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Interview

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SUSAN PEPPER, LEILA WEINSTEIN, WITH
PATRICIA D. BEAVER***

“Singing Just To Make Music”: Betty Smith in Her Own Voice

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Carl Jenkins holds a B.A. in anthropology with a concentration in sustainable development. He is completing an M.A. in Appalachian Studies, where his research focuses on rural homelessness.

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Patricia D. Beaver, professor of anthropology, directs ASU's Center for Appalachian Studies. She taught the Colloquium in Appalachian Studies in which these graduate students conducted the interview with Betty Smith.

*I wish I were a penman
and could write a fine hand...*

*If I were, I would write something very profound about where I fit into
the traditional or folk music picture. I only know I am bound to sing
and play it.*

*I was born and bred in North Carolina;
Do you think I've any reason or right to complain?*

-Betty Smith
[Liner notes to *Songs Traditionally Sung in North Carolina*]

INTRODUCTION

Born in Rowan County, North Carolina, in 1926, Betty Smith is an educator, performer, and music scholar. She has an extensive repertoire of

American and British ballads, as well as hymns, folk songs, and children's rhymes and games. She has recorded several albums and has performed frequently over the past several decades, often accompanying herself on one of the many instruments she plays—the psaltery, mountain dulcimer, guitar, and the autoharp.

Smith is an accomplished teacher. She spent several years teaching in the public school system and has taught college courses on music and pedagogy. She has also written music curricula for early childhood and has been a frequent participant in the Appalachian Writers Workshop at the Hindman Settlement School.



Betty N. Smith, at the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, Spring 2000. Unless otherwise noted, photos courtesy of Betty Smith.

Smith has contributed to music scholarship in many ways, notably by bringing Jane Hicks Gentry, a ballad singer from Madison County, North Carolina, to life by writing her biography, *Jane Hicks Gentry: A Singer Among Singers* (1998), and by writing and performing “A Mountain Riddle,” a one-woman play about the singer, produced by the Southern

Appalachian Repertory Theatre in 1999. The book received the Willie Parker Peace History book award from the North Carolina Society of Historians and was featured at the Southern Festival of Books (Nashville, Tennessee, 1998), the Literary Festival (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1998), the Kentucky Book Fair (1998), the Virginia Festival of the Book (1999), and the Southeastern Booksellers Convention (1998).

Betty Smith received the 1982 Bascom Lamar Lunsford Award for Significant Contributions to Appalachian Music, the 1997 Mountain Dance and Folk Festival's Recognition for Outstanding Service and Performance, the 2000 Historian of the West Award from the North Carolina Society of Historians, the 2000 Dr. Gene Wiggins Award for her long and significant contributions to traditional music in North Georgia, the 2001 Brown-Hudson Award from the North Carolina Folklore Society in recognition of her valuable contributions to the study of North Carolina folklore, and the 2005 Minstrel of Appalachia Award from Mars Hill College for a lifetime of preserving and performing mountain music.

On October 24, 2006, we interviewed her at Sunnybank in Hot Springs, North Carolina, where Jane Gentry resided and ran a boarding house. Betty Smith and her husband, Bill, live near the town of Hot Springs in Madison County.

INTERVIEW

BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION

AB: Tell us about your childhood, your family, your education, and the role of music in your family.

BS: I was born in Salisbury, North Carolina. My parents [Ray and Erma Nance] were the first generation to move to town, as my dad had a job in Salisbury. He was a decorator for a furniture store, and he always could hang drapes better than anyone I ever knew. But there was no call for that kind of job during the Depression, so they moved to High Point. My dad was from Randolph County, and my mother was from Rockingham County, and that was closer to all their people.

On my dad's side, the Adamses were Scots-Irish. They came from Ulster to Pennsylvania to Randolph County. We used to call my mother's family the French Canadians because the ones that we met came down from Canada and all spoke French. Then I found out they were Irish. They came from Ireland to Canada to Rockingham County, and their names were Husband. There's this joke they used to tell in the family: "Alisha had a big family of children, so she had to check in at the hotel in Reidsville. When they came down one time, somebody said that there is a woman who checked into the hotel with seven husbands!" That's the family joke.

I had two sisters, and we used to sing as a trio in church and other places. I was the oldest, so I always had to sing harmony. And because of that, I still sing harmony. My dad was a really good singer. He sang with a group. He had a good tenor voice, and he learned to read music through

shape notes. Back then you didn't have to play an instrument. There were people who played instruments, but he was always a singer. They had these singings with groups of singers. He would say, "We came up against Pleasant Garden," but I'm sure there weren't any prizes or anything. He used to say that he didn't know why we bothered with the way we read music, because it was a lot easier with shape notes, and I thought, whatever you know is easy, right?

My dad knew ballads. My grandmother, my mother's mother, also knew ballads, and I think most people did. I've done residencies down in the eastern part of the state, and the older people know the same ballads they know up here. This was the music on the East coast at one time, and you'll find the old people, if there are any still singing, know a lot of the same songs in almost every community.

In the fifth grade I started to play violin and viola. It was easier for kids to learn to play instruments then than it is now. We were growing up in the Depression, and there certainly was no money for buying instruments, but you could rent instruments very reasonably. We had an elementary school orchestra and a band, and I played violin and viola through high school. I don't think I was ever any great shakes, but I was very dedicated, so I usually got to play in the orchestra. I always thought of myself as a singer.

When our kids were little, we used to camp. That's the only way we could afford to go on vacations. We were sitting around one night, and I said it sure would be nice to be able to play something like a guitar, to sing to. So for Christmas I got a \$15 guitar and a free how-to-use-it book, and it got me going. That's really more my thing. I used to sometimes play violin with Byard Ray in an old-time string band, and we would play twin fiddles. But he was really carrying it, and I was tagging along, playing harmony or something. After guitar, I learned dulcimer, and then autoharp and psaltery. I guess I had to try one of everything. I would apply what I knew on one instrument to the next.



Betty Nance

Now about school, I always loved school. I went to school before I was old enough because I wanted to be there. My mother was the oldest of eight children. She had two brothers who weren't much older than I was, and I went to school with them in a one-room schoolhouse. My grandmother would fix me a sausage biscuit and a jar of chocolate milk.

I was the first one in my family who went to college, except for my grandmother. She went to Old Trinity College (which was later Duke University) in Randolph County when women went for two years and then taught school. Her uncle was the math teacher there, and there is no way she could have gone if it hadn't been for him. I'm sure she lived with his family because she was the oldest of ten children, and her mother had died fairly early. She was a remarkable little lady. She wore dresses as long as she lived down to her anklebone. I know that women weren't supposed to do a lot of things then, but I have read things that she wrote for the Sunday School. It was pretty amazing that she was allowed to do that. I went to Woman's College of the University of North Carolina. It's UNC-Greensboro now, but it was Woman's College then. I had a scholarship to Guilford College, but I could afford to go to Woman's College for less than I could go to Guilford with the scholarship.

Bill [Betty's husband] worked for Hewlett Packard, and their southern office was in High Point. When they moved it to Atlanta, we got transferred to Georgia, and that meant that everything I was doing was gone. I worked part time as a Girl Scout field executive. They could only afford part time, and



Betty Smith with psaltery at a festival at Clinch Valley College in Virginia

I didn't want to work full time. I had children coming home from school, and I had some music students. Cobb County schools wanted people who would get a Master's degree in early childhood education.

This was before Georgia had public kindergartens, so it was Title One and Head Start. I started at the University of Georgia and got tired of driving so far after school, so I changed to Georgia State and got a Master's.

CJ: You play a variety of musical instruments, including one that is not so common, the psaltery.¹ Please tell us a little about it.

BS: I was invited to the Florida Folk Festival, and Bob Beers or the Beers Family was always there. We did small concerts in the Bell Tower. You didn't need a sound system. It was really nice, and I would just hang on every note. It was one of those things that I just had to do, and Bob promised to help me get one built and learn to play it. But he was killed in an automobile accident before I ever got an instrument. Michael Autorino, who had built Bob's from an old McKenzie piano harp from the 1800s, built me one, and I got a 30-minute lesson from Bob's son-in-law. There are no books, and the only recordings are some that Bob did. So, it was strictly do-it-yourself.

I went to New England once, and they said, "You don't play like anybody we know!" and I said, "How I am supposed to know how anybody plays? I never hear anybody play it except me." I love it, because I can sing with it. I can't sing with fiddles very well, but I love to play the psalter. I can't tell you why. It sounds more like a harp than anything else. It was just one of those things. It had strings on it. George Kelischek says that if it has strings on it, I have to pluck it.

PERFORMANCE AND REPERTOIRE

LW: How do you choose the songs that you include in your repertoire, and do you remember what was the first ballad that you learned?

BS: I think it was probably "Barbry Ellen" because I don't remember learning it. My aunt Lena came to spend a week with me one time, and she said, "You sing 'Barbry Ellen' more like Momma than anybody does." I said, "I don't think I learned this from my grandmother. Are you sure?" And she said, "Oh yes. That was her baby rocking song, and you were the oldest grandchild, and you've been hearing that ever since you were born." I do not remember learning it. I just hear that song in my head. At one point I tried to learn the way that John Jacob Niles sang it. Well, that doesn't work for me. I cannot keep it; even if I think I've learned it, next time I try, it's gone. I think that anybody who sang any ballads at all knew "Barbry Ellen." It's probably the most popular, best-loved ballad ever.



Photo by Susan Pepper

How do I choose what I'm going to sing? I make a list, and then I read my audience. I don't like printed programs, because I may change my mind once I see who's there. I go through times when there are certain songs that I sing a lot. Then I'll realize that I'm not singing that song much any more, so I'll put it in, but then I have to remember it again. I always do ballads, which I'd rather do than anything else. But I also try to put in some play party tunes and hymns and different kinds of songs too, for people who might not be just into ballads.

LW: How do you choose the songs that you include in your repertoire for performance? Is there something specific that draws you to certain songs?

BS: I can't tell you what makes me want to learn a song. I wish I could. I just have to hear it and want to learn it.

LW: What sorts of audiences and settings do you find ideal for performing music? Do you have a favorite?

BS: People who know what the music is all about, of course, are the best, but I really like most audiences. First of all, I don't assume that they know everything about it. I think you have to tell people what you're doing and talk about why you're doing it, or say something about it that lets them get connected to it. There are a lot of people who do not connect with their audience. They just do their thing and expect you to pick up on it. I don't think it works that way.

PJ: Over the years you've been a frequent performer at the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville. When did you first attend it or perform at it, and what prompted you to go? What were your impressions of Bascom Lamar Lunsford, the founder of the festival?



At the Mountain Dance & Folk Festival in Asheville, Betty Smith with dulcimer built by Edsel Martin

BS: I'm not sure when we first started going. I don't even know how I found out about it. It was about '62 or '63 that I went and sang. We would go with friends, and they'd say, "Why don't you go sing?" and I'd say, "I've never sung at a festival." I'd sing at church and at school, but I wouldn't just walk up and say, "Can I be on your program?" So I wrote Mr. Lunsford a letter, and I sent him a tape with two songs. I sent him "Barbry Ellen" and "Omie Wise," because I knew he would know those. And he said to come. Bill says I've missed about three times in 40 years, but I'm not sure. It's probably something like that.

He [Lunsford] was a pretty amazing old man. With three nights of the festival, he never

had a program. He just had a sense of what ought to go next. If he had a ballad singer on, he'd have a string band next. Everybody sat on the stage in those days, and there was another stage built out for the dancers, so they didn't have to change the microphones around. Some things don't get any better, do they? They just get more complicated. If he didn't know you, you

were on the left-hand side of the stage, and you were on early, before they went on the radio. And if he knew you, then you'd be on the radio. It was along about sundown, but you didn't go on the radio until about 7:30, 8 o'clock. He just kept things going. You sat on the stage with your children. It was really nice. Now we have to stay in the back, because we don't have enough seats in Diana Wortham [Auditorium in Asheville] for everybody. If all the performers took up seats, they wouldn't be able to sell those seats. That auditorium is not as big as the Civic Auditorium.

PJ: What about ways that the festival, or Lunsford himself, affected the local music and dance traditions, or you in particular?

BS: Well, I know that it affected the dance. Back then, they didn't have taps on their shoes, and they didn't have uniform clothes either. I can remember dances where there would be all sizes. There would be big folks and little folks, and they danced together. You see that at the Folk School. There are children there. Your partner may be this high, but they know how to dance, so it's okay. I think it was the competition that caused some changes in the dance. It didn't make a whole lot of difference to me. I still do what I do.

It used to be that if you were there and you sang, you were in competition. I got to a point where I said, "I really don't want to be in competition." I had won some ballad things and some dulcimer things, and I wrote a letter, and I said, "I do want to come, but can I just not be in competition?" And that's when they decided that you didn't have to be. And now we don't have competition.

I think Mr. Lunsford started it [the competition] because he didn't have any money. And to get string bands and ballad singers and others to come, there was a better turnout if there was a chance to get a little money. It enticed people to come. So it started out with competition. That, I'm sure, probably did cause some changes, but I know that's why he did it. Then after a while, he would give gas money, \$10, \$15, if he knew you came from out of town. He was just running things the best way he knew how. He didn't have anything to go by either, and I think that he just wanted other people to appreciate what he knew mountain people could do up here. But he also wanted people to appreciate what they did themselves—to understand that what they did was important. And if other people appreciated it, then they would know that what they did was important. But everything changes when it gets to be in big auditoriums. And when the Chamber of Commerce was running it, that made a difference, too, because you know what they're interested in. They want to promote Asheville.

BALLAD COLLECTORS, CECIL SHARP, AND JANE GENTRY

LW: When Cecil Sharp came to the Southern mountains he was looking for survivals of English folk song. With that in mind, can you speak about what role the written and recorded works of collectors play in shaping our perceptions of regional music traditions? Also, do collectors have any responsibilities when they decide what they are going to collect?

BS: One thing that I have to keep remembering is that you can't collect

everything, so collectors have to decide what it is they're going after. You can imagine that if Cecil Sharp had come to Jane Gentry and just let her sing... Her daughters said, "Goodness, he didn't get any hymns." Well, he did, about three, but he didn't get any of the local songs she knew. She was doing for him what he asked for, English folk songs in the Southern mountains. We criticize collectors saying, "They didn't get any of this, and they didn't get any of that." But if you were doing the collecting, you would have to make up your mind what it is you're going to collect—because when you get people like some of these singers who knew so many songs, you couldn't possibly collect all that they sang.

When they do start learning out of the collectors' books, all kinds of things can happen. I can tell you one instance. Cecil Sharp collected "Black is the Color," from Ms. Lizzie Roberts in Hot Springs. Well, somebody came to my class and sang it, and I thought, "Whoa, that's right out of Sharp" [*English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachians*]. They changed the name of the river, but other than that, it was note for note right out of the book. I said, "Where did you learn that?" And she said, "Oh, we all have this book." In other words, she learned it out of the book. But then later on, at a festival, I heard her say that she learned it from her father. Well now, somebody else learned it from her, who thinks it came from another area, and it just keeps going.

Even the most traditional singers I know of learned songs that had been collected—not from their own community. But they liked the songs, so why shouldn't they sing them? No collectors wrote things down as well as Cecil Sharp did. He was the best at that. Think about how you have to write down a ballad. Only the first verse goes according to the notes. After that, you're on your own. If you wrote it down exactly the way people sing, one ballad would take page after page after page. Every verse would have to be written down separately, since nobody ever sings each verse exactly like any other. Ballad singers don't have to have an instrument to keep up with, if they're singing unaccompanied—so it doesn't matter. Sometimes they leave out a line; sometimes they add a line. That's the great thing about singing ballads; you don't have to have a guitar.

The collectors have to take the tune and listen to all of it and do the best they can to get the sense of how it goes. They write it down, and then it's up to the singer. I don't know if any other collectors have been as good [as Sharp] at writing it down. As far as responsibility goes, I think that most of them were probably thinking about doing a book. That's what most of them did.

CJ: The recent film *Songcatcher* depicts a music teacher visiting Appalachia in the early 20th century who is awakened to the wealth of songs and musical tradition in Appalachia. What was your reaction to the film?

BS: I wrote a review for the *Appalachian Journal* [see *AppalJ* 30.2-3 (Winter-Spring 2003), pp. 248-52]. I thought they [the filmmakers] had the best chance I've ever heard of to do the best movie about the music. I really did. But they just did some Hollywood stuff. If you didn't know anything about

the music or the history, or how it was collected or anything, it wouldn't bother you a bit. You'd probably think it was wonderful, but that woman was supposed to be Olive Campbell, and Olive Campbell was not a college professor. She collected the music. It was just a labor of love, and that's all.

The person in the movie was like Dorothy Scarborough, because Dorothy Scarborough was a music professor at Columbia. Mr. Lunsford took her around collecting in the 1930s, and she collected with a small recorder that was built for her, not like that thing that they were dragging over the rocks. It looked like a player to me, not a recording machine, but she [Scarborough] had one that was built for her, a portable one. Her book is called *A Songcatcher in the Southern Mountains*, and I know that David Brose, the folklorist at the [John C. Campbell] Folk School showed them the book.

But they said it was Olive Campbell, and that wasn't a bit like her. The way she worked was not like Olive at all. Even people who are very critical of most of the collectors say that Sharp and Campbell were the best of all of them because they had more concern for the people they dealt with.

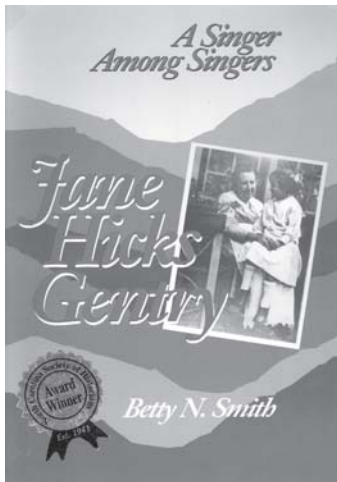
The old woman that Mary Jane Queen coached was wonderful. I thought she was the best thing in it. And the little ballad singer [Emmy Rossum] that Sheila [Adams] coached, they never let her sing a whole ballad. They just let her sing little snatches. I realized that when my children gave me that recording [*Songcatcher: Music From and Inspired by the Motion Picture*, Vanguard 2001]. The only song they let her sing all the way through was one with Dolly Parton, a song that wasn't in the movie. The only people who got to sing whole songs were Iris DeMent and Emmy Lou Harris, who sang "Barbry Ellen" with full orchestra. But she [Emmy Rossum] had really learned how to sing ballads. They said she was an opera singer. I did hear her sing one, a snatch of one song, that I'm almost sure came from the book of Miss Gentry's singing. I've never heard that song like that anywhere else. But she didn't sing enough of it. I wanted to hear some more to be sure it was Ms. Gentry's song. I guess they didn't trust us to want to hear a whole ballad unaccompanied.

After I saw the movie, I called Sheila [Adams], and I said, "Sheila, you and I know that no matter what their inclination—those two teachers would not have been out in the woods. *Everybody* was out in the woods! If you were going to do something you didn't want people to know about—and especially if you were 'fotched-on' women in the mountains—you're not going to be out in the woods, where someone would certainly see you." And she said, "I tried to tell them that, but they wouldn't listen to me." The moviemakers missed the whole point that two teachers in the mountains wouldn't have done anything to upset their students' parents. They weren't from around here. They were "from off," as Jan Davidson [Director of the John C. Campbell Folk School] says.

PJ: Cecil Sharp collected many ballads from Jane Gentry. In your book *Jane Hicks Gentry: A Singer Among Singers*, you have written that many of Gentry's songs and ballads have Scottish roots and that her ancestors in the

Hicks family may have come from the north of England. Another part of her family, the Harmons, was German. While the English and Scots-Irish connections with Southern Appalachian music and dance are apparent, why don't we see more evidence of German influence within these traditions? Do you also see any traces of German folk culture in Gentry's songs or stories?

BS: I've always thought that the stories were maybe from the German side.



Old Counce's great-grandfather, George [Harmon], came down from Pennsylvania to Randolph County ["Old Counce," Council Harmon (ca. 1807-1896), was Jane Gentry's maternal grandfather]. Then Cutliff Harmon [1748-1838], Old Counce's grandfather, lived there, and it was Cutliff who was carrying goods for Daniel Boone and Colonel Robinson up from the Yadkin Valley through Boone country to Elizabethton [Tennessee]. Cutliff liked that country up there, so he moved his family from Randolph County up to Beech Mountain. I have always thought that maybe it was the tales, at least the Jack Tales, that probably came from the German side of the family.

PJ: Are there any particular tales from Germany that you know?

BS: I can't tell. Old Counce was known as the greatest storyteller of them all. All of the Beech Mountain storytellers will say, "I learned this from my great-great-great," however many generations back. But Ms. Gentry learned them from him directly, and she was the first one to have her stories collected.

Many of the songs are known in Scotland and England and Ireland. A professor from Duke at a North Carolina Folklore meeting one year made the comment that sometimes the songs are on both sides of the border. Since we don't know where they lived in England, it could have been in the north of England, where there could have been some Scottish influence. I don't know how we'll ever know, but there must have been some German influence.

Cutliff married a German woman, but there was a lot of intermarriage going on between the Scots-Irish and the Germans before they ever came down this way. We all know the Scots-Irish came later than the Germans, but I think there was a lot of intermarriage.

SP: In the Foreword to your book, Cecelia Conway asks women readers and scholars of Appalachia to "think carefully about the silences in Gentry's life" and to consider what these silences might suggest about adversity faced by Gentry in her life. What would be your response to Conway's inquiry?

BS: Well, I think she was a lot like her grandfather, Old Counce Harmon, and they learned early on how to live every day the best they could. In spite of the fact that she never complained about a bad back, her daughter [Nola Jane, the youngest child] told me that she used to rub liniment on her mother's back at

night. All her adult life she had a really bad back. She never complained about how much work she had to do. That family's philosophy was that as long as you don't call it work, it's not work. It's only work if you say it's work.

They were up on Meadow Fork [in Madison Co., NC] with all those children in a small house in the wintertime, raising almost everything they ate. They raised their own sheep. And she's spinning and weaving and sewing and knitting for all of those children. You and I know that's hard work. But her granddaughter told me that she and her mom [Maud Long] just wouldn't have appreciated talking about how hard their lives were. "That's life," they said.

SP: Did you intend for the book to provide insights related to gender and women's studies?

BS: I decided that I would let somebody else do that, though when Bill Malone did his women's thing at Duke and UNC,² I went down for a day to both places. He had me do a little bit of the play that told about Jane Gentry's early life. I think that you can't do everything in one book, and I decided I would let somebody else do that. I didn't want to get so academic that you couldn't see her. I really wanted it to be a book that a lot of people would like to read, not just scholars who wanted to know about the music or the stories.

SP: In the Preface of your book, you talk about an important informant named Miss Peggy Dotterer and how she said that you and Maud Long [Gentry's daughter] were both good singers, but that Jane Gentry was "out of the past." In Miss Peggy's words, she was "genuine." What is meant here by "genuine"?

BS: That's what Miss Peggy said. There were only three people who really had heard her sing, and Miss Peggy was one of them. All I can say is that it sounded old-timey to her. I was just quoting Miss Peggy. Mr. Bill Moore, he's the one who said that she was the most beautiful singer, "a singer among singers." That's where the title of the book came from. Both of them and her daughter Nola Jane made me think that she was a beautiful singer. A lot of people think that if you don't sing kind of rough and sound strident, that you



Betty Smith inside Sunnybank, Jane Gentry's home. Photo by Leila Weinstein

aren't a good ballad singer. I think there were, and still are, all kinds of singers. She is one of those people I would just give anything [to have heard].

She does walk in this house [Sunnybank], you know. I think you have to have a baby to meet her, though. I met a young couple on the street in Marshall who had spent the night here when they got married. The husband won't come back because he met her on the stairs. He didn't know who she was, but that's who it always is here. I said, "You don't have to worry. I would give anything to meet her. She's a wonderful old woman. You should go back if you can meet her." "No," he said. "I'm never going back." The amazing thing is that I started hearing this from different grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They'd say, "Do you know the ghost story?" And they'd tell it, but they all told it differently. There are all of these family stories, and everybody tells them differently.

I was listening to a tape that someone left running during a family reunion, and I heard a first-hand ghost story from somebody in the family. A woman said, "My husband and I spent the night at Sunnybank with our baby. Aunt Maud and Nola Jane were there, but there were no boarders in the house at the time. After supper, we put the baby to bed upstairs, and we all went to bed. In the night, somebody came in and covered the baby and walked out. There's a balcony all down the side of the house. In the morning, I thanked Aunt Maud for looking after the baby, and Aunt Maud said, 'Well, honey, that wasn't me. That was Momma. She always looks after the babies in this house.'"

I found out who it was. The lady worked at UNC-Greensboro, and her husband was a lawyer in Greensboro. She said that he didn't go into the courthouse on Monday morning and say, "I saw my wife's grandmother who died in 1925, covering up the baby," but she declared that's what happened. Elmer [Hall] who owns Sunnybank can tell you more, because every now and then it happens.

BALLADS

SP: You have been able to befriend traditional singers in various communities of western North Carolina renowned for their old-time music traditions. Has this enabled you to see any overarching differences between the singing in different regions, such as Beech Mountain (in Watauga and Avery counties) and Madison County?

BS: When I did the book, I took all of the Madison County singers and compared them to the Beech Mountain singers and found that Ms. Gentry sang some songs that they didn't sing here, and she didn't sing some that they did. But to really compare I'd have to get out all my notes. She definitely was more like the Beech Mountain singers than not. But there is always a lot of overlapping, and there were some times when Sharp did not put anything but one verse of a song, which happened with songs like "Barbry Ellen" and "Lord Thomas."

The version of "Three Nights Drunk" that they sing in Beech Mountain, that has been recorded in books by Thomas Burton, is a much later version

than Ms. Gentry's. Ms. Gentry's version doesn't mention anything like a zipper on a dishrag or a J.B. Stetson chamber pot. Hers says "buttons on a bed quilt" and "galluses on a petticoat." She died in 1925, so most of hers are older versions than what those singers were singing for Burton. That's just one example, but it does make a difference when things were collected. Ms. Gentry's were collected in 1916 and 1917. The singers in this county [Madison] tend to sing pretty much the same songs. They have a certain group of ballads that most of them know.

When I was in Scotland, I had been trying to find Lizzie Higgins. Her mother [Jeannie Robertson] was the most famous of all the Scottish ballad singers, and I wanted to meet her. So John Ramsey, who was at that time head of the Berea Country Dancers, gave me a list of people to get in touch with, and one of them was a young man who was head of the farm at Clooney Castle. So I wrote to him, and he said, "Oh, you must stay with us, and would you like to meet Lizzie Higgins?" [laughter] Some days you're just living right! We had a whole evening of trading ballads, and I couldn't understand very much of what Lizzie said, but boy, I could sure tell what ballads she was singing!

It was so good to hear some that we do sing and to know how different they are and yet they're the same ballad. You know they are; they're telling you the same story, but the tune is different.

I heard a version of "Barbry Ellen" down in the eastern part of the state, and it sounded for the world like it came right out of the Victorian era. Every other word was "the villain," and I had never heard it that way before. But it was the same story. There's a Black version of "Barbry Ellen," too. I do like to hear other versions.

LW: Do you think that it's important that a singer know about the cultural context of the songs he or she sings? And could you tell us anything about the ballad "Omie Wise"?

BS: The ballad of "Omie Wise" was one of those that I learned early on, because my grandmother's grandfather was the sheriff who arrested old Jonathan Lewis. The Adamses—you know, in the song it says Adams' Springs—lived right there near the town of Randleman [NC]. This happened



Thomas McGowan presented Betty Smith with the 2001 Brown-Hudson Award from the North Carolina Folklore Society

in 1807, though some sources say 1808. There's plenty of court records that said it was 1807. She was a young girl who worked for an Adams family. Nobody has been able to find out which Adams. In our family, there were three Adams brothers who came to Randolph County, but there were some other Adamases, too. The exit that you would take to find her grave is the same exit that goes to Richard Petty's museum. Now there is a stone on her grave, but there wasn't when she died. Somebody who thought that she should have a grave marker put it there later on.

But to this day, if you go to Randleman, you will see the main street is called Naomi Street, and the bridge is Naomi Bridge. At one time the J.P. Stevens Mill was Naomi Mills, and the Methodist Church was Naomi Methodist Church. Eleanor Wilgus, D.K. Wilgus' wife, has done a book [*Naomi Wise: Creation, Re-creation, and Continuity in an American Ballad Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: Chapel Hill Press, 2003], and before she died, she used to call me every now and then. She loved to talk about Omie Wise, and they found a diary in California that they think is the same Omie Wise. In effect, it says that she was no better than she ought to be, and that she'd probably had other children, illegitimate children.

I have a second cousin, Thelma Adams, who is in her 90s, who I told about the book. She lives on the other side of the highway from the Richard Petty Museum. Thelma said, "That is not so!" [laughter] In other words, they have been protecting this young, beautiful girl who was "done wrong" all these years since 1807, and you're never going to convince her that it's anything but the way she's always believed it to be. It's amazing what kind of impact a local murder has on the community, because they still remember it, and they



Folksinger Betty Smith

still talk about it. That one was written up by the man who was the president of old Trinity College, Dr. Braxton Craven, but he used a pseudonym, Charlie Vernon [see *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, Vol. II*]. I guess it wasn't suitable for a college president to be writing about a local murder, but it was done some years after it happened.

"Omie Wise" is one that I've known for a long time. I like to know about a song, I really do. I like to find out all I can.

IDENTITY

PJ: Although you now live in Madison County, you grew up in the Piedmont and also lived in Marietta, Georgia, for many years. How has living in these various places influenced your own music? Do you consider yourself to be a "mountain person" and an Appalachian singer?

BS: I don't know how I fit in. I just sing. I don't call myself anything, because I don't like to be put in a box.

PJ: How do you label yourself, if you tell somebody what you do?

BS: Well, when I went to Vancouver, British Columbia, to a United Nations Conference, they had music from all over the country. The woman who met me in the airport didn't know me, so I walked over, and I said, "Are you looking for Betty Smith?" And she said, "You don't look seedy enough to be a folksinger" [laughter]. So, I guess I'm not a folksinger. She spent all weekend apologizing [laughter]. I've been writing down some stories, and my daughter Jan thinks that should be the name of the book: "You don't look seedy enough to be a folksinger."

This was 1976, and you were seeing all these people with jeans with holes in their knees and their hair needed washing, and they thought that's what folksingers looked like. So I told her if she would come where we made music, she would find out that even if they had overalls on, they were clean and pressed. Mr. Lunsford said that these were social occasions, and so you just wore the best you had, and you behaved the best you knew how.

I'm a folksinger if I'm singing something that I learned from my dad or my grandmother, but sometimes I'm not. What do you call a folksinger? What did Big Bill Broonzy say? He had never heard anyone other than folk singing. He'd "never heard no horse singing!" So what *is* a folksinger?

PJ: How do you fit in with the long-standing community of Madison County ballad singers? Are you accepted by the local singers?

BS: I guess I've pretty much been accepted, although I am an outsider, but so was Jane Gentry. She was one of the very few [Madison County singers] who was not related. She came from Beech Mountain, and her repertoire was more like the Beech Mountain people than the Madison County people.

I live here because I like to live here. I guess we started building our house about 30 years ago and moved in full-time about 20 years ago. But I've been coming up here for more than 40 years just for the music. We have one of the best festivals anywhere right here in Hot Springs—the Bluff Mountain Festival. We've got music mostly from this area because we all work for free. We don't go around inviting people who have to travel to get here. The people here who

have organized it are people like Rodney Sutton and Mary and Rob Kelly, so it isn't always the people who have always lived here who organize things.

AB: You say in your liner notes for *Both Sides Then and Now*, "Everyone should sing" and that "everyone should sing in whatever voice and style feels natural." How do you view your own voice and style?

BS: I just sing. And I just sing the way I've always sung. A couple of times I've had to go [to the doctor], and they put that light down your throat, and they think you've got polyps or something, and I've never yet had them. They tell me that it's because I sing naturally, that I'm not doing anything to my voice that is not natural, which is what makes you have polyps. But then I've never had any voice training either. I like to hear people just sing in their own natural voices. And the funny thing is that even in the same family, everybody doesn't sing alike.

I used to have Miss Dellie Norton and Berzilla Wallin in my classes. They were sisters, and they never sang alike. Miss Dellie, you could hear across the holler over there. That's the way she sang, but Berzilla didn't sing that way. Some people say, "Oh, in this community they go up on the end of phrases." They don't all go up on the end of phrases. Some do, some don't. It's just really that they are doing their own thing.

People are teaching now how to sing like somebody. Well, I don't teach that, because I'm not sure how to do that. I guess it's okay, if that's what you



Betty Smith. Photo by Susan Pepper

want to learn. For example, you might want to learn to sing Carter Family songs the way they sang them, but that's just not what I do, so I don't teach that. I love Carter Family songs, but I don't try to sing them like the Carter Family—because that's not who I am.

TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND REVIVALISTS

PJ: When discussing old-time music traditions today, it is hard to avoid the subject of “folk music revivalists.” What role do revivalists play in the tradition, and do you consider yourself to be a revivalist?

BS: Every singer I've ever known is sometimes a revivalist and sometimes not. Mr. Lunsford was a revivalist. He collected songs from other people, and then he sang and played them.

PJ: So what role do revivalists play in the tradition? Is anyone who collects, performs, and passes on a musical tradition—and thus keeps it alive—a revivalist?

BS: That's what I think, but that's not what everybody else thinks.

PJ: Who would *not* be a revivalist?

BS: Somebody who only sang the songs from their own community or their own family and never went outside to sing. That would be a traditionalist all the way, I guess, but how are you going to find anybody like that?

PJ: All musicians who play “traditional” music today have been exposed to recordings, songbooks, radio, whatever, so what is a good working definition of what is traditional now?

BS: There hasn't been anything that was absolutely traditional in so many generations now because we don't have communities like that anymore. We don't have communities that are cut off from the rest of the world and people who never leave their homes. Even the people that we think of as very traditional know songs that are not from their family or their community, and they don't worry about it.

You know, my dad never would have said, “I'm going to sing a ballad” or “I'm going to sing a hymn” or try to explain what he was going to do. He just sang. A lot of people don't try to explain to you. In fact, they may not even call them ballads at all. They just go sing what they know. Some people did call them “ballets” when they wrote them down, with a “t,” but most of them didn't write them down.

Even with the stories. Maud Long said it “just went dead” on her when she tried to write [a story] down. So I did. I took 11 long Jack Tales off the Library of Congress tapes. And if you think that's not hard... She was an incredible storyteller, so you're just going along, and all of a sudden you realize you haven't been typing in five minutes [laughter]. You've been sitting listening to her tell that story and trying to figure out how to spell this so it sounds like what she said, because she hadn't written them down. She was one of the most incredible Jack Tale tellers of *long* Jack Tales, involved. She told more than her mother told, at least the ones that were written down.

But, you know, that is such a hard question, because we just don't have places where people are cut off from the rest of the world. We hear the

radio—even the early days of radio. Bradley Kincaid sang “Barbry Ellen” every Saturday night for four years by request on the National Barn Dance. That was early country music, but Bradley Kincaid went to Berea College, and he met a lot of people from all over, especially when he started singing in places like the National Barn Dance. When he started out, he probably was what you’d call a traditional singer, but after a while, he was performing for big groups of people.

PJ: Has there ever been a time when people have spent a lifetime only exposed to the music of their family or their community with no outside contact?

BS: I think so—a long time ago, but nobody was collecting it then, except for possibly those older collections in the British Isles. It’s also entirely possible that Sharp may have met some people like that in this county. He said that when he got to Kentucky and met the miners, he could tell that their versions of the songs had changed more because they had more contact with outsiders than people in this county did.

When Ms. Gentry lived on Meadow Fork, I doubt if she had very much contact with anybody else except there was some more family up there. But when she moved to town, she had boarders who came into Sunnybank. If she heard somebody sing a song that she wanted to learn, I’ll bet she learned it.

There was one song, “Sing Said the Mother,” in the first edition of the Sharp songs that wasn’t in the next one because it may not be a traditional song. But she knew it. She liked children’s songs, and that’s what that was. I don’t know who wrote it, but it wouldn’t be a song that would be in her repertoire of traditional songs. I’ll bet she learned it from somebody who stayed here in this house. Only Sharp didn’t know that because he had probably never heard it either.

PASSING IT ON

AB: Will you tell us about your experiences as a teacher?

BS: I’ve taught everything from pre-school to Elderhostel and all in between. I used to teach at Mars Hill [College] in the summers. I taught Elderhostel, and then I taught music for elementary teachers and regular summer school. I do think of myself as a teacher, and I’m still teaching. Anne Lough is teaching my continuing dulcimer class at Campbell Folk School this week, and I still teach a week at Western [Carolina University], and this year I taught a week at Elkins [Augusta Heritage Center, Davis & Elkins College, in West Virginia]. I’m still teaching short courses. I really like teaching.

One thing that I found with teaching dulcimer is that I like to get people to get the songs in their head, which is not exactly the way everyone is teaching dulcimer these days. I don’t like this thing of reading numbers. It’s just reading numbers when you have no idea what the song sounds like. This will be the third year at Western that I do a tape of all the tunings we are going to do, and all the songs we are going to do. The university sends it out with a letter from me that says, “I don’t want you to try to play this. I just want you to listen to it, every day if you can,” and it becomes something like

oral tradition. I mean you get it in your head before you start, and it's incredible how fast people learn to play a song on instruments when they already know what it sounds like. That's always been my way of teaching. So we just started trying it over there, and I've had some big classes and it really works. I'm all for knowing the tune before you start.

PJ: As a writer and an educator, you have been on staff at numerous workshops—at Hindman Settlement School, John C. Campbell Folk School, and at Berea College. What role do these workshops play in the music and dance traditions of the region? Do they help to shape local tradition in any way?

BS: You know, I'm not sure. The first time I taught a class at Mars Hill, there was a group of alumni that they brought back, and this would have been in the late '60s, but it was before the colleges, at least Mars Hill, had paid any attention to being "Appalachian" at all. We set up this week-long course. I brought in members of the faculty in different areas, and some musicians, and we did music and dance and history and culture. We had some good people. And it turned out to be really successful because these people had been to college at Mars Hill, but they hadn't thought about where they were, or even what part of the country they were in.

So that was the start. From that, we started teaching a summer Elderhostel. It was music and dance, history and culture, flora and fauna. We had 45 people every time we taught it! It just filled up, you know, because we had some good people.

I guess that was probably before I wrote that curriculum guide that I'd forgotten all about until you found it. But I'd probably learned some of that from just doing those courses where I didn't have anybody to tell me what to do. All I could do was to bring in people who knew about the history or about the flora and fauna. That's when we started Appalachian Studies.

PJ: What about at the Campbell Folk School in Brasstown [North Carolina]?

BS: At the Folk School, once a week there is a dance. It's open to everybody who's at the school—it could be Elderhostel people, it could be any of the classes—and the local people all come in. There's also a Friday night concert that is free every week, and the local people all come in for that. When you're teaching those Elderhostels, they come from all over. It's really hard to know how much it impacts the local people, except I think it does in Brasstown, because they come to the school while the students are there for things.

PJ: For the evening events, but not the classes?

BS: The local people take the night classes because you don't have to stay at the school. I mean, that *is* who takes the night classes. There's a lot of banjo and guitar and fiddle in the night classes. And when they don't fill a class up, instead of canceling it, they will offer a scholarship to local people. They get on the radio and say "we have a ...," and then it only costs a very small amount because they're not staying at the school. The idea is that it doesn't cost the school any more to teach a couple more people, and it's better to keep from canceling the class. It does bring local people into the school who might not be there otherwise. I think there's more there than in most places.

At Hindman, we get some local people in sometimes for the night programs, especially when there's dancing and music. At Elkins, there are probably some local people, but it's not specifically set up for them. It's hard to say about the impact on the community. It depends on where you are.

SP: Let's talk about the curriculum that you mentioned before. Do you think that a course like that would be just as applicable now as it was 30 years ago?

BS: I don't see why not, because at that time we were thinking, "We ought to know more about our own music and our own stories and our own dance." Actually, that's what you're doing in this Master's program, aren't you?

We had a project some years ago to research the genealogy of the Madison County singers and to learn what music, if any, their family was doing now. We found that all except for a very small number were related back to the first Roderick Shelton, who settled Madison County. We did the project ourselves until we got to a point where we knew we were going to need reams of tape and we would need to pay for transfers. It was getting out of hand, and we did not get funding. NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] said we didn't have an oral historian on our committee.

I had a degree in sociology. I had worked in welfare and family service agencies, and what did I do? I listened to people, and I wrote it down. We also had someone who was Head of Psychiatric Nursing at Chapel Hill (Betty Sue Johnson, who organized and ran the Byard Ray Festival for 11 years), and a



Betty Smith in grandson Bradley's 2nd grade classroom in Midlothian, Virginia

clinical psychiatrist, as well as historians, librarians, etc. on faculty at Mars Hill. We really didn't think that was a legitimate complaint. Then for so long after that, Cratis Williams and Loyal Jones, who knew about the project, would want to know

what happened to it, and we'd have to say that we just couldn't do it. But I think it would have been good to know what music, if any, they were still doing in the same families.

Some are doing it now who weren't doing it then. For one thing they have a place; they have somewhere to sing. The ballad singers have found that there are places where they can sing. There are festivals, and there are people who are interested in it now. So they started to learn the ballads that were in their community all the time. They just didn't know them, but now they do.

AB: In your liner notes to *Songs Traditionally Sung in North Carolina* (1975), you said, “I would like to see singing return to the mountain communities as an art form as it was when Cecil Sharp was there in 1916.” So, in the spirit of looking forward, what do you see for the future of ballad singing in Madison County? And what changes have you seen over the past 30 years or so?

BS: I see more singers than I did 30 years ago, probably. There seem to be more of the young ones in some of these families learning the ballads. But that’s not very widespread; that’s for sure. I think that they started realizing that it was important for somebody to carry on, and as I said before, that there are a lot of festivals and other places to sing too. There used to be some [venues], but I think that there are certainly more festivals today.

AB: What other changes have you seen in the role of music in communities in general, in schools, churches, and the home?

BS: I wrote music curriculum for young children for a long time. The woman that I work with from New York thinks that it is getting worse and worse—that children aren’t getting any music. They aren’t getting enough in school to make any difference, and they aren’t getting any at home. She gets very discouraged, and then she comes down here and thinks that we do a lot better than they do up there. But I’m not sure that we’re doing that well.

I used to do so many school residencies, and I often didn’t even see a music teacher in the schools. I don’t think we’re doing as good a job as we ought to do. I just think that we need to make music however. It’s meant an awful lot to me to be able to make music. It doesn’t matter what kind you make. Children are such natural musicians. They really are. Something happens by the time they get grown, and then they say, “I can’t sing.” Well, they could. They did. But something happened. I just think we’ve become such spectators. We think that if somebody says to sing, we’re talking about performing, and I’m not talking about performing. I’m talking about just singing—just to make music. You know my dad, he just liked to sing, and he did. They got together and just sang, and they weren’t performing. And when I say I think everybody ought to sing, I’m not talking about performing.

CJ: What do you hope will be your legacy?

BS: Oh, my goodness, what a question! Well, I’ve learned a lot from other people, and I hope somebody has learned from me. I hear people say, and I see it written, that people get angry because somebody sings one of their songs. And I’m thinking, “Why did you put it on a recording or in a book if you didn’t want anybody to sing it?” There are ways to be respectful of other people’s material, however. I will say that.

I think through teaching I’ve probably made more of an impact than any other way. I’m not sure, but I hope that I will have caused some people to make music who maybe might not have otherwise. I don’t even much care what kind or how they do it. I just think it’s important. I think that’s one of the best things in this whole world to be able to do.

And dance. I’m not leaving that out! Dancing’s just something that happened when people didn’t have all these other things. They weren’t

watching TV. They couldn't even go to the library. If you lived up on Meadow Fork, you told stories and you sang to entertain each other. But now we have to do it around all the other things that are happening.

I did teach a lot of kids who didn't have a whole lot of things at home going for them. I taught all the ones who didn't speak English and had emotional problems. But sometimes the only things they knew were TV jingles. My dad had all these little sayings and little songs. They weren't anything much—you know, "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream." And "Here I stand upon a stump. Come and kiss me 'fore I jump." There are children who don't know any sayings and songs, not that those are important things—just that it's important to know things that your family or your community knows. If nobody ever says or sings or tells you those things, then you don't have anything from your family that makes you a part of that whole. And that's one of the good things: when people knew the same songs and told the same stories, they were a part of a family or a community. It's important to feel like you're a part of something.

NOTES

1. The term "psaltery" generally refers to "an instrument of the zither family" which "consists of a raised piece of wood, or a wooden box with soundholes, without a neck; it may be rectangular, triangular or trapeziform in shape." The strings are generally plucked either with fingers or plectra. When the strings are struck, a psaltery is more aptly described as a hammered dulcimer (McKinnon, James W., Nelly Van Ree Bernard, Mary Remnant and Beryl Kenyon de Pascual. "Psaltery" in *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy. <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>).

Smith's psaltery "is played like a table harp and is encased in a beautiful wooden box like a small, square grand piano. It is portable in that the legs may be removed and the instrument transported quite easily in a car" (Moore, 8A. See "Selected Articles" below, p. 184). For extensive information on the history of the psaltery, see the entry for "psaltery" in *Grove Music Online*, referenced above.

2. Bill C. Malone, professor emeritus of history at Tulane University, is a well-known scholar of country music who served as the first Lehman Brady Chair Professor, a position shared between the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University. During the spring semester of 2000, he taught the course "Women and the Making of Southern Folk and Country Music." Guest performers/lecturers in the course included Betty Smith, Hazel Dickens, Murphy Henry, Tish Hinojosa, and Carol Elizabeth Jones. Topics included Hillbilly Women and Blues Women: 1920-1933; The Women of Protest: Aunt Molly Jackson and her Sisters; Women in Country Music: 1933-1945; Women and the Folk Revival; Women in Country Music: 1945-1963; Rockabilly Women and Janis Joplin; Bluegrass Women; Gospel and Blues Women; The Women of Top 40 Country Music; and Tejano Women. For more information contact the Manuscripts Department, CB#3926, Wilson Library, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Bill C. Malone Collection, Call No. 20315.



Patricia Beaver, Annie Bryant, Phil Jamison, Betty Smith, Carl Jenkins, Susan Pepper, Leila Weinstein on the porch at Sunnybank, 24 Oct. 2006

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