

Folklorist John Quincy Wolf Jr.: From the Ozarks to Memphis

Alex Piazza

2012 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

Over the course of the twentieth century, folklore has become an academic discipline, with its own lexicon, idiosyncrasies, and lore. As a popular concept, folklore is often associated with nostalgia, banality, and archaic beliefs, but in its academic study, folklore is concerned with the role of regional culture in shaping social life.¹ They study the ways in which people create individual and collective identities through a sense of shared past and membership to specific communities. Folklorists also watch as expressions of communal consciousness, both in everyday occurrences as well as historic events, define and renew people's social identity.² These people put under a microscope events usually viewed from afar; they dive into cultures that they may not be familiar with in hopes of getting closer to the lives of their subjects. They are not so much motivated by nostalgia as by the desire to document and preserve the aspects of culture that are integral to the formation of people's identities. Ironically, most of these folklorists receive little of the credit that is due to them. Their names are known by those who study the materials they collect and the people whose lives they touched while working. John Quincy Wolf Jr., referred to as Quincy by friends, is one such folklorist.

¹"University of Pennsylvania - Folklore and Folklife," School of Arts & Sciences - University of Pennsylvania, July 14, 2012, <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/introduction.html>.

²Ibid.

Wolf was a professor of English at Southwestern College and spent three decades of his life collecting folk songs from the Mississippi Delta and Arkansas Ozark regions. He traveled, usually at his own expense, to make recordings of musicians that would have remained in obscurity were it not for him. He was driven by a passion that was the product of a love of music and deep respect for the musicians he recorded.³ By the end of his life, folklorists and festival promoters from all over the country asked for his advice on various topics on which Wolf had become an expert. His diverse interests and tireless work ethic made him an expert on rare glass, wildflowers, the poet Wordsworth, photography, and pointer dogs.⁴ As one article put it, "On these topics, he knows just about all there is to know." His primary passion, though, was always the folk music of the Ozarks and nearby regions. Despite the tremendous impact he had on the musicians that he recorded and the students in his English classes at Southwestern, Wolf's death received little notice in print. Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Alan Lomax, Wolf never sought commercial gain from the recordings that he made, and refused to capitalize on the musicians that he encountered.⁵ Although his goal was to bring financial success to the musicians that he felt were under appreciated, he never sought the same for himself. Wolf was content with his glass collection, his Wordsworth anthology, and his pack of pointer dogs (totaling thirteen at one point). He was a native to the Ozark region, born in Batesville, Arkansas, and despite teaching in various cities and institutions across the nation, his heart never strayed too far from the Ozarks.

³Gene Hyde. "Audibly Ozark: Folklorist John Quincy Wolf Jr..." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, April 3, 1998

⁴Thomas Bevier. "When He Says, 'Hey Listen To This!' They Do." *The Commercial Appeal*, May 15, 1971, 1 edition.

⁵Hyde, *Audibly Ozark*.

The Ozark region extends from northwest Arkansas into Missouri and Oklahoma. Around the end of the nineteenth century, the primary concerns of its inhabitants were family and community, and these were closely tied to the region's main economic force: agriculture.⁶ John Quincy Wolf Sr. was born in an area of the Ozarks known as the Leatherwoods, on his family's farm situated near the upper White River. Wolf Sr. grew up hearing stories of the Civil War, but the relative isolation of the Leatherwoods prevented its inhabitants from experiencing much of the conflict. The tales focus mainly on lost crops and livestock due to night raids conducted by soldiers and opportunists, and Wolf Sr. notes that his family farm was not spared from these hard times. The Reconstruction era took on a more personal meaning to the Wolf family as Wolf Sr. helped his mother and sister rebuild the fences on their farm. After his father died during the war, Wolf Sr. spent a short time on a steamboat that traveled the White River. Eventually, he would move to Batesville and start a life in one of the larger cities in the Ozark region.⁷ He began as a cashier of the First National Bank and grew to become a pillar of the community. Wolf Sr. was an unnaturally inquisitive as a child, and his fondness for learning may have seemed out of character for such a rural environment. Wolf would listen to folk stories told by family members and neighbors with keen interest, and in his later years, became an avid storyteller himself. In the 1930's the elder Wolf began publishing essays about his early life in the Batesville newspaper and the Arkansas Gazette. His anecdotes provide an interesting and accurate vignette into mountain life in the late nineteenth century. Wolf Sr.'s children, John Quincy Jr. and Cleo,

⁶John Quincy Wolf Sr. *Life in the Leatherwoods*. (Memphis: Memphis University Press, 1974), 2-3.

⁷Wolf Sr., *Leatherwoods*. 9

shared his inquisitive nature, and Wolf Sr.'s sense of deprivation in his poor childhood may have been Quincy's inspiration for choosing an academic life.⁸

Wolf Jr. was born on May 14, 1901 in Batesville, Arkansas. As a child, he listened to his father's stories about growing up near Calico Rock. He attended Arkansas College, the local Presbyterian university, and graduated in 1922 with a degree in English.⁹ The next year he earned his Master's degree from Vanderbilt. He then returned to Batesville to teach at Arkansas College, instructing students in math, history, and chemistry.¹⁰ Wolf had a fair singing voice and would frequently sing at churches and special events in town. In 1926, one of his students, Bess Millen, began accompanying him at these performances. In 1931, the couple married and moved to Baltimore where Bess would continue her musical studies, and Wolf would pursue a Ph.D. in English at John Hopkins.¹¹ Wolf was about a year away from completing his dissertation on Sir Francis Bacon when his advisor, a professor of Renaissance literature, died. None of the other faculty members had the background or the interest in Bacon for Wolf to continue his work, and they advised him to change subjects. Reluctantly, Wolf shifted his focus to the eighteenth century and William Wordsworth, but the depression changed his financial situation so that he was unable to take the year off that he needed to finish his thesis.¹² Wolf and Bess returned to Arkansas College, but the depression had severely affected the small school. In 1933, they left the family home in Batesville to work at Goucher College for the next three years while continuing work on his Doctorate.¹³ Wolf made the most of his time in Baltimore by learning

8George Lankford, "John Quincy Wolf: An Appreciation," *Mid-America Folklore* 13, (1985): 3-9Ibid.

10Ibid.

11Biographical Sketch of Bess Millen. Rhodes College Archives.

12Letter from Wolf Jr. to President Diehl of Rhodes College, Rhodes College Archives.

13Ibid.

more about a newfound interest: old glass. In an interview with journalist Harryette Hodges, he said:

Baltimore in the early 30's was a treasure trove. I studied Ruth Webb Lee's first books on old glass and tried to become as knowledgeable as possible on the subject. Dealers then really didn't know much about glass. Occasionally I would give them pointers. My big handicap was lack of money. I could have laid in some great treasures.

Wolf admitted to feeling some guilt when he bought a rare piece of glass from a dealer who did not know its value. After the sale, he would explain the value of the piece to the salesman and offer to return it. His honesty was usually appreciated and the salesman would remark, "No, a deal's a deal" and let him keep it.¹⁴ Wolf spent another year as the Senior Graduate Instructor and the Senior Scholar in English at John Hopkins before applying for a position in the English department at Southwestern College in Memphis. After corresponding with President Diehl, Wolf began teaching in the English department in 1937. During the war years, President Diehl would not release Wolf to go back to John Hopkins, and so he had to wait until 1946 to finish his degree.¹⁵

Despite his academic studies and position, Wolf maintained an interest in folklore—likely a product of the stories that his father told while he was a boy. Wolf Sr. would spin tales about the Civil War, natural disasters, and other facets of growing up in the Ozarks. He was also responsible for documenting the histories of families in his area and the contributions of the Leatherwoods community to the state of Arkansas. Wolf Sr. reflected on his upbringing in the frontier land of the Ozark Mountains and confronted the idea of overcoming the poverty and isolation of his youth. Quincy recognized a deep independence in his father that manifested in a

¹⁴Bevier, Hey Listen to This.

¹⁵Harryette Hodges, "Harryette's Hotline," Newport Independent, May 18, 1971.

curiosity that would elevate him out of his circumstances. He also noted that when his father would tell his stories of the people and places of his youth, he would avoid unfair coloration for the sake of entertainment.¹⁶ Quincy realized that his father told these stories with respect for the people and their ways of life, and was motivated by genuine interest and gentle amusement. Quincy embodied these traits through his work as a folklorist and teacher.

His first foray into folklore occurred when he began studying European ballads as a sophomore at Arkansas College.¹⁷ He discovered the tradition through his literature studies and soon made the connection to local ballad singers. The term ballad is commonly used to distinguish between two types of song popularized in the British Isles during the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Lyrical song, commonly thought of as folk song, refers to lyrics set to melody and includes the light-hearted play-songs that are often taught to children.¹⁹ Ballads distinguish themselves from lyric songs in that they tell a more cohesive story. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the authority on traditional ballads was Harvard professor Francis Child. He had created an anthology of popular English and Scottish ballads and claimed to have collected “every valuable copy of every known ballad”.²⁰ This somewhat arrogant statement was based on the assumption that ballad singing as an oral and folk tradition had all but died out. Scholars sought to disprove this idea and Wolf was one who did so. His English teacher told him that some of these old ballads were still being sung by inhabitants of the Ozark Mountains.²¹ Wolf read collections of literary ballads dating back to the Romantic period and set off into the hills looking for people still singing them. After a bit of searching, he found that his professor had

¹⁶Wolf Sr., *Leatherwoods*, 12.

¹⁷Bevier, *Hey Listen to This*.

¹⁸W.K. McNeil, *Ozark Country*, University Press of Mississippi, 1995.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Bevier, *Hey Listen to This*.

been right. Wolf would use his remarkable memory to write down the words to the songs he heard the old folks sing and compare them with the originals in his English literature book, as well as with other ballad singers versions.²² The ballads he heard often focused on historic events and were sometimes the only way the inhabitants of the Ozarks preserved their ancestral history. As Wolf's academic pursuits intensified, he had to decrease the time he spent searching for ballad singers, but his interest in the ballad tradition was renewed shortly after he began teaching at Southwestern.

In 1941, Wolf traveled to Blanchard Springs, Arkansas for the Old Settler's Picnic and Folk Festival.²³ The festival began as a one day affair that encompassed a community picnic with local Ozark folk musicians providing the entertainment. This festival would later spawn the more popular Arkansas Folk Festival in Mountain View established by Jimmy Driftwood. Wolf had his camera with him and documented the festival. Large prints of these photos would be exhibited 30 years later at the Festival, where attendance was between 50,000 and 60,000 people.²⁴ This initial visit to the festival in Blanchard Springs would revive Wolf's interest in the Ballad tradition that he had studied as an undergraduate at Arkansas College. After attending the festival, Wolf recognized the abundance of culture and talent that resided within a fifty mile radius of Batesville. It was also at this festival that Wolf heard a young history teacher, Jimmy Morris, perform the old songs of the area at the all day sing.

Jimmy Morris, better known as Jimmy Driftwood, grew up in Stone County Arkansas under similar conditions to John Wolf Sr. Without attending high school, Driftwood passed the Arkansas teacher's exam when he was sixteen and began teaching in one-room schoolhouses

²²Lankford, An Appreciation.

²³Hodges, Hot Line.

²⁴Ibid.

across Stone and Cleburne County while earning his high school diploma in Mountain View.²⁵ After dropping out of college, he spent time in Phoenix, Arizona, performing folk songs at talent shows and on the radio. When Driftwood was twenty eight, he left Phoenix to return to teaching in his home state.²⁶ He brought his experience as a folk singer to the classroom, incorporating his vast folk song repertoire into his lessons. He used songs to help his students differentiate between historic conflicts and identify prominent figures.²⁷ In 1941, Driftwood performed at the Blanchard Springs Folk Festival and met the folklore enthusiast John Quincy Wolf Jr. This was the first instance that Wolf would tell Driftwood, “You’ve got real talent. You ought to be making records.”²⁸ The two wrote each other frequently over the next decade, however, Driftwood’s primary concerns were his crops and his students. In 1949 he earned his BSE degree and became principal of Snowball School in Searcy County.²⁹ In the early 1950’s Driftwood took Wolf’s advice and submitted several recordings to Blasco Music Company and Shelter Music, labels in Kansas City.³⁰ Both companies recorded Driftwood for their label but he found little commercial success with them. Driftwood and Wolf used their summer breaks to meet in person, either when Wolf was in Batesville or Driftwood in Memphis, and Wolf encouraged him to keep working on his career as a folk musician. In 1957, Driftwood stopped by Wolf’s home in Memphis and told him that he was on his way to Nashville, saying with a grin, “I’m gonna make me an album for RCA.”³¹

²⁵Zac Cothren, "Jimmy Driftwood ." The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture, July 22, 2012, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2187>.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Letter from Wolf to Jimmy Morris

²⁹Cothren, Jimmy Driftwood.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

He would go on to find commercial success along the country music circuit, and his song *The Battle of New Orleans*, which he originally used to help students differentiate between the War of 1812 and the Revolutionary War, held the top seat on both country and pop charts for weeks. Driftwood returned to teaching in 1962 and to Arkansas in 1963, and with advice from Wolf, he would help establish the Arkansas Folk Festival, the Rackensack Folklore Society, and the Ozark Folk Center.³² Driftwood often asked Wolf for tapes he had made in the Ozarks for use in his own classes and would usually request that Wolf add whatever introduction he saw fit for the lesson. He would also ask Wolf to give lectures at the Arkansas Folk Festival each year. Jimmy Driftwood was not the only folk singer to develop a close relationship with Wolf. Wolf's loyalty to the singers that he recorded helped him earn their respect and trust, and his genuine enthusiasm was always appreciated.

Wolf's encounter with Jimmy Morris at the 1941 Blanchard Springs Folk Festival was part of an experience that invigorated Wolf's interest in recording folk singers, but he was unable to pursue it further for almost ten years. The rationing of tires and gas during World War II prevented Wolf and Bess from making more trips to the Ozarks, but in 1950, the Carnegie Foundation gave Wolf a grant to determine if there was any folklore left in Northeast Arkansas.³³ During Christmas and summer breaks, Wolf and Bess left their home in Memphis and travel between rural towns near Batesville looking for folk singers.³⁴ Wolf later explained his strategy for locating musicians to folklorists and his students. He would visit either the post office or grocery store in town and talk to the oldest person working there, asking them if they knew of anybody who could sing

³²Ibid.

³³Hodges, *Hotline*.

³⁴Lankford, *An Appreciation*.

“grandma’s songs” or “songs grandma used to sing”.³⁵ He was almost always met with a far off gaze followed by cryptic directions to a house “back in the woods” or “up on the hill”. He would also take out ads in local papers asking for people who knew “old songs”. Wolf would often return to the post office to record the singer if the home did not have power for his tape machine. He admitted in an interview with Harryette Hodges, “I didn’t know who could sing or who couldn’t, but I found hundreds of people eager to preserve their old songs...I would never interrupt or discourage a singer. After I would get home I would sift through all I had collected, and Bess would take down the tune from the recorder for me.”

Wolf wrote about one such trip to the Ozarks in the summer of 1952.

He arranged to meet and record a male ballad singer in Greers Ferry but when he arrived, he was introduced to not one but six women who could all sing ballads. Among them was Almeda Riddle, her mother, grandmother, and daughter. Riddle claimed that she could write a list of one hundred ballads that she could sing for Wolf and after those songs, she could write another list of one hundred songs to perform. In addition to these songs, Riddle recalled other songs when prompted that had escaped her memory. Wolf had walked into a treasure chest of ballads as Riddle was capable of singing the songs exactly as they had been taught to her by her father. Riddle was fifty four years old when Wolf met her and was a widow caring for her mother.³⁶ She had not traveled the Mississippi River, and had not sung for an audience outside of her family and friends. Wolf realized that many of the songs Riddle sang dated back to seventeenth century Scotland, England, and Ireland, and that he had stumbled upon a great bearer of tradition. Riddle and Wolf corresponded over the next few years, and he visited her at

³⁶Hodges, Hotline.

³⁶George West, "Almeda James Riddle ," The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture, July 22, 2012, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=609>

her home in Cleburne to take more recordings of her songs. He amassed a large collection of ballads sung by Riddle in her thin nasally style, with renditions of the same song performed at different times. Wolf later introduced her to another folklorist, Alan Lomax, while he was on a trip to find folk musicians in the south.³⁷ Wolf and Lomax's recordings of Riddle earned her invitations to sing at colleges around the nation. Wolf accompanied her to her performance at Harvard University and was taken by the students fawning over Riddle.³⁸ He "had to smile because the wealthiest, the most aristocratic university in the United States was sitting at the feet of a woman from the Ozarks."³⁹ Riddle visited New York University, UCLA, University of Illinois and Chicago, and at Berkeley in California before concluding her tour with three nights at Harvard.⁴⁰ Her first college performance, and her favorite as she states in an interview with one of Wolf's students, was at Southwestern College.

When Riddle was sixty two, her mother passed and she committed more time to "getting out the old songs" in person, in print, and on tape. In the early 60's a folk revival was underway in America, and Riddle received requests to perform at festivals from coast to coast, sharing the stage with Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Doc Watson to name a few.⁴¹ She also recorded for Vanguard records in 1964; Wolf was asked to write the liner notes for the album. The two maintained correspondence all during Riddle's career, and in her letters she noted the discomfort she felt toward the publicity she was receiving. Wolf encouraged her to ignore it and turn the concerts and coverage into "a grandma's duty".⁴² She once told a younger musician, "Well, the kids kept begging for the old songs...and God gave me the strength to go and I went." Riddle

³⁷Bevier, *Hey Listen to This*.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Hyde, *Audibly Ozark*.

⁴⁰West, *Almeda Riddle*.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

became the best known ballad singer that Wolf encountered during his trips to the Ozarks, but she was one of many that he recorded in the 1950's.

He visited towns across the Ozarks through the fifties into the early sixties eventually recording over two hundred performers. Wolf wound up with enough recorded material to begin asking academic questions about folk singing. He noticed that some singers varied the words and melody of a song during different performances. Wolf used his recordings to verify that others sang songs the same way every time. He became interested in the ways that folk singers take creative liberties with songs and their opinions on the matter. Wolf interviewed the singers he considered the most important in the area in which he operated, that being the White River area of the Ozarks.⁴³ He reported that of the hundreds of singers he recorded in the area, only three of them had been recorded by folklorists before. Lomax listened to Wolf's recordings from the area and state that the singers of this region showed "wider variation and bolder handling of traditional song than in any other part of the country." Wolf substantiates this claim in an article, noting the singers who adhere strictly to the conventional lyrics and melodies. Others that took creative liberties with the tunes freely admitted to change the lyrics and melody. He used this evidence in his 1965 publication, "Folksingers and the Re-Creation of Folksong" to refute findings of previous folklorists who thought singers unintentionally changed songs over time.⁴⁴ Wolf's focus on singers in the Ozark region established him as a major resource in the folk community. Lomax corresponded with Wolf and stayed at their home in Memphis whenever he was looking for folk singers in the area.⁴⁵

43John Wolf Jr., "Folk singers and the re-creation of folksong." *Western Folklore* 26 (1967): 101-104.

44Lankford, *An Appreciation*.

45Ibid.

Wolf's travels were halted midway through 1959 due to his developing rheumatoid arthritis. His folklorist nature could not be suppressed, however, even while he was recovering in Baptist Hospital. An article published in the Memphis Press Scimitar says that he met a woman during his stay there, who told him a story of a sensational murder committed in Memphis. This particular story was passed along as a folk song describing a conflict between two women, and Wolf transcribed the lyrics to further investigate the song when he had recovered.

Wolf's mobility declined in the early sixties and so he turned his attention to folk music closer to his home in Memphis. In 1960 he and Bess attended service at a Primitive Baptist Church where Sacred Harp singing was still part of the service.⁴⁶ The singing had a great impact on Wolf, and the next Sunday, they went to a church near Bruce, Mississippi to hear an entire service done in the Sacred Harp tradition. Sacred Harp singing, also known as shaped note or "fa-so-la" singing, dates back to the time of Queen Elizabeth I.⁴⁷ The people of region, lacking formal music training or instruments, were left to devise their own musical system. They brought the tradition to America where it thrived. Eventually a community would become prosperous and formal European music would push the Sacred Harp tradition out.⁴⁸ The Southern Uplands, during the 19th century, could not afford organs and musical instructors, and so the fa-so-la tradition continued. People published books with instructions for singing in this tradition that contained traditional songs as well. The Sacred Harp was one of these books, and since it was published later in the series, it contains the most popular and frequently used songs.⁴⁹ George Pullen Jackson researched the prevalence of Sacred Harp singing in the South and claimed that

46Hodges, Hotline.

47John Wolf Jr, "The "Sacred Harp" in Mississippi." *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968): 337-340.

48Ibid.

49Ibid.

the tradition had all but died out in Mississippi.⁵⁰ Wolf traveled to Mississippi and Alabama to take recordings of shaped note performances throughout the early sixties. He would find vast amounts of evidence to refute Jackson's claim that Sacred Harp singing was in decline in Mississippi. Wolf noted that the shaped note performances evoked nostalgia from the older people in the crowd, but it still held the same importance in the lives of its practitioners as it did for their ancestors. He observed that the annual singings served as a homecoming, a kind of memorial, while also playing a fundamental role in the community's religious practice. He reflected on one of the last performances he attended in an article for the *Journal of American Folklore*:

As I look from face to face of the singers and listen to their whole-hearted participation I realize that Sacred Harp singing is an expression of the highest and noblest thoughts and feelings of which these people are capable -- of what they believe and love and are in their best moments; in short, that perhaps more than anything else it is an expression of their total ideals and total sensibilities.

This statement encapsulates what Wolf believed to be the role of folk music in the lives of its performers and listeners. In 1964 Wolf referred Ralph Rinzler of the Newport Folk Festival to a quartet of Sacred Harp singers and sent a tape to the committee in New York. The panel wired back to charter a bus to bring forty of the singers to the festival that year. Wolf's years of attending Sacred Harp singings culminated in his 1968 article "The Sacred Harp in Mississippi" which corrected Jackson's classic study in 1933. Wolf was clearly more than an amateur folklorist, as he had the breadth of knowledge to correct other collectors.⁵¹

As Wolf's mobility gradually declined, he turned his attention to blues musicians in Memphis,

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Lankford, *An Appreciation*.

and began sending students out to interview and record local players. Wolf would befriend a number of these artists, including Bukka White, Furry Lewis, and Gus Cannon.⁵² Gus Cannon's jug band achieved great success in Memphis during the 20's and 30's. He effectively retired from music in the late 30's, but in 1963, his song "Walk Right In" was popularized by the Rooftop Singers without Cannon's knowledge or permission.⁵³ Wolf had sent one of his folklore students to interview and record Cannon, and during the visit, he played "Walk Right In". The student knew of the popularized version of the song and realized after the interview that Gus was the original composer.⁵⁴ He reported this to Wolf who began working to help Cannon claim what was due to him. In 1965 Wolf corresponded with Alan Lomax about ways to help Cannon claim rights to the song. Lomax put Wolf in touch with his connections that were more versed in the matter, and Wolf would eventually find a lawyer willing to represent Cannon for free.⁵⁵ Gus did not have the money to hire his own legal counsel and had pawned his banjo to buy coal the winter before the Rooftop Singers made his song a hit.⁵⁶ Before Wolf could intervene, record label representatives from New York approached Gus with a banjo bought from a pawn shop the day before their visit. They offered him five hundred dollars and one quarter of the royalties to record his own version of "Walk Right In".⁵⁷ Cannon was not able to claim the money he was due from the Rooftop Singers version of his song, but its popularization coupled with the blues revival of the 60's helped him reinvigorate his career as a musician.

⁵²Gene Hyde "Wolf Folklore Collection: Lyon College." Lyon College | Home. July 22, 2012, <http://web.lyon.edu/wolfcollection/index.htm>.

⁵³William Barlow "Looking Up At Down", *The Emergence of Blues Culture*. Temple University Press (1989), 214.

⁵⁴Notes from interview with Adele Grilli.

⁵⁵Letter from Lomax to Wolf 1963, Lyon College Archives.

⁵⁶Barlow, *Looking Up*.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 216.

Wolf strove to help other musicians avoid similar occurrences, including Bukka White, Furry Lewis and Ollie Gilbert. Furry and Bukka visited Wolf's folklore class for interviews and performances. Wolf's interest in the blues culminated in the publications "Aunt Caroline Dye: The Gypsy in the St. Louis Blues" and "Handy's Conversion to Folk Music" which would be published as "How the Blues Came to Beale Street". Wolf heard the story about a performance by Handy in Clarksdale, Mississippi at which he heard a group of young musicians who transformed him into a folk musician. In 1969 Wolf planned a trip to Clarksdale to determine the identities of these musicians, who had, in essence, changed the direction of American popular music.⁵⁸ Wolf's arthritis prevented him from making the trip himself, so he sent one of his folklore students, Jerry Stauffer, instead. Armed with a tape recorder and specific instructions from Wolf on how to proceed with interviews, Stauffer was able to ascertain names and nicknames of the three musicians. Both Stauffer and Wolf would go on to publish essays about the identities of the musicians who had introduced W.C. Handy to the blues. Wolf also published the results of his inquiry into the identity and character of the gypsy Handy sang about in his song "St. Louis Blues". He identified her as Aunt Caroline Dye of Newport, Arkansas, and described her as gentle and unpretentious.

Through the early sixties, Wolf's role as a folklorist shifted from collector to informant. His arthritis all but immobilized him by 1965, and his folklore classes began meeting at his home regularly.⁵⁹ Although Wolf had long been a resource to folklorists and folk enthusiasts, his enforced physical inactivity increased his scholarly work. The areas of folk music that he studied during the previous two decades coalesced into mature scholarly publications. Numerous folk festival promoters consulted Wolf as to the musicians they should hire. He referred the Newport

⁵⁸John Wolf Jr., "How the blues came to Beale Street." *Delta Review* 6 (1969): 58.

⁵⁹Hyde, *Audibly Ozark*.

Folk Festival to Almeda Riddle, the Sacred Harp singers, and the Preservation Hall Band. Wolf was also asked to give lectures at these festivals, as he had asserted himself as the leading expert in a number of fields. He helped Jimmy Driftwood organize the first ever Arkansas Folk Festival in 1963 and gave lectures throughout the festival. When his health prevented him from attending, he still contributed through articles written for the festival. In 1964, he wrote articles for the Newport Festival about Sacred Harp and the quill playing tradition. He also contributed articles to the Arkansas Folk Festival and the fourth annual Festival of American Folklife held in Washington, D.C. The Festival of American Folklife was established by the Smithsonian Institute, and the four day affair drew over one hundred thousand visitors, including a large international contingent.⁶⁰ He was consulted by the National Park Service on the background music for a documentary film they created to help preserve the Natchez Trace Parkway. He also worked with educational television producers on a four part miniseries on folklore.⁶¹ Wolf regularly spoke at Folklore Society meetings, including the Ozark Folk Society, the Tennessee Folklore Society, Mississippi Folklore Society, and the American Folklore Society. He was elected Vice President of the Tennessee Folklore society in 1964 and asked by other societies to become an honorary member. He collaborated with journalists from Arkansas and Memphis newspapers on various folklore topics, from water witching to old wart cures to ghost stories. The breadth of his work is impressive, but the number of projects his health forced him to decline is nearly as vast.

By the time Wolf's health prevented him from leaving Memphis entirely, he received requests from nearly every folk festival in the country for appearances and lectures. In 1968, the

⁶⁰"Mission and History", Smithsonian Folklife Festival -. Smithsonian Institute, 22 July 2012. <<http://www.festival.si.edu/about/mission.aspx>>.

⁶¹Lankford, An Appreciation.

New York Times magazine ran an article that referenced Wolf's role in Arkansas folk music. Shortly after the publication ran, Little Brown & Company contacted Wolf about writing a book.⁶² He had to decline as he was already working on one at the time. The next day, CBS called asking him to work on a documentary; Wolf declined, and suggested Jimmy Driftwood in his place. The following day, "Voice of America" asked him to help create a series of films about American folk music. Their intentions were to beam these tapes to Russia, but again, Wolf recommended Driftwood for the job.⁶³ Had Wolf's health permitted him to participate in these endeavors, his legacy as a folklorist may have been vastly different. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Wolf never used his recordings for profit. Many of the musicians he encountered were victims of other folk song collectors. These men would pay the musician a small fee to make a recording and sell it to record companies pocketing all of the profit. Others like Alan Lomax would collect songs from specific regions or genres of folk music and release them under his name, crediting the musicians in the liner notes. His releases did not take advantage of the musicians to the degree that others did, but they promoted the collector far more than the performer.

Wolf's motivations as a folklorist were neither commercial nor academic. His drive came from a sense of duty to preserve and share the culture of people isolated from the gaze of history. He felt that these people's culture defined their existence, that the two were one in the same. In a lecture at the first Arkansas Folk Festival, he said that "folklore is as universal as the air we breathe, it is a part of every person's education, customs, likes and dislikes..." and it is "an indelible part of every individual and to understand folklore is to understand ourselves better." Wolf could not justify the actions of other folklorists who appropriated what he viewed as

⁶²Hodges, Hotline.

⁶³Ibid.

simultaneously universal and individual culture for profit. His academic study of folklore did not stem from a separatist view either, that is, he immersed himself in the culture of the Ozarks and other regions and continued that tradition through oral education. Only after his health hindered his mobility did he present his vast knowledge in written form. He had a great impact on the musicians he encountered, forging familial relations with many of them. (His daughters spent time at Riddle's home on occasion, while Wolf and Bess went on recording trips) His true legacy, however, lies with the students who took his English and Folklore classes.

From the start of his career as a Professor of English, Wolf intended to foster skills in his students that would put them on par with students from prestigious institutions like Harvard and Yale. In a letter to President Diehl, he outlined the rigorous course he planned for his freshman English students. Wolf required that they write essays twice a week and would often return their papers the next day, as he wanted them to reflect on their writings while they were still fresh in their minds. His syllabus for his folk class included a list of musicians in Memphis and Mississippi for his students to contact for their folklore projects. He required that they work as amateur folklorists, conducting interviews and taking recordings on their own. He offered advice on how to approach these musicians and the best ways to conduct an interview in order to collect coherent and factual information. He also emphasized the importance of collecting information from people rather than books. By doing this, he exposed his students to the fundamental spirit of being a folklorist and broadened the scope of their experiences with the community around them. One of his former students reported that "He reminded us to be courteous and to accept singers for who they were."⁶⁴ Wolf's sense of dignity, ethics, and egalitarianism had a great impact on

⁶⁴Hyde, Audibly Ozark.

his students. Numerous students from Wolf's folklore classes pursued their interest in folklore long after taking his class. Wolf received letters from them discussing their continued interest in folk music and the lasting impression his course had on them. When Wolf began teaching his folklore classes from his home in 1969, he and Bess tore down a wall in their living room in order to accommodate all of his students. They would gather in his living room once a week, after Wolf had settled into his armchair, and he would play recordings for them and discuss them. He would ask for updates on their folklore projects and offer specific advice on how to proceed with their studies. He taught late into his life, even when his arthritis forced him to remain bedridden. His spirit remained vibrant despite the hardships of his disease. Dr. Jack Hurley, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Memphis acted as a teaching assistant to Dr. Wolf during these years. Dr. Hurley explained that a clerical error by Southwestern resulted in the omission of Wolf from the faculty retirement program. By the time the error was discovered, it would have been too costly for the Wolfs to buy into the system. Wolf never complained about the error, nor did he condemn the questionable treatment of his rheumatoid arthritis.

In 1959, Wolf visited his general practitioner about pain and swelling in his knee. The problem would linger, subsiding and becoming re aggravated over the next few years. Finally, he was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and his doctor prescribed him a drug usually reserved to treat cancer. Wolf's daughter Adele claims that the doctor used her father as a sort of test subject at times, ignoring the harsh side effects of the drugs he prescribed. She and Bess often urged Wolf to seek different opinions, but Wolf viewed his doctor as a close friend and therefore put all of his trust in him. His health forced him to retire in 1971, and in 1972 he checked into Baptist Memorial hospital in Memphis. He was placed in a bed without rail guards, and one night, while

sleeping, Wolf fell from his bed, breaking his shoulder and three ribs. Due to the stress of the fall, his lungs filled with fluid and were unable to drain themselves. He developed pneumonia and died six weeks later. Bess pursued legal action against the hospital and settled out of court.

Wolf's dedication to Southwestern reached further than the English department. During the thirties and forties Wolf would attend almost every football, basketball, and track practice, and often corresponded with President Diehl as to the state of the athletics department. He served as the school's photographer until his arthritis restricted his mobility and edited the *Southwestern News* for twelve years.⁶⁵ The total range of Wolf and Bess' interest was vast. By the end of his life, Wolf had an encyclopedic knowledge of bird dogs, silver, old coins, furniture, birds, wild flowers, and antique glass. He shared this final passion with Bess, as the two had been collecting glass since they married.

Bess was a collector of the same spirit as Wolf. Rather than leave her valuable antique glass collection in a case or on a shelf never to be touched, Bess ensured that she got full use of her pieces. She would bring her glass to parties and play songs on them using small wooden mallets. Her act was the only of its kind and she appeared on several Memphis and Little Rock television programs.⁶⁶ Since their marriage, Bess accompanied Wolf on the majority of his field recordings, usually providing a helpful hand in building amiable relations with the folk musicians. She was also responsible for handling musical transcriptions of the recordings. Bess was not always helpful, however, as her outspoken and confident nature sometimes confronted the gender norms of the Ozarks. She shared Wolf's passion for folk music and would continue working on Wolf's folklore projects after his death.

⁶⁵Lankford, *An Appreciation*.

⁶⁶Biographical Sketch of Bess Millen, Rhodes College Archives.

In 1969 Bess, Wolf, and Jimmie Driftwood began planning a summer folklore workshop to be held in Batesville. The goal of the summer workshop was to introduce students of all ages to the folk culture of the Ozarks, and college credit was offered to those who qualified. By this time, Wolf was unable to physically prepare for the workshop, so the majority of the work had to be done by Bess and Jimmy. The first workshop ran for four days in June 1970. During the day, students could attend lectures on various folklore topics like sacred harp singing and how to play the jawbone.⁶⁷ They could also learn to make crafts in the folk tradition, including brooms, baskets, and simple instruments. In the evenings, students heard performances by musicians from the area. Jimmie Driftwood avoided electrified instrumentation through his selection of guitar, banjo, and fiddle players but had to concede to a PA system in order to shepherd the attendees into the Mountain View school gymnasium for the concerts.⁶⁸ The student reviews from the first Ozark Folklore Workshop rated the experience highly, and encouraged Bess and Wolf to expand the workshop for next year. The Ozark Folklore Workshop of 1971 was conducted in similar style to the previous year except that it now ran for a week. Almeda Riddle participated in the festival both in the classes during the day as well as evening performances. After the success of the second annual festival, Arkansas College asked Wolf to make the workshop a regular part of their summer school curriculum.⁶⁹

After Wolf's death, Bess continued to participate in folklore education. Her work with the summer workshop at Arkansas College was part of a nationwide movement to teach folklore. Bess was a charter member of the Mountain View Folk Center and played an instrumental role in organizing the committee responsible for fundraising efforts. In 1974 Bess completed a project

⁶⁷Ernie Deane, "Folk Songs Preserve Ozark Culture", *Arkansas Traveler* (Fayetteville), July 16, 1970.

⁶⁸Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, "Pickin' and Singin' and Ozark crafts," June 26, 1970, 1 edition.

⁶⁹Deane, Folk Songs.

Wolf had been working on since 1971. Wolf collected all of the stories his father published in the local papers and was in the process of editing them. His plan was to publish the stories as a cohesive unit that presented a clear image of growing up in the Ozarks. Wolf died before he finished his work, so Bess took over the editing process and published the memoirs in 1974 under the title *Life in the Leatherwoods*.⁷⁰ Bess planned to spend the rest of her life working with the aging tape collection she and her husband had assembled over thirty years. While she worked to organize the summer folklore workshops, she also worked to catalog and re-record the collection in her home. Unfortunately, failing health and familial responsibilities forced Bess to relinquish the collection to someone else.⁷¹

In 1983, Bess approached Southwestern with the collection of tapes and offered them a collection which stood as perhaps the most thorough exploration of Ozark ballad singing. Southwestern declined the collection, so Bess took it to the Arkansas College Regional Studies Center. They accepted her gift and now house the collection of tapes as well as Wolf's personal correspondences and other folklore material. The tapes stored in the Regional Studies Center at Lyon College (as Arkansas College was renamed) number 476. These tapes are primarily recordings of ballad singers and string bands from the Ozarks but include some shaped note and blues performances. In 1997, Lyon hired archivist Gene Hyde to catalog the Wolf Collection and assist in the production of a website. The website was finalized in 2002 and contains some of Wolf's field recordings, published articles, and a short biography.

After exploring the website and the physical archives at Lyon, I noted a disparity in the amount of material present in each. The Wolf Collection website contains performances by about

⁷⁰Lankford, *An Appreciation*.

⁷¹*Ibid*.

one hundred fifty Ozark musicians, with anywhere from one to fifty songs per musician. It also has a recording Wolf took at a Sacred Harp singing in Fulton, Mississippi in 1961. In the Memphis blues section, the only recording is of a visit Bukka White made to Wolf's folklore class. The website has not been updated since its creation in 2002. On its homepage it states that more Sacred Harp singing and blues material will be added in 2003, but as it stands, each section contains one set of recordings. The information the website presents on these two areas of interest is also lacking depth. They only speak briefly about his interest in the blues and fail to note that his students were responsible for most of the interaction with the blues musicians as Wolf's arthritis had all but immobilized him by the mid 60's. In regards to Wolf's publications, the website has links to four of Wolf's published articles, but does not list all of his published. At this time, there are no copies available of his archived correspondences other than the original documents in the Lyon College library. The contents of the archive were catalogued and the Wolf Collection website includes an index/finding aid. Unfortunately, my visit to the archives made it clear that there are gaps in their index. The website lists three boxes with multiple folders in each box. In the archives, I found eight different boxes with numbers ranging from 198 to 215, each containing multiple folders. The labels on the actual folders are the only real guide to their contents, as the index has become outdated with their current filing system. This presented a significant challenge to finding relevant documents during the course of my research, and I spent much of my time sifting through boxes making a catalog for myself. The tapes in their archives are in a similar state of organization. Few of the tapes have labels and to my knowledge, no catalog of their contents exists. Lyon has faced some financial setbacks in the past few years and the lack of attention paid to the Wolf Collection reflects this. After interviewing Adele Grill, the Wolfs' younger daughter, she expressed some disappointment in the attention paid to her father's

collection. After our interview in the Wolf family home in Batesville, Adele showed me a closet that contained more of Wolf's tapes. There were roughly one hundred reel to reel tapes, and at least twice as many cassette tapes lining the shelves of the closet. After examining some of the tapes I found that few had labels describing the contents of the tape. Most had the name of the person who took the recording and an additional name crediting one other person. Many dated from the mid to late 60's so it is my suspicion that they are recordings conducted by Wolf's students. I plan to reference the names on the tape with a list of Wolf's former students to confirm this hypothesis. Adele said that she was unsure of the contents of the tapes and that they were not a part of the Wolf Collection at Lyon College. She planned to work through the tapes herself with the help of her sister but her duties as an administrative secretary at Lyon will prevent her from doing so any time soon. She does not plan to give these tapes to Lyon and we are hoping that she will agree to work with students and archivists at Rhodes in the coming semester to determine the contents of these tapes. Although Adele claims that she and her sister are not as altruistic in their motives as their mother was, she seems very excited to work with an institution that can give her father's work more visibility. I hope to establish a fellowship for the coming semester which will allow me to work with these tapes and establish a secondary effort to make Wolf's work available to the public.

Wolf's primary goal as a folklorist was to raise awareness of culture that would be forgotten otherwise. We now face a similar task with the recordings that he made. He is no longer around to say, "Hey! Listen to this," and so the responsibility falls to those of us who are as passionate about preserving the culture of the Ozarks and delta region as Wolf was. His folklore publications assert him as an expert on varied topics, and the breadth of his field recordings are an untapped reserve of Ozark culture. And yet, his strict code of ethics concerning

the musicians he worked with has prevented him from being appreciated outside of the people he knew. When the musicians and students he encountered pass away, who will be left to praise the work of John Quincy Wolf Jr.? Quincy would doubtfully care about the lack of attention he has been paid as a folklorist, but his collection represents thirty years of commitment to musicians across the south. The recordings he made are at this point a grossly underutilized resource to folklorists across the world. I hope that this biography represents the first step in broadening the awareness and accessibility of his collection.

Bibliography

- Barlow, William. "Looking Up At Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture. Temple University Press (1989), pp. 214-17.
- Belvins, Brooks . "John Quincy Wolf Jr. ." The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture. <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=3033> (accessed July 22, 2012).
- Bevier, Thomas . "When He Says, 'Hey Listen To This!' They Do." *The Commercial Appeal (Memphis)*, May 15, 1971, 1 edition, sec. 2.
- Cothren, Zac. "Jimmy Driftwood ." The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture. <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2187> (accessed July 22, 2012).
- Deane, Ernie . "Folk Songs Preserve Ozark Culture." *Arkansas Traveler (Fayetteville)*, July 16, 1970.
- Hodges, Harryette. "Harryette's Hotline." *Newport Independent*, May 18, 1971.
- Hodges, Harryette. "Harryette's Hotline." *Newport Independent*, June 30, 1968.
- Howard, Edwin . "From Memphis...." *The Memphis Flyer*, August 14, 1970.
- Hyde, Gene. "Audibly Ozark: Folklorist John Quincy Wolf Jr. ." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)*, April 3, 1998, 1 edition, sec.
- Hyde, Gene. "Wolf Folklore Collection: Lyon College." Lyon College | Home. <http://web.lyon.edu/wolfcollection/index.htm> (accessed July 22, 2012).
- Lankford, George . "John Quincy Wolf: An Appreciation." *Mid-America Folklore* 13, no. 1 (1985): 3-7.
- McNeil, W.K. *Ozark Country*. University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- "Mission and History." Smithsonian Folklife Festival -. Smithsonian Institute, n.d. Web. 22 July 2012. <<http://www.festival.si.edu/about/mission.aspx>>.
- Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)*, "Pickin' and Singin' and Ozark crafts," June 26, 1970, 1 edition.

"University of Pennsylvania - Folklore and Folklife." School of Arts & Sciences - University of Pennsylvania. <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/introduction.html> (accessed July 14, 2012).

West, George . "Almeda James Riddle ." The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture. <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=609> (accessed July 22, 2012).

Wolf, John. "Three Spring Pilgrimages ." *Tennessee Folklore Society bulletin* 29, no. 103 (1963): 103-105.

Wolf, John. "Folk singers and the re-creation of folksong." *Western Folklore* 26 (1967): 101-104.

Wolf, John. "The "Sacred Harp" in Mississippi." *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968): 337-340.

Wolf, John. "How the blues came to Beale Street." *Delta Review* 6 (1969): 57-66.

Wolf, John Quincy Sr. *Life in the Leatherwoods*. Memphis: Memphis University Press, 1974.