

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PUCKETT COLLECTION OF ONTARIO FOLKLORE¹

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Newbell Niles Puckett was an American sociologist and folklorist, best known for his work in the field of southern black folklore.² A native of Mississippi, he spent his teaching career at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was deeply involved in collecting the popular beliefs and superstitions of that state, and, in fact, was working on a definitive collection of Ohio folklore at the time of his death in 1967 at the age of sixty-nine.³ During his later years, Puckett had vacationed in the Kawartha Lakes district of Ontario, near the city of Peterborough. Between 1956 and 1963, he made a number of tape recordings with a variety of local citizens, tapes which after his death were deposited in the John H. White Department of the Cleveland Public Library. The committee appointed to supervise the assignment of Puckett's various materials to appropriate institutions decided to place the Canadian tapes with the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. The work of transcribing and annotating the material, begun by Puckett, was taken up first by Dr. N. V. Rosenberg, Archivist, and eventually by this writer. Although still far from complete, it is sufficiently advanced to allow a general description of the collection and an appraisal of its importance to the study of Canadian musical traditions.⁴

Contents of the Collection

The material forwarded to Memorial University consisted of twenty tapes plus some tentative transcriptions made by Dr. Puckett. Eighteen of the tapes were made at Bobcaygeon, and one was recorded at Lakehurst; the final tape consists of sample excerpts taken from the other nineteen tapes. Nearly all the recording dates fall into short periods in early July and early September, suggesting that the collector had only brief vacation periods in which to do his field work. Generally the technical quality of the tapes is excellent; incomprehensibility results more from an excess of conviviality among the informants than from any technical difficulties, although occasionally the opening or closing words of a conversation or song are lost.

Of the 25 informants interviewed (20 men and 5 women),⁵ 22 sing and 7 play instrumental music. The music and songs appear to have been acquired chiefly from three sources: from the informants' own families, from

¹I am indebted to Dr. N. V. Rosenberg and Michael Taft for their assistance in the preparation of this article.

²See his *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press; London: H. Milford, 1926).

³Wayland Hand, "Newbell Niles Puckett (1898-1967)," *Journal of American Folklore*, 80 (1967), 341-342.

⁴A checklist of songs and instrumental music is included at the end of this article.

⁵Three informants who sing in German are not included in this count, nor is their material discussed in the article, since it appears that they are personal friends of the collector who are visiting the area.

phonograph records or radio broadcasts, or from fellow workers in the lumbercamps. The age range is quite broad; the oldest informant is 96, while the youngest appears to be in his late teens or early twenties. Generally the informants were born in the immediate vicinity of Bobcaygeon and had spent all of their lives there. Several, however, appear to be former residents who return from urban centres just for vacation. Four separate family groups are represented. It is evident that many of the informants are well acquainted with each other, as they combine in various ways to sing or play together, and some of them know Puckett quite well, while others have obviously just met him. Little information is given about present occupations except for scattered references to work as licensed guides, but most of the men at one time were employed locally in the lumbering industry. There is no indication that any of the women interviewed work outside the home.

Most of the recording time on the 20 tapes is given over to songs and instrumental music, including 157 recordings of 123 different songs which fall into most categories known to the folklorist. Although the collection had already received the appellation "Canadian Lumberjack Songs" before it reached Canada, only eight of the total number are songs directly related to the industry, and not all of the others were learned in the lumbercamps. The lumbering songs include local compositions such as "The New Limit Line" and "The Anstruther Township Lumbercamp Song",⁶ along with camp songs of wider provenance — "The Jam on Gerry's Rocks" and "Peter Emberly." The latter is often pronounced "Embly" or "Emerly," the result of a central Canadian tendency, most marked among people of Irish descent, to ease pronunciation by dropping or changing the central consonants in a name.

Two other local ballads appear in the collection, "Maggie Howie" and "Bill Dunbar." The former relates to a murder trial of the last century, in which a young Catholic man was tried for the murder of his Protestant sweetheart in Napanee, near Belleville.⁷ Interesting background material to the second ballad is given by Puckett's most elderly informant, a 96-year-old man who knew Bill Dunbar and Bob Cottingham, the two victims of the Pigeon Lake drowning accident.⁸

Of the two Child ballads recorded, one is fairly rare in North America. More commonly known as "Henry Martyn" (Child 250), the informant calls it "Three Loving Brothers from Merry Scotland." In the Ontario version, the central character, the youngest of the three brothers, is not named, but his adversary (Charlie Stuart) is, suggesting a closer relationship to American than to Newfoundland or British versions.⁹ The only other Child ballad appearing is "Barbara Allen" (Child 84).

⁶For versions of these songs from the same informant, see Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), pp. 54, 58.

⁷A recording of this song appears on Folkways FM4005; see also insert notes supplied by Edith Fowke.

⁸This song appears in *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods*, pp. 143-145.

⁹For American, Newfoundland, and British versions of this ballad, see H. M. Belden, ed., *Ballads and Songs: Collected by the Missouri Folk-Lore Society*, (1940, rpt. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966) 87-89; Maud Karpeles, *Folk Songs from Newfoundland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 103-106; and James Francis Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Vol. IV (1892, rpt. New York: Dover, 1965), 393-396.

The largest single category is that of the British broadside, with 20 songs falling into this classification, only 10 of which are listed by Laws as current in North America. Of the 9 native American ballads included, all are listed by Laws with the notable exception of the Civil War song, "The Boy Who Wore The Blue" ("The Soldier's Letter"). Appearing in only a few American collections, it appears to have a fairly wide provenance in Canada; it has been recorded in Newfoundland¹⁰ and is known also in the Gatineau area of western Quebec.¹¹

The second largest category is that of the sentimental nineteenth-century or turn-of-the-century song. Mothers die ("The Banks of the Clear Crystal River"), fathers drown ("Why Don't My Father's Ship Sail In?"), children expire ("The Blind Child's Prayer," "The Dying Message"), sons are imprisoned ("A Mother's Plea for her Son"), and drunkards see the error of their ways ("The Drunkard's Dream") in swift succession throughout all the tapes. In the same emotional vein, there are more recent country-western songs, learned by the singers from records and the radio. Among the better-known singers represented are Vernon Dalhart ("Floyd Collins"), Jimmie Rogers ("When the Cactus Is in Bloom"), Roy Acuff ("The Great Speckled Bird"), Wilf Carter ("Hobo's Song to the Mounties," "The Capture of Albert Johnson"), Hank Snow ("A Rose from the Garden of Prayer", "The Prison Cowboy"), Ernest Tubb ("The Soldier's Last Letter"), and Bobby Helms ("Fraulein"). The fact that this list covers forty years of recording history suggests that the acquiring of new songs from records is a well-established tradition in the area.

Almost half the songs are very light-hearted in tone, and form a sharp contrast to the ballads, broadsides, and sentimental songs previously mentioned. Music-hall songs figure prominently, with many stage-Irish numbers represented ("Me Tipperary Daisy," "Pat McCarthy, Hale and Hearty," "My Name Is Johnny McNaulty"). There are also many nonsense songs, such as "When the Clock Struck Seventeen," and "The First Time in Twenty-Four Years." But perhaps the most interesting of the light-hearted group are the bawdy songs. In collecting this material, Puckett apparently did not encounter the difficulties often met by other folklorists, who are not well known to their informants. Thus, he was able to acquire complete and uncensored versions of "Girls, for my Sake Never Wed an Old Man," "The Keyhole in the Door," "The Red Light Saloon," "There Was a Jolly Barber and He Lived in Aberdeen," and "Molly Machree." Because several of the tapes were made in a socializing rather than a formal interviewing situation, Puckett was able to collect some songs which a collector might otherwise miss, but which are a definite part of the common repertoire for this type of occasion. These include the ubiquitous "You Are My Sunshine," which seems to pop up on every other tape, but also several interesting song parodies such as "Maggie Jones" ("In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree") and "Two Schoolteachers" ("Where the River Shannon Flows").

¹⁰Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, Accession 69-36, Shelf C587, Rev. 303.

¹¹Author's personal experience.

Finally, the collection contains a handful of hymns and religious or moralizing songs, which are often sung in close conjunction with some of the racier material but with equal gusto and enthusiasm. There is also a small body of songs which one informant claims to have written, but at least some of these appear to have been previously written by someone else; for example, "The Coupon Song," which was recorded by Bill Monroe in 1941.¹²

In addition to this wide range of vocal material, the tapes provide 72 instrumental recordings of 52 identified tunes and 5 untitled ones. These are played on fiddle, guitar, banjo, piano, ukelele (a commercially produced bowed zither), and a tin-can instrument devised by one of the informants from burnt matches and piano wire, with a sound that is not describable. All of the above are used as solo instruments, suggesting the possibility of a broader instrumental tradition in the province than was previously believed to exist.

As with the vocal music, there is great variety in the melodies played. They range from the well-known Irish and Scottish jigs and reels to more modern waltzes and breakdowns to commercial successes of the 1950s and early '60s, all played in a rhythm designed to make them suitable for dancing. While the artistic quality of the instrumental music is not as high as that of the singing (the instruments, for example, are not always in tune with each other), the recordings as a whole give a good indication of the nature of the instrumental tradition in that part of the province.

In addition to the musical material, the collection contains a wide variety of verbal lore of various sorts. There are recitations of toasts and poetry (although the latter is hardly comprehensible as the informant is in an advanced state of inebriation), and various forms of prose narrative which would be of interest to the legend and folktale scholar. On eight separate occasions amid the singing and music-making various informants spin tall tales about fishing, or experiences in the lumberwoods; one informant tells Paul Bunyan stories which he obviously learned orally in a lumbercamp setting. Another informant tells a circular tale, the type of endless story which, like the tall tale, is intended to put the listener on. The informants jokingly reveal that they delight in using these stories against visiting American sportsmen. In a more serious vein, the informants recount anecdotes from local history or describe the district during their childhoods, giving many details of the social history of the area, and a great deal of information about the local logging industry is contributed by men who worked in the woods or in related industries. Local folk medicinal practices are also mentioned in the way of charms and blood-stopping devices. And finally, of greatest importance to the folk-music scholar, many of the informants reveal the sources of their repertoires and contribute anecdotal material about the musical traditions of the area.

Significance of the Collection

It appears that Newbell Niles Puckett had planned to publish just the songs from this collection. Presumably the "lumberjack" title had been

¹²Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys: An Illustrated Discography* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1974), 29.

assigned by him (the word, incidentally, is never used by any of the informants), and before his death he had begun transcribing the songs that he found most interesting. Many of these, however, have already appeared in print in Ontario collections,¹³ and most of the others are readily available elsewhere.

Having worked with this material over a period of twenty months, during which time I have become acquainted with the field of Canadian folklore scholarship, it seems to me that the importance of this collection goes far beyond the value of any one rare and interesting item. This body of material indicates that there are aspects of our musical traditions that our scholars have yet to examine seriously.

In the first place, the collection forces us to take a second look at the province of Ontario. As Edith Fowke has already pointed out,¹⁴ we can no longer accept the image of staid, stodgy, and unmusical Ontario. Nor is the music limited to any one ethnic or national group: the informants on these tapes represent Irish, Scottish, English, French, German, Ojibway, and American bloodlines. But perhaps more importantly, we can no longer accept the old folkloric maxim that a traditional singer must be ancient, uneducated, isolated, perhaps a bit backward, and most definitely an anachronism in the modern world. These singers are very typical of rural and small-town Ontario straightforward, knowledgeable, communicative, able to express themselves effectively, at times much more effectively than the collector who either naturally speaks bad grammar or assumes it in a misguided effort to put his informants at ease.

In direct contrast to what is usually seen as good song-hunting territory, Bobcaygeon is not an isolated enclave; located in one of the most popular vacation areas of southern Ontario, it experiences a yearly influx of summer residents, chiefly from the Toronto region. While basically conservative, as are most rural areas, the society here is adaptive to change, having had to cope with constant change from the early days of settlement; Ontario colonists came to the new world, not from a peasant society, but from a Europe already undergoing the transformations resulting from industrialization and urbanization. Living within a basically stable society which experienced constant gradual change, the people of this district, and of many others in the southern and eastern areas of the province, have been able to selectively retain old traditions and to adopt new ones on the basis of their relevance to their way of life. In the context of this pattern of settlement and growth, the fact that ancient and modern materials exist side by side in the repertoire of one singer is not all that remarkable.

In addition to forcing us to look again at the lore of our most heavily populated province, this collection raises questions about our knowledge of traditional singing on a national level. We have tended to ascribe the prevalence of a singing tradition in any specific area of the country to some demographic or geographic characteristic of that area; thus, Newfoundlanders

¹³Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods; Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario* (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates; Don Mills, Ont.: Burns and MacEachern Limited, 1965).

¹⁴Edith Fowke, *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario*, pp. 1-6.

sing because they are isolated and live near the sea, whereas in Quebec it is because they are French and Catholic. The fact that many of the performers on these tapes are highly musical without any such ethnic or geographic excuse suggests that the Canadian singing tradition is not restricted along occupational, religious, or ethnic lines as we had previously believed. Moreover, as my own experience in three provinces has taught me, there is an amazing similarity in repertoire across widely separated areas of the country, a similarity that cannot be accounted for simply on the basis of availability of songs. It appears that in emphasizing regional cultural diversity, we have built up an image of the country as a series of fragmented old-country transplants, totally overlooking the fact that among ourselves we share both a widespread interest in musical self-expression and a common taste in lyrics and melodies.

It seems obvious that, given this new view of the province and the nation, the direction of our research has to change; and perhaps we can learn something from this sometimes kindly, sometimes condescending American tourist who wandered so unprejudiced into rural Ontario. With no preconceived notions of what he should find, Puckett collected everything, and thus the tapes present a fuller picture of the total musical tradition of this area than that presented in any printed collection of any Canadian area. While it is true that financial considerations always make the total publication of a collection next to impossible, we must admit that our collectors, let alone our editors, have often been too selective. In addition, because Puckett collected songs where and when he could find them, many are seen in the social context of a group of acquaintances getting together on a summer's evening to make music; contrast this with the earlier practice of lining up informants and paying them off with a drink of rum for each song produced. The collections compiled as a result of this latter field method tell us a great deal about the tastes of the collectors, but very little about the singing habits of the people, or about the significance of music in their lives. Moreover, they have tended to promote the old regional stereotypes – the “folksy” Maritimer, the super-cool urbanized Upper Canadian – which have distorted our view for much too long.

A real understanding of our cultural traditions can be founded only on a sound base of comprehensive collecting in all areas of the country, and the publications produced must be geared, not towards looking impressive on the shelf of some antiquarian-minded scholar, but towards telling us something important and vital about ourselves. Edith Fowke's listing of the total repertoire of each of her informants in *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario* was a strong step in the right direction; the publication in some form of this collection would be a second one.

CHECKLIST

(*indicates that Edith Fowke collected the song from the same informant)

Songs:

Adam's Last Race	Barbara Allen (Child 84)
Anstruther Township Lumbercamp Song*	The Battle of Mill Springs* (Laws A13)
Anything	Beautiful Sunday
The Baggage Coach Ahead	Bill Dunbar*
The Banks of the Clear Crystal River*	The Black Bottle*

The Blind Child's Prayer*
 Bonnie Irish Boy* (Laws P26)
 The Bonnechere River (Jimmy Judge)*
 (Laws C4)
 The Boy Who Wore the Blue
 (The Soldier's Letter)
 Brian O'Lynn
 The Brigand on the Mountain
 (The Italian Girl)*
 The British Man-of-War*
 A Broken-Down Sport Without Money
 The Capture of Albert Johnson
 The Cat Came Back
 The Chippewa Stream* (Laws H10)
 Come All Ye Young Fellows,
 I'll Sing You a Ditty
 The Convict and the Rose
 The Coupon Song
 Courting Six Pretty Girls
 Courtship Song ("On the twelfth
 day of August . . .")
 Dad's Dinner Pail
 The Drunkard's Dream
 The Dying Cowboy (Laws B1)
 The Dying Message
 Erin's Lovely Home (Laws M6)
 The First Time in Twenty-four Years*
 Floella (Laws F1)
 Floyd Collins (Laws G22)
 The Flying Cloud (Laws K28)
 Fraulein
 A Froggie Went A-Courting
 From Prison to Mother's Grave
 Girls, for My Sake Never Wed an Old Man
 God Leads His Dear Children Along
 Goin' To Swipe a Few Chickens
 Going up to Bummer's Hills
 The Great Speckled Bird
 Green Grows the Laurels
 Harry Dale (Laws C13)
 Henry O'Connor (Laws M5)
 The Hobo's Song to the Mounties*
 I Am Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes
 I Have a Little Home
 I Married My Wife in the Month of June
 (Nickerty-Nackerty)
 I'll Be Thinking of You
 I'm a Man You Don't Meet Every Day
 I'm Glad I'm Married
 I'm So in Love with You
 I've Got Fortunes in Memories
 I've Got Sixpence
 It Is No Secret
 The Indian's Lament
 The Jacket of Blue*
 The Jam on Gerry's Rocks* (Laws C1)
 Judge Martin Duffy
 Just Nineteen Years Old*
 The Keyhole in the Door*
 Lady Leroy (Laws N5)
 The Lakes of Pontchartrain (Laws H9)
 Little Brown Jug
 The Little Mohee (Laws H8)
 Love Is Such a Very Funny Thing
 The Lumberman's Alphabet
 Maggie Howie
 Maggie Jones
 The Maple on the Hill
 The Marriage Game
 Mary Ann O'Shea
 McCafferty
 Me Tipperary Daisy
 Michigan-I-O
 Miss Maloney's Ball
 Molly Machree
 The Monkey Married the Baboon's Sister
 Moonlight and Skies
 A Mother's Plea for Her Son
 My Name is John Campbell
 (John Campbell's Pig)*
 My Name Is Johnny McNaulty
 My Name Is Yon Monon
 My Old Savannah Home
 Never Been Kissed
 The New Limit Line*
 No One to Welcome Me Home*
 Nobody Knew They Were There
 O Sacred Head Surrounded
 Oh No, My Boy, Not I*
 Ojibway song about a bird
 Ojibway song in praise of a woman
 The Old Milk Horse*
 On the Banks of Sweet Dundee (Laws M25)
 Pat McCarthy, Hale and Hearty
 Peter Emberly* (Laws C27)
 The Prison Cowboy
 Pulling Hard against the Tide
 The Queenstown Mourner (The Dunville
 Girl) (Laws H14)
 The Red Light Saloon
 The Reservoir Dam (Johnny Stiles)*
 (Laws C5)
 A Rose from the Garden of Prayer
 The Rosy Banks of Green
 The Susquehanna Shore
 The Sheffield Apprentice (Laws O39)
 A Short Time Ago an Irishman
 Named Doherty

The Soldier's Last Letter
 The Soldier's Song (The British
 Soldier's Grave)*
 That Is True
 There Was a Jolly Barber and
 He Lived in Aberdeen
 Three Loving Brothers from Merry
 Scotland (Henry Martyn)
 (Child 250)
 Till We Meet Again
 The Trip We Took over the Mountain
 True Blue Bill
 Two Schoolteachers
 What a Friend We Have in Jesus
 The Wheelbarrow Song
 When the Cactus Is in Bloom
 When the Clock Struck Seventeen (My
 Freckle-Faced Consumptive Mary Jane)
 When the Roll Is Called up Yonder
 Who Killed Cock Robin?
 Why Don't My Father's Ship Sail In? *
 The Wild Colonial Boy (Laws 120)
 The Wild Side of Life
 The Wreck of the Old Ninety-
 Seven (Laws G2)
 The Yellow Rose of Texas
 You Are My Sunshine
 Young Harriette Brown
 Young Sailor Bold (I) (The Rich Mer-
 chant's Daughter) (Laws M19)

Instrumental Music:

Banjo Jig
 Bridget O'Brien
 The Bully of the Town
 Charlie McCann
 Cock of the North
 A Country Dance
 Crooked Stovepipe
 Davy Crockett
 Devil's Dream
 Durango's Hornpipe
 Flowers of Edinburgh

The Golden Slippers
 Goodnight Ladies
 The Great Speckled Bird
 Guitar Boogie Breakdown
 Hell Among the Yearlings
 The Highland Fling
 Home Sweet Home
 Irish Washerwoman
 The Little Brown Jug
 Liverpool Hornpipe
 Macdonald's Reel
 Macleod's Reel
 McIlmoyle's Reel
 Merrily We Roll Along
 Money Musk
 Nigger in the Woodpile
 Ninety-Nine Years Is a Mighty Long Time
 Oh, My Darling Nellie Grey
 Oh, Susannah
 Old Opera Reel
 Over the Waves
 Peek-a-boo Waltz
 Red River Valley
 Red Wing
 Rickett's Hornpipe
 Rippling Waters
 Rock Valley Jig
 Showers of Blessing
 Silver Bells
 Soldier's Joy
 Strawberry Roan
 Swamp Lake Breakdown
 There's a Star-Spangled Banner
 Waving Somewhere
 Three O'Clock in the Morning
 Turkey in the Straw
 Virginia Reel
 Walking Uptown
 Where the Bluebird Hollers and
 the Jaybird Sings
 Where the River Shannon Flows
 Wildwood Flower
 Woodchoppers' Breakdown

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Resumé: Laurel Doucette donne des détails au sujet de la collection d'un folkloriste Américain, Newbell Puckett, collection recueillie dans la communauté de Bobcaygeon, Ontario. Elle souligne la variété des chants et airs instrumentaux et présente une liste des items de cette collection.