Nora Hicks and The House Carpenter

Building Connections Through Research and Records

On August 28, 1940 Frank Clyde Brown returned to Watauga County, North Carolina to document and record the folk songs of North Carolina. By this point he had already been travelling throughout North Carolina for several years, collecting folklore including superstitions, folk ballads, legends, and games via a wax cylinder Ediphone rigged up to the engine of his Ford. Nora Hicks, then aged 55, recorded 14 new songs for him that day in her mountain town of Sugar Grove, including a version of the popular folk ballad “House Carpenter.” The final result of Brown’s work, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, paints a broad picture of how folklore colors the lives of the people who pass it down. Through Brown’s exploration of this music, we are able to understand how folk songs may serve a purpose as ways to teach moral lessons, motivate laborers, provide comfort, and entertain those whose daily lives likely consisted of little more than working to get by.

Nora Hicks was born in Watauga County on Christmas Day of 1885 to William Hicks and Elizabeth (Betty) Baird Hicks, one of five children. There is very little information available that gives a solid idea of who she was as a person—the records I’ve found in my research don’t tell much more than where she lived and what her families did for work. Nora’s most lasting legacy has become recording the songs she sang for Frank Brown over the course of a few days in 1939 and 1940. However, I can attempt to piece together what her life might have looked like as a rural mountain woman in the late 19th/early 20th century through various records and supplemental articles. I can summarize the history of a place, trace the history of a family, document the evolution of a song, and speculate as to how these things might have come together to one day be documented by an enthralled professor from Trinity College.

Nora had a wealth of knowledge of folk songs, passed down to her from her paternal grandmother Fannie (b. 1837). Fannie’s grandfather was Samuel “Big Sammy” Hicks (from whom Calvin was also descended), a man who is considered to be one of the major harbingers of folk music to the northwestern region of North Carolina (Matteson). “Big Sammy” came to Watauga County in 1779, ultimately settling in Banner Elk. It was here that he supported himself “by hunting and making maple syrup and sugar” and his boisterous sons played tricks on him as he avoided service in the Revolutionary War (Arthur 212).

Fannie had one child, Nora’s father, and never married—first living with her parents and later with her son William and his family, presumably until her death in 1914 (1870 and 1900 US Census). It most certainly was during this time that she would have passed along her musical knowledge to her granddaughter.

By the time Nora was born in 1886, Watauga County was rapidly growing in population, although it was—and is still—a rural area.

“The 1890s ushered in the beginning of the one of the most significant eras in Watauga County’s history. The population of the county grew by 35 percent between 1880 and 1890 (10,611 people in 1890), and it increased another 23 percent by 1900… Four of the biggest factors that changed the county were the rise of Blowing Rock as a resort town, the building of the Moses H. Cone estate near Blowing Rock, the Linville River Railway and the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad, and the Watauga Academy in Boone” (Hardy 96-97).

While this may not be the most exciting information, it does lead me to believe that there would have been enough people vacationing, traveling through, and settling in Watauga County for there to have been opportunities for social interaction outside of the immediate family for many individuals. Blowing Rock, at 16 miles away, would have been a particularly appealing locus of culture. Music and dancing were regularly held events during the warmer months at the Watauga and Blowing Rock Hotels (Hardy 97), and could perhaps have contributed to the spreading of folklore throughout the area.

In 1905, Nora married Calvin Hicks and children of her own—five of whom lived to adulthood: Edith (b. 1910), Margaret (b. 1913), William “Bill” Ambrose (b. 1916), Addie Mae (b. 1920), Andrew “Andy” Jackson (b. 1923), and an infant, Charles Walters (b. 1926), who died at 26 days old (NC Standard Certificate of Death). Census records indicate that Nora lived on farms for most of her life, first with her parents and later with her husband Calvin. For a period of time around 1920’s Calvin found work as a laborer on a sawmill (1920 Census). At this point, the timber boom was already in rapid decline due to the introduction of machine and the suffering North Carolina forests, and it is intriguing to speculate as to how Calvin’s brief foray into the industry might have affected his family’s financial wellbeing just before the onset of the Great Depression (Eller 109-110).

Because there is so little personal information about Nora available, and because census records indicate she spent nearly her entire life on farms, it can be speculated that her day-to-day life consisted mainly of child rearing and housekeeping. “Women…were usually burdened with the responsibilities of running a large household. In addition to the daily activities of cooking, cleaning, spinning, weaving material for clothes, knitting stockings, and making quilts and blankets, the mountain women fed and milked the cows, slopped the hogs, fed the chickens, hoed the corn, carried the water from the spring, washed clothes in an iron kettle in the side yard, and gathered and chopped wood for the fire and the stove. In her younger years, she often bore a child a year and was primarily responsible for the health and discipline of ten to fifteen children” (Eller 32).

In my mind, folksongs would have been sung frequently in the Hicks household, passing from Fannie to her son and to her grandchildren as they went about their daily duties on the farm, or as they settle in for the evening after a long day of work. Amongst the songs Nora Hicks inherited were hymns, popular ballads like “Barbara Allen” and “William Riley,” and “House Carpenter.”

“House Carpenter,” also known as “The Daemon Lover,” “James Harris,” or Child 243, is a ballad delivered as a back-and-forth conversation between two lovers. In Hicks’ version, a man returns from his time away at sea to find that his lover has been married to a house carpenter. Persuaded by promises of the far-off land of “Sweet Willie”, three ships, and a hundred and fifty devoted seamen to “maintain [her] upon”, she departs with him—and leaves her husband and child behind. After two weeks at sea she comes to regret her decision, and weeps bitterly at her choice. The recording is cut off before the conclusion, but in most versions from volume two of the *Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, the woman dies after the ship springs a leak (Brown 171-180).

An old ballad, “House Carpenter” has a rich history. Its earliest appearance in print can be traced to 1657 London, as the broadside “James Harris” (Burrison 171). This version was later recorded in Francis J. Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* *Vol. 2*, published in 1892. This English version (Child 243 A) describes the song as a “Warning for Married Women, being an example of Mrs. Jane Reynolds (a West-country woman), born near Plymouth, who, having plighted her troth to a Seaman, was afterwards married to a Carpenter, and at last carried away by a Spirit…” (Child 360). It is a cautionary tale that takes place over 32 stanzas, describing in detail the tale of a young couple, secretly engaged, who are then separated on the day they are to be married when he is sent to sea. She faithfully waits for him for several years, until eventually she hears that he has died. He reappears as a ghost after seven years, and, much like in Brown’s version, tempts her away from her husband and three children. Her husband finds that she is gone and hangs himself in his grief, while we can only speculate as to what becomes of Jane Reynolds (Child 362-364).

The song has gone through several variations and changes—the most distinct being between the British the American versions. According to Frank Brown, “The notion that the lover from the sea is a *revenant* or a demon, present in the original broadside and less definitely in some of the versions from Child, has faded from most American texts; with us it is merely a domestic tragedy. And perhaps for that very reason it is one of the favorites of American ballad singers” (Brown 171). In its transatlantic journey the song has morphed from a fantastical tale in which the woman is punished for her immoral behavior by her daemon/lover to a song that loses its religious undertones and becomes a story of the consequences of an independent choice.

John Burrison explores early variants of “House Carpenter” in his essay “’James Harris’ in Britain Since Child.” In describing its evolution, he states, “the life of the ballad has been one of printed-oral-printed-oral tradition” (Burrison 271). The ballad crossed borders orally, where verses were revised according to the culture of the region, then circulated back again, morphing into a hybrid version the “old” and the “new”. Specifically, Scottish traditions of “James Harris” differ from their English counterparts with their incorporation of the imagery of the hills of heaven and hell (Burrison 273).

Despite the popularity of “House Carpenter” in America, Burrison was only able to find four “new” versions of “James Harris” throughout his research, leading him to theorize that either the folk tradition in Britain is dying out or that the collection of folksongs by ethnomusicologists has declined. One of versions, published by H.E.D. Hammond is distinctly a mix between Scottish, English, and possibly even American variants (Burrison 275-276).

Burrison also takes creative license into consideration. Given that folklore is passed down orally but recorded by hand, he questions whether or not later versions, with revised lyrics that are not found in older English or Scottish renditions, were added as a conscious reworking or not (Burrison 282).

“House Carpenter” morphs yet again when it makes its way across the Atlantic and through America. Alisoun Gardner-Medwin traces these various transformations of the ballad in her essay “The Ancestry of ‘The House Carpenter’”. She guesses that it appeared in America before the Revolutionary War and Child’s 1882 version (and long before the birth of Nora Hicks), as the lovers’ mysterious destination of “Italy” in English versions becomes “Tennessee” in some American versions. She states: “If I am correct in my belief that the ballad came to the Appalachian Mountains before 1775, then it would seem not impossible that the name “Tennessee” was substituted for “Italy” because the old belief in a western sea just beyond the mountains had not yet been superseded by the correct knowledge of the geography of the rivers and perhaps also because Tennessee represented the mysterious and beckoning west” (Gardner-Medwin 420). The author deduces that Child’s broadside, the first printed record of “House Carpenter,” was published too late to have arrived in America with the first wave of Irish immigrants to Pennsylvania, but that it might have come with Scottish tobacco merchants in the 18th century (Gardner-Medwin 424-425).

Gardner-Medwin also notes the song’s possible journey back to Scotland through tobacco trade between the Scotch-Irish in Virginia with Glasgow. “Though I cannot point to a proven case…It is not impossible that an American version of ‘The House-Carpenter’ could have returned to Britain by 1907 when H.E.D. Hammond printed the Dorset version that forms the basis for Burrison’s theories” (Gardner-Medwin 426).

The journey of “House Carpenter” throughout Britain and America can only be concretely identified to a certain point. Many of the theories put forth by both Burrison and Gardner-Medwin are just that—theories. However it came to exist in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina, it somehow reached the Hicks family, and was passed down to Nora through her grandmother Fannie (Brown Field Notes). When Frank Brown collected the folklore of North Carolina, his audio recordings went untouched for several decades. Through the transcription, documentation, and analysis of “House Carpenter,” it is undergoing another transformation. It will likely continue to absorb cultural elements and variations, keeping the tradition of the folk ballad for years to come.

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