times and tastes, yet simultaneously emphasize the unchanging elements: the basic human motives and long-held beliefs that enable a medieval ballad to survive and still serve as a document in the study of modern folk life. Whatever may be the relative ages of the pieces in a local folk song repertory, the range and limitation of interests shown by that repertory are both significant. Significant also is the curious *mélange* of ideas which the traditional poetry reveals. Ballads about reproachful or vengeful ghosts, *e.g.*, *The Cruel Mother* and *Fair Margaret and Sweet William*, have been extremely popular. Those rare and haunting pieces *Riddles Wisely Expounded* and *The False Knight Upon the Road*, both sung recently in Pennsylvania, overlay the purely pagan matching of wits between mortal and supernatural beings with a superficial gloss of Christianity. A strong faith in the heavenly powers mingles in our older folk song with equally firm belief in ghosts and magic: as it does yet in the minds of many contemporary singers. Folk hymns and spirituals echo the fervors of past great revivals, and probably foreshadow similar outbursts yet to come. But they also depict the confused religious ideas of a folk, as some of them express eloquently the grace and mercy of Christian life, while others paint terrible pictures of a vengeful God, and, as it were, reduce religion to the observance of taboos.

The usefulness of folk song research to help fill out the picture of group migrations and cultural fusions in this country is beginning to be realized with the advent of criticism which takes

into account both the verse and music of the songs. Again, in this respect, the Pennsylvania versions and airs should contain useful information. We have noticed the potentialities of local research for throwing light on the spread and influence of German folk music in this country. We should also find much in this region to increase our information on the cultural influence of the energetic Scotch-Irish, whose settlements in Pennsylvania and the South were so extensive. Already research on the Pennsylvania material has indicated roads toward solving some problems connected with certain striking differences between the folk song repertoires of the Northeast and Southeast; and more collection in this state would very likely furnish us with a larger supply of such "touchstone" data, beside filling up the greatest gap in the traditional records of the East, from Newfoundland to Florida.

Such folk songs of undoubted Pennsylvania origin as have been found so far have more socio-historical than literary value. But they are generally set to good old British folk airs. Nearly all are local satires, laments, or murder ballads. Such are the piece about James Monks of Center County, hanged in 1819 for murder;⁵ the ballad of the *Three Drowned Ladies*, concerning a Washington County occurrence of 1849;⁶ and *Harrison Brady*, the tale of a local elopement, for which an old Scottish ballad on the same theme furnished most of the phraseology. Likewise there are two Greene County ballads on the murder of the drover McCausland in the 1880's, and two others about the killing of Polly Williams in Fayette County in 1810.⁷ The local satires usually concern obscure persons, and are almost never preserved in their entirety if they happen to be recalled for any length of time; but like the work songs and some other pieces of restricted currency,

⁵ Monks was a native of Potter Township, and his execution was the second in the county. See Fred Kurtz, *Centennial History of Centre County, 1800-1900* (Publication authorized by Centennial Executive Committee), p. 13; and D. S. Maynard, *Industries and Institutions of Centre County* (Bellefonte: Richie & Maynard, 1877), pp. 33-35. A good, complete version of the ballad is in Mary O. Eddy, *Ballads and Songs from Ohio* (N. Y.: J. J. Augustin, cop. 1939), pp. 256-7.

⁶ A version of this travelled as far as Michigan, and may be seen in E. E. Gardner and G. J. Chickering, *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, cop. 1939), pp. 301, 2.

⁷ Both different from a literary lament composed probably in Fayette County, and often reprinted in the pages of the *Uniontown Genius of Liberty*.

they are apt to contain more interest and information than the conventionalized laments or criminal ballads.

The largest group of indigenous Pennsylvania songs belonging to a special category of workers is that of the anthracite miners as collected by Mr. Korson.⁸ Scarcely a lumberman's ballad may be traced to this state, although we know from Colonel Shoemaker's work that many have been sung here.⁹ Of the early wagoners' and canalmen's songs, hardly anything remains. Whether more may be recovered at this date can be determined only by more investigation, which should not be delayed.

It is a pity that this survey cannot illustrate the often exceedingly lovely folk music of Pennsylvania. In it we have a treasure which may to some extent make up to us the losses occasioned by our belated start at collecting oral folk art. Thus far the only extensive musical gatherings have been made in the southwest and central regions; but they reveal a fine tradition of song airs, unexcelled by that of any other territory, and a wealth of instrumental tunes possessing delightful variety and vivacity. The song melodies are mostly traceable to the old Anglo-Celtic repertory of the British Isles; but the instrumental music, which in large part must be equally ancient, shows the influence of more than one European regional folk culture, and includes the considerable German infusion already mentioned.

This musical material is of all but priceless value in several ways. We have already reviewed its social, historical and educational interest as undiluted folk art. Its peculiar local interest as *transplanted* folk art, developing in different surroundings and subject to the influence of other traditional musical styles, is a feature which alone makes it worth attention from the student of American culture. But it does not have to depend on these circumstances for all its value or appeal. As the folk song texts are not only social documents, but poetry—so the folk tunes are not only anthropological data: they are music, and music of a quality

⁸ George G. Korson, *Ballads and Songs of the Anthracite Miner* (New York: The Grafton Press, 1927). Pennsylvania bituminous miners' songs may be found also in the same author's *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1943).

⁹ See any edition of his *North Pennsylvania Minstrelsy* (the 3d edition, Philadelphia, 1931, entitled *Mountain Minstrelsy of Pennsylvania*), a fine collection marred chiefly by the absence of traditional music.

sufficiently good to command the respectful appreciation of any person sensitive to fine melody.

Pennsylvania singers appear to have preserved as archaic and excellent a body of folk song tunes as one may find on this side of the Atlantic. Melodies of the older ballads and love songs do not fail to impress the listener with their dignity and restrained pathos. They are pleasingly varied, as in other parts of the British-American folk song area, and well preserved also—showing the unimpaired workings of a popular art which has learned to fashion beautiful melodies and to keep them organized, with exquisite proportion and balance, throughout countless variations. For the same reason, the airs of American-made religious folk songs—drawn from the same fund of modal and anciently-flavored melodism—are often deeply moving. Nor do instrumental tunes on the whole register deterioration in structure or melodic verve; though they differ often from old-world versions, they preserve the same freshness, vigor and grace, combined with subtle and pleasing melodic turns, that distinguish the Scots and Irish dances. The fifers' tunes are notable for antique tonality and a fine, martial solidity and swing.

The remnants of this folk culture which does so much credit to the talent and taste of our forebears in Pennsylvania should be collected as quickly and comprehensively as possible. To rescue it, quick action will be necessary, for to all appearances it will not survive delay. And its disappearance through neglect will be a cultural loss to both the state and the nation.