

Wisconsin Folksong Collection. Field recordings made by Sidney Robertson and Helene Stratman-Thomas for the Archive of American Folksong (1937-1946)

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Essay by James P. Leary (guest post)*



Stella Stacy & Henry Thunder; Ho-Chunk Singers; Black River Falls, WI, 1946



Wisconsin Lumberjacks: (back L-R) Earl Schwartztrauber, Frank Uchytel, J.H. Wallis; (front L-R) Otto Rindlisbacher, Iva Kundert Rindlisbacher, Ray Calkins; Rice Lake, WI, 1937



Olive Green Lewis & Lily Richmond; Grant County, WI, 1946

The vast varied Wisconsin Folksong Collection, the first deep field survey fully engaging the rich musical pluralism of an American region, was carried out by two remarkable women, Sidney Robertson and Helene Stratman-Thomas, between 1937-1946.

Robertson (1903-1995) hailed from a prosperous northern California family. Educated at Stanford and the San Francisco Conservatory, she was a veteran music educator and fledgling folksong collector when hired in 1936 by ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, who helmed the Music Division within the Resettlement Administration launched by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Assigned to Wisconsin from April to August 1937, Robertson soon realized she was not in the America of New England villages, New York tenements, Pennsylvania Dutch farms, Appalachian hollows, Southern cotton plantations, or Western plains celebrated by academicians and popular culture as folk musical hearths. Here was a territory of deep woods, inland seas, mines, mills, and hardscrabble farms; a place wherein Native peoples, native-born, and newcomers jostled, jangled, and intermingled.

During her short Wisconsin stint, Robertson borrowed recording equipment from the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song, set to work with musical Wisconsin lumberjacks, and acquired numerous leads to polyglot performers that she shared with the Archive's "Assistant-in-Charge," Alan Lomax. In 1938, Lomax imagined "a rapid recording survey" of folk music in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota that fizzled when, just after venturing into the Badger State, he ran out of time and money. Compelled by other obligations but intrigued by Robertson's contacts, he wrote to Leland Coon, chair of the University of Wisconsin's School of Music, requesting someone to carry on.

When no faculty responded, Helene Stratman-Thomas (1896-1973), an instructor, took up the challenge. Raised in rural southwestern Wisconsin in a musical family blending Cornish and German folksongs, and familiar with singing Welsh neighbors, she learned of performers from many folk musical traditions through her students and responses to press releases in statewide newspapers. Assisted by a student audio engineer, she traveled the state in the summers of 1940 and 1941. Wartime shortages prevented further fieldwork until summer 1946.

Collectively Sidney Robertson and Helene Stratman-Thomas recorded roughly 900 folk songs and tunes representing traditions of occupations (farmers, loggers, railroad workers, Great Lakes sailors) and 25 cultural and linguistic communities: African American, Anglo-American, Belgian, Cornish, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French Canadian, German, Ho-Chunk, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Luxembourger, Norwegian, Oneida, Polish, Swedish, Swiss, and Welsh.

Captured in kitchens and parlors, churches and dance halls, their discs spanned dance tunes, ballads, lyric songs, hymns, laments, political anthems, street cries, recitations, and more. Many were sonic fragments of lost worlds: a Missouri-born ex-slave's comic commemoration of Noah's ark; an Icelandic mother-daughter duet concerning a Christian knight enticed by cliff-dwelling elves; a fiddling singer invoking bandit exploits in Poland's Tatra Mountains. Others featured dramatic adaptations of esoteric Indigenous and Old World repertoires for then contemporary public events: a Ho-Chunk warrior song repurposed for summer tourists; a Finnish lullaby arranged for the stage of a workers cooperative hall; a Norwegian one-stringed solo church instrument cast into a quartet to offer secular tunes for multiethnic culture shows. Some were well-known nineteenth-century patriotic songs reinvigorated from afar with twentieth-century despair and rage as invading fascists occupied Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Norway. Still others addressed new circumstances through witty or poignant makeovers of familiar genres: an Italian sojourner's paean to America's grandeur; a Wisconsin Luxembourger musical welcome to fellow immigrants settled in Chicago; a former Czech soldier's song transposed to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. A handful included scurrilous or bawdy ditties previously ignored or censored by genteel folklorists: a risqué Welsh invitation to romp in the woods; a lusty lumberjack's tryst in the "Red Light Saloon"; a raunchy alphabet song commencing with "Oh A is for Asshole"; a seriocomic complaint about conditions in "Fond du Lac Jail." There were startling mash-ups of languages, genres, and cultures: Pan-Indian hand-drum songs with English lyrics; "The Irish Washerwoman" played on accordion by Germans chanting square-dance calls in English; a Walloon/English mixed-language ditty about a bumpkin's market misadventure. Songbooks, radio, and 78 rpm recordings in many languages likewise circulated throughout the region, with lyrics and melodies added to those learned from oral tradition: a ballad from a Danish folk-school songbook; a Dutch rendition of the English music hall standard entreating Daisy with a bicycle-built-for-two; a version of "Gambler's Blues" acquired from a Paramount 78 cut in Grafton, Wisconsin.

Exemplifying a distinct American folk musical region, these performances, in all their variety and complexity, marked a significant historical moment. The nation was emerging from the Great Depression, World War II was erupting, media- and market-driven mass culture was developing as a national force, and concerns with who and what was or was not "American" were rife. Yet despite the efforts of Sidney Robertson and Helene Stratman-Thomas, the depth

and breadth of Wisconsin's folksong traditions remained elusive and almost forgotten for decades.

The many-splendored linguistic and cultural traditions documented through field recordings defied their individual and collective reach. More regrettably, because of reservations regarding cultural pluralism that, until recently, have dominated America's government, academy, and popular culture, their subsequent books and record albums emphasized English-language performances exclusively—as if the majority of the songs they recorded simply did not exist. Only English-language songs appear in the documentary recordings produced, respectively, by Robertson and Stratman-Thomas: “Wolf River Songs” (1955) and “Folk Music from Wisconsin” ([1960] 2001). Stratman-Thomas tried but failed to find a publisher for her manuscript representing the full span of Wisconsin's folk musical traditions. An English-only anthology, “Folksongs Out of Wisconsin” (1977), was published after her death. As Joseph Hickerson—then curator of the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song—pointed out in a 1976 symposium, “Ethnic Recordings in America: A Neglected Heritage”: “On the federal level, there was some reluctance . . . to publicize the recordings of foreign language singers in the United States. Congressional philosophy was not strongly pluralistic, and the melting-pot persuasion was prevalent” (1982: 77).

When a representative sampling of the Collection was finally released as the Grammy-nominated “Folksongs of Another America” (2015), critics universally recognized its worth: “the United States just got bigger . . . this set, so astounding in its exhumation of sounds many of us were only distantly aware of, is like nothing else on this earth” (“The Old Time Herald”); “as odd and singular as the stuff being made in Appalachia or the Mississippi delta” (“Los Angeles Times”); “a mind-boggling swath of material” (“New York Times”); “a staggering set of diasporic folklore” (“Uncut,” UK); “undiscovered gems from America's rich musical heritage . . . whose diversity has remained largely unknown to the rest of the nation—and the world” (“Songlines,” UK); “un document extraordinaire” (“Metamkine,” France); “a corrective to the dominance of field sources that has often threatened to equate US folk music with that of Appalachia, the Delta, or elsewhere in the American South . . . recovery work of the highest order, introducing us to an almost lost stratum of American folk expression” (“Journal of American Studies”).

The Library of Congress holds the original field recordings made by Robertson and Stratman-Thomas. The website “Wisconsin Folksong Collection, 1937-1946,” created by Mills Music Library and UW Digital Collections at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, provides free online access to the entire collection.

<https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AWiscFolkSong>

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