

Giving Old Songs New Life

BY SARAH JANE NELSON

For the past two years I have been following the trail of Ozark folk song collector Max Hunter of Springfield, and for the most part I have been doing so remotely from my home in New Hampshire. How did this New Englander hear about Mr. Hunter, you might ask? It all started with a random tip from a musician friend and one of those late night song searches; I was getting ready for an upcoming musical performance, needed “new” old material, and there it was but a mouse click away: <https://maxhunter.missouristate.edu/>

This song collection, begun in 1956, includes almost 1600 traditional songs from the Ozarks. Hunter, who died in 1999 at the age of 78, was the last of the major Ozark ballad collectors, although he virtually stumbled upon this avocation largely by happenstance, as will be discussed.

When businessman Max Hunter first began recording traditional songs back in 1956, he did so for the sheer fun of it. He had no idea that several of his recordings would some day be housed in the Library of Congress, and that audio copies of his informant’s songs would be available to anyone who had access to the internet. Nor was he aware of the luminary song catchers who had come before him—from Harvard’s first English professor, Frances James Child (of the so-called ‘Child Ballads’) England’s Cecil Sharp and partner Maud Karpeles (both of whom took a particular interest in Appalachian ballads, many of which eventually made it to the Ozarks), to University of Missouri professor Henry Marvin Belden (who first



*Max Hunter with his truck.
Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Nelson.*

sent students into the field in 1903 and spent 37 long years amassing an impressive collection). Hunter was unacquainted with Arkansas folklorist John Quincy Wolf, Jr. and knew little or nothing about Library of Congress collectors such as John and Alan Lomax, among others. In short, Hunter stumbled into his life's work with a minimum of training and little background knowledge.

Early on he occasionally traveled down to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville to attend Professor Mary Celestia Parler's ballad collecting workshops; but most of the time—when he wasn't getting advice from Parler or her partner Arkansas folklorist and writer Vance Randolph—Hunter worked off of sheer gut instinct. This 'instinct' was the result of both temperament and ancestry, and there is no doubt that having family roots planted deep in Ozark soil helped Hunter connect with informants who might otherwise have shut him out. At the close of his active collecting days, when Hunter spent much of his time officiating at folk festivals in Silver Dollar City and Eureka Springs, his dear friend Adolf (AKA Dolf) Schroeder of University of Missouri-Columbia, would often introduce Hunter as "A Gentleman of the Ozarks"; and while Hunter questioned the "gentleman" part he never cast doubt on the rest of this title.

In 1977, as a guest of Dr. Schroeder's during the Festival of Missouri Folk Music, Hunter—who tended towards the pedantic—characteristically devoted the first part of his talk to defining the

term Ozarker vs. Ozarkian: "I am an Ozarker," he said, "because I was born in the Ozarks. I've lived in the Ozarks all my life, my great-great grandparents came to the Ozarks in eighteen and forty, they lived and they died in the Ozarks on both sides of my family." Hunter then went on to poke fun at those who use the other label: "An Ozarkian...(this is my personal opinion)—moves into the Ozarks, likes it so well and then in a couple of [maybe] three years writes back home wherever they came from and says 'I'm a Hillbilly'." Hillbilly wasn't necessarily a negative label—the genuine "hillbilly" (as Hunter liked to think of him) was worthy of great admiration for his sheer resourcefulness, but this archetype was fast disappearing and was being replaced by a damaging caricature: "If there is a ridiculous hillbilly, it is the professional hillbilly that appears in our commercial attractions," Hunter remarked in 1974.

Born July 2nd, 1921 to Springfield natives Ethyl and Roy Hunter, Max Hunter had this to say about the application of the "Hillbilly" label: "Well, I am a Hillbilly, have been all my life and proud of it..." And yet according to his eldest daughter, Linda, he forbade the use of this term in his own household, and always referred to his beloved ballad bearers as the 'Hill People.' "He showed them the greatest respect, and it got him in," she said in a 2014 interview. Regarding his own family tree, Hunter could reach at least as far back as his great grandparents when tracing his family roots, and (and like so many Ozarkers) they all came to the Ozarks Region from

such Appalachian states as North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee.

Hunter's childhood was steeped in Ozark folk culture, although he wouldn't have perceived it as such at the time. By the mid-1970's his talks for universities, libraries and other civic groups would be infused with memories of his early exposure to Ozark traditions and superstitions, while at the same time poking fun at them: "I have seen my Grandmother Rose place a cobweb on a bleeding cut. Some stop[ped] bleeding quickly and others took a little longer.

Who knows? Maybe they were ready to stop anyway.... It seems the worse the medicine smelled and tasted, the better it was for you. If the first remedy didn't work, then another was tried. If none of them worked, you were too far gone, and might as well get ready to pass on."

Hunter documented other family cure-alls with unflinching enthusiasm: "When my father or his brothers would have an ear ache, my Grandmother Hunter would have them urinate in a cup and would very slowly pour this in their ear. My dad said it worked." Roy Hunter also claimed



Hunter with his pipe. Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Nelson.

that rain water found in a hollowed stump was a palliative for rheumatism. Hunter's mother Ethyl was fond of making an anti-itch salve from lard and sulfur. "...it took quite a stay in the washtub to get the salve off. It had got rather brittle and we didn't have any inside plumbing in our house," he later recalled. Speaking with musician Cathy Barton, whose interview materials have provided extensive information on Hunter's life, he said that his mother "had a lot of medicines that she cooked up." In addition to numerous home remedies, his family believed that eating black-eyed peas on New Year's Day would bring good luck for the entire year, and that you should never tell a "dream before breakfast if you don't want it to come true."

Hunter recalled hearing his father tell him that "when my Grandmother Hunter died ...my grandfather had the boys cover the mirrors with bed sheets. When the casket with the body in it was brought to the home before the funeral, a candle was placed on a table at each end of the casket and was kept burning until the casket lid was closed." His father went on to explain the meanings behind these rituals: "Whoever looks upon a dead person and then into the mirror will be the next to die. The lighted candle is to keep the evil spirits from stealing the soul out of the casket."

Hunter's father Roy Hunter was born in Ozark, Missouri in 1887 and worked in the Eisenmeyer flour mill on the outskirts of town for 32 years, 27 of which he served as its superintendent. Such a position did not bring in a lot of money. Although Hunter

spoke of having "the biggest garden in the neighborhood" he also said that he was from "a poor family, probably a little below middle class." The Hunter childhood home stood on Division Street, (at the time unpaved) a street thusly named because it set the boundary between North Springfield (established in 1870 when the St.Louis-San Francisco Line came through), and Springfield. "It was a dirt road and you went a little farther out and you went to the stockyards, which was outside the city at that time," he told Cathy Barton.

Although we know that later in life Hunter became a member of the Methodist Church on Campbell Avenue, it appears that Hunter's birth family attended both Baptist and Methodist services on differing occasions. Hunter once gave Barton a vivid description of the spontaneous singing that would take place on Sundays: "There are a lot of songs that start, even during the preaching....Somebody'd get up and start a song like that and the whole congregation—even the preacher—get in and sing. After they went up and down the family [starting songs], and a few of the neighbors, then they'd quit and he'd go to preaching again."

In addition to the church, Hunter's mother Ethyl was a primary musical influence in his life; "she played piano and sang a larger number of songs, [as did his sisters] ranging from ballads like 'Barbara Allen' and 'The Drunken Fool'... to more recent Victorian parlor pieces such as 'The Blind Child' and 'The Little Rosewood Casket.'"

The second to youngest in his family, Hunter had two older brothers and a sister on either side. The Hunter children would sing both at home and on the way to church, and Hunter particularly enjoyed harmonizing, although it is interesting to note that years later—when he hosted a variety of folk festivals—Hunter strongly discouraged harmonization in ‘traditional’ ballad performance. His older brother Harold (whose deeply resonant voice can be heard in the collection) played the guitar and would later become a Methodist minister.

The harmonies that pervaded Hunter’s childhood extended themselves into his years as a young adult; he married his high school sweetheart, Virginia Mercer, on Christmas Day 1939, and immediately apprenticed to her father who ran the Mercer Refrigeration Company in Springfield. He would stay with that company for 13 years, after which he moved on to the John Rhodes Refrigeration Supply Company in 1952. And it is during his employment with the Rhodes Company that Hunter began his song collecting activities. By this time Hunter and his wife Virginia had three daughters and one son. Hunter’s work as a salesman regularly took him on a 150-mile circuit through Southwestern Missouri, Northern Arkansas and the eastern border towns of Kansas.

Hunter got lonely being away from his wife and four children back in Springfield, so he made a habit of bringing his \$10 guitar along for company. And while he wasn’t

much of a performer himself, he was always on the lookout for Ozark songsters, and started making primitive recordings of people he met along his sales route. Luckily for posterity, Hunter just happened to have a great ear for the good old stuff.

Hunter was on a sales trip circa 1956 when he decided to stop by the Ozark Folk Festival in Eureka Springs, Arkansas: “Well, I was smart enough to know if you were going to a folk festival you should have a folk song,” he later recalled. One of the songs he chose to sing was the humorous betrayal song alternately known as “Our Goodman”, “Three Nights Drunk” and by other titles as well. The lyrics will no doubt be familiar to many readers: “Well, I came home the other night/Just drunk as I could be/Found a hat on my hat rack/Where my hat ought to be....” and so it goes.

He chose well, for his rendition caught the ear of two important audience members—the famed author and Arkansas folklorist Vance Randolph and Vance’s [future] wife Mary Celestia Parler—a University of Arkansas professor and a collector in her own right. Randolph and Parler quickly took Hunter under their collective wing and gave him some tips on how to record ballads. First off, they told him to “stop erasing” songs (something that was necessary on the low-capacity, single-wire device he had been using) and get better equipment so that he could record more than one ballad at a time.



Hunter's house on the corner of Franklin and Division, Springfield, Missouri. Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Nelson.

This was a game changer for Hunter. He bought a giant—and yes—cumbersome Webcor reel to reel, but he could now come back to Springfield at the end of each business trip, full of new “old” songs. When he returned home from many days on the road, Hunter’s family would help him bring the tape recorder into the laundry room (aka his “office”) where he’d hunker down by the washing machine and begin the long and arduous process of transcribing the lyrics of songs he’d collected. His youngest daughter Jenny helped with many transcriptions, all of which were done on long yellow legal pads since there were no transcription machines back then.

From day one Hunter’s number one rule of collecting was to never be in a hurry. He understood that informants (many of whom had lead difficult and long lives by the time he met them) needed him to listen to their stories as much as to their songs. Hunter also knew that gaining the trust of strangers was essential to his success, and so he made many friends along his sales route. He would return year after year to collect songs from his favorite balladeers, many of whom were in their seventies or beyond. While some of his informants kept “ballet” books of lyrics, the majority of them sang from memory: Said Hunter’s daughter Linda, “It all came right out of their heads. They didn’t write them down,” and if they did, it was sometimes on newspapers, old calendars, or anything

else they could find. By the close of his collecting days, Hunter had recorded virtually hundreds of singers. Some of his more well known sources include Almeda Riddle (of Heber Springs, AR) “Aunt Ollie” Gilbert (of Mountain Home, AR), Fred High (of “High,” AR), May Kennedy McCord/”Queen” of the [Original] Ozarks Folk Festival (of Springfield, MO), Raymond Sanders (of Mountain Home, AR) and Jimmy [Driftwood] Morris (of Timbo, AR), to name but a few.

As I’ve described elsewhere, Hunter sometimes went to great lengths to get people to sing for him. These efforts often took the form of farm chores, some of which included driving a hay truck that had no seat, feeding twenty-one baby

calves from a nipple attached to a feed bucket; and wrapping himself in curtains to get wasps out of an Arkansas well house. Hunter also had many adventures along his 150-mile circuit, chief among them: abandoning his car to wade across a creek during mud season; helping to deliver “stump” whiskey; witnessing an Arkansas rock fight started by a mother and her ‘jilted’ daughter; lending his car [unwittingly] to an escaped convict (who nicely returned it on schedule); listening to a preacher in boxer shorts who had a ‘colorful’ manner of describing parishioners who could never be ‘saved’; and tracing an elusive balladeer to a local tavern.



Hunter with his books. Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Nelson.

Hunter's most active collecting days were from the late 1950's through the early seventies, not un-coincidentally the same time period during which the Folk Revival was reaching its height. In 1972 Hunter bequeathed his many tapes to the Springfield Greene County Library, where his original materials can still be found. While several folklorist friends suggested that he give his materials to an academic institution, Hunter was concerned that his songs would get buried deep in an archive and never be made use of. Much of this reluctance can perhaps be attributed to his own lack of formal schooling. In 1998, shortly before his death, Hunter was presented with the Missouri Arts Council's highest award.

Fast forward to 1998 when music professor Michael Murray, his wife Kathy, and other staff members at Missouri State University began to digitize Hunter's songs: Says Murray, "We decided to first transfer the original reel-to-reel recordings to Digital Audio Tape, and then transfer those recordings to CD. This process would both preserve the recordings and also provide the Library with a more user-friendly format for circulation."

Since Hunter passed away in 1999 it's been a race against time to speak with anyone who knew him or his informants. Early in my wanderings to and from the Max Hunter website I took little notice of the name "Mark Bilyeu," listed among Dr. Murray's helpers. It was Stephanie Cramer of the Springfield Arts Council who made mention of local musicians who had

just recorded an album of songs derived directly from the Max Hunter and the John Quincy Wolf collections. Wolf Hunter is the fruit of more than a decade of collaboration between Mark Bilyeu and his wife Cindy Woolf. Mark, who comes from a large musical family rooted in Christian and Taney counties, was a graduate student at MSU when he joined the music department's Hunter project. His wife Cindy is an Arkansawyer who grew up in a large and accomplished bluegrass family, which included a banjo-playing father.

John Quincy Wolf, Jr. was—like so many folklorists before him—an English major, but unlike many of his predecessors, he went into the field himself. He became a beloved professor at Southwestern University in Memphis where his accomplishments were many—but chief among them was his discovery of ballad singers Almeda Riddle, Aunt Ollie Gilbert and Jimmy [Driftwood] Morris, in addition to his friendship and collaboration with contemporary Alan Lomax. Wolf's collection has also been digitized, and is housed at his Alma Mater Lyon College in Batesville, Arkansas.

Both Hunter and Wolf, who were collecting during largely the same time period, tried to meet several times; but correspondence indicates that they were unsuccessful. This gives the Wolf Hunter album all the more significance: As stated by Mark and Cindy in their liner notes: "Our role, as we saw it, was to fulfill the promise of their work by giving these songs new life—by interpreting them for

our place and time.” It should be noted that the ability for musicians to tap into original recordings, anywhere, anytime (via the internet) makes the history of traditional music palpable in a way that deeply informs our lives as performers.

Mark was a grad student in music theory at Missouri State when music professor Mike Murray went in search of a lackey to help digitize Hunter’s songs. Murray asked Mark if he knew anything about computers, “and I lied and said I did....I took Hunter’s type written transcripts/ lyrics and typed them into the computer.... Even though it was busy work, it meant a lot to me.” Mark also had the opportunity to observe the painstaking work that Kathy Murray put into notating the music for the songs. “Her ear is deadly perfect, so she was highly accurate.” Since Max Hunter was a stickler for accuracy and taking the songs exactly as they were delivered (lyric inconsistencies, melodic deviations and all) the notations thus recorded are not for the faint of heart. All of this provided Bilyeu with valuable experiences that would later serve him well as an interpreter of the old “gems” (as Hunter often referred to them).

Throughout my research on Max Hunter’s life, I was continually surprised and delighted to learn that the impact of his song collecting project traveled far beyond the borders of Missouri or Arkansas; as far back as 1963 Caroline and Sandy Paton of Folk Legacy Records in Connecticut, made a recording of Hunter singing his own songs. And during the early 1980’s a University of Massachusetts professor by

the name of Fred Danker met with Hunter and his associates several times to gather songs and biographical information on vocalist/instrumentalist Ollie Gilbert. It was the long lives of ballads that most interested Hunter. He once said, “I don’t think you can compose a folk song... because to me a folk song has to go through something. I don’t know what it is. It’s got to go through part of an oral tradition to get to be a folk song.” In addition to his affection for the past, Hunter always kept a clear eye on the future; as expressed in a 1979 interview with Cathy Barton: “There’s two things I’m proud of: I’ve never been run off by anyone, anywhere. I’ve made lots of friends. Another thing is that all this stuff is going in the library...It ought to be out where people can get hold of it.” —

Author’s Note:

Although innumerable members of the folklore and music community have contributed to my biographical work thus far, I would like to give particular thanks to the following: Cathy Barton, who conducted thorough interviews with Hunter while she was a graduate student at Western Kentucky University and later made a video about him; Adam Davis, Prof. of English at Truman State University and an essential member of the Missouri Folklore Society; Editor and folklorist Becky Schroeder, whose love for her friend Max extended to my book endeavor; and to Max’s daughter Linda, who has been a faithful correspondent.

OZARKS WATCH

Series 2, Volume VI, № 1 Spring 2017

the magazine of the Ozarks



a publication of Ozarks Studies Institute