

"GOOD FRIENDS AND BAD  
ENEMIES": ROBERT W. GORDON  
AND AMERICAN FOLKSONG  
SCHOLARSHIP

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"GOOD FRIENDS AND BAD ENEMIES": ROBERT W. GORDON  
AND AMERICAN FOLKSONG SCHOLARSHIP

by



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## ABSTRACT

Robert W. Gordon was a pioneer American folklorist whose work has remained largely unknown to contemporary American folklorists. Gordon was born in 1888 in Maine, brought up in New England and trained as a folklorist at Harvard by Kittredge. He abandoned a career as a university professor and managed to make a living as the first professional folklorist in the United States between 1925 and 1933. It was primarily during these years that Gordon used the popular media and extensive field trips to bring together what was then the largest and most diverse collection of American folksongs ever made by a single person. Gordon continually conceived of his work on a grand scale and in 1928 established the first national center for the study of folksong -- the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. This thesis uses Gordon's own publications, his voluminous correspondence, interviews and some secondary sources, to provide a chronological account of Gordon, his life, work, successes and failures.

Gordon proceeded with a rigorous scientific approach and maintained a developmental theory of the growth of folksong. He sought to contribute to the advance of folklore scholarship by answering the basic and vital questions of the discipline. To do so, he formed and tested hypotheses and

adopted a broad and inclusive approach. This thesis examines the theories and methods by which Gordon worked and discusses the social, cultural and historic contexts which framed his efforts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research and writing of this thesis took me over many miles -- most of them by Greyhound bus. It is to the credit of the many people named in these pages that the project remained enjoyable and even exhilarating.

Joe Hickerson first introduced me to the R.W. Gordon collection and has continued to facilitate and encourage my research in every way. Gerry Parsons has provided much help and many stimulating discussions. Their colleagues at the Archive of Folk Song, Pat Markland and Dick Spottswood, were equally helpful.

By a lucky coincidence I met the Robert W. Gordon collection and Archie Green at nearly the same time. Although the amount of time Archie spent in the Archive was small, he had a large impact on me and on the idea of doing a thesis on Gordon. Archie largely instigated this study and fired my imagination with provocative questions. Much serendipity was involved both in my study of folklore and of Gordon. Without the unflagging support of David Greene of Lehigh University I might not have become acquainted with either.

I was accorded every kindness by the staffs of the Library of Congress' Music Division, the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley, the Eugene C.

Barker Texas History Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, the Randall V. Mills Archive of Northwest Folklore and the Library of the University of Oregon at Eugene.

Barre Toelken, Karen Sieradski, Suzi Jones and the staff at the Randall V. Mills Archive unrolled the red carpet for me. They were more than generous with their time and resources. Also on the West Coast, Norm Cohen and Alfred Frankenstein asked questions and offered insights from which I greatly benefitted.

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This thesis is not written on a Newfoundland topic, but both it and I have benefitted from Newfoundlanders. For this I especially thank Alma and Ray Berkshire, Hilda Best, Gert and John Hollett, Mack Masters, Neil and Lil Masters, Linda, Lil, and Frank Slade, Rowena and Roy Wareham, Wilfred Wareham and their families.

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Herbert Halpert was responsible for the republication in 1938 of Gordon's New York Times articles, and I owe him a particular debt of gratitude. I will be neither the first nor the last of Dr. Halpert's students to testify to his kindness and to his scholarship; I have benefitted from both.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND FORMAT USED

### I. Collections

AFS -- Archive of [American] Folk Song, Library of Congress. In referring to manuscripts in the R.W. Gordon Adventure Mss the following format is used: Number of item in collection, name of informant/correspondent, date of correspondence, as follows:

#2387, Otto Willwood, December 23, 1933.

All Adventure correspondence was addressed to Gordon; the only case in which both the letter writer and receiver are cited is when it is a letter from Gordon, as follows:

#478 to Oliver H.P. Ferris, September 26, 1968.

Manuscripts not in the Gordon collection proper, but part of the Archive of [American] Folk Song personal letter files are cited by name of author of letter, name of receiver, date, location of letter, as follows:

Ben Dover to RWG, March 17, 1940, LC/AFS Pers.

MUNFLA -- Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, St. John's, Newfoundland. Tape recorded interviews on deposit here are so indicated.

UO -- University of Oregon [Robert W. Gordon Collection of American Folksong]. Cited according to their own

system (discussed further in Karen Grimm's "Prolegomenon"):  
 Box number/folder number, as follows:

Juanita Rest to RWG, December 2, 1902. UO 7/9.

## II. Publications

- AA - American Anthropologist
- ACLS - American Council of Learned Societies
- JAF - Journal of American Folklore
- JCM - Journal of Country Music
- JEMFQ - John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly
- JFI - Journal of the Folklore Institute
- JPC - Journal of Popular Culture
- KFQ - Keystone Folklore Quarterly
- Mid SF - Mid-South Folklore
- MQ - Musical Quarterly
- NWF - Northwest Folklore
- OSTMHS - "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" column in Adventure
- OTM - Old Time Music
- PMLA - Publications of the Modern Language Association
- SFQ - Southern Folklore Quarterly
- WF - Western Folklore

#### NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTIONS AND QUOTATIONS

Quotations from interviews are transcribed exactly from the tapes. Standard format is followed -- ellipses indicate omissions, and square brackets indicate doubt on my part as to exactly what was being said.

Gordon's typographical errors are silently corrected. Otherwise all quotations from printed sources are set forth exactly as written, except when square brackets are used, which indicate insertions on my part, meant to clarify the quotation.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already beyond him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter -- tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . . And one fine morning --

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

## I

### INTRODUCTION

After World War I the United States first became generally conscious of the existence of folk traditions. There were, of course, earlier collectors, some of them very important, but they were not part of the mainstream of American consciousness. More than any other American folklorist in the 1920s, Robert W. Gordon embodied the images and interests of that era in the United States. More than any of his contemporaries, Gordon knew how to manipulate those images and interests.

He had a far-seeing imagination. He was an entrepreneur who used a pulp magazine as a mechanism to reach as wide an audience as the most popular commercial artists on radio. By this method he collected a large mass of American song and established a network of correspondents who sent him texts and referred him to singers, some of whom he recorded on wax cylinders. Like his friend Edison, he was dedicated to research; he experimented with theories and with machines searching for the pure truths of science. As a folklorist in the 1920s he sought to define a discipline of folklore according to the same natural laws that apparently governed in the pure sciences. Like Clarence Darrow at the Scopes trial, Gordon brought natural laws to the courtroom,

when he propounded literary evolution in defending the Victor Talking Machine Company's copyright to the song "The Wreck of the Southern Old 97." He had a vision of establishing a national center that would both collect and study scientifically the whole of oral literature in America. At least part of this vision came true; he was the founder of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Almost uniquely he was able to earn his living for a period of years as a folklorist. Gordon was entrepreneur, technician, scientist and scholar. A man of his time, his work grew out of the possibilities of his era.

His era, however, had never heard of a full-time folklorist. While Gordon successfully marketed his "Great Plan" to collect the extant corpus of American folksong, and while he gained considerable popular support, he pursued his research plans intractably. Often he fell into disagreement with his supporters who, inevitably, had other than his own rigorous scientific interest in the subject of inquiry.

Gordon's remarkable success as a folklorist in the 1920s was balanced by great difficulties, disappointments and conflicts. He saw many of his dreams defeated. Neither his "Great Plan" nor his definitive volumes of collectanea and theory were ever finished. At first Gordon's life had the makings of an Horatio Alger success story. Gordon -- like

characters in other novels of the twenties -- seemed able to dream tremendous dreams and to reach them. Instead, the man who was made for success was defeated, compelled to abandon his career as a folklorist. Nearly the last thirty years of his life were spent in other pursuits.

Gordon early gave up teaching and the supervision of graduate students; he never raised a generation of student disciples. Because much of his work was in ephemeral publications and he never completed any of his projected major volumes he is a somewhat dimly seen figure in folklore tradition. Although well-known to folksong collectors and scholars of his own day, Gordon became less known in the next decades when, ironically enough, folklore began to gain wider acceptance.

Robert W. Gordon was a pioneer American folklorist. This thesis is about his efforts to establish himself and his discipline before the American public. Because he had a wider view of his field than his contemporaries did, the thesis examines -- as he did -- the development of the discipline in relation to popular culture, social movements and individual interaction.

Its sources are Gordon's voluminous collections and correspondence. These data are divided between two widely separated locations: the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and the University of Oregon at Eugene.

Additional materials in the possession of Gordon's daughter and son-in-law provided a valuable supplement.

To augment these documentary sources I interviewed surviving friends and relatives of Gordon, on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Although I cannot pretend to have an encyclopedic knowledge of Gordon's career, nor of the various problems he faced, with the materials available to me I have tried to assemble a picture of Gordon, his life, work, theoretical stance and the social and cultural milieu within which he worked.

I first became acquainted with Robert W. Gordon's work in 1974 when, as an undergraduate at Lehigh University, I convinced a tolerant English department to allow me to do an independent study course in folksong and found my way to the Library of Congress' Archive of Folk Song. There, without realizing that I was reinventing the historic-geographic method, I decided to investigate one song in detail. I found two versions of that particular song in Gordon's collection and was fascinated by the letters from Gordon's Adventure correspondents which accompanied the texts. Even more fascinating were Gordon's responses to those who had written him. Joseph Hickerson, then Reference Librarian at the Archive of Folk Song, had a personal interest in Gordon and told me something about the man's life. In December of 1974, when I had returned to the Archive of Folk Song as an intern, I began constructing informant and

geographic indices to Gordon's Adventure correspondence. A letter from Gershon Legman in regard to the bawdy songs among Gordon's collections introduced me to another facet of Gordon, the scientist, and inspired me to construct an index of the items, informants and geographic locations represented in the "Inferno" collection -- "The Inferno" being the bawdy material which Gordon had collected in his effort to document what his informants really sang. I was aware of Gordon as a scientist, scholar and as an enigma in terms of the history of folklore studies. When I met Archie Green on his frequent visits to the Archive of Folk Song I became aware of the political and social contexts within which Gordon was working, and became even more interested in the man and his history. My interest in seriously studying Gordon was encouraged by my teachers at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Herbert Halpert and Neil V. Rosenberg who contributed their knowledge of the man, his legend and the contexts from which he worked. The Folklore Department and the University made it possible for me to consult the widely scattered Gordon manuscripts and the cylinders as well as to interview individuals who had known Gordon.

Barre Toelken and Karen Sieradski generously made available to me copies of tape recorded interviews which they made from 1968 to 1970 with the late Arthur Brodeur, Gordon's long-time friend; with Frank Kester, a cohort of

Gordon's from Berkeley days and the man who introduced him to many of his Oakland and San Francisco waterfront informants; and with the late Benjamin A. Botkin, who knew Gordon slightly from Harvard and who later acceded to Gordon's position in charge of the Archive of American Folk Song.

Between 1976 and 1977 I conducted numerous interviews. I reinterviewed Frank Kester, and interviewed Alfred Frankenstein, a music and art critic, journalist, and long-time student of folk song who, in addition to knowing Gordon in the late 1920s and 30s had been a friend of other important figures in Gordon's life such as Herbert Putnam, Carl Engel, Carl Sandburg and John Lomax. George Stewart, a colleague of Gordon's in Berkeley's English department, was able to substantiate some of Arthur Brodeur's recollections. In Darien, Georgia, Mrs. Gordon's home and Gordon's field station for more than three years, I was able to interview Gordon's brother-in-law Carruthers Paul. Mardis Clarke and Evey White, sisters who had been neighbors of the Gordons in Darien many years before and had been witnesses to Gordon's situation and collecting efforts also contributed their recollections. Gordon's daughter Roberta and her husband L. Bert Nye, Jr. spent many hours talking with me about the man and his life. Rae Korson, the late Harold Spivacke, Joe Hickerson, Jim Smart, Mary Rogers and Edward Waters contributed what recollections they had of

Gordon at the Library of Congress. Gordon's first cousin Louise Ewer remembered their childhood together. Interviews with Charles Seeger and Alan Lomax contributed perceptions of Gordon in the 1930s.

There are, of course, biases and orientations to these oral sources. The theoretical positions of Seeger, Spivacke and Lomax tinge their evaluation of Gordon's activities. Individuals connected with the Library of Congress often reflect or react to the somewhat ambivalent position the Library took for many years in regard to Gordon as discussed in chapter eight. Members of Gordon's family remember him within the context of the difficult and troubled times they endured on his behalf. The opinions, biases and imaginations of those who remember Gordon help greatly in defining the networks within which he worked. They hint at the receptions he received, the understanding and support -- or lack of it -- which he was accorded. Most important, they provide balance to the pages of closely-typed copy which Gordon produced between 1923 and 1928 in response to his "Old Songs" readers. It is these 3897 letters which constitute the bulk of our knowledge of the man.

Using these sources, the study approaches Gordon's life and work from both thematic and chronological points of view, and proceeds in the following way: Chapter two gives a brief outline of Gordon's life and introduces the contexts within which he worked. Because Gordon never articulated a

definitive statement of theory, the implicit assumptions motivating his activities throughout his career must be described. Therefore chapter three examines the theories and techniques which directed his research and the hypotheses he attempted to test.

Four major periods emerge as almost natural divisions in Gordon's life. In each he made his home in a different part of the country and pursued a slightly different occupation. Although the last period by far encompasses the most years, the bulk of Gordon's productivity and creativity as a folklorist occurred earlier in his life. Therefore these four major periods are divided into the five chronological chapters. Chapter four discusses Gordon's youth and education in New England (1889-1918). Chapter five discusses his tenure at the University of California at Berkeley (1918-1924). The four years which Gordon spent on his extended southern field trip are examined in two chapters: chapter six which discusses his actual field work in North Carolina and Georgia (1924-1928), and chapter seven which deals with his use of Adventure magazine at that time. Chapter eight examines his employment at the Library of Congress and his later years in Washington, D.C. (1928-1961).

The ninth chapter looks closely at Gordon's collection and use of case histories of songs, and the tenth chapter presents my final conclusions.

## II

### A MAN OF HIS ERA: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTS

Robert Winslow Gordon was born in Bangor, Maine in 1888, the only child of an elderly New England couple. During Gordon's youth his father was almost always absent; he was raised by his over-protective and devoted mother who made sure that he received the best of educations. Through scholarships, awards, the help of relatives and his own resourcefulness, he attended Exeter Academy from 1902 to 1906. Gordon grew up fascinated with the new inventions and advancements in science and technology of his era. He tinkered with photographic and phonographic equipment, with radios and airplanes.

He was curious and perspicacious, thorough and meticulous in his studies. The qualities stood him well at Harvard where he began his study of English literature in 1906. At Harvard, Gordon became interested in folklore and folksong. During the eleven years that he spent there in varying capacities from 1906 to 1917, Gordon came in contact with many of the scholars who were to play significant roles in the development of folklore studies in the United States over the next few decades. He began his life-long friendship with Arthur Brodeur, a fellow student of English Literature at this time.

Gordon met and married Roberta Peter Paul of Darien, Georgia in 1912. They lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts where Gordon held positions as Assistant in English under George Lyman Kittredge and Barrett Wendall at Harvard. The Gordon's only child, a daughter, also named Roberta,<sup>1</sup> was born in 1914 while the family lived in Cambridge.

In 1917 Gordon accepted the position of Assistant Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. He had a friend there already; Arthur Brodeur had been hired by the same department the previous year. Gordon's teaching duties at Berkeley included instruction and supervision of graduate courses in folklore. It was at Berkeley that Gordon began actively recording and collecting folksong. Using a cylinder recorder for which he specially designed modifications, he recorded sea songs and shanties on the Oakland and San Francisco waterfronts.

In 1923, while teaching at Berkeley, Gordon began editing the "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" department in the pulp magazine Adventure. This was a question-and-answer column devoted to the "old songs." It eventually brought Gordon nearly 4000 letters from readers of the

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this thesis Gordon's wife will be referred to as Mrs. Gordon. His daughter, the present Mrs. Roberta Paul Gordon Nye, Jr. will be referred to as Roberta.

column; most of these contained more than one song text with contextual detail and the reminiscences of the correspondent. By 1927, when the column was discontinued, Gordon had a nation-wide network of informants and contacts, as well as a substantial manuscript collection.

As a result of a conflict within the Department of English, Gordon received a sabbatical for the year of 1924-1925 with the understanding that he would not be rehired the following year. Leaving his family in California, Gordon returned to Harvard, ostensibly to finish his doctorate. He never did this -- instead he decided to devote himself entirely to the scientific collection and study of oral literature. He planned an ambitious year-long field trip for 1925-1926, intending to make the "final collection" of American folksong, recording with cylinder machine as he went from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi and from the southern Appalachians to Newfoundland. Gordon soon abandoned both his schedule and his itinerary however, for he was unable to pull himself away from plentiful material and willing informants. He spent more than four years in the field -- from 1925 to 1929 -- recording mainly the traditions of mountaineers in the Asheville, North Carolina area, and of Blacks in the vicinity of Darien, Georgia.

He was supported in his first year of fieldwork by a Sheldon travelling Fellowship from Harvard University,

discounts and donations on equipment from the Edison, Ford and Eastman companies, loans and aid from friends and contracts for articles with The New York Times. As time went on he continued to market himself, his knowledge and his field, suggesting to firms in the commercial music industry that they hire him as a scientific consultant and free-lance writer-researcher specializing in folksong. The uses he saw for an expert on folksong were by and large unappreciated by the firms he approached, although time has since justified the utility of many of his suggestions.

By 1926 Gordon was bringing himself and his suggestions to the attention of Carl Engel, chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress. Engel was enthusiastic about Gordon's ideas and the two men began dreaming of the establishment of a national center for the collection and study of folk music. As no government funds were available, private donors were solicited and subscriptions were raised. In 1928 the Archive of American Folk Song was established at the Library of Congress. Gordon was appointed Director by Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress.

Relations between Gordon and Putnam did not remain cordial. Although Engel, Putnam and Gordon all may have shared a belief in the importance of a center devoted to the collection and study of American traditional music, they did not agree upon the methods by which such a center should

develop. Gordon wanted the freedom of a research scientist. He wanted financial backing and complete support while he went about his investigations. Although he knew that he could produce more evidence of his work for the Library, it was his judgement that the rigorous and time-consuming investigation of folksong problems was more important. The conflict of views grew. The Depression put an end to the donations which had maintained Gordon's position, and in 1933 the last of the funds ran out. This, coupled with the Library's disappointment in his performance cost Gordon his job -- a blow from which he never recovered.

Gordon's active career as a folklorist ended in 1933, although some of his most important publications appeared after that. He worked in the Washington, D.C. area primarily as a Technical Editor and as a Professor of English until his death in 1961.

While the magnum opus that was to be the culmination of Gordon's work never appeared it influenced all of his research. His research, in turn, shaped those of his publications which did appear. His magnum opus was to be the definitive statement on the development of oral literature. He wanted to define and to answer the basic and vital questions in his field; he expected to do for American folksong what Child had done for the popular ballad. He never did this; however, in order that he might produce this masterpiece he adopted a scientific approach and implemented his

"Great Plan." In turn, the breadth of this approach made him aware of many aspects of folksong traditions that his colleagues had not noticed. Gordon's research in the border areas of folklore studies enabled him to prepare testimonies for copyright cases involving folksongs. His breadth of view included both popular culture and the national elite establishment; Gordon conducted a column in a pulp magazine and conceived of a national research center for the study of oral literature.

Another product of his desire to produce his definitive volumes -- and less visible to us today, but no less important -- were the methods by which Gordon carried on his research. His nascent hypotheses, his attempts to theorize and investigate his subject in a rigorous scientific manner, his use of popular media, his concept of himself as a research scientist, and his efforts to improve recording equipment all mark him as a pioneer and, seemingly, as an anomaly among our predecessors.

What does remain visible to us today are the articles which Gordon published in popular periodicals and volumes. His first published comments on folksong theory and development appeared in his "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" column -- itself designed as one cog in his big machine, one part of his Great Plan. Outside of his "Old Songs" column in Adventure which ran monthly from July 10, 1923 to September 15, 1927, most of Gordon's writing

appeared between 1927 and 1931 in periodicals such as The New York Times, The Forum, World Review and The Golden Book. Many of these short articles were simply items from his collections with brief explanations. His article "Folksongs of America" which appeared in the November 14, 1927 issue of World Review was a recapitulation of the first essay in his fifteen-article New York Times series on types of American folksong which were originally published between January 2, 1927 and January 22, 1928. The entire series was republished as Folksongs of America in 1939 by the WPA. In 1939 also, Gordon published a theoretical essay on "American Folksongs" in The Caravan and a review essay on Flanders, Brown and Barry's New Green Mountain Songster in the Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society.

Gordon was involved as a collaborator in the publication of two volumes, both of which were intended for popular audiences rather than for scholars. For the Society for the Preservation of Negro Spirituals he contributed an article on the development of the spiritual to their volume Carolina Low Country published in 1935. The Society collected songs and presented concerts in which they sang their arrangements of the material; Gordon was supportive of their efforts. Afraid to embroil the group in the controversy over the origins of black spirituals, he toned down his article considerably rather than emphasizing what he felt was his radical understanding of the situation.

Gordon's second collaboration, published privately in 1935, was aimed at a specialized audience and sold only to contributors to the volumes. Called Mademoiselle from Armentières, the book consisted of unexpurgated verses of the song solicited from ex-soldiers. Gordon wrote a detailed chapter on the musical origins of "Mademoiselle," tracing its "family tree."

Growing out of his interest in the development of oral literature, Gordon's family trees of particular songs were useful in another arena -- the court of law. He used his scientific approach to folksong to defend the Victor Company's copyright to the song "The Wreck of the Southern Old 97" when he prepared a detailed case history of the song as testimony for the court. By the 1930s Gordon had completed substantial research on several other song histories which he hoped to use, while director of the Archive of American Folk Song, in provoking test cases on folksong copyright. In the early 1940s Gordon also prepared testimony for the Shapiro-Bernstein Company for a case dealing with the copyright to "Casey Jones"; this case never came to court.

These investigations reflected Gordon's awareness of popular culture, an awareness that was unusual for a folklorist in the 1920s. His understanding extended from a knowledge of popular published versions of songs to a very real ability to gauge how to capture popular support. His

informal writings -- the letters he wrote to his "Old Songs" correspondence -- carried his Great Plan further. Through these letters he extended his reach, attracted and kept a large and dedicated audience willing to supply him with texts, information and contacts. Like any performer, radio announcer or ballyhoo salesman of the decade, Gordon learned to judge his various audiences and to perform successfully before them. Through his column, other publications and letters he developed a core of dedicated fans.

In his use and awareness of popular culture, Gordon resembled the A & R man -- the Artist and Repertory man who worked as field worker and talent scout for commercial record companies. In fact, I feel that Gordon, and even the more cloistered academics and folksong collectors in the 20s, were with their commercial brethren riding the same wave. After the first World War the United States became generally conscious of the existence of folk traditions. The story of the involvement of commercial record companies with folk traditions -- in particular with Southern traditional music -- has been well documented.<sup>2</sup> The A & R men, however, were not the only collectors operating in the southern mountains.

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<sup>2</sup>Bill C. Malone, Country Music U.S.A.: A Fifty-Year History (Austin: University of Texas Press for the AFS, 1968), pp. 32-78. See especially pp. 32-42. Also see Archie Green, "Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol," JAF 78 (1965), 204-228, and D.K. Wilgus, "An Introduction to the Study of Hillbilly Music," JAF 78 (1965), 195-203, especially 197.

Gordon, his fellow folklorists, enthusiasts, radio announcers and record executives -- both those who wanted to "Sell-America-Music" and those who wanted to "Make-America-Musical"<sup>3</sup> -- were, in the 1920s, in the vanguard of a revitalization movement,<sup>4</sup> a deliberate attempt by variously motivated individuals to exploit folk culture -- and particularly folk music. The movement blossomed in the WPA projects of the 1930s which seized upon folk music and culture as grist for the mills of high culture -- the stuff of which poets, playwrights, musicians and artists could create truly American culture. These government sponsored projects represented the first widespread interest and attention to folk culture in the United States. This is not to say that folk culture was yet able to command for and of itself; significantly some folkloristically-inclined WPA projects were greeted with derision and disbelief.<sup>5</sup> If folk and popular interest in folk culture was attained to varying degrees in the 1920s and 1930s, it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that elite groups began to constitute a significant market for folksong.

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Seeger both coins these terms and discusses them in "Music and Class Structure in the United States," American Quarterly 9 (Fall 1957), 281-294. This distinction will be pursued further in the following paragraphs.

<sup>4</sup>Anthony F.C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," AA 58 (April 1956), 265.

<sup>5</sup>Jerre Mangione, The Dream and the Deal. The Federal Writer's Project, 1935-1943 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1972), p. 266.

The long road that American traditional music took to respectability was a result of what Charles Seeger has identified as the activities of two pressure groups which developed concurrently with the development of American music and culture. Both the "Sell-America-Music" and the "Make-America-Musical" movements dismissed folksong as bad music, although they did so for different reasons. The first group was typically interested in anything that would sell. Tailoring their products to urban lower-middle and middle classes, members of the "Sell-America-Music" fraternity<sup>6</sup> were responsible for the birth of the popular idiom of the day.<sup>7</sup> The "Make-America-Musical" group was concerned with establishing good music in America -- on the order of European high art music. Although both groups were bitterly opposed to each other's products, they were united in despising folk music.

Seeger observed that their audiences joined them in this. Popular audiences preferred the kind of music "that shied away from folklore and had yearnings, rather low-grade, it is true, for the 'finer things of life'."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Bill C. Malone calls Seeger's two pressure groups "fraternities" and specifically relates their activities to the development of country music in Country Music U.S.A., pp. 32-42.

<sup>7</sup>Seeger, 289. Charles K. Wolfe considers distinctions between these groups in The Grand Old Opry: The Early Years, 1925-1935. [OTM booklet 2] (London: OTM, 1975), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>Seeger, 290.

Elite audiences were dedicated to nurturing high art in America. Those who fondly remembered, listened to or performed home-made music received little attention by either group, although they constituted a sizeable audience.<sup>9</sup>

Seeger recognized that both groups served as acculturative forces, and changed the music they touched. Those who wanted to sell America music and those who wanted to make America musical may have had different ends in mind. Nonetheless they treated folk music as an exploitable commodity -- as grist, regardless of what kind of mill it was destined for. Many academics, collecting folksong as an avocation, considered commercial field workers to be the blackest of devils. Print was anathema, commercial discs certainly no better. The intent of academics was often to "preserve" a sort of song that was valuable for romantic, aesthetic, moral, cultural or intellectual reasons. In reality, they differed little from the commercial field workers. Folksong was an exploitable resource.

In fact, those discovering folk music in the 1920s advertised their ventures with similar rhetoric, regardless of their academic or commercial affiliation.<sup>10</sup> Both commercial field workers and their academic brethren often

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<sup>9</sup>Malone, pp. 31-34.

<sup>10</sup>Green, 219. The headnote to Gordon's column, included on p. 88, provides good comparison. Also see Joe Bussard, Wilson Reeves and Leon Kagrise, "Buell Kazee Talking," OTM 6 (Autumn 1972), 7, and Wolfe, p. 17.

prejudiced their collections in favor of "old-time," "traditional" songs that had been "preserved" rather than recording or encouraging innovative performances which reflected the influences of jazz or urban musics.<sup>11</sup> The field techniques employed also were similar; field workers from both backgrounds used newspapers, performer grapevines, and existing town and civic organizations as aids in their collecting.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Wolfe, p. 16. Charles K. Wolfe, "Ralph Peer at Work: The Victor 1927 Bristol Sessions," OTM 5 (Summer 1972), 11; Norman Cohen, "The Skillet-Lickers of North Georgia," in Thurston Moore, ed. Country Music Who's Who, 1970 (N.Y.: Record World Pub. Co., 1970), 19-20; Fred Hoeptner and Bob Pinson, "Clayton McMichen Talking: 2," OTM 2 (Autumn 1971), 15; John A. Lomax, "Field Experiences with Recording Machines," SFQ I:2 (1937), 60. John Powell protested the image of the "bearer of traditional music" that was emerging in "In the Lowlands Low," SFQ I:1 (March 1937), 1. Stress on narrative songs is mentioned in "Commercial Music Documents: Number Nine," JEMFQ 7:3 (Autumn 1971), 124; "The Early Recording Career of Ernest V. "Pop" Stoneman," in Thurston Moore, ed. Country Music Who's Who, 1970 (N.Y.: Record World Pub. Co., 1970), Pt. 7, 31.; Hugh Lemay, "Now Come All You Good People," Colliers 84:18 (November 2, 1929), 20, 58-59, reprinted in Linnell Gentry, ed. A History and Encyclopedia of Country, Western and Gospel Music, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Clairmont Corp., 1969), 8. This was not always the case. John Cohen says that Frank Walker, Columbia A & R man was looking for performers who would "move with the times." See John Cohen, "Introduction to Styles in Old-Time Music," in John Cohen and Mike Seeger, eds. The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book (N.Y.: Oak, 1964), 18. It is also not to say that there were no differences between commercial and non-commercial collectors. Mike Seeger makes interesting comparison in "Some Thoughts About Old-Time Music," also in The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book, 24.

<sup>12</sup>See Robert Dixon and John Godrich, Recording the Blues (N.Y.: Stein and Day, 1970); Kyle Crichton, "There's Gold in Them Hillbillies," Colliers 101 (April 30, 1938), 24; Marian P. Michael, "Child, Sharp, Lomax, and Barry: A Study in Folksong Collecting," Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1960, pp. 21-28, 39; Ralph Peer, "Discovery of the First Hillbilly Great," Billboard 65:20 (May 16, 1953), 20-21.

Relationships between collector and informant were likely to run the gamut from impersonality to close friendship, regardless of the academic or commercial affiliation of the collector.<sup>13</sup>

There is also evidence to show that audiences made little distinction in their reactions to those who courted them. Bradley Kincaid, announcer and singer on the WLS Barn Dance radio show in the 1930s received fan mail strikingly similar to the sort that Gordon received as editor of the "Old Songs" column and as director of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Appreciative individuals wrote in to both Kincaid and Gordon to express their delight that someone else had taken an interest in the "old songs."<sup>14</sup> The trade magazine Talking Machine and Radio Journal perceived little difference between commercial and non-commercial interests in traditional Southern music, describing the establishment of the Archive of American Folk

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<sup>13</sup>For example, Keith S. Chambers, "The Indefatigable Elsie Clews Parsons-Folklorist," WF 32 (1973), 186-187; John Cohen, "Adopted and Arranged in the Public Domain," in John Cohen and Mike Seeger, eds. The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book (N.Y.: Oak, 1964), 34; Norm Cohen, "'I'm a Record Man' -- Uncle Art Satherley Reminisces," JEMFQ 8 (1972), 19; Maurice Zolotow, "Hillbilly Boom," Sat. Eve. Post 216:33 (February 12, 1944), rpt. in Linnell Gentry, ed. A History and Encyclopedia of Country, Western, and Gospel Music, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Clairmont Corp., 1969), 40; Norm Cohen, "Notes on Some Old-Time Musicians from Princeton, West Virginia," JEMFQ 8 (1972), 97.

<sup>14</sup>Loyal Jones, "Who Is Bradley Kincaid?," JEMFQ 12 (Autumn 1976), 126.

Song in 1928 as another example of the growing enthusiasm over hillbilly music.<sup>15</sup>

This is not to say that there were no differences between the fraternities, or even that field workers themselves did not prefer to view themselves as members of one fraternity rather than another. Gordon, unique to the last, didn't approve of what he thought were the methods and attitudes of A & R men any more than he approved of the work of many academic folklorists. Gordon recognized that he was an acculturative agent; he recognized that both the publications of Cecil Sharp and the Okeh Record company were changing mountain traditions. Still, he felt that his activities differed significantly from those of his fellows.

Unlike many other academics, however, while Gordon expostulated against the lavender cowboys and yodelling hillbillies produced by Tin Pan Alley, he was equally ready to supply interpreters of folk music to the American public. He recognized that such interpreters would find an audience. As in his other productions, he intended to combine the popular with the scholarly, to produce popular recordings that did justice to the folk material.

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<sup>15</sup>"There's Gold in Them Thar Hills! And You Can Put Some Of It in Your Cash Register," The Talking Machine and Radio Journal (January 1930), 37.

Gordon can be best seen as a member of both fraternities. He thought that music could sell, and he thought that it should sell, that from folk music could be built a genuine American music. With these views on the aesthetic and moral value of folk song, Gordon aimed at many markets -- elite as well as popular and folk -- well before anyone else.<sup>16</sup> He convinced both the American reading public and wealthy benefactors to support him as a full-time folklorist.

It is worth noting that while a rising popular interest in folk culture was growing in the 1920s, few folklorists were able to tap that interest and to gain public support. Even fewer were able to gain endowments from foundations, universities and similar elite sources. While part of a social movement, most were unable to turn it to their own use. For the first thirty years of the twentieth century there were only a few folklore courses taught in the nations colleges; only a handful of folkloristically inclined theses. Those few scholars who were interested in folklore were able to pursue it only as an avocation. Charles Lummis searched for a publisher for his volume of California folksongs for years with no success. Finally, in 1923 he published it at his own

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<sup>16</sup>See Archie Green, "Commercial Music Graphics: Twenty One," JEMFO 8 (1972), 77.

expense.<sup>17</sup> During the twenties, thirties and forties Vance Randolph's applications for grants to carry on the collection and study of Ozark folk materials were turned down.<sup>18</sup> In 1926, John Lomax wrote bitterly to Gordon, asking him not to talk to him about folksong as Lomax had neither the time nor the money to engage himself in anything other than the difficult business of making a living and raising a family. Gordon was a notable exception in his ability to market his skills and his subject.

Still, Gordon was by no means alone in his interest in folk culture. He had a great deal in common with both other academics and other professional field workers. He merged academic background with commercial techniques, collected among the "folk," published for popular audiences and gained the support of the elite. This was an almost unparelled flexibility despite the fact that the 1920s provided an equally unparelled opportunity for such a feat. The public was becoming interested in folk culture, new "pressure groups" were turning their attention to folk culture, and media were experiencing rapid growth. The possibilities were there. Gordon recognized and took advantage of the opportunities which he saw.

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<sup>17</sup>Dudley C. Gordon, "Charles F. Lummis: Pioneer American Folklorist," WF 28 (1969), 181.

<sup>18</sup>Richard M. Dorson, "A Visit with Vance Randolph," JAF 67 (1954), 260.

The distance between the avocation of scholars and the profession of A & R men is lessened when they are viewed as acculturative agents, as participants in the same revitalization movement. Similarly, it is often true that both sides of an intellectual conflict often have more in common than it might seem. Gordon's own correspondence testifies to this. He called himself a communalist, but considered that his methods made him a hard-headed pragmatist on the order of Louise Pound, although he thought himself more sane. He referred to her as a good communalist -- she retorted that he was just a bad one.

Just as it is easy from a distance to view A & R men in opposition to academics, so is it easy to view the efforts of earlier scholars as falling into clear-cut opposing camps. Depictions of folkloristics as a series of confrontations is common. Phillips Barry wrote of the war over the music of the ballads; D.K. Wilgus discussed the ballad war between communalist and individualist and John O. West recently commented on the professional-amateur-popularizer feud. While such reductionism identifies important issues in a discipline, it neglects the popular, political and social movements which provide a context for the issues. A history told in terms of intellectual antagonisms tends to blur these contexts.

Folklorists are trained partially through the examination of the collections and theories of their

predecessors, yet often they do not know how those collections were gathered, what aesthetic influenced the collector, or how and in what contexts the theories were made. Although the collection of folklore is a transaction, seldom are the social interactional and contextual realities disclosed.

As folklorists have pointed out in recent articles, biography offers insight into these dynamic aspects of the development of the discipline. Esther Birdsall has used biography to explore stereotyped perceptions of George Lyman Kittredge.<sup>19</sup> Gerald Alvey has examined Phillips Barry's life and work in order to broaden our understanding of the "import of the rebelling non-conformist scholar, the individual who has obligations to none and is free of responsibilities to institutions and their scientific norms."<sup>20</sup> Growing attention to precursors in the discipline makes for a more realistic, less stereotypic, portrayal of our intellectual foundations.

In discussing the use of biography as a tool for the anthropologist, Jacob Gruber distinguishes two aspects

<sup>19</sup> Esther K. Birdsall, "Some Notes on the Role of George Lyman Kittredge in American Folklore Studies," JFI 10 (1973), 57-66.

<sup>20</sup> Dan Ben-Amos makes this comment about Alvey's paper in "A History of Folklore Studies -- Why do we Need it?," JFI 10 (1973), 123. See R. Gerald Alvey, "Phillips Barry and Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship," JFI 10 (1973), 67-95.

of science: content and enterprise.<sup>21</sup> Content reflects only the end result of study while enterprise includes all the efforts involved in the process of scientific activity -- mistakes and false starts included. A focus on the enterprise of a discipline -- which biography allows -- offers insight into the discipline in the making. A focus on content pictures history as a chronology in which "progress" is assumed, or in Kuhn's terms, as a series of paradigms.<sup>22</sup>

As Gruber and Ben-Amos suggest, the process of paradigm formation -- or enterprise -- when studied yields insight into the nature of relationships between scholars and their subject.<sup>22a</sup> What was the relationship of Gordon to his informants, colleagues and employers? Where did he fit within the emerging discipline of folklore and other scholarly, popular, political and cultural movements? This study focuses on these interactional and contextual aspects of Robert W. Gordon's career. Who he was, what he hoped to do and how he did it relates the development of folkloristics to folk and popular as well as elite movements in American culture.

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<sup>21</sup>Jacob Gruber, "In Search of Experience: Biography as an Instrument for the History of Anthropology," in June Helm, ed. Pioneers of American Anthropology: The Uses of Biography [Am. Ethnological Society Monograph 43] (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 8-9, 18-19, 20-21.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974. [First published 1962]).

<sup>22a</sup>Gruber, 8, 22-23, 26-27; Ben-Amos, 119-121, 123-124.

Previous considerations of Gordon have not dealt with these aspects of his life. For various reasons, including the fact that his papers and collection were scattered, no-one has ever attempted a detailed study. Various scholars have consulted the personal papers, notes, research on the "Wreck of the 97" court case and the typescripts of texts and collected material which are in the possession of the University of Oregon. Others have examined the original letters and responses initiated through Gordon's "Old Songs" column which comprise the Adventure MSS portion of the Gordon Collection at the Archive of Folk Song, Library of Congress. The cylinders and discs which Gordon recorded in the 1920s and 30s remained on deposit at the Library of Congress where they were not recopied onto tape until quite recently<sup>23</sup> and thus have rarely been used or consulted. The R.W. Gordon Collection at the Library of Congress also includes the collections by other individuals which he acquired for the Archive, his own field notes, ephemera, and bound volumes of typescripts of all the texts and fragments he collected. As I mentioned earlier, Gordon's family, Mr. and Mrs. L. Bert Nye, Jr. of Shallotte, North Carolina, had several boxes of unique material which had never been consulted.

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<sup>23</sup>Thanks to the generosity of the Folklore Department of Memorial University of Newfoundland, which provided funds for the copying of the cylinders in the fall of 1976.

As Gordon's own comparatively small number of publications would indicate, he himself published very little of this enormous mass of material. Others have printed excerpts from his collection. In the 1920s Gordon gave several texts and tunes to Carl Sandburg; they subsequently appeared in somewhat confused form in The American Songbag. Ed Cray included in The Erotic Muse many texts from what Gordon called his "Inferno" collection -- that portion of his recorded verse that was bawdy. Irish songs from Gordon's collection have been published, as have various occupational songs.<sup>24</sup>

The only major study of any part of Gordon's work is Norm Cohen's excellent article describing Gordon's involvement with the Victor Company in the suit over "The Wreck of the 97." Cohen's article includes a discussion of Gordon's investigation of the song-complex and description of his basic methods and theories.<sup>25</sup>

Those scholars who have considered Gordon's place in American folklore scholarship have examined his work

<sup>24</sup> John Wilson Foster, "Some Irish Songs in the Gordon Collection," NWF 3:2 (1968), 16-29; Susan N. Donahue and Marce Pollan, Songs of Working Americans (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, 1975); Archie Green, Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 91-92, 198-199ff, 334.

<sup>25</sup> Norm Cohen, "Robert W. Gordon and the Second Wreck of the 'Old 97'," JAF 87 (1974), 12-38.

insofar as it has touched on the matters of their concern. D.K. Wilgus has viewed Gordon as a last-ditch communalist, while characterizing his approach as eclectic.<sup>26</sup> Archie Green has commented on Gordon's rapport with the working man and his contact with a wider section of informants -- in geographic, social, and economic terms -- than any other folklorist of the twenties or thirties.<sup>27</sup> Both Green and Cohen have observed Gordon's considerable understanding of media and popular culture and have asked questions about the cultural phenomena surrounding Gordon's unknown history. This briefly, is Gordon's background, the contexts from out of which he has worked, and what has heretofore been known of him. In the next chapter I begin by describing Gordon's theoretical framework.

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<sup>26</sup>D.K. Wilgus, Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1959), pp. 110-112.

<sup>27</sup>Archie Green, Only a Miner, pp. 53-54, 90-91, 196-197.

### III

#### "THE MOST BASIC AND VITAL PROBLEMS": GORDON AS THEORIST, SCIENTIST, SALESMAN AND TECHNOLOGIST

Gordon's primary assumption -- that "the amount of oral literature [was] comparable to and perhaps even greater than the total amount of printed literature"<sup>1</sup> -- made his approach both remarkably broad and remarkably narrow.

It was broad in that within the field of oral or folk literature he was dedicated to making all knowledge his province. In letters to correspondents (on respectively March 6, October 11, and November 7, 1926) Gordon emphatically stated this, although these were by no means the first times that he enunciated the intention.

Remember that I'm interested in them all, and not in any one special class. Old ballads, work-songs, spirituals, outlaw songs, -- all are of use. And so too are those of the out-doors that are often quite too broad to be printed. They belong to the collection, and are often of much service in tracing complicated song histories.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that no specialist can be worthy of the name who does not find out all that it is in the human power to find out concerning his subject.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Gordon, "Archive of American Folk-Song," Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Year Ending June 30, 1932 [Appendix IV] (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1932), 323.

<sup>2</sup>#1627, Robert E. Howard, March 6, 1926.

<sup>3</sup>Adventure Correspondence, October 11, 1926.

Yes, I'm collecting everything in the way of genuine old songs, -- good, bad, and indifferent.<sup>4</sup>

Gordon's intense commitment to the thorough comprehension of his subject (though at the expense of his family as well as himself) led him to early and local hymnbooks, vaudeville and minstrel songsters, newspapers and discs. He recognized that all of these publications contained much "genuine folk material," in fact, provided documentation of the oral literature of preceding generations. At the same time these publications exerted an influence upon the oral literature of the present generations. Therefore, Gordon considered thorough knowledge of these documents essential to an understanding of his subject. In 1933, reporting on the state of the Archive of Folk Song, he conceded that few other students of folksong followed him in this point, but was adamant in insisting that

Any sound interpretation of folk song can be made only on the basis of the entire field and not on a study of one particular racial or geographic type. To interpret, for example, the songs of the Southern negro requires an intimate knowledge of nearly every other type of folk song known by whites up to and including the time when the spirituals were developing. No attempt has up to this time been made to survey the entire field or to discover the interrelations and influences of one type upon another.

Hence many of the most basic and vital problems have remained undiscovered and uninvestigated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Adventure Correspondence, November 7, 1926.

<sup>5</sup>Gordon, 323.

As far as he was concerned, awareness of the field -- intimate knowledge of all types of folksong -- demanded awareness of commercial publications. So, Gordon took a broader view than most of his colleagues in terms of content -- he had a wider definition of the field than most. In terms of intent, he also took a broad view. He sought to examine theories and basic questions and to delimit the field scientifically rather than to collect and preserve.

His approach was narrow in that he viewed "folk" and "author" verse as dichotomous poles on a continuum. These were his terms, and were a central feature of his approach. He maintained the dichotomy between the two sorts of material even though he recognized their necessary interrelation. Writing in 1933 about the accomplishments of the Archive of Folk Song he stated

That all previous definitions of, or attempts to define, folk song have been too narrow and have, most of them, failed to give sufficient acknowledgement of the part played by various authors and individuals in the growth and development of the type.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Gordon, 324. There were, of course, antecedents for this sort of distinction. Cecil Sharp, whose concepts of folksong evolution seem to have influenced Gordon, wrote in 1907 about the difference between "art-music" and "folk-music" in his English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions (London: Simpkin and Co., 1907). "Art-music, then, is the work of the individual, and expresses his own personal ideas and aspirations only; it is composed in, comparatively speaking, a short period of time, and, by being committed to paper, it is forever fixed in one unalterable form. Folk-music, on the other hand, is the product of a race, and reflects feelings and tastes that are communal rather than personal; it is always in solution; its creation is never completed; while, at every moment of its history, it exists not in one form but in many." (p. 15).

Nonetheless, in articles and letters written from 1923 to 1939, Gordon minimized the importance of the author in the making of folksong. Just as his interest in author songs related to his attempt to define folk materials, his interest in the author related to this same attempt. So, rather than directing himself to a study of "the part played by various authors and individuals in the growth and development of the type," Gordon directed himself to questions which were more universal in scope and which dealt with the nature of oral literature. Why did folksongs have certain characteristics and traits which seemed to be the same cross-culturally? How did these folk characteristics and folk traits develop? How did folksong develop? Gordon considered these the basic and vital questions; he attempted to answer them.

Implicit in his questions, hypotheses and research was his underlying assumption that folksong was organic -- that it grew and developed according to the same sort of natural laws that governed the evolution of birds and beasts. If these laws could be discovered, analyzed and described in the fields of genetics and psychology, then they could be discovered, analyzed and described in the field of oral literature. In this Gordon followed Sharp who in 1907 described folk music as being "scientific music." Sharp further claimed that

. . . it is constructed on well-defined, intelligible principles. Folk-music is the ungarbled and ingenuous expression of the human mind, and

in that account it must reflect the essential and basic qualities of the human mind . . . . For, although folk-tunes of different nations differ from one another, and they all differ in certain respects from art-melodies, yet they are one and all constructed upon the same fundamental and scientific principles.<sup>7</sup>

Attempting to understand the development of a large system -- to detect the laws and rules by which folk-song evolved -- Gordon necessarily saw the individual's part as insignificant. In fact, he saw individual contributions to folksong as being largely instinctual and unconscious. Comparing the development of folksong to the evolutionary models of Darwin and Mendel in his article on "American Folk-song" which appeared in 1939, Gordon stressed his organic view of folksong:

Sometimes, of course, intentional changes are made by folksingers, perhaps in order to adapt an old song to meet modern conditions. If these changes are in character with the song -- if they do not have any mark of individual artistry -- they may last, otherwise they have slight permanency. Sports cannot change overnight the even character of a race. And underneath folk songs seem to be certain basic laws of nature, limited neither by time nor national boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

Sharp, again, had examined folksong as something which evolved. Also discussing the idea of "sports," Sharp went on to discuss the three principles of evolution --

<sup>7</sup>Sharp, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup>Robert W. Gordon, "American Folksongs," The Caravan 1 (April 1939), 15.

continuity, variation and selection -- as they pertained to folksong. Sharp emphasized the unconscious and communal character of these principles. Gordon also stressed these qualities; he viewed change in oral literature as something which occurred both instinctively and unconsciously. Like Sharp, he felt that "consciousness" was one of the main criteria by which one could distinguish "folk" from "author" song. In 1927, Gordon wrote his colleague H.H. Fuson suggesting that the folk poet or author "instinctively" used "old technique" which originally and long ago could have come only from communal composition. This "inherited technique" was a powerful influence in shaping the character of folksong -- even over-riding the contribution of the individual folk author himself.<sup>9</sup>

In 1933, explaining the development of folksong to the Third Circuit Court of New Jersey in the case over the copyright to "The Wreck of the Southern Old 97," Gordon pointed out that unconscious, unintentional changes were a characteristic of folk verse. Attempting to avoid controversial points or extensive detail in dealing with the court, Gordon testified that

. . . folksong changes sometimes radically through various courses. A man who has heard it thinks he can improve and adds a new verse of his own, or revises an old verse. A man hears, or thinks he hears, a certain word or phrase and repeats it incorrectly, honestly as

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<sup>9</sup>#2586 to H.H. Fuson, February 18, 1927.

he heard it, but not as it was sung. That is one of the most characteristic traits of folk songs. It changes unconsciously, as for example in a game of gossip, where a certain statement is made rapidly, and repeated around a circle, and it comes out from the last speaker highly changed. Those changes are unintentional. As a result then a folksong has no standard text, and is considered -- the entire body or text of the song -- as known.<sup>10</sup>

So, Gordon postulated that individual contributions -- conscious changes or mutations of songs -- would not ultimately have any effect upon the song's life. As his comment about "sports" quoted above would indicate, Gordon accepted that radical as well as gradual change was possible in oral literature. As long as the radical change was accepted by the folk or in character with the song, Gordon viewed the "item" as the traditional and unconscious expression of the group.<sup>11</sup>

Because oral literature was characterized by unconscious changes -- which occurred both gradually and radically -- it tended to exist in variation, as Gordon pointed out. In his court testimony Gordon explained that the basic difference between a folksong and an author song

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<sup>10</sup>Victor Talking Machine Co., Defendant-Appellant vs. David Graves George, Plaintiff-Appellee. Transcript of Records No. 5169 ([Camden]: United States Circuit Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, October 1933), Vol. 1, pp. 349-350.

<sup>11</sup>Sharp, too emphasized the relation of folksong to the racial, national or unconscious expression of the group, pp. 15, 89-90.

was that an author song always had a standard version, and thus remained virtually unchanged for a substantial period of time.<sup>12</sup> The standardizing influence exerted by print or disc (here Gordon admitted that Cecil Sharp, Okeh records and his own publications were likely to have the same effect) differed from natural (even radical) folksong growth, for it tended to impede development. Gordon felt that folksong was alive only when it was changing, and for that reason he investigated the active traditions of folk groups instead of searching for Child ballads. Author song, however, not only checked development because it existed in a standard or "right" version, but also was a very consciously created form of art. Folksong, in Gordon's view, was the antithesis. Unconscious and an instinctive creation, it reflected the traditional values of the group.

The definition of folksong which Gordon gave in his 1939 article on "American Folksong" must be interpreted in terms of his perception of this long evolution of folksong, and in terms of his special understanding of "communal composition."

The term folksong applies only to songs that seem to have been composed over an appreciable period of time by a group rather than by an individual.<sup>13</sup>

Gordon hypothesized that the folksinger was a conduit for the

<sup>12</sup>Victor vs. George, pp. 349-350.

<sup>13</sup>"American Folksongs," 15.

unconscious expression of the group while the "author" of a song was not. This was implicit in the following comment, another excerpt from his article on "American Folksong" which appeared in 1939:

In no case is the author -- conscious or unconscious -- of prime importance. He is a necessary but a minor factor. In artistic literature it is the author who makes the song; among the folk it is rather the song that rules and directs the author.<sup>14</sup>

Gordon felt improvisation was not likely to create good folksong. In his Adventure column, as early as 1924, Gordon recognized the role that the individual necessarily played in the creation of folksong. Consistent with his later views, he emphasized here as well that the author's part was necessary but not important.

Few songs probably of any real merit have been composed entirely by the folk. While we know that it is possible for a group, acting together and at one time, to compose, we realize that the results of such action are very crude, indeed. Seldom are they good enough to survive for even a short period. What does survive is a curious blend of individual author, and folk, the author's part being more that of a mouthpiece than that of a creator. At any rate, he does not seem to have impressed his individuality upon the song or the ballad.<sup>15</sup>

Gordon recognized that his investigations raised questions about "laws of taste, of changing fashion, [and]

<sup>14</sup>p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>Robert W. Gordon, "Old Songs That Men Have Sung," Adventure (September 30, 1924), 190.

of what makes a song popular,"<sup>16</sup> but he felt that it was more important to concentrate on examining what D.K. Wilgus called "a theory of historic and universal literary growth."<sup>17</sup> Because of his theoretical orientation, Gordon in a letter to H.H. Fuson on February 18, 1927 criticized his contemporaries who

. . . tend[ed] a bit too much toward including everything, every scrap that the folk sings of whatever style or origin. That is all wrong. . . . If you once start including pure author songs just because the folk know and sing them, there is no end -- mere confusion of mass without distinction.<sup>18</sup>

Gordon was neither interested in documenting creativity among folksingers, nor in discovering native categories of folksong. He was interested in distinguishing between author and folk songs because he felt that it was the best way to discover the nature of oral literature. Certainly, Gordon considered it more than his duty to be aware of popular and author songs. He believed, however, that the primary task of the student of folksong was to document, and to investigate the nature of the discrete body of songs which could be classed as "folk." Gordon maintained his opinion. Reviewing The New Green Mountain Songster in 1939, he criticized Phillips Barry for defining folksong as (according to Gordon) "any song popular enough to be indulged in by either people or folk for the

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<sup>16</sup> #2455 to Horatio Wood, January 31, 1927.

<sup>17</sup> D.K. Wilgus, Anglo-American Folk-Song Scholarship Since 1898 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press), p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> #2586 to H.H. Fuson, February 18, 1927.

sheer joy of singing."<sup>19</sup> Gordon saw these standards as both radical and dangerous. Letting down the bars to admit the like of "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Old Black Joe" to the body of folksong would create confusion and obscure the differences between folk and author verse. Gordon was convinced that such indiscriminate consideration -- as well as indiscriminate collection and publication -- would be the subject of mockery when folksong eventually was scientifically understood.

This is not to say that Gordon objected to the study of author verse, popular songs or local poets. His collection attests to the fact that he realized the inter-relationship that these sorts of verse had with folk literature. He recognized, too, that such author material was often well worth saving for literary, historical or other grounds. Limiting himself to one point of view -- that of the student of folksong -- Gordon felt that author verse was worth studying only insofar as it demonstrated folk technique or affected folk tradition. "The fact it may be popular does not affect the matter at all. Popularity does not make folksong -- or unmake it."<sup>20</sup> So, while recognizing the incipient writer of any song popular in

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<sup>19</sup>Robert W. Gordon, "The New Green Mountain Songster: A Review," Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society NS 7 (December 1939), p. 256.

<sup>20</sup>#2586 to H.H. Fuxon, February 18, 1927.

oral tradition, he firmly rejected popularity as criterion for a song's status as a folksong.<sup>21</sup> An author song became interesting insofar as it took on folk style, acquired variations and was remade by the folk. Here, however, he was talking about basic stylistic changes. Minor differences in versions, changes that did not affect the basic style, or changes that proved to be largely evanescent or insignificant did not make an author song worth studying from the point of view of the folklorist.<sup>22</sup> Gordon was not being dogmatic; he was simply viewing folksong and author song as poles in a continuum. Gordon graphically expressed his evolutionary view in his 1939 review of The New Green Mountain Songster.

For many years collectors of both schools of thoughts with respect to folk-song -- I prefer this term to the "hostile camps" used by Mr. Barry -- have been taught to record all variations in material classed as folk, whether caused by the folk them-selves or by intrusive authors . . . on the theory that a folk-song has texts but no text, that the history of the living organism with all its changes and variations represented the true song. By the word text I include tunes as well as words alone.

But to include as important, or even of any value at all, the infinitesimal and usually evanescent changes in all songs and in all tunes each time they were sung by any singer, not a professional, who sang in unmotivated and spontaneous fashion, is absurd. It would be almost as bad as if we should appoint a reporter to

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<sup>21</sup>#2586 to H.H. Fuson, February 18, 1927.

<sup>22</sup>#2586 to H.H. Fuson, February 18, 1927.

follow every step of every American youth on the chance that he might someday become president. It would fill our collections with wholly useless and vain repetitions.

Individual creative acts are important only if they continue long enough, and in one general direction, to cause radical changes. The frog in the well who climbed three feet each day and slipped back two each night eventually got out, but only because he was able to start a bit higher in the right direction every morning.<sup>23</sup>

Gordon had attempted to postulate stages in the evolution of folk music itself in his series of articles published in the New York Times between 1927 and 1928, later republished, in 1938 as Folk-songs of America. In these articles, intended for a popular audience, Gordon hypothesized that fiddle tunes with their primitive technique represented a low rung on the evolutionary ladder. Banjo tunes were a step higher, and the voice and words eventually took over the role of the instrument altogether. Significantly ballads were sung unaccompanied -- ballads represented "the ultimate welding of two arts, narrative and music."<sup>24</sup> It was missing the point to describe this system, as Phillips Barry did, as the "improvisatory, agglutinative and author-narrative" version of folksong origin.<sup>25</sup> Gordon was not

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<sup>23</sup>"The New Green Mountain Songster: A Review," 257-258.

<sup>24</sup>RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>25</sup>Phillips Barry, "Das Volk Dichtet Nichts," BFSSNE 7 (1939), 4. Reprinted in Samuel Bayard, ed. Bulletin of the Folk Song Society of the North East (Philadelphia: AFS, 1960).

talking about the origin of folksong; he was attempting to distinguish stages of development in a system of growing folk artistry. He was trying to figure out how the frog got out of the well, not how he got there in the first place. Gordon himself felt that although the series was not written for scholars it constituted an important contribution to scholarship.<sup>26</sup>

Gordon admitted that in his time -- in historic time -- all oral literature was a mixture of both folk and author elements. He intended to differentiate and classify, in order to eventually reach "a final definition of exactly what folk song was."<sup>27</sup> In 1933, summarizing the research he had done while at the Archive of Folk Song, Gordon articulated some of the "decidedly revolutionary hypotheses" he had developed in attempting to distinguish between folk and author material. The following examples had arisen from his study of the influence of "genuine folk materials upon the vaudeville and minstrel stage between 1830 and 1890 and of the minstrel conventions upon folk song, both white and negro, of this period":<sup>28</sup>

1. That the first influence of the negro upon the stage was largely that of rhythm and dance rather than song.
2. That at various periods from 1850 to 1890 quite different concepts or stage conventions

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<sup>26</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon, "Archive of American Folk-Song," 324.

<sup>28</sup> p. 323.

of the negro appeared upon the stage.

3. That the white man's burlesque of the negro in these different periods after 1840 reacted upon the negro himself and caused him to modify the form in which his folk song appeared.

4. That in the white songsters are preserved numerous bits of genuine folk songs, both white and negro, which constitute often our only evidence of what the folk song of the period actually was.

5. That the American sailor chanteys belonged to a much more recent period than that has formerly been believed, and that they are very greatly influenced by and indebted to vaudeville and minstrel style material on the one hand and negro folk material on the other.<sup>29</sup>

Gordon did not limit his efforts to distinguish between folk and author materials to the study of texts alone. He also investigated problems relating to the origin, growth and development of folk tunes. He used earlier printed books of popular stage and camp-meeting songs, and compared the tunes presented there with those on modern commercial phonograph records and field recordings.<sup>30</sup> He suggested some hypotheses here too in his 1933 Report on The Archive of Folk Song:

1. That the so-called mountain fiddle tunes are very closely interrelated and that many of them form family groups progressing from a common original into widely diverging variants and versions.
2. That the origin of the tunes of certain sailor chanteys can be discovered.
3. That the folk have adopted author or stage tunes and recomposed them in folk form, and that many popular hits of recent times can be traced directly to folk tune originals.

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<sup>29</sup>p. 324.

<sup>30</sup>p. 324.

. . . That the mountain fiddle tunes have as a body certain essential differences in technique which mark them off definitely from the same or similar tunes as played by a violinist, and that these differences are greatly similar to the literary differences existing between folk and author songs.

. . . That a further study of the family groups in tunes will explain and confirm many of the theories now held on the basis of words alone.<sup>31</sup>

Making rigorous distinction between folk and author traits was only one of the scientific methods which Gordon adopted in his effort to generate hypotheses to illuminate the basic and vital questions in his field. That he viewed his pursuit as scientific research and his methods as scientific was reflected, not only by his stance as a folkloristic Clarence Darrow, but in his use of terms from genetics and psychology. He wrote of "sports" and of the "unconscious"; he described his field work as an effort to obtain "still living specimens" which he could bring back to the laboratory for study. He wrote the following in a letter to a correspondent on January 31, 1927:

I shall try my best to study and to interpret folk-song as a living thing -- but that cannot be done while on a trip. All I can hope now is that my field work will be so conducted that I may bring back to my study the still living specimens for later work. Hence the phonographic recordings of everything. I can at any moment recall the actual singer though miles away. And what I fail to do in the way of proper interpretation will be open to others who come after me. I shall not muddy the water or conceal the trail.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>p. 324.

<sup>32</sup>#2455 to Horatio Wood, January 31, 1927.

Apparently neither the Library of Congress nor a court of law in 1933 was ready to accept folklore as a science or the possibility that a folklorist could be a scientist. Chapter eight deals with Gordon's desire to have the freedom and facilities of a research scientist; it also deals with the myopia of the institutions supporting him.

Nonetheless, Gordon was committed to scientific methods in technique as well as theory. He intended to record and preserve his specimens in as scientific a way as possible. He actively experimented with recording equipment in order to improve what he felt was highly unsatisfactory field equipment. Gordon was not a helpless college professor befuddled by wires and tubes; he had been enchanted by technology from an early age. During his youth in New England he had tinkered with radio, cameras and airplanes. In California he modified a cylinder recorder for field work. Like the research scientist Gordon had to be a bit of an inventor, to build for himself the equipment he wanted. He described, in a letter to a correspondent in 1926, one of the inventions he had contrived the previous year. Typically, the recording outfit allowed Gordon the possibility of examining his specimen -- his catch --

One of the biggest helps is having some hobby -- something to rest up with. I've had a number. Radio was my latest, and it helped pull through a period of pretty intensive mental work. I did the whole thing myself, of course. Started with a crystal, and ended

by bringing in Newcastle, England at Cambridge, Massachusetts. All spare time stuff. Turned to it when I was too dog-goned fagged to do anything else. My latest set was a corker! Had three or four simple inventions of my own attached. I sat and typed evenings with earcaps on. When I heard anything worth recording I simply pressed a button, and a recording phonograph on the other side of the room started up and with its own special built in loud speaker took down permanently whatever I wanted. Next day I could study my catch at leisure.<sup>33</sup>

With this machinery Gordon most probably became the first folklorist to produce a pirate recording. Vernon Dalhart was the recording artist whose 1924 Victor issue of "The Prisoner's Song" and "The Wreck of the Old 97" became the first hillbilly record to sell a million copies; a phenomenon which eventually brought Gordon into court to testify as a folklorist. On April 25, 1925 Dalhart performed on a radio broadcast originating in New York City. Two hundred miles away in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Gordon pressed a button and -- unbeknownst to Dalhart -- recorded his performance.<sup>34</sup>

Just as Gordon considered knowledge of commercial publications essential to comprehension of his chosen field, so did he consider it essential to understand developments in technology. He was well aware of the capabilities of the modified Edison cylinder machine which he took with him into

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<sup>33</sup> #2154 to Burroughs, November 24, 1926.

<sup>34</sup> #1080 to M. Lipscomb, April 30, 1925.

the field in 1925. He was also aware of the quality of the machines used by commercial companies. In offering his services to Victor in 1925, Gordon had suggested to them that some of his field recordings might be useful to them for commercial issue; he readily admitted that only a very few of his recordings would be of a good enough quality to be useful in this way to Victor. Without the budget of Okeh or Victor and without the equipment, Gordon's field recordings were necessarily different. A single man with simple equipment, Gordon could not have recorded string bands with any degree of accuracy. Accuracy -- the scientific recording of folk material -- was his primary concern. Gordon was in consultation with commercial companies who were willing to cooperate with him, but none of them had by 1928 "developed any simple field outfit that [could] be carried and operated by one man."<sup>35</sup>

Gordon continued his experimentation with recording machinery during his tenure at the Library of Congress. He took advantage of a trip to Toronto for the 1928 MLA meetings to confer with phonograph manufacturers and other field workers. In a letter to Carl Engel reporting on the December 1928 meetings, Gordon criticized the method of recording used by Marius Barbeau:

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<sup>35</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, December 1928, LC/AFS Pers. Archie Green mentions the differences between commercial recording machines and other field-work machines in Only A Miner, p. 48.

The trip from Toronto on proved rather hectic. I went first to Ottawa, where I spent a day inspecting the Canadian folk song materials. Barbeau was using the old wax process in its most primitive form -- could play each record only about nine times before it became so worn and noisy as to be practically worthless. . . .<sup>36</sup>

He continued to have conferences with the Tonophone, Speak-O-Phone, Fairchild and Amplion engineers. He borrowed different models of machines for trial periods from these companies in order to test them at the Library of Congress. With the loaned Amplion he eventually recorded fifty-eight songs for deposit in the Archive of Folk Song in 1933.

Previous to his field work with the Amplion and his experimentation with the other disc machines, Gordon had felt that disc recorders were not suitable for field recording. Writing to Engel in December 1928, Gordon mentioned some of his objections to the disc machines, and some of his objectives in recording:

As to the aluminum record, I'm a bit skeptical. But I'm writing the Speak-O-Phone people for a detailed description of their apparatus and method. I fear surface noise if the "cut" is made deep enough to be really "permanent." I'd like much to be able to examine a sample record under a microscope. Also aluminum unless kept free from fumes will eventually oxidize slightly. You see I want an ideal, something that is capable not only of reproducing acceptably for an audience but also of being magnified for oscillagraphs. And this must be "permanent." I fear that theoretically several steps must be used: first, a temporary cutting in a material smooth and soft

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<sup>36</sup> RWG to CE, December 1928.

enough to offer little resistance to the stylus; second, a permanent master made from this original in some substance that will neither warp nor oxidize; and, third, a number of working records made from time to time from the master. The great objection is cost.<sup>37</sup>

Before his extensive investigation of disc recorders convinced him that the recent improvements in the machines made it possible to consider them for use as field equipment, Gordon had been conducting his own experiments with magnetic wire recorders, as both Charles Seeger and Roberta Gordon Nye recollect. As well, Gordon wrote to Engel, again in December of 1928, that he was also "investigating some recent German improvements of the old magnetic tape method" which might be the solution to his problems -- providing "temporary but accurate [field] recordings that could then be re-recorded on standard laboratory apparatus."<sup>38</sup> Gordon left no possibility unexplored in his attempt to bring back to his "laboratory" accurate reproductions of folk song -- still living specimens.

The scientific reliability of Gordon's own theories depended upon the reliability of his equipment and his methods of research, but he was not concerned only for himself. He intended to provide accurate data, firm cornerstones, for others, as he indicated in a letter to a correspondent on December 4, 1926:

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<sup>37</sup> RWG to CE, December 1928.

<sup>38</sup> RWG to CE, December 1928.

What the final result of my work will be I don't know. I want it to be accurate and complete. Hope I may be able to use part of it myself in various ways. If not, then I want it ship-shape for the others who come after me. As Kipling says "After me cometh a builder -- Tell him I too have known." I vision many results. Fanciful as it seems I believe that somewhat of the spirit of the American past lives in the songs. If I can bring it back, I want to. Modern jazz is not American. The pioneers sang something of their own sturdy ideals into their songs. Let's revive them.

And someday, too, some great musician, or dramatist, or poet, or painter, or author, may get, even from the unprintable -- but characteristic -- material just the needed touch to make over into great art. He must know the facts, not what we believe now of value, but what actually was there. There he can pick and choose, draw his inspiration, and create. Buried Pompeii with its trivial and intimate details has taught us ten times as much of Roman life and Roman spirit as have Cicero or Horace. They chose and edited; Pompeii preserved all without choosing. One was temperamental the other accidentally and providentially scientific.<sup>39</sup>

As his comments indicate, Gordon felt that scientific trustworthy work could be useful, not only to scholars, but to a wider audience. He himself considered many schemes in which he could combine the scientific practice of folklore with the needs of emerging fields such as the radio, phonograph and motion picture industries. In part these schemes arose out of financial necessity, but they were also the result of his intense altruistic dedication to the idea of applied folklore. He sincerely believed in the aesthetic, moral and scientific value of folk material; as well he

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<sup>39</sup> #2170 to Walter Crow, December 4, 1926.

recognized the growing public interest in anything "folk." He had always admired the sea story writers who incorporated folk material into their stories; he foresaw the possibility of using his field recordings to train singers "who knew something at least of how to sing folk stuff," and felt confident that the result would "make a sensation . . . would be feature headlines the next day!"<sup>40</sup>

Gordon's awareness of trends in popular culture was responsible for his confidence that his "finds would go big if they could be properly produced."<sup>41</sup> He distinguished three types of folksongs being presented on the air in 1928; trained voices who sang rewritten or harmonized folk melodies; "real folk singing or playing trashy stuff," and fairly well done presentations of minstrel and vaudeville material.<sup>42</sup> That all three types of material were being greeted with enthusiasm, and that all were finding a market encouraged Gordon's optimism about his own scheme, although, as with many other things, he was not willing to undertake the plan until he was sure that he would have complete control of its production.

Gordon recognized that a similar warm public reception was being currently given to books on folksong of

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<sup>40</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, March 2, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>41</sup> RWG to CE, March 2, 1928.

<sup>42</sup> RWG to CE, March 2, 1928.

which he was critical. He intended, in his own publications, to capture the same wide audiences but to supply them with scientifically valid material. He hoped to collaborate with Carl Sandburg in pushing this "popular-scholarly combination" according to a letter which he wrote to Engel on April 27, 1928:

What we have in mind is directly in line with my theory that scholarship can and should combine with general popularity. Facts can be facts and still be interesting. One of the curses of the past has been, I think, that real contributions have been hidden away in recondite journals where they were seen only by those who needed them least. The reception given at present to certain very unscholarly books on folk-song leads me to think that the time has come to make a real campaign for honest reputable material presented to the public at large. And Sandburg is a genuine and sincere man. Moreover he appreciates scholarship. Just the type of man to join in with and push the "popular-scholarly" combination that I believe in.<sup>43</sup>

Gordon eventually was disappointed in his accomplice when Sandburg published the American Songbag with some sixteen of Gordon's texts and tunes in a state which Gordon called hardly recognizable.

One of the reasons that Gordon believed so deeply in his "popular-scholarly combination" was that he himself saw a great deal of moral worth in folk literature. He felt that the "old songs," since they were the unconscious expression of the group, reflected an older value system. His

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<sup>43</sup> RWG to CE, April 27, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

field work then, by revitalizing these older more wholesome values, might serve as the basis by which the present jazz craze could be turned back. Writing to correspondents on respectively November 10, 1925 and February 19, 1927, Gordon enunciated these views:

I am now on a long trip that will keep me away from my desk for over a year -- collecting and preserving the old songs that your and my grandmothers used to sing. They are rapidly being forgotten and unless someone takes enough interest in them to write them down and save them they will soon be lost forever. With this in mind I'm attempting to do all I can, and to urge others to do the same, that future generations may still own what I think is one of the greatest American heritages, the old songs . . . . Every one who helps out may feel, I think, that he or she is doing something that is very much worth while for future Americans, and I hope that enough interest may be aroused to help a bit in turning back our music away from the present "jazz" toward the older type.<sup>44</sup>

I want to save if possible what I believe to be a great national heritage of song -- folksong that our present generation will otherwise let slip until it is too late. I believe that a whole lot of the sturdy honesty and ideals of our fathers and grandfathers can be perpetuated in a way by passing on the songs they loved and sang as a future antidote for this confounded jazz. In this idea I antedate all that Henry Ford has to say, for I've preached my ideas on the subject for fifteen years.<sup>45</sup>

Gordon used the moral value of folksong -- and his objections to jazz and the productions of Tin Pan Alley -- to

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<sup>44</sup>Adventure Correspondence, November 10, 1925.

<sup>45</sup>Adventure Correspondence, February 19, 1927.

command support for his research and to win favor among his correspondents. The following excerpts come from letters which he wrote on September 12, 1926 and February 15, 1927 to correspondents:

. . . for after all, the old stuff was genuine and wholesome, -- not like the modern trash filled with sex and innuendo. I don't mind plain vulgarity, such as used to be common in many sea songs and in all songs of out door men for that matter, but I hate the modern jazz and all that goes with it.<sup>46</sup>

I'm not a fanatic at all, but I do think that a lot that our fathers sung helped toward making good Americans. Much more than this modern jazz -- which I detest. I hate to see the old songs and the old traditions drop out. And unless some fool like me saves them they soon will.<sup>47</sup>

Gordon used the evocative value of the "old songs" to stress their importance -- and the importance of collecting, preserving and studying them. Legitimizing folk literature in 1928 to an audience of cultured individuals at the Library of Congress who perceived music in terms of educated, classical standards, Gordon emphasized the aspects of his work which they would identify with and subscribe to -- emotionally as well as monetarily. He described folksong as a source of revitalization for flagging values, morals and culture.

The trade magazine Talking Machine and Radio World Journal saw his efforts as part of the current hillbilly music craze:

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<sup>46</sup>Adventure Correspondence, September 12, 1926.

<sup>47</sup>Adventure Correspondence, February 15, 1927.

The fact that hill-billy music is coming into prominence and a stage of importance in Musical America is attested to by the fact that the United States Government has taken official cognizance of the growing popularity of this type of music. Within the last four years the Government has taken up the subject under the Division of Music, Archives of American Folk Song, and they are sending expeditions into the hill country to make permanent records for posterity. In fact, in certain places they keep permanent expeditions on the ground that go into the deepest hills, the spots hardest to get to and most off the beaten-track to get the music and the words down in permanent form. A special department has been created at Washington, D.C. for the preservation of music and verses of songs as recorded by these scouting expeditions, under the direction of R.W. Gordon. The Government recognizes the hill-billy and the American negro as the basis of American folk-song and music.<sup>48</sup>

In his views that folksong could provide grist for the mills of high culture; in his ideas for revitalizing a portion of American culture with folksong; in his recognition of an enthusiastic audience for his products; in his desire to reach wide audiences and in his methods of recording he was part of that "craze." Like the commercial record industry Gordon was interested in redefining the nation's attitude toward the folksongs of uneducated hillbillies, although his motives for that redefinition may have been different. Undeniably, both Gordon and the commercial record industry recognized and took advantage of a large, previously ignored

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<sup>48</sup>"There's Gold in Them Thar Hills! And you can put some of it in your cash register," The Talking Machine and Radio Journal (January 1930), 37.

musical audience -- those who were more conservative in taste, those who were pleased to hear simple vocal songs rather than current sophisticated and relatively complex dance music.<sup>49</sup>

While the record industry certainly was investigating newer, more efficient ways of recording at the same time that Gordon was, they differed in their motive here, as well. Both wanted to reproduce sound with better fidelity; the commercial music industry, however, was "accidentally but providentially scientific." Gordon was purposefully scientific, and in his terminology, methodology and technique firmly placed himself in the ranks of the pragmatic researcher in the pure sciences.

There is no indication that four years of intensive field work and five more years of equally intensive laboratory and library study ever changed his basic assumptions or his conviction of the most fitting manner of their presentation. In 1939, Herbert Halpert initiated the WPA Federal Theatre Project republication of the articles Gordon had written for the New York Times more than eleven years previously. At that time, Gordon felt that although he might add additional examples of songs, he would

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<sup>49</sup>See "What the Popularity of Hill-Billy Songs Means in Retail Profit Possibilities," Talking Machine World (December 15, 1925), 117. Reprinted in Archie Green, "From the Archives," JEMFO 7 (1971), 75-76, and Norm Cohen, "Tin Pan Alley's Contribution to Folk Music," WF 29:1 (January 1970), 19.

. . . change little or not at all what I have said concerning the basic origin and development of American folk-song.<sup>50</sup>

This then was the framework within which Gordon worked: the organic developmentalism which inspired his hypotheses and questions; the basic dichotomy which he drew in order to examine his subject rigorously; the lengths he went to assure that he had "living specimens" to study; and the use he saw for the results of his researches. The following chapters will discuss the contexts within which Gordon prosecuted his Great Plan, and the mechanics of that plan.

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<sup>50</sup>Robert W. Gordon, Folk-Songs of America [Publication #73-S] (N.Y.: National Service Bureau, December 1938), p. iii.

#### IV

### "O QUAE MUTATIO RERUM!": UPBRINGING AND EDUCATION IN NEW ENGLAND, 1888-1918

Robert Winslow Gordon was born September 2, 1888 in Bangor, Maine, the only child of Elijah Winslow Gordon and Harriet Adeline Euer. Although the elder Gordon was fifty-nine when Robert was born, neither the birth of a son nor advancing age put an end to his wanderings. A professional carpenter and cabinet-maker, Elijah Gordon had left Maine for the West during the Gold Rush. During the Civil War he had seen considerable minor action in a Union cavalry regiment. While Robert was growing up he continued

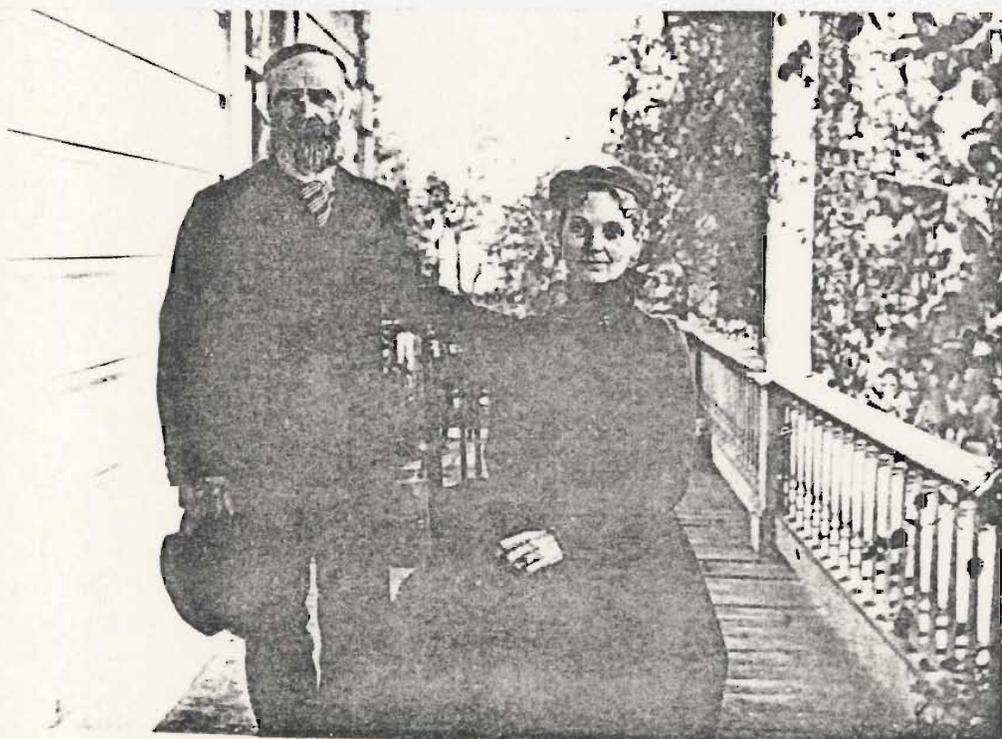


Figure 1. Elijah and Harriet Gordon, Bangor, Maine, c. 1900.

his adventures in the West. The family joined him in California for brief periods when Robert was ten and again when he was thirteen. Most of Gordon's boyhood, however, was spent in New England; there he saw his father infrequently.<sup>1</sup>

Gordon was proud of his father, even if the absences hurt. Years later in 1924, he described his own "line" in a letter to correspondent I.I. Harrison, a National Park Service employee in Arizona.

First of all I'm one d-d good American, or think I am. Descended from old Alexander Gordon, who came here in 1652. He was caught fighting "for his rightful king" by Cromwell, imprisoned in Tutthill Fields Prison, London, and deported to the Colonies. In fact, he was sold as a bond-slave for a term of five years, as were many political prisoners, in order to pay for his passage and help out government graft. He worked a year for a man in Watertown, Mass. -- got sick of it, and appealed to the General Court for freedom, -- which he obtained. Then he went to New Hampshire and started a saw mill and a family. Both succeeded.

It was a sturdy stubborn stock, for Alexander was born about 1620-30, and I am number eight in direct line . . . If I live my allotted time I'm good till 1960, and that makes about 340 years to be divided by eight. Our line is New England born and bred. And that accounts for my love of the East!

Now as to my right to speak of California. My dad, born in 1830 . . . went around the Horn and landed in Frisco . . . in 1855. I take off my hat and listen soberly whenever a genuine "forty-niner" speaks, but if a man can't tag in before 1855, I'll tell him to sit quiet and listen to grandfather. Dad stayed on the coast

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<sup>1</sup>Roberta P.G. Nye, Field Notes, May 21, 1976; Nye Collection; Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

and on the plains -- he knew Bridger well -- until 1885 and returned. Personally I've been in California in 1898-9, 1901-2, and 1918-24, and thus have a bit of first-hand knowledge as well as having been brought up<sup>2</sup> on the lore and background of pioneer days.

With his father absent, Gordon grew up "the only daughter of an old maid."<sup>3</sup> His mother dressed him in ruffled shirts, picked up after him, studied with him and babied him. She kept him in long golden curls until he was six. Arthur Brodeur, a college acquaintance who became Gordon's life-long friend, related the following impression of the relationship between Gordon and his mother.

His life was considerably influenced by his mother, a rather pitiful, but distinctly difficult woman, whose temperament and ways of life were probably influenced by the fact that she was born with only one arm. After Gordon's marriage his mother lived with them and made Bob's wife uncomfortable so long as the old lady lived. As late as 1950, Roberta Gordon was still expressing her unhappiness over her mother-in-law. . . . Gordon was constantly solicitous of his mother, and she was equally solicitous of him. She babied him, and he babied her. And he could never, in the long run, refuse her anything she wanted, but he could make things turbulent for her in the meantime . . . .<sup>4</sup>

His nervous and demanding mother and his romantic adventuring father exerted a great influence upon Gordon throughout his life. He developed a romanticism like his father's

<sup>2</sup>#805 to I.I. Harrison, November 11, 1924.

<sup>3</sup>Roberta P.G. Nye, Field Notes, May 21, 1976.

<sup>4</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

-- and like his father eventually threw over a steady job for an unsure but adventurous and exciting life. His



Figure 2. Robert W. Gordon  
c. 1895.



Figure 3. Harriet Gordon,  
Bangor, Maine  
c. 1900.

parents' presence was almost constant -- and in a very real way -- for Gordon supported them until their death. They lived with him and his family for quite a while in later years.

Gordon was an ingenious and curious child growing up in a period of rapid change. As a boy in the nineties, he was fascinated at the sight of a horseless carriage, in a circus procession, accompanied by a horse in case the

thing needed pulling. Technology captivated his interests; while still a youth, he tinkered and experimented with equipment. The following photograph was taken in about 1900 by Gordon himself when he had learned how to take and print double exposures. By the time he was sixteen he had built several radios, according to a letter he wrote to Adventure

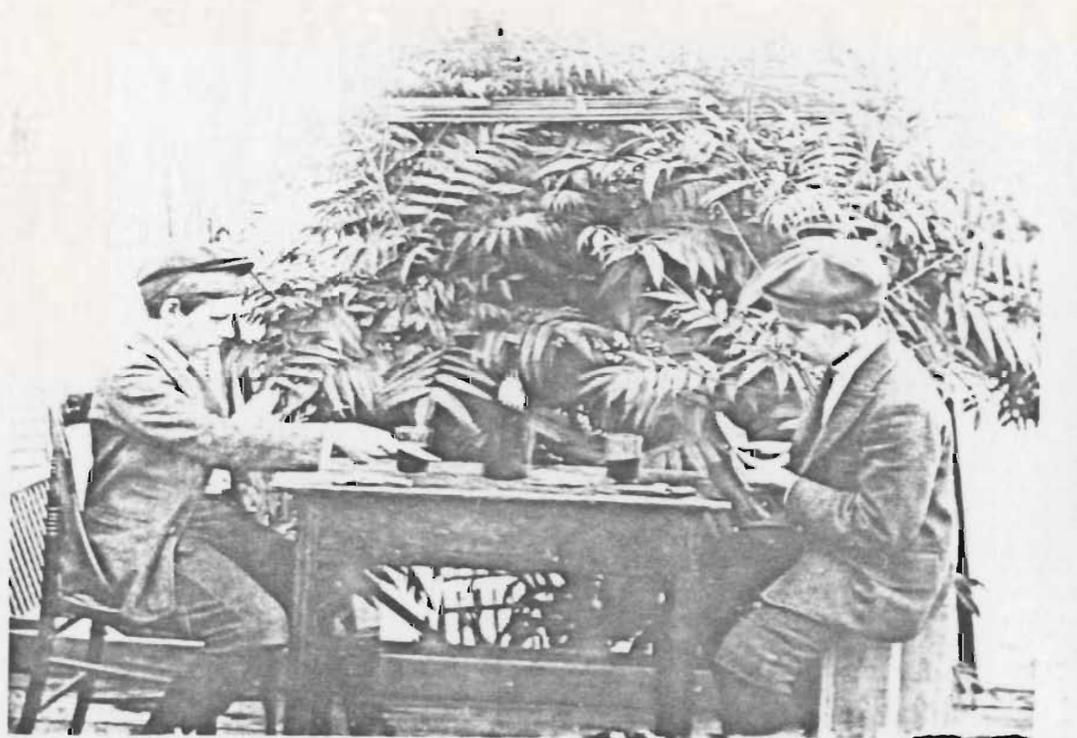


Figure 4. A double exposure of Robert W. Gordon playing cards with himself. Taken by R.W. Gordon, Bangor, Maine, c. 1900.

correspondent William Shea in 1926.

. . . radio was the thing with boys as early as 1904. I had a set, -- two antennas and no ground, that worked well across a large room. Used the old nickel coherer. Then I fooled with the sulphuric acid capillary tube, then the whirling brass disk and the mercury cup. Lord it was fun! Crystals and "Audion tubes" were undreamed of. Yet we made headway . . . .

Big excitement -- Signalling Mars! Chained lightning! O quae mutatio rerum!<sup>5</sup>

Gordon's precociousness was many faceted. While he never made much progress in music (although pictured with his music teacher (c. 1900) below, Gordon is said to have been tone deaf), he showed great academic promise. At the

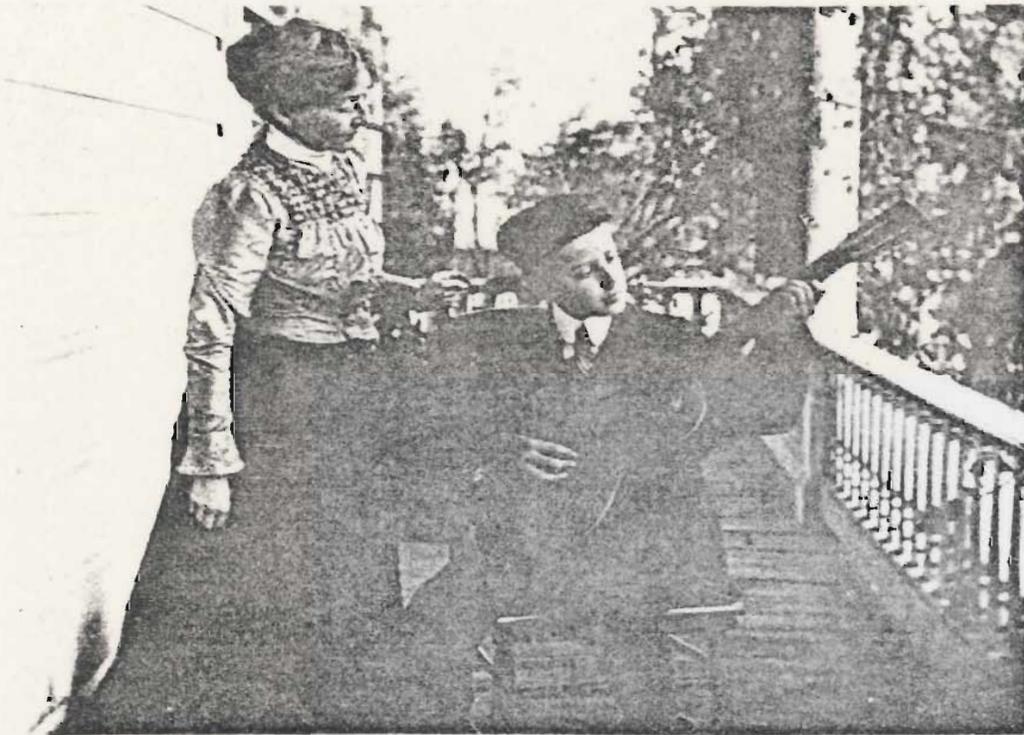


Figure 5. Robert W. Gordon with his music teacher, Bangor, Maine, c. 1900.

age of fourteen he was offered a scholarship to the Phillips Exeter Academy. Gordon accepted the grant and moved to Exeter, New Hampshire, where he lived with an aunt for four years, from 1902-1906, while he was a student there. He also occupied himself at Exeter with odd jobs in order to

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<sup>5</sup>#1891 to William Shea, September 30, 1926.

help pay for his education. The class prophecy in 1906 envisioned Gordon and a fellow classmate as the proprietors of a new department store in Boston with the logo "We deal in everything."<sup>6</sup> In the Class Day Exercises of 1906,



Figure 6. Robert W. Gordon upon graduation from Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire, 1906.

Gordon wrote and delivered the "Address to Undergraduates," an unsurprising speech encouraging his classmates to follow

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<sup>6</sup> John Jay Hiatt, "Class Prophecy," Class Day Exercises, The Phillips Exeter Academy, Thursday, June 21st, 1906 (n.p.: MacFadyen, Hiatt, Tincombe-Fernandez, 1906), 18.

the high ideals and principles learned at Exeter, to remain gentlemen, and to be true to themselves.<sup>7</sup>

From 1906 to 1910 Gordon received scholarships to study English as an undergraduate at Harvard University. Although he graduated Phi Beta Kappa after extensive studies in Greek, Latin and English literature, it is evident that he did not confine himself solely to academics. His interest in science and technology grew. Radio continued to be a time-consuming hobby. With equipment he had built himself, Gordon brought in stations as far away as Newcastle, England.<sup>8</sup> Airplanes as well caught his attention. He experimented and tinkered as well as watched, according to the letter he wrote in 1926 to Adventure correspondent William Shea.

I still have somewhere a fragment of the old "Ground Hog I" which like its successor "Ground Hog II" never flew, the first airship built by a college -- Harvard about 1908-9, possibly 10. I helped build it. It was on display at the first Harvard-Boston Meet. Graham White looked at it -- and smiled. Martin was to fly it. Cold feet. Once, only once, the Ground Hog II managed to rise exactly two inches from the ground in a secret trial on Soldier's Field about 5 o'clock A.M. How we cheered! Had a motor-cycle engine, because we could not afford a better one.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Winslow Gordon, "Address to Undergraduates," Class Day Exercises, 21-22.

<sup>8</sup>#2154 to Wm. F. Burroughs, November 24, 1926.

<sup>9</sup>#1891 to William Shea, September 30, 1926. Shea had a particular interest in the excitement with technology described by Gordon, for he worked for Mark Sullivan, social historian and author of In Our Times.

Gordon continued on at Harvard, doing graduate work in English from 1910 to 1918. At the same time he worked at numerous jobs in order to support himself in his studies as well as his family. Here, as later, Gordon's life and dreams were dogged by constant financial problems. In 1910 he took a job selling subscriptions to Harvard's Graduate Magazine, a publication described by his friend Arthur Brodeur as being the single dullest publication he had ever opened. Nonetheless, Gordon stuck to it. That he was able to make any money from the job was a testimony to his remarkable powers of salesmanship, according to Brodeur.<sup>10</sup>

Beginning in 1912 Gordon taught Freshman Composition and several other courses in English, serving as an assistant under George Lyman Kittredge and C.N. Greenough at Harvard. In addition Gordon taught Freshman English part time at Radcliffe college from 1913 until his departure from the Boston/Cambridge area in 1918.

It was while Gordon was a graduate student at Harvard that he met Arthur Brodeur. They had similar interests and compatible temperaments. According to Bertrand Bronson, who knew of their later careers at the University of California at Berkeley, they were both mavericks. They got along well, and Brodeur's recollections

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<sup>10</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

of those days provide the only available view of Gordon at Harvard.

Brodeur characterized Gordon as being curious, ingenious and very thorough. Nor was he likely to take "no" for an answer:

I first met him when we were both in the graduate school, and we used to prepare together for two courses. It was a most interesting experience. I remember one story that I always liked. When we were taking a course in Middle Scottish together at Harvard, Gordon had a notion about the translation of a certain word in a sixteenth century poem -- a very difficult poem. And Neilson had told the class that nobody knew the meaning of this word. The word was ['brayg'], but the sense in which it was used in this poem -- nobody knew. So Gordon got to work on it. He came up with an explanation at the next meeting of the course, and Neilson said, "That's possible, Mr. Gordon, possible." So Gordon began to argue for his point of view, and Neilson said, "Mr. Gordon, you are aware that all of the authorities differ on this question. Let us not rush in." Neilson was a great person.<sup>11</sup>

Brodeur felt that Gordon was a perfectionist; others who knew Gordon later in life corroborated that judgment. Although Gordon spent eight years in graduate study at Harvard, he never completed an advanced degree. While many factors probably contributed to this, Brodeur believed that it was this aspect of Gordon's temperament and manner which was primarily responsible for his failure to finish

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<sup>11</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

the degree and for some of the disappointments he bore later in his life.

He was a man who could not bear anything less than perfection in anything he undertook. That may be why he left certain undertakings incomplete. He always had to be first in whatever he was doing. It was a matter of pride as well as ambition. Physically he was not imposing. He was tall -- about six feet -- and thin and looked fragile. In fact, men who met him often said that he looked like Robert Louis Stevenson. Actually, however, he was remarkably sinewy and powerful. He could never bear to be excelled by anybody, and that at times made it a little difficult to get along with him.<sup>12</sup>

Gordon was cocky, and proud of his "very very ultimate Scottish ancestry." He had the habit of collecting his friends by whistling the Gordon clan song "The Cock O' The North" outside of their windows.<sup>13</sup> He was tough as well, despite his coddled upbringing, and acted on a strong sense of what he believed was right and what he believed was wrong. Brodeur recounted an anecdote illustrative of this.

It was amazing how strong the man actually was. I first realized that -- painfully -- when we were at Harvard. I had a roommate whom I got into the way of bullying a bit. He was always, the roommate was always playing tricks on me, and I'd retort [in a physical vein (?)]. Bob was there once when that happened, and that was when I first knew him, when he looked very frail. And he told me to leave my roommate alone. And I asked him what he intended to do about it. And the result is, we had a wrestling match. Well, at

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<sup>12</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>13</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

that time I was a pretty strong young man for my weight. I weighed very little, but I have thrown men who weighed up to forty pounds heavier than I was. Bob and I wrestled to an absolute deadlock; neither one could gain any advantage over the other. And he could undergo extreme exertion for a long time.<sup>14</sup>

A remarkable assemblage of scholars were collected at Harvard during the years which Gordon spent there. In addition to Professor Kittredge, there were other members of the faculty with interests in folksong, field work and oral traditions, among them American literary specialist Barrett Wendall and germanicists Kuno Francke and Leo Weiner.<sup>15</sup> Enrolled as students there were persons who shaped the course of folklore scholarship in the United States during the next four decades: John Lomax, Archer Taylor, Stith Thompson, S.B. Hustvedt, Franz Rickaby and Ben Botkin. In spite of his Harvard contacts, Gordon went his way alone, showing little evidence of being greatly influenced by many of his peers or teachers. However, the few scholars whom he did keep in touch with (albeit infrequently) in later years, were those he had met during this formative era in his life: Brodeur, Archer Taylor and Kittredge.

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<sup>14</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>15</sup>Their influences on other folklorists are discussed in R. Gerald Alvey, "Phillips Barry and Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship," *JFI* 10 (1973), 67-95, and Esther K. Birdsall, "Some Notes on the Role of George Lyman Kittredge in American Folklore Studies," *JFI* 10 (1973), 57-66.

George Lyman Kittredge stands out as a formative influence. Gordon had worked under him as a Teaching Assistant and studied under his direction for the Ph.D. Gordon was very proud of his association with Kittredge, frequently listing as one of his credentials his training under the "world authority on the subject of folk song."<sup>16</sup> Kittredge thought highly of Gordon and respected his work. He gratefully accepted, bound and placed in the Treasure Room of Harvard's Houghton Library the set of "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" tear-sheets given to him by Gordon. He recommended that Gordon provide the necessary editorial advice and aid required by at least one individual desirous of publishing a collection of folksong.<sup>17</sup> According to Brodeur, Kittredge had tremendous confidence in Gordon.<sup>18</sup>

According to Gordon's daughter, his decision not to complete a Ph.D. was greatly influenced by the fact that the two scholars whom he most respected -- Kittredge and Barrett Wendall -- did not have advanced degrees. Arthur Brodeur concurred:

There's a curious thing. Gordon had certain little prejudices. He was very keen at one time on getting his Ph.D., but during most of the time that he was a candidate he was also working full-time as a teaching assistant. He carried four classes of freshman English,

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<sup>16</sup>#2376 to Robert Barry, January 16, 1927.

<sup>17</sup>Birdsall, 62.

<sup>18</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

and of course that meant a great deal of reading -- and also constant consultations with students. He dealt wonderfully with students. And then he -- I told you that one of the men he worked with was Barrett Wendall. Barrett Wendall was proud of the fact that he never had any degree higher than A.B., and Gordon worshipped his memory, and once when I said to Bob, "You should have got your Ph.D.," he said, "Barrett Wendall never got a higher degree."<sup>19</sup>

While Wendall is not remembered as a scholar particularly embroiled in early theoretical disputes over ballad origins or as a collector of folksong, it can be assumed that he encouraged Gordon's interest in folksong, just as some years earlier he had deeply touched and impressed John A. Lomax by his willing interest and support for Lomax's song collection.<sup>20</sup>

Although Gordon did not have the same close personal relationship with Francis Gummere that he enjoyed with Kittredge and Wendall, it is evident that he was considerably impressed by Gummere. Gordon accepted Gummere's major theoretical assumptions although with his own modifications, which diverged significantly from Gummere's communalism. In a letter to an Adventure reader Gordon commented on the Harvard scholars.

Though I never knew Gummere personally -- just heard him speak at meetings -- I feel

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<sup>19</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>20</sup>John Lomax, Adventures of a Ballad Hunter (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1947), p. 39.

almost that I knew him. Have read everything of his many times. Most of my work has been done with George Lyman Kittredge, who, with Gummere, was a disciple of the greatest of American folk-song workers, Francis James Child.<sup>21</sup>

Child, in fact, commanded a great deal of Gordon's admiration and stirred his imagination. Gordon dreamt of doing for American folksong what Child had done for the ballad. His plans to compile the "American volume of Child" were advertised in later years to any of those correspondents who might be vaguely familiar with folksong scholarship.

It was at Harvard that Gordon's interest in folksong was awakened. Although his daughter believes that he began to record folksongs while in Cambridge, no recordings seem to be extant. Gordon's earlier scientific and technological bent was readily adapted to his new interests. His experimentation with radio led easily into the building of recording equipment. Gordon's facility with photographic equipment found new outlets, as well. He spent considerable time exploring and photographing graveyards and tombstones within a wide radius of Cambridge.

It was during these years at Cambridge while he was supporting his parents, going to school and doing odd jobs -- including waiting table -- that he met Roberta Peter Paul of Darien, Georgia. She was his third cousin, and while

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<sup>21</sup>#983 to Grover Theis, March 17, 1925.

visiting cousins in Hackensack, New Jersey, happened to visit Cambridge with a relative. There she met Gordon; their daughter Roberta says that it was love at first sight. They married on December 26, 1912 in Darien, Georgia. A letter from an Adventure correspondent, a sailor on board the S.S. Savannah, inspired Gordon to reminisce some years later.

The address -- SS City of Savannah brings me pleasant recollections for I went south on her some thirteen years ago and returned bringing with me the finest girl in the whole south.<sup>22</sup>

Their only child, a daughter Roberta, was born in 1914.

In 1918 Gordon was offered a position as Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of California at Berkeley. His friend Arthur Brodeur was already teaching there. Gordon accepted, packed up his possessions and family and went west.

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<sup>22</sup>#1192 to J.J. Welsh, August 18, 1925.

"CULTIVATING THE SAN FRANCISCO WATERFRONT":  
BERKELEY, 1918-1924

As an Assistant Professor at Berkeley, Gordon received a salary of two thousand dollars yearly and taught freshman English, sophomore and upper division courses in the history of English literature, and graduate courses in Middle Scottish literature as well as the English and Scottish ballads. He directed theses in folksong, encouraging one student to complete a study of songs of the forty-niners using a great deal of San Francisco songster material. Another student under his direction examined black folksong using largely unpublished texts.

Brodeur's recollections here, as in other areas, provide nearly the only first-hand views available of Gordon as a teacher and scholar in action. He remembered Gordon as a "remarkable teacher."<sup>1</sup>

To this day I occasionally meet people who were students of his and they always speak of him with great enthusiasm.<sup>2</sup>

He could talk and his lectures were absolutely fascinating. I attended a number of them and they were amazingly good, and how he could hold a class.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>2</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>3</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

Brodeur remembered Gordon as a superb committee member also. During his tenure at Berkeley, Gordon served as member of the Executive committee of the College of Liberal Arts, as Secretary-Treasurer of Phi Beta Kappa, and as chairman of five committees. His activity within the University was evidently great.

The Berkeley days were, however, most important in that they framed the period in which Gordon first became visibly active in the study and collection of folklore and folksong. His interest apparently blossomed in both academic-scholarly and popular-scholarly directions. In the academic realm, Gordon delivered a paper on "Ballad Imitations" at the 1920 meeting of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast.<sup>4</sup> At the 1922 meeting of the same association, Gordon spoke on "Some Recent Criticisms of the Communal Theory of Ballad Origins."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately no copies of either seem to be extant.

Gordon's approach to folksong scholarship already had begun to differ from the typical contemporary pattern of the ballad-minded English professor who occasionally took down texts from his students. Gordon's California Collection

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<sup>4</sup>"Proceedings for 1920" [from the meeting of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast] PMLA 36 (1921), xiv.

<sup>5</sup>"Proceedings for 1922" [from the meeting of the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast] PMLA 38 (1921), xiv.

of texts at the Archive of Folk Song, Library of Congress contains at least 400 songs and groups of songs, collected primarily between 1922 and 1923. Of these, approximately the first 130 seem to be transcriptions of the recordings he made.

Gordon collected everywhere. Brodeur, who shared an office with Gordon, remembered that Gordon collected songs there, in the office, from students.<sup>6</sup> Gordon may have started with his students but he collected most widely among other social, economic and occupational groups. He approached the Seaman's Union in San Francisco in his researches and found them most interested in his collection and "in every way helpful."<sup>7</sup> Working class groups such as the Union were more representative of the networks within which Gordon typically collected. He was interested in folk groups with active song traditions; he expected that investigating the traditions of groups of hoboes, sailors and prisoners would tell him something about folksong development. He was willing to admit when his hypotheses about groups didn't work -- in time, he admitted that prisoners apparently had no distinctive song traditions of their own. While at Berkeley, however, Gordon's path lay among hoboes, sailors and convicts.

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<sup>6</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>7</sup>#2607 to John Giles, February 21, 1927.

His unorthodox research methodology was a cause of misunderstanding between him and some of his colleagues. Bertrand Bronson arrived at Berkeley about three years after Gordon had left, and gave an impression of the ambience of the scene:

I never set eyes on R.W. Gordon, I regret to say. He had left Berkeley before I came there in 1927. From gossip in the Department of English -- but the references were infrequent -- I gathered that he was something of an odd-ball who spent a lot of time cultivating the S.F. waterfront when he should have been tending to tomorrow's teaching assignments. I also gathered that he wasn't much liked by the Department majority who rather distrusted him. Arthur Brodeur thought more kindly of him than most and I think they found each other congenial in part of their interests and lives. Arthur too had a streak of the maverick in him.<sup>8</sup>

The department majority may have been quite unaware of what Gordon was actually doing down on the waterfront. At least one of his former colleagues was unaware in the twenties, and had remained unaware up to 1976 that Gordon had been recording and collecting folksong.<sup>9</sup> It is quite likely that Gordon was not inclined to enlighten his colleagues as to his actual activities, particularly if they did not see exactly eye-to-eye. Both Brodeur and Herbert Halpert, who knew Gordon later in his life, have described him as a man of great principles, a proud, unyielding, sometimes inflexible

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<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Bronson to DK [letter], October 2, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> George Stewart, May 12, 1976, Field Notes.

and righteous man. The account that follows is Brodeur's description of Gordon at Berkeley.

He was a difficult person in some ways -- very difficult. Nearly everyone liked him tremendously or disliked him intensely. He was not at all neat in personal appearance -- he cared nothing for the looks of his clothes or of his person. Once a member of the English Department remonstrated with him about his appearance, and Gordon said, "I'm not paid for that." But when people liked him they would do anything for him. He had a remarkable gift for dealing with his informants when he was collecting material.<sup>10</sup>

Brodeur suggested as well that Gordon's publications were unappreciated because they dealt with a largely unrecognized field and, further, because they appeared not in a scholarly publication but in a pulp magazine.

It was in 1923 that Gordon began his profitable six-year association with Adventure magazine. Again Arthur Brodeur was involved. He had been writing stories for Adventure, a bi-monthly pulp magazine with high standards which stressed good fiction and reputable non-fiction articles. Brodeur learned that Arthur Sullivan Hoffman, Adventure's editor, was looking for a new department editor for one of the non-fiction columns, a question and answer feature dealing with, at that time, both folk and popular song called "Old Songs That Men Have Sung." The "Old Songs" column was a part of the "Ask Adventure" section of the magazine in which a number of writers expert in their field undertook

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<sup>10</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

to provide in the pages of the magazine, answers to the various questions of Adventure readers. Hoffman had explained to Brodeur that none of the previous "experts" in charge of the "Old Songs" column had been completely successful.

John Lomax and Adventure had had a brief and, for the magazine, unsatisfactory relationship. H.M. Belden had been offered the job. He had accepted, but even before the department had started under his name he and the magazine came to the mutual decision that, while he had the scientific knowledge necessary he was "entirely ignorant of magazines and methods."<sup>11</sup> According to a letter written by Hoffman to Brodeur in January of 1923, the magazine felt that Belden

. . . was completely ignorant of the whole copyright question and could not protect us against unconscious pirating of copyright matter . . . . Also he was unwilling to undertake the "poems asked for" part of the department in its broad sense. The results would have been largely what we get now -- a department filled largely with appeals to readers. Some of that stuff is extremely good for the department but not as much as we're having.<sup>12</sup>

Robert Frothingham was the next editor of the department and Hoffman was no more satisfied with his performance than he had been with that of the others. Several

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<sup>11</sup>A.S. Hoffman to Arthur Brodeur, January 2, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>12</sup>Hoffman to Brodeur, January 2, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

other pulp magazines featured "old song" columns, and Hoffman with his managing editor F.K. Noyes felt that Adventure, like the Railroad Man's Magazine and Sea Stories, could print material of real value. Noyes had had extensive experience with this sort of column when, as editor of the Railroad Man's Magazine he ran a department called "Songs by Bards of Rail and Wire." He and Hoffman were aware of the sort of reader responses that could be obtained in a column just as they were aware of the copyright problems that must be avoided. Frothingham had filled his department with very few texts, spending most of the space on lists of songs requested by readers; Hoffman and Noyes were more sophisticated in their understanding of the capabilities as well as the function of such a department, and they expected more.

Brodeur suggested Gordon as a possible successor to Frothingham. Although I have no knowledge of exactly what Brodeur said in recommendation of his friend, Hoffman responded favorably, indicating that although the magazine had the names of two or three others who could handle the department, none of them "would seem so well adapted to the work as Mr. Gordon."<sup>13</sup> Gordon, in fact, had just been on the point of writing to Sea Stories in 1923, intending to ask them if he could run their "Log Book" column in order

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<sup>13</sup>Hoffman to Brodeur, January 2, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

to collect folksong. When Hoffman wrote to him offering the position with Adventure, Gordon was delighted and promptly accepted.

Hoffman seems to have had a firm idea in mind of the sort of work Gordon was so "well adapted to." Adventure magazine under the direction of Hoffman had a well-defined policy and attitude toward its readers. Gordon extended this in his tenure as department head. Understanding how Gordon fit into the magazine and how much he and Hoffman respectively contributed to the philosophy of the "Old Songs" column entails examining Adventure's stated principles and procedures. This is done in chapter seven, which deals more extensively with Gordon's use of the magazine and with its format and intent. Here I merely outline the beginning of the relationship between Gordon and Adventure.

Adventure sent a welcoming letter out to every individual who became associated with the publication and editing of the magazine -- whether as free-lance writer, regular contributor, or department editor. It stressed the feeling of community and comradeship that Adventure tried to promote between reader, writer and editor; between scholar and hobo, businessman and convict. Hoffman wrote about the "Adventure family" and "our magazine," about the many close friendships that had grown up between "the men

about the Camp-Fire."<sup>14</sup> A mimeographed sheet explicating the philosophy of the magazine and indicating the perception Hoffman had of its network of readers was included in the welcoming letter Noyes sent to Gordon on April 7, 1923.

It is a very wholesome company, and a very strange. Wholesome because in our stories and our "Camp-Fire" it is our common interest in the big clean outdoor things of life that draws us together. Strange because probably in all the world there is no other friendly gathering of such diverse types, of such extremes of society. For we are those who love the world's open places -- those who can not keep away from them. We are lawyers, physicians, bankers, ministers, working men, merchants, teachers, business men, scholars, as well as explorers, soldiers, hunters, beach-combers, civil engineers, prospectors, naturalists, tramps, sailors, adventurers, travellers.

And so, when you come into our circle by telling us a story, we wish you to know that we stand ready to welcome you as something more than a name and words on a printed page, to welcome you as one of our fellowship which has no rules and no formalities, no obligations except fair play and cleanness, no object except human friendliness to the measure of each man's desire to be friendly.<sup>15</sup>

Adventure encouraged the participation of readers from all walks of life, occupations and geographic locations. This suited Gordon well, as he hoped to collect folksong from a wide range of individuals. As well, Adventure stressed the same kind of wholesome All-American values that Gordon saw in song.

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<sup>14</sup>Included in letter from F.K. Noyes to RWG, April 7, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>15</sup>Noyes to RWG, April 7, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

In other ways too, Hoffman's magazine could not have fitted more happily into Gordon's plans. The magazine was extremely helpful in agreeing to pay expenses incurred by the editors in discharge of their duties. This included postage and stationery as well as a standing offer to print or mimeograph any standard answers which would help department editors in responding to questions which came in again and again. Gordon took advantage of the offer, sending out copies of songs which were particularly in demand by his readers. Gordon's scholarly thoroughness was abetted by Adventure; for accounting purposes they demanded monthly receipt of all the letters department editors received, as well as carbon copies of all the answers sent out. This kept the magazine aware of the responses their editors were both receiving and giving. For each letter sent out editors received "the royal sum" of fifty cents. These letters -- including both the correspondents' originals and carbons of Gordon's answers -- constitute the bulk of the Adventure Mss portion of the Gordon Collection now at the Archive of Folk Song, Library of Congress.

Both philosophically and technically, then, the magazine's way of operating fit Gordon's objective of making Adventure a center for folksong collecting. In this grand plan he departed from his predecessors in the department. Lomax may have received a quantity of letters; he sent only a few into the department and seemed to have had no idea of

using the publication as a tool, although he was later associated with a pulp column -- "Fiddler Joe's Song Corral" in Street and Smith's Wild West Weekly. Frothingham had used published versions of songs, or referred readers to published versions rather than depending on texts received from correspondents. Frothingham's major interest lay in his own poetic publications -- not in collecting folksong.

Gordon wanted his first column for Adventure to herald the difference. As he wrote to Noyes on April 11, 1923, he hoped that it would

. . . serve as a permanent appeal to the scholarly world, an appeal to make Adventure a center for folk-song collecting. With this in mind, I included an entirely unknown version of "Springfield Mountain" and one of "King Brady" which will make them sit up and take notice.<sup>16</sup>

Gordon also immediately determined that his style was not to sound "high-brow." Without talking down to anyone, and maintaining a tone that was "chatty without being slangy," he proposed to tap the resources of the Adventure audience.<sup>17</sup>

These ideas and the proofs of Gordon's first column apparently pleased Hoffman, for he immediately relaxed certain rules, making special allowance on Gordon's behalf. Gordon was allowed more than the usual one and one-

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<sup>16</sup> RWG to Noyes, April 11, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>17</sup> RWG to Noyes, April 11, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

half pages for his opening plea. He had asked that "King Brady," which he intended to include, be "amputated entirely" if the editors felt that it was a "bit edgy" or of an improper tone for a magazine which prided itself on a policy of printing only "clean stuff." Gordon agreed to substitute a dash for the word "hell" but asked that no emendations be made otherwise.<sup>18</sup> To these requests, Hoffman acceded, agreeing that it would be "quite all right to use legitimate profanity in the Old Songs -- this as an exception to our regular rule."<sup>19</sup>

Gordon's first monthly column appeared in the July 10, 1923 issue of *Adventure*. A facsimile follows.

### Old Songs That Men Have Sung

Devoted to outdoor songs, preferably hitherto unprinted—songs of the sea, the lumber-camp, Great Lakes, the West, old canal days, the negro, mountains, the pioneers, etc. Send in what you have or find, so that all may share in them.

Although conducted primarily for the collection and preservation of old songs, the editor will give information about modern ones when he can do so and *if* all requests are accompanied with self-addressed envelope and reply postage (*NOT* attached). Write to Mr. Gordon direct, *NOT* to the magazine.

Conducted by R. W. GORDON, 1362 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif.

SOMEHOW I've always felt that this department of *Adventure* belonged quite as much with Camp-Fire as it did tucked away under that "Staff Experts" at the end of the magazine. I've

dropped in at every meeting since 1916 and haven't found a dull one yet. But I don't claim to be an expert at all, simply to be interested—tremendously interested—in old songs, songs that belong to us all.

Figure 7. Gordon's first *Adventure* "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" column, July 10, 1923. (continued on following page)

<sup>18</sup> RWG to Noyes, April 11, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>19</sup> Noyes to RWG, April 20, 1923, LC/AFS Pers.

as a people, songs that for generations have been passed on from man to man, songs that *haven't* been printed and that *ought* to be printed.

Many of these songs are rapidly passing from memory. The old ballads our grandfathers and grandmothers used to sing are almost entirely forgotten; the sailor chanteys which began to disappear from the sea with the coming of steam are now hardly sung at all; many of the haunting melodies of the old-time negro, his humorous or pathetic love songs, his unique work songs, have been lost for want of some one to take them down and record them. The greater number of those red-blooded songs of the Western pioneer, songs that told of his hardships and his hopes as he journeyed laboriously across the great plains, or as he "reaped the shinin' gold" on "the banks of the Sacramento" have gone forever with the men who created and sang them.

That's why I appeal to you other men about the fire, to those of you who have from time to time spoken up and to that larger group who have sat in, and smoked, and dreamed, and listened. These are *your* songs. You have sung and enjoyed them; will you pass them on, share them with those who are yet to come? You are the men who *now* possess them; you are the only ones who can collect and preserve them.

Taken collectively, Camp-Fire is the greatest living expert on the songs of the American people. There is not a nook or cranny that one of us has not explored, not an experience that one of us has not had, not a song that one of us has not sung.

I want Bill Adams and Captain Dingle to bundle up and send in those deep-sea chanteys; I want Hapsburg Liebe to contribute more of his songs of the South and of the Southern negro. I want you each one to tear a few blank sheets from the old note-book and scribble down titles and then add the verses—even the fragmentary, half-remembered ones—and then send them in. Don't wait for questions to be published, send in the songs and make the questions, most of them at least, unnecessary.

Seriously it's very much worth the doing. A few years ago an English scholar, Cecil Sharpe, during a brief visit in our Southern mountains succeeded in obtaining a number of valuable and unrecorded songs. We knew and had known that the songs were there; but we had been too careless, too indifferent to take the trouble to collect and preserve them. The mass of worth-while material still unprinted is large; glance for a moment at the heading and note its variety. What Mr. Sharpe did for a small section, *Adventure* can, if it desires, do for the entire country. The men actively engaged in helping to preserve these songs of the American people are few. Their names will be remembered with gratitude by future generations.

It's up to you men to decide. Write me a line and say frankly what you think of it all. If you're interested, let's all get to work before it's too late—R. W. Gordon, 1262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif.

HERE is an unpublished New England version of a genuine old American song that has been sung in one form or another for over a hundred and fifty years. It was given to me at Cambridge, Mass., in 1916, by Austin R. Frey, who said

"My father used to sing 'Springfield Mountain' to me as a lullaby when I was a baby. He learned it from my uncle, who in turn heard it sung by guides

at Franconia Notch in the White Mountains.

Springfield Mountain

On Springfield Mountain there did dwell  
A nice young man; I knew him well—I ell.

Chorus: Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay,  
Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay—I ay.

He farmed it on his father's farm,  
And never thought he'd come to harm—I arm.

He worked away from morn till dark,  
And then his sweetheart he did spark—I ark.

Her cheeks were red, her hair the same,  
And Molly Brand it was her name—I am.

One Monday morning he did go  
Out in the meadow for to mow—I owe.

He scarce had mowed one-half the field  
When a pesky sarpint bit his heel—I eel.

He raised his scythe and struck a blow  
That laid the pesky sarpint low—I owe.

He took the sarpint in his hand  
And posted off to Molly Brand—I and.

Poor Molly screamed in mortal fright  
When she observed the sarpint's bite—I ka.

"Oh, Johnny dear, why did you go  
Out in the meadow for to mow?—I owe."

"Oh, Molly dear, I thought you knowed  
'Twas father's field and must be mowed—I ode."

"Oh Johnny dear, you'll surely die  
Unless you drink some good old rye—I ie."

He drank old whisky by the pail;  
Alas, it proved of no avail—I ail.

And this young man gave up the ghost,  
And hastened off to Gabriel's host—I ost.

Poor Molly wept a week or more,  
And blackest bombazine she wore—I ore.

She could not dance, or sing, or laugh  
Till she had writ this epitaph—I af:

"Here lies a man within his grave  
Whom even whisky could not save—I ave."

Then dried her eyes, and soon began  
To try to catch another man—I an.

Now all young men a warning take:  
Beware of the bite of a pizen snake—I ake.

Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay,  
Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay—I ay.

HAPSBURG LIEBE sends in some interesting additional stanzas for the song of "John Hardy," published recently. He says:

"The song given in the back of *Adventure* for April 1916 is quite famous in the hills of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina—it is going out a little now, but when I was a boy everybody knew and sang it. I heard a *comparatively* sharp it. It was a *hoop* song, and there really is something catching about the air—I used to knock it out on the banjo and sing it myself. It is a *hoop* song.

clusion that a man needs about a tin cupful of corn 'tisky to give it right. In the aforesaid hills it is 'John Hardy' instead of 'John Henry.' This is one of the songs that everybody who sings adds a verse. The words are always on the tragic order. Here are a few verses that *Adventure's* man missed:

"John Hardy had a sweet true love,  
He kept her all dressed in red;  
She followed him to his hangin'-ground—  
'Oh, Hardy, I heerd you was dead, pore boy!  
Oh, Hardy, I heerd you was dead!'

"Father and mother standin' around—  
'Father, won't you pray fo' me?  
I'm standin' on my hangin'-ground.  
Father, won't you pray fo' me, pore boy—  
Oh, father, won't you pray fo' me?'

"The first stanza as I've heard it is usually this:

"John Hardy was a bad, bad man;  
He carried two guns every day;  
When sheriffs rode out through the land,  
You ought 'o seed John Hardy gettin' away—  
Oh, you ought 'o seed John Hardy gettin' away!'  
—HAPSBURG LIEBE.

In the "Journal of American Folk-Lore" for 1919, pages 505-520, Professor J. H. Cox sums up what is known of John Hardy and prints a number of the songs sung about him. Professor Cox has discovered that there was in 1872 a negro of this name famous as a steel-driller—"a gambler, a roust and a fierce fighter," and that in 1893 a negro of the same name was executed for murder in West Virginia. These he believes to have been one and the same man. He points out that three different groups of songs have sprung up about Hardy, one dealing with him as a steel-driver, a second dealing with

him as a steel-driver who was murdered, and still a third dealing with him as a murderer.

A FEW days ago a friend of mine who desires to remain anonymous gave me a fragment of a song popular in the South some thirty years ago about "King Brady." It's rather amusing, and seems to be connected in some way with the John Henry-John Hardy group. Can any one send a more complete version, or give any information about its hero?

King Brady.

When King Brady was on de beat,  
He 'lowed no ladies to walk de street;  
Now King Brady is daid an' gone,  
An' de ladies walk de street all night long.

"Mammy, Mammy, how can it be,  
Pappy was killed in de fix' degree!"  
"No, no, son, dat can't be so,  
Fuh he was here 'bout a nonn ago."

"Mammy, Mammy, gimme my hat."  
"No, no, my son, I caln't do dat."  
Jes' wrap dis shawl all 'bout yo' head,  
An' go an' see if yo' daddy's daid."

When King Brady was well an' soun',  
He chased dem ladies jes' like a houn';  
Now King Brady is daid an' gone,  
An' dem ladies is walkin' de streets all night long.

When dey heard King Brady was daid,  
Dey all went home an' dressed in red;  
Come back dancin' an' singin' a song—  
King Brady went to hell wid a Stetson on.

SEND all song material and all requests for information to R. W. Gordon, 1262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif. Do not send them to the magazine.

As he had intended, a new tone was set. His innovations extended to details of layout. For the first time a boxed introductory headnote preceded the column, announcing that "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" was devoted to certain types of songs, although the description was more suggestive than prescriptive. He emphasized his interest -- significantly, in view of his hypotheses concerning the development of folksong -- in the "old songs, songs that belong to us all as a people, songs that for generations have been passed on from man to man."<sup>20</sup> Appealing to all of the readers around the Camp-Fire, Gordon asserted the worth of the songs and the value of services rendered in behalf of their collection and preservation. He solicited not only the texts of his readers, but their comments on his ideas and method of running the column. From this point, his earliest appearance before a wide-unspecialized audience, Gordon sought to develop a style -- combining popular appeal and sound scholarship. He also sought to involve and commit his correspondents.

The texts which he printed were all previously unpublished; he included with each a significant amount of the correspondent's original commentary. This had never been done in previous "Old Songs" columns, nor had scholarly

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<sup>20</sup>Robert W. Gordon, "Old Songs That Men Have Sung," Adventure (July 10, 1923).

annotations been used to the extent which he used them. His summaries of scholarship provided contextual information to his readers without intimidating them. He was anxious to turn readers into correspondents, and he wanted to train those potential correspondents. His method of combining theory and collection in the pages of the column was meant to educate his readers at the same time that it entertained them. Gordon hoped to gently and gradually enable his audience to distinguish folksong from "author verse," to send him variant versions, and to deliver him their texts unedited. In his third "Old Songs" column which appeared on September 10, 1923, for example, Gordon explained that

. . . a true folk-song is like a tree, constantly branching out and changing. Only when it has ceased to be sung does this process stop. For this reason it is important not to be content with one text or version, but to gather all the versions. In this way we are able to discover the most effective and most singable forms.<sup>21</sup>

Explaining that a true folksong had no single text, but a great variety of versions all of which were authentic and valuable, Gordon asked for all the versions, fragments, lines and even titles that his readers could remember. All would be valuable to the folklorist. He described the different sorts of commonplaces characteristic of different sorts of folksong thus educating his readers and at the same time providing hints to jog their memories.

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<sup>21</sup>"Old Songs," September 10, 1923, p. 191.

A wide variety of songs filled his column. He printed and commented on chanties, outlaw ballads, minstrel and vaudeville songs, humorous and play-party songs, fiddle and banjo songs and old ballads. Of course, the texts Gordon found room for in the "Old Songs" columns represented only a very very small percentage of his collection. His inclusive, eclectic approach to the subject demonstrated in Adventure, and the wide variety of folksong he elicited there were in part attributable to the demands of his audience. Although he was a specialist he realized that members of his audience were not. Necessarily his collection and publication became more inclusive in answer to their needs. A letter to a correspondent later, in 1926, expressed the ethic under which Gordon operated the column.

The nearer a song is to the true folk type the more I personally am interested in it. But I have many readers to consider and feel that I cannot confine the department to the strict folk-song. Some would be sure to howl.<sup>22</sup>

That he bowed to the tastes of his readers rather than enforcing his own aesthetic contributed to the success of the column. Nor did Gordon feel particularly displeased with the content of "Old Songs," for, believing that folksong contained a mixture of folk and "author" elements, Gordon was able to find worth in many songs. After ten

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<sup>22</sup>#1949 to L.B. Corey, October 20, 1926.

months of association with the column, Gordon wrote, on April 26, 1924 to F.K. Noyes, expressing his feelings of satisfaction in regard to the column.

Wish you would give me the "straight from the shoulder" on how you like the stuff I'm running. It is attracting a good bit of favorable attention in university circles, but I wonder whether it meets with the full approval of you and A.S.H. Judging from the type of persons writing in it seems to go well with readers. It draws a better class of contribution than did the type Frothingham printed. I've tried to get away from the cheap vaudeville type of song and yet not be too "highbrow." I have a guilty suspicion, however, that I talk too much myself in the issues. How about it?"<sup>23</sup>

We don't know how Noyes answered, but readers did respond favorably to Gordon's changes in the department. He was quick to answer them, in turn, with encouraging, personable replies, bringing them back for more. Readers took a personal interest in Gordon, his family and his endeavors. Upon hearing of the Berkeley fire in the late summer of 1923, many of Gordon's correspondents wrote to express their concern over his well-being. As it had happened, the fire had burnt itself out less than one hundred feet from the Gordon's home while the family stood on the roof watching,<sup>24</sup> but correspondents, not knowing the extent of the damage, were eager to offer their help.

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<sup>23</sup> RWG to F.K. Noyes, April 26, 1924, LC/AFS Pers. A.S.H. is Arthur Sullivant Hoffman.

<sup>24</sup> #163 to Army Adams, September 27, 1923.

Gordon encouraged the development of friendships with his correspondents. He hoped someday to be able to meet many of them in person in order to make recordings of their repertoires. He expressed this hope to many of his correspondents, talking of song-swapping sessions and describing his extensive collection of field recordings, mentioning that he enjoyed playing the cylinders for visitors.<sup>25</sup> He assumed an active interest on the part of his readers and correspondents and got it.

Gordon went out of his way to establish and maintain good relationships with his correspondents. He sent out -- at his own expense -- many copies of "a tiny book of Finger's that happens to contain a few good things."<sup>26</sup> Nor was his involvement restricted to sending readers some long-sought and obscure version of a song. When a correspondent imprisoned in San Quentin appeared to have difficulty in obtaining stamps and paper, Gordon sent him some by mail.<sup>27</sup> In a letter to another inmate corresponding about the "old songs" in 1928, Gordon recalled visiting correspondents in San Quentin some years before when he had lived in Berkeley.

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<sup>25</sup> #178 to D.G. Newell, October 3, 1923; #135 to Mr. Lee Gotcher, September 12, 1923.

<sup>26</sup> #633 to Jack Williams, April 10, 1924. Gordon is probably referring to the Haldeman-Julius (Girard, Kansas, 1923) edition of Charles J. Finger's Sailor Chanties and Cowboy Songs.

<sup>27</sup> #633 to Jack Williams, April 10, 1924.

If I were back at Berkeley, I'd run over to see you. When I was Professor at the University of California I ran over a couple of times to see men with whom I was in correspondence. And on two occasions was permitted by the courtesy of the Warden to go "inside." Had a guard along, of course, to serve as nurse and to see that I broke none of the regulations. I'll never forget the beauty of the garden in the inner court! Or my amazement at the library. Imagine you've already been using that. If not, find out about it at once. There is some worthwhile reading there. Also write a few things for the magazine. I used to get copies of it<sup>28</sup> now and then and found them very interesting.

In the Berkeley area, his work in the "Old Songs" department had made him known and appreciated, if not by his colleagues in the English Department, at least by readers of Adventure and those members of the social or occupational groups within which he did his collecting. Gordon himself was occasionally surprised at the repute his column had gained. Writing in November 1926 to Adventure correspondent Alan LeMay, who had commented in a letter about hobo songs, Gordon recounted another incident that had occurred when he lived in Berkeley:

From time to time I have had a few dealings with tramps and hoboes, and have found that the only thing you can ever count on is what you get at the time. Promises are quite worthless in their case. Met a man once on Mission Street, Frisco. He braced me for money for eats. Rough-looking customer. Said he was a lumber-jack "temporarily out of work." His hands seemed to bear out this story.

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<sup>28</sup>#3449 to S.J. Duffield, March 13, 1923

Usually I pay little attention to a pan-handler, but this fellow interested me and I got to talking with him. Asked a few questions about old songs, and the son of a gun referred me to Adventure. I asked who ran the department, and he answered "feller by the name of Gordon." Thereupon I bit hard, gave him a good handout on his promise that he would mail in to me a few of the songs he had been talking of. He never did.<sup>29</sup>

Gordon's work was also known and appreciated by an Oakland newspaperman, himself a devotee and collector of old sea songs and stories, who was to prove to be a great help to Gordon. Frank Kester was the marine editor of the Oakland Tribune when he met Bob Gordon. He had been running a column called "The Dogwatch" in which he printed sea songs and stories, including many that he had collected from the old windjammer men who he knew from his "beat" on the Oakland and San Francisco waterfronts.<sup>30</sup> Kester remembers that Gordon searched him out at his office.

One day . . . the receptionist of the Tribune editorial department came to me and said there was a man outside who was very anxious to meet me. Going out to the reception room I was startled to see a man that I thought must be the reincarnation of Robert Louis Stevenson. Many times later, I was to note the close relationships and resemblance of these two men. Both were carefree individuals with a keen sense of humor and more or less careless in their general appearances, which because of their outstanding personalities and individualities made all who met them overlook that fact. Also both indulged in an

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<sup>29</sup> #2089 to Alan LeMay, November 14, 1926.

<sup>30</sup> Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

occasional drink of something stronger than coffee.<sup>31</sup>

Gordon introduced himself as the editor of the "Old Songs" department of Adventure which impressed Kester favorably as he knew the column well. Gordon then expressed his interest in the work which Kester was doing with sea songs. After delivering a good-natured chiding to Kester for having "lift[ed] some of the old English sea songs" from volumes already in print, Gordon asked him for help in tracking down some of the "old sea songsters."<sup>32</sup> Gordon had already enlisted the aid of a number of ex-sea captains in the area, men who Kester also knew. Kester was curious to see how a professional collector went to work, and readily agreed to take Gordon with him on his waterfront beat in order to introduce him to some of the crews of the few windjammers still calling in at Oakland Harbor.<sup>33</sup> Kester's description of their first outing is one of the few available accounts of how Gordon went about his field work.

I was quite surprised when he showed up for our first, er, excursion to the waterfront. Instead of carrying a sheaf of notepaper he had an old style Edison cylinder phonograph. Bob explained that he would have his subjects sing into the machine thus recording not only their voices and the words, but

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<sup>31</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

<sup>32</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

<sup>33</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

the music as well on the more or less fragile wax cylinders. At the present time I have forgotten exactly the particular sailing ship that we were aboard, but my recollection is that it must have been a coal carrier from Newcastle, Australia . . . I located the mate and explai- Bob explained the purpose of his visit. As I recall now, the mate who was, uh, trying to get the packet unloaded as quickly as possible was a bit hostile about yanking a man off the job to sing into a phonograph. But Bob exerted his personality, and the mate was won over. One of the sailors, a grizzled old chap, was yanked off the job. He was not averse to being taken from the dirty coal passing job to sing, uh, sea shanties. We went to a shielded spot on the deck where Bob set up the recording apparatus. Then the shell-back in strong Australian accents under the quizzing of, uh, began, uh, in a rather rusty voice, to sing, uh, an Australian sea shanty. This was followed by a couple of uh, better known [pulley-haul (?)] and [walk-along (?)] shanties. As we left the ship, Bob announced that the Australian song alone was worth the visit.

On another trip went aboard a freighter. There the mate was m-more genial. When Bob explained his, mm, desires, he shouted out, "All right you blokes, do any of you know a sea shanty?" One of the chaps, who was a cook, and who claimed to have been also cook on the famous Flying Cloud, which Bob and I both discounted, gave him a rendition of the old song "Our Cook He Is A Dirty Man." Like the other records- er, his voice would never have made a place in Grand Opera.

Following those two excursions Bob went on his own, mm, in making visits, as I had to cover my beat, and also, mm, had to make the editions, However, he must have succeeded pretty well, for, later, in going along the waterfront, covering my job, some of the s-sailors were in -- and also the stevedores -- were keenly interested in Bob's efforts to collect old sail- songs, would ask, "Hey, where's that your friend of yours with his phonograph?"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

Around the Oakland and San Francisco waterfronts, Bob Gordon became known as "the guy with the derby hat and the phonograph."<sup>35</sup>

Gordon "went around with the hoboes too."<sup>36</sup>

According to Frank Kester, he took his Edison into hobo jungles and recorded there. He had some familiarity with hobo monickers, for he reported to Kester that in his travels he had seen Jack London's sign -- "Skysail Jack" -- left at a hobo jungle in Sacramento Valley. Adventure had provided Gordon with a number of contacts in both self-proclaimed and retired hoboes. Kester said that in this context too, Gordon became known as the man with the hard hat and the phonograph -- a reputation that followed him wherever he went.<sup>37</sup>

Kester spent a good bit of time with Gordon, and often helped him to answer the mountains of Adventure correspondence. From his first column in July of 1923 to the time he left Berkeley in approximately October of 1924, Gordon received more than 750 letters. Kester recalled that

. . . Bob was inclined to be lazy when it came to correspondence. In fact, after he'd gone east I only received a couple of post card messages from him. The letters would pile up, until he would admit, "I simply must get at answering these." He would then go, go

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<sup>35</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

<sup>36</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

<sup>37</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

through the mail. Some, Bob would answer personally. Others he would hand to me to, with what to say, and others he would, uh, use in his co- uh, use in his department. That's the way it was right up to the time of his departure. That afternoon and night, we poured over the piled up mail. We didn't get through until half past two in the morning. I went home and left Bob to pack up for his departure. But for once, we had the entire pile of correspondence cleaned up.<sup>38</sup>

Kester was also involved in another one of Gordon's song-related enterprises -- the organization of an "Adventure Camp-Fire" group -- as were Leighton Robinson, Jack Schickel and Andy Turner, three of the ex-sea captains whose aid Gordon had previously enlisted in his efforts to collect sea songs, and from who he had recorded many songs on his modified Edison cylinder recorder. Newspapermen and a few persons from the University of California faculty -- among them Arthur Brodeur -- were involved in this "Adventure Camp-Fire" group formed by Gordon in 1923. Evidently Gordon had wanted to organize a group that would be interested in folksong which could serve as a center for its collection and discussion. The club seemed primarily, however, to serve as an interested audience for Gordon's cylinder recordings. He often played them for the group, after which they would "try them out" themselves.<sup>39</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

<sup>39</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.



Figure 8. The Adventure Camp-Fire group, near Berkeley, California, c. 1923-1924.

group entertained frequent distinguished visitors; after the guest's lecture the entire group often enjoyed singing.<sup>40</sup> So pervasive was Gordon's influence that the group carried on even after he had left. One of the visitors eventually entertained by the group was John A. Lomax, although his visit occurred well after Gordon had returned to the East. Lomax was extremely enthusiastic about the singing of the group.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>41</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

Adventure Camp-Fire's singing was evidently quite good, for the group was hired by Radio KELX in Oakland. Under the direction of Captains Robinson and Turner, and with Gordon, Brodeur and Kester among the personnel -- Kester called himself and Gordon the "tobacco tenors" of the bunch -- the group pretended to heave up anchor and head out to sea on an imaginary windjammer, singing the shanties that would have been used in such a departure. The broadcast was extremely popular -- the station received letters from as far away as Japan and Montana as well as from all up and down the California coast, and they decided to stage a repeat performance. "Old shellbacks and present day seamen alike" found the group authentic sounding as well as enjoyable; the singers subsequently appeared at several maritime club gatherings in the Bay area.<sup>42</sup>

Because the men in the group had a great range of interests, the club's activities were not restricted solely to folksong performance, collection or discussion. Thus Gordon found himself on archaeological expeditions to nearby Indian mounds with members of the club. Kester remembered one of the digs on which the group went between 1923 and 1924, when Gordon was in the area:

Bob Gordon was interested, but he was, uh, we were, uh, able to get him to only go, uh, on one of the mound-digging expeditions. I recall

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<sup>42</sup>Kester did the booking for the group. Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

that it was in Marin County. In his section of the trench was only turning up a few fire-stones and a [mess] of plain rocks. Finally, he laid down his shovel, wiped his sweat from his face, and announced--"This is too much like clam-digging to suit me." With that he rolled a cigarette, sat back to watch the rest of us work.<sup>43</sup>

While Kester remembered Gordon as having been uninterested in mound-digging in this particular case, the impression is deceptive. Gordon's investigations of California Indian mounds reflected the interest in burial customs, beliefs, graveyards and tombstones which had led him throughout numerous cemeteries in Massachusetts and would lead him through Spanish and Indian burial grounds in the South.

Gordon was busy in the Bay area collecting, recording and spreading folksong and pursuing other interests. It has been mentioned that he was not one to concern himself overmuch with his image among his colleagues. Gordon was not a diplomat; he ignored the politics of the English department and pursued his own investigations. The manner in which Gordon came to a parting of the ways with University of California in 1924 reflected an unwillingness to be moved by institutional values or procedures. The later termination of his post at the Library of Congress was due to a similar conflict. In this former case Gordon's idealism,

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<sup>43</sup>Taped interview by Frank Kester, July 1970.

his sense of what was right and his loyalty to Arthur Brodeur led him to an action which infuriated the head of the department.

According to Arthur Brodeur, W.M. Hart, the head of Berkeley's Department of English, liked neither Gordon nor Brodeur, but saw an opportunity to relieve himself of Brodeur first. The previous chairman had recommended Brodeur for promotion to associate professor. While on sabbatical in Sweden, Brodeur learned that Hart, the new chairman, had prevented the promotion. Brodeur wrote to the man angrily, saying that he had been tempted to resign but had changed his mind. The chairman then informed the rest of the department that he had received a letter from Brodeur containing his resignation. No one saw the letter, as Hart had merely paraphrased it; however, acting on it they found a replacement for Brodeur. Returning to Berkeley in the fall, Brodeur presented himself in the department to learn that he had resigned. He confided in Gordon who, in addition to being a good friend of Brodeur's, was a very curious man "always bent on investigating a subject to the bottom."<sup>44</sup> Gordon went into the department files, found the original letter, and at the next department meeting read it aloud.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>45</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

Brodeur was reinstated, but for such an action -- regardless of the brave and honorable motives which had inspired it -- Gordon obviously had to suffer. He received notice that the department had unanimously recommended his dismissal because he had no doctorate and had published nothing since he was originally hired. According to Brodeur the supposed grounds for dismissal were false on two counts. First, recommendation for Gordon's dismissal had not come unanimously from the department -- the majority of the department was unaware of the situation and only a handful of individuals were involved -- therefore the dismissal was actually not legal.<sup>46</sup> The second false statement concerned Gordon's publications. As Brodeur pointed out, Gordon

. . . had published rather extensively, but in a field which was not then recognized -- American folksong. Moreover, he had published this material not in a scholarly journal, but in Adventure magazine . . . .<sup>47</sup>

Learning that the dismissal had been illegally engineered by a few men on false grounds, Brodeur proposed to bring the whole matter up openly before the entire department. Gordon, however, "was an exceedingly proud man, and insisted that nothing should be done in his defence."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>47</sup>Arthur Brodeur to George Stewart, April 23, 1966. Quoted courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

<sup>48</sup>Brodeur to Stewart, April 23, 1966, as above.

Gordon was awarded a sabbatical for the school year 1924-1925, with the understanding that he would not be rehired the following year. He decided to use the sabbatical to return to Harvard to complete his doctorate. In the late summer of 1924, Gordon prepared to return east. Unfortunately, both he and his wife came down with severe cases of amoebic dysentery. Mrs. Gordon, Roberta and Gordon's mother, who lived with the family, remained behind in Berkeley and Gordon went on alone to 6 Conant Hall, a graduate residence at Harvard.



Figure 9. Standing, left to right: Mrs. Paul (Roberta Paul Gordon's mother), Roberta Peter Paul Gordon, Harriet Ewer Gordon, Josephine Brodeur (Arthur Brodeur's sister). Sitting: Roberta Gordon, Robert W. Gordon. Berkeley, California, c. 1922.

VI

"ALL MY EGGS IN ONE BASKET":  
FIELD WORK, 1924-1928

Gordon's collecting and recording continued during his trip back east in 1924. In a letter to Louis B. Hart of the Grosvenor Library, and a long-time friend and Adventure correspondent, he briefly mentioned that he had "spent too much time on the way, especially in northern Minnesota, where [he had] got a number of good things."<sup>1</sup>

Although he had returned to Harvard alone, intending to concentrate solely on finishing his dissertation, a number of matters arose to distract him. Financial worries continued. Back in California his wife had suffered a remission and was finding it very difficult to pay for both the necessary medical treatment and the living expenses of the family from the limited funds at her disposal. She described the situation in a letter to her husband written in the winter of 1924:

In regard to your plans. As much as I hate to say it I do not see how you can do any research work another year. If it were just bread and butter we had to have we could exist. Were you single you could go ahead. And it makes me feel very badly to be the millstone which keeps you back. This treatment has taken six months. And this was an easier one than the duodenum.

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<sup>1</sup>#980 to Louis B. Hart, March 17, 1925.

I won't be able to leave here before May and may be not for two years. Time will tell. As I have no tonsils to hold me back and my nerves are in better shape I may respond quickly and I may not. You will have to take advantage of the best opening you see for teaching or in the business world. May be your doctorate will fall short of your anticipation. But you will have to bear the disappointment. If that is the only thing in the way. Dr. says he is glad you went on with your Ph.D., that you are able bodied and talented so he expects you to go ahead. As he is a family man (himself) and has had to surmount obstacles he feels he can express an opinion. He said today he would rather do anything than tell me what was before me . . . . We have given up "the woman once a week" and have been doing our ironing etc. -- trying to economize a bit. The statement last month showed a balance of less than five hundred . . . . These six months have passed and so will the next six -- I know I am not equal to much even though I look fine and feel well, spasmodically . . . .<sup>2</sup>

In addition to familial and financial pressures, other factors contributed to the failure of Gordon's second attempt to finish his doctorate. According to both Brodeur and Roberta Gordon Nye, Gordon merely needed to write up his dissertation, for he had done extensive research already on Peter Buchan and had proved Buchan's "utter unreliability."<sup>3</sup> However, Gordon was a perfectionist and, according to Brodeur . . . couldn't write a line until he had read and digested everything that bore on the

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<sup>2</sup>"Bobbie" to "Dearie," dated "Wednesday" [Roberta Paul Gordon to RWG, probably Winter of 1925] Nye collection.

<sup>3</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969. Exactly what sort of research Gordon had done concerning Peter Buchan, the 19th century Scottish ballad collector, is not known to me.

subject. Also it is a fact that just as he couldn't write letters so he had great difficulty in writing anything.<sup>4</sup>

Wendell and Kittredge, the two academics most admired by Gordon, had influenced his first career as a graduate student; the fact that neither man had a higher degree may have helped him rationalize his failure to complete the degree the second time.

Gordon's interest in living folksong continued to steal time and energy away from his dissertation. By October 1924 he was dreaming of an extensive field trip devoted solely to recording and collecting folksong. Such a trip eventually came about and led him even deeper into collecting and even farther from a doctorate. Although there was no certainty, in the fall of 1924, that such a trip would be a reality, it was certainly on Gordon's mind. His letters to correspondents mentioned that he was continuing his collecting "and finding much material in this part of the country," and that he hoped to travel into the South the following year and after that to Newfoundland.<sup>5</sup>

Besides Gordon's interests and the pressures upon him, a simple detail evidently prevented him from finishing his doctorate. A fee was required of all those writing a

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<sup>4</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>5</sup>#750 to Ed Baker, October 28, 1924.

thesis; when the time came, Gordon did not have the money.<sup>6</sup> The thesis was never written and Gordon made a momentous decision. Regardless of the difficulties his family was facing and the precarious future which such a decision insured, Gordon determined that what was heretofore hobby would become his full-time work. In a mood to reminisce in late March of 1928, Gordon looked back on the decision in letters to many correspondents, of which the following two excerpts are representative.

. . . that if I were really to accomplish what I wanted it would be necessary for me to spend all, not just a part of my time at it, and that I should have to travel about the country and collect myself.<sup>7</sup>

. . . then decided that a college teacher might very well do work with books but that if I was to do what I really wanted to do I should have to spend all my time at it. Put all my eggs in one basket -- jumped off -- and decided that the dear American reading public should support me and my research. And bless 'em, they've done it so far!<sup>8</sup>

What Gordon had in mind was a more extensive field trip than had yet been undertaken. He would begin in the fall in Asheville, North Carolina and continue through the South up the Mississippi, through the Dakotas and Minnesota to the Canadian side of the Great Lakes, through New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to finally end a year later in Newfoundland.

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<sup>6</sup>Mr. and Mrs. Bert Nye, May 25, 1976, Field Notes.

<sup>7</sup>#3461 to G.A. Bunting, March 15, 1928.

<sup>8</sup>#3459 to C.W. Loutzenhiser, March 14, 1928.

Technically the projected trip was also to be, if not the first of its kind, at least unusual in its emphasis on the complete and accurate recording of all the material available. In an undated typed draft of a paper summarizing his plans and objectives for the proposed trip, Gordon made the following comments:

The method of collection and preservation will differ markedly from those used by former collectors such as Sharp, Lomax, Odum, Perrow, and others, in that in every case the tune will be preserved by means of a recording phonograph in the exact tones and intonations of the original singer. These records will be shipped to the Harvard Library, and there deposited. After duplicate records have been made, the master records will be sealed up and preserved for an indefinite period. (Mr. Edison assured me, in a conference I had with him about three weeks ago, that by means of washing the cylinders in solenium and then nickle plating them that they could be kept in perfect condition for at least 500 years.)

This is the only proper method of handling folk-song, since our present conventional musical notation can at best only roughly approximate the delicate but intentional variations both in pitch and in time used by the folk. No American Library has at present any considerable collection of such records, and the few cylinders now in existence will soon become useless through failure to preserve them against use and moisture.<sup>9</sup>

Gordon spent much of the spring of 1925 in attempting to secure financial support and sponsorship. As credentials he offered not only his solid academic background, but his extensive California field work and his position as the "Old

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<sup>9</sup>"Trip paper," undated, UO 11/9.

Songs" man. He boasted that within a year or two he would be the recognized expert in the field. The Grosvenor Library in Buffalo, New York, which held the second largest collection of American popular song in existence, seemed to agree with Gordon's estimate; they invited him at their own expense to come to look over their materials.<sup>10</sup>

Harvard demonstrated their confidence in Gordon and their belief in his project by giving him a \$1200 Sheldon Fellowship. The grant alone, however, was not sufficient. In addition to the automobile, cameras and recording equipment needed for the trip, Gordon required travel expenses for the year, and he had to be able to provide for his family. As it was, the planning of the trip coincided with further ill luck for the Gordon family. Treatment for Mrs. Gordon's illness had dragged on, taking \$1200 from their small budget. In April of 1925, Gordon's mother became seriously ill. Shortly thereafter she had to be placed in a sanatorium -- another drain on finances. Gordon had already borrowed heavily on his life insurance policy. There probably could have been no worse time in which to begin contemplating a field trip.

Gordon had already begun knocking on doors. In February 1925 he "'broke in' to radio on WEAJ (Bell Telephone, N.Y.) and about twelve other linked stations by furnishing

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<sup>10</sup>#1140 to Nate Colwell, July 16, 1925.

the old songs part of the Lincoln [day] program . . . ."<sup>11</sup>  
 In March he went to New York City with the idea of raising the money to support the trip through contracted articles and projects. He went back to WEAf, offering them exclusive rights to the materials he expected to turn up. He would furnish advice, old songs, and "new verses of genuine folkstuff . . . that would make them supreme in the whole country."<sup>12</sup> Gordon recognized the potential popular appeal of the material he hoped to record, and with this in mind he also approached the Victor Phonograph Company, offering them the first chance to issue as commercial records any of his field recordings which might have commercial value. They seemed interested and told him that his royalty on any such discs would be two cents a record.<sup>13</sup>

Gordon also offered "such expert advice on the matter of folk-songs as [he] could give them," pointing out his potential worth in the matter of folksong copyright questions.<sup>14</sup> In return he wanted Victor to subsidize his trip; by a close vote his proposition was refused.

Although nothing concrete had come out of these initial conferences, Gordon was optimistic. He wrote to

<sup>11</sup>#916 to Larry Jean Fisher, March 6, 1925.

<sup>12</sup>#1140 to Nate Colwell, July 16, 1925.

<sup>13</sup>"Trip paper," undated, UO 11/9.

<sup>14</sup>#2037 to Wm. E. Shea, November 1, 1926.

Louis B. Hart that deals were pending, and speculated that the records released by Victor should be extremely profitable.<sup>15</sup>

Nor did Gordon neglect other media. He approached the New York Times, explaining the trip he was hoping to embark on. Characterizing himself to Gordon Theis of the Times as a "wandering minstrel carrying a phonographic recording apparatus and collecting folk-songs," he wondered whether "the Times would consider a sort of roving special correspondent commission . . . ." <sup>16</sup> The Times would in fact consider it, and Gordon secured a contract for a series of ten articles. He was to be paid \$1000 for the "exclusive" on the condition that no other newspapers carry his material. Gordon then began to solicit magazines. He received a few tentative expressions of interest, but no other contracted articles.

Gordon also attempted to gain the backing of institutions and industries. He approached the board of the Grosvenor Library, whose sizeable collection of songsters and sheet music testified to their interest in the subject and with whom Gordon had already had a long and amicable relationship. On April 25, 1925 he wrote to Louis B. Hart:

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<sup>15</sup> #1029 to Louis B. Hart, April 25, 1925.

<sup>16</sup> #983 to Gordon Theis, March 17, 1925.

Should there happen to be anyone among the donors and benefactors of the Grosvenor who might be sufficiently interested in the subject of American folk-song to be kindly disposed toward the idea I think I can "sell" him after about twenty minutes conversation. The material is there and waiting for the collector; I have the requisite training and experience in the work; all that remains is the wherewithall to make successful what is by far the most elaborate trip ever planned in the field. I hope to make nearly 3000 recordings, and each blank for that purpose costs at retail nearly forty-five cents! That calls for nearly \$1500.00 unless I can induce Mr. Edison to make a special reduction in my favor.<sup>17</sup>

Gordon was able to procure special favors from Edison, whom he seems to have known rather well. The exact arrangement is unknown to me; however Gordon secured a modified Ediphone for the trip, ". . . a most special machine partly of [his] own design. No other one like it."<sup>18</sup> It played Edison cylinders, and the Edison company periodically shipped recording blanks to Gordon in the field, often on credit and more than often at great delay. Despite the kindness of the company, Gordon frequently had cause to be upset when he was unable to record willing informants because no blank cylinders had arrived.

To pay for the recording equipment Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, editor of Adventure, made four hundred dollars available to Gordon from Adventure's "secret fund." Gordon was

<sup>17</sup> #1029 to Louis B. Hart, April 25, 1925.

<sup>18</sup> #2636 to Charles Roe, February 26, 1927.

to pay back the sum when he began to receive profits from his projects, in order that the next worthwhile scheme of a needy Adventure "family" member might benefit from the fund. Hoffman's support of Gordon's trip was unflagging. Later, when the trip was a reality, but trembling on the brink of disaster, Hoffman sent Gordon a check for two hundred dollars, endorsed "for publicity." Ostensibly, the articles Gordon was writing for the New York Times were bringing attention -- and new subscriptions -- to Adventure. He intended to pay the sum back should Hoffman feel that this investment had not been to the magazine's benefit.<sup>19</sup>

Gordon hoped to convince the Ford Motor Company to supply him with a vehicle for the trip. Although they refused to give him a machine outright, they agreed to sell him a used sedan at cost and to guarantee its condition. Promising him "complete equipment" and the personal attention of the superintendent, for \$275 they sold Gordon the first automobile he had ever owned -- or driven.<sup>20</sup>

Gordon had also hoped to obtain a camera and equipment for processing and developing his own film from the Eastman Company. Here again he was unsuccessful in securing a donation from the firm; however a friend who

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<sup>19</sup> #3518 to A.W. Proctor, May 9, 1928.

<sup>20</sup> RWG to A.S. Hoffman, August 14, 1925.

was an Eastman dealer agreed to sell Gordon all the necessary apparatus at wholesale prices.

One of his money raising expeditions provided other diversions for Gordon. In Washington, D.C., for the March 1925 inauguration of Coolidge, Gordon maintained his image as the inveterate recorder. Harold Spivacke remembered:

For instance I found there . . . and then he finally recollected that he recorded on a cylinder machine Coolidge's inaugural address. DK: Oh really? I'd heard about the Lindberg material.

HS: No -- Coolidge's inaugural address. He says "Yeah, you're right. I snuck up there and got on a table underneath the platform." . . . But he'd forgotten about it, you see. I saw the damn thing lying there. And, uh, I said, "What were you doing there -- were you such a Republican?" He said, "No, I just happened to be nearby and -- crowds weren't so great then, they weren't, at inauguration." And he said, "I thought I'd walk over, and then I had my machine with me, and walked up underneath the speaking platform -- nobody stopped me."<sup>21</sup>

The Sheldon fellowship from Harvard began in September of 1925. Gordon loaded his equipment into his Ford and headed south. After nearly a year of planning, his spirits were high. Anticipating his trip a few months earlier, he had written to a correspondent:

Am taking a Tin Lizzie as a general duffle wagon to carry phonograph and records, and then will side trip on anything from "shank's

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<sup>21</sup>Taped interview with Harold Spivacke, Washington, D.C., November 9, 1976.

mare" up. Shall have to learn to chew --<sup>22</sup>  
have all the other vices well in practice.

During the first month of travel Gordon had little opportunity to exercise either his new equipment or "shank's mare" as he spent most of his time in cities and libraries where research, public relations and mechanical details kept him occupied. He spent five days in Washington, D.C. Writing to Ian Campbell, an Adventure correspondent who taught at Trinity College and shared Gordon's interest in gravestones, Gordon mentioned that at the Library of Congress he had

. . . turned up some things that had escaped the notice (I believe that's the kindly phraseology used in reviews) of other investigators. Had the honor when I left Washington of starting from the White House with Coolidge's "God speed and good luck!" and his signature on my Harvard credentials. I'm not collecting autographs but have a formidable list of names written across the back of the letter with which Harvard sent me out. Some that you may recognize are those of Thomas A. Edison, George Palmer Putnam (G.P. Putnam & Sons, N.Y.) Franklin Pierce Adams ("F.P.A.") etc. They all help when I ask favors as I go along.<sup>23</sup>

Thus equipped, Gordon looked forward to getting "into the real folk side of the trip."<sup>24</sup> He had contacts aplenty from the "Old Songs" column and was eager to exploit further the large network of correspondents which he had built

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<sup>22</sup> #1094 to I.I. Harrison, April 30, 1925.

<sup>23</sup> #1207 to Ian Campbell, October 18, 1925.

<sup>24</sup> "Trip paper," undated, UO 11/9.

up there. He had announced his trip in the September 10, 1925 issue of Adventure which follows in facsimile.

### Old Songs That Men Have Sung

Devoted to outdoor songs, preferably hitherto unprinted—songs of the sea, the lumber-camps, Great Lakes, the West, old canal days, the negro, mountains, the pioneers, etc. Send in what you have of kind, so that all may share in them.

Although conducted primarily for the collection and preservation of old songs, the editor will give information about modern ones when he can do so and if all requests are accompanied with self-addressed envelop and reply postage (NOT attached). Write to Mr. Gordon direct, NOT to the magazine.

Conducted by R. W. GORDON, 4 Conant Hall, Cambridge, Mass.

SOMETIME in September, probably about one month after this issue reaches most of you, I shall leave Asheville, North Carolina on what I believe to be the most extensive trip yet planned for the collection and preservation of our American folk-song.

I shall spend at least six weeks in the mountain districts of North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia; pass through South Carolina, visiting Charleston and the Port Royal Islands; and go south along the coast to Savannah and Jacksonville. After that I shall go through the mountain district of Georgia, the interior of Alabama and of Mississippi, then visit the various cotton ports as far west as Galveston. In the spring I shall go north along the Mississippi, and so to Minnesota and the Dakotas; then east on the Canadian side of the Great Lakes into New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and finally Newfoundland.

THE success of the entire trip must depend in large part upon your cooperation. Obviously the time that I shall have to spend in any one district will be brief, too brief to enable me to hunt out singers. That I'm trusting you to do for me. You can direct me to districts where you know old songs are still to be found, can give me the names of friends and acquaintances who might be able to serve as local guides, and can send me brief notes of introduction to singers.

FOR my part, I shall make every attempt to insure the accurate recording and the permanent preservation of the materials collected. The tunes as well as the words will be taken down by means of phonographic recordings, and these records will be specially treated in order to make them more permanent.

Thus it will be possible for future generations to hear the living voices of singers of our day. There is no reason, as Mr. Edison himself assures me, why these records should not still be in perfect condition hundreds of years from now.

The idea of phonographic recordings is not new, but they have never been used—except for the songs of the American Indians—in any great extent in this country. Moreover such records as have up to this time been made by collectors have not been treated so as to preserve them for long periods of time. If then, through your cooperation, it is possible to make several thousand such recordings in the course of the next few years, something very real will have been done for the preservation of our national song.

I SHALL of course see personally many of you in the course of the trip, but in order that fairly definite plans may be made before the start, it is important that I should have before September such as much advance information as possible

Write me a brief note now, suggesting places that I should visit, people I should see, and giving such information as you can concerning to roads.

HERE is a contribution from Ontario, Canada. Mr. R. G. Shaw, who sent it in, says, "This is a true shanty song which I have heard sung many a time on the river and in the camps. It is not complete, but possibly some of your subscribers may have the rest of it. Ricks was one of the men sent out by the Georgian Bay Lumber Company to hire shantymen. Push—the foreman."

#### The Wahnapiac

Eighteen hundred and ninety-four,  
Off to the woods we thought we'd go;  
We hired with Ricks of the Georgian Bay  
For to cut down pine on the Wahnapiac.  
Come arant come a roaring, fol a diddle day,  
Come arant come a roaring, drunk and away!

Seven miles to walk to the boat,  
Then out lightly she did float;  
We held her down and kept her straight,  
And when we got there 'twas pretty damn late.  
Come arant come a roaring, fol a diddle day,  
Come arant come a roaring, drunk and away!

Then it was those logs to cut—  
We cut them down and skidded them well;  
Then it was those sleighs to load,  
And we bogged them down with a damn big load.  
Come arant come a roaring, fol a diddle day,  
Come arant come a roaring, drunk and away!

O the first team in was a team of greys,  
They were the boys to handle the sleighs!  
The teamster yells as the horses snort  
And he swears by—'tis a summer resort.  
Come arant come a roaring, fol a diddle day,  
Come arant come a roaring, drunk and away!

O the next team in was a grey and a black,  
They were the boys that won't hold back!  
The teamster's whip goes chicadee chack,  
He sits there and says, "—you, Jack."  
Come arant come a roaring, fol a diddle day,  
Come arant come a roaring, drunk and away!"

O the next team in was the Push's team,  
You'd swear by— they were run by steam!  
They run four trips on a four-mile road  
Forty-five logs to every load.  
Come arant come a roaring, fol a diddle day,  
Come arant come a roaring, drunk and away!

THE next is a song of English origin that should be familiar to many of you, though you will probably know it in a different version. I'd be glad to have copies from different parts of the country. The text here printed is from Mr. C. L.

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Gift  
Robert W. Gordon

Figure 10. "Old Songs That Men Have Sung," Adventure, September 10, 1925. (continued on following page)

Goodspeed of Chicago as he learned it from his father.

There were three jolly Welshmen,  
Three jolly men were they,  
They all went a-hunting  
On St. David's Day.  
Look a-there now!

They hunted in the hollow  
And the first thing that they found  
Was a snake in the grass,  
And that they left behind.  
Look a-there now!

One said it was a snake,  
The other he said nay,  
The other said 'twas his father's whip  
With the cracker cracked away.  
Look a-there now!

They hunted in the hollow  
And the next thing that they found  
Was a pig in the lane

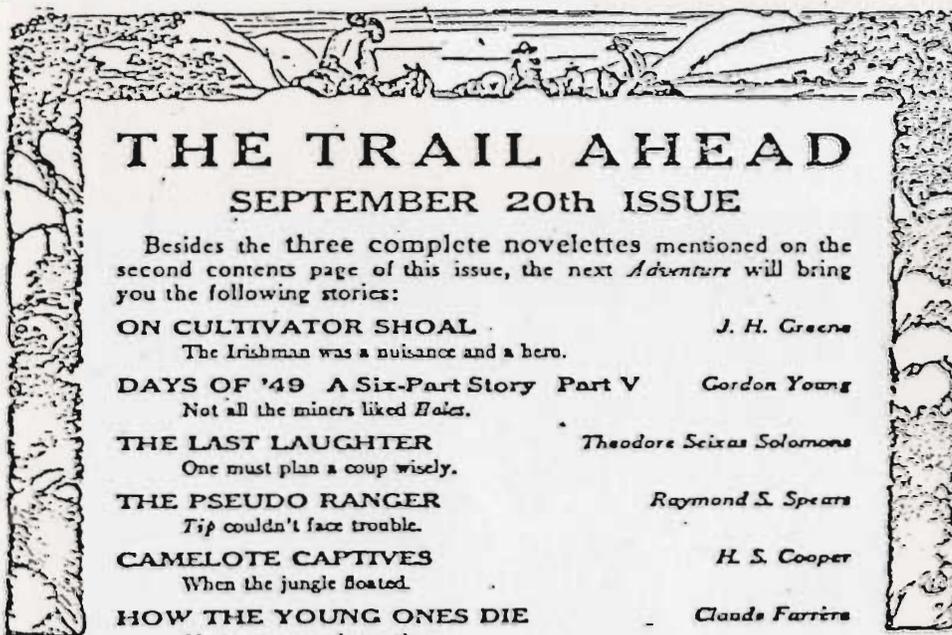
And that they left behind.  
Look a-there now!

One said it was a pig,  
The other he said nay,  
The other said 'twas a canary bird  
With its feathers shot away.  
Look a-there now!

They hunted in the hollow  
And the next thing that they found  
Was an owl in its ambush  
And that they left behind.  
Look a-there now!

One said it was an owl,  
The other he said nay,  
The other said 'twas the DEVIL  
And all three ran away!  
Look a-there now!

SEND all contributions to R. W. GORDON, 4  
Conant Hall, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Do  
not send them to the magazine.



## THE TRAIL AHEAD

### SEPTEMBER 20th ISSUE

Besides the three complete novelettes mentioned on the second contents page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:

<b>ON CULTIVATOR SHOAL</b>	<i>J. H. Greene</i>
The Irishman was a nuisance and a hero.	
<b>DAYS OF '49 A Six-Part Story Part V</b>	<i>Gordon Young</i>
Not all the miners liked <i>Hales</i> .	
<b>THE LAST LAUGHTER</b>	<i>Theodore Seixas Solomons</i>
One must plan a coup wisely.	
<b>THE PSEUDO RANGER</b>	<i>Raymond S. Spears</i>
<i>Tip</i> couldn't face trouble.	
<b>CAMELOTE CAPTIVES</b>	<i>H. S. Cooper</i>
When the jungle floated.	
<b>HOW THE YOUNG ONES DIE</b>	<i>Claude Farrère</i>
No torture can daunt them.	

**STILL FARTHER AHEAD**

THE THREE ISSUES following the next will contain *long* stories by H. R. Bedford-Jones, Thomson Burtis, William Byron Messery, Charles Victor Fischer, Talbot Mundy, T. S. Strehling, Bill Adams, Bruce Johns, Harold Lamb and John Wield, and short stories by Leonard H. Nason, Barry Scobee, James Parker Long, Captain Dingle, Arthur O. Friel, Fairfax Downey, Alan LeMay, Claude Farrère, Frederick J. Jackson, Alex. McLaren, David Thibault and others; stories of aviators in the oilfields, mounted policemen in the North west, renegades in Mexico, doughboys on the Western Front, sailors off Cape Suez, Yankee detectives in Central America, Caesar's legions in the British Isles, pearl hunters in the South Seas, Dan Cosacks on the Russian steppes, cowboys on the Western range and colonial conspirators in old France.

Figure 10

On his way south in early October 1925, Gordon made a slight detour in his route, "out of sheer pique" with the Victor Company.<sup>25</sup> When Gordon had offered his services to the Victor Company in return for their subsidizing his trip, he had been aware that they were particularly interested in "getting the facts about 'Old 97'."<sup>26</sup> Shortly after Victor's executive committee had refused his services, a member of the company's legal department wrote to the "Old Songs" department asking for information about the song. Gordon was angered by the action, and felt that "the whole thing seemed . . . to be the cheapest sort of attempt to obtain the services of an expert that they were unwilling to pay for his labor."<sup>27</sup> Later, through a comment in the letter of another "Old Songs" correspondent, Gordon came to realize that Victor's executive and legal departments were not aware of each others' actions. On October 16, 1925, however, the misunderstanding had not yet been cleared up, and Gordon made a special effort to obtain more information about the song. When he arrived in Asheville he posted a letter to Ian Campbell describing the result of his attempts.

Two nights ago [October 16, 1925] I drove seventy-five miles to spend the night with

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<sup>25</sup> #2037 to Wm. E. Shea, November 1, 1926.

<sup>26</sup> #2037 to Wm. E. Shea, November 1, 1926.

<sup>27</sup> #2037 to Wm. E. Shea, November 1, 1926.

the original author of "Old Ninety-Seven" -- you will remember the record of the Wreck on the Southern Railroad which you heard at Conant. There's been a big suit on over copyright, and the Victor people have been working to run down the facts of the authorship. They failed and I won out simply because I was not in the commercial game. I have as result the exclusive story and lunched the day following with George Broady, a brother of the engineer who was killed in the wreck. Curiously enough all the men who really had the facts refused to talk for Victor but were only too glad to make records for Harvard.<sup>28</sup>

Gordon had several reasons to be proud of receiving what seemed to him to be a much better reception than that accorded to the Victor representatives. He was pleased to have outdone Victor; he was also pleased to have gotten along well with southern mountaineers. Although Gordon had done considerable recording and collecting in California, he was not without qualms about venturing into this unfamiliar territory. Writing to Ian Campbell, he expressed his doubts and recounted with some pleasure his first encounter with a group of "natives" on his way south.

How well I shall fare in the mountains remains to be seen. Mountaineers are a curious breed. My only indication was the fact that one night in Virginia when I was loafing about a tiny restaurant near which I was camped I fell in with a group of natives who invited me to go out in the country with them "to get something." They cut a pack of cards to see who should drive the car, and he was not permitted to drink. To make up for it, they brought back a large bottle and gave him a good skin full after we were

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<sup>28</sup> #1207 to Ian Campbell, October 18, 1925. Conant is Conant Hall -- the dormitory in which Gordon lived while doing graduate work at Harvard.

safely back to my tent. If the cops heard the noise they had sense enough to stay away . . . .<sup>29</sup>

Gordon arrived in Asheville, North Carolina on October 18, 1925 and set up camp in the mountains outside of town. To keep expenses down he lived in his tent, descending to town every other day for his mail -- which he answered by typewriter from the tent. The main business of recording began. Within the first week Gordon made nearly seventy recordings. Despite some adverse conditions he was enjoying himself and he reported that fact to his correspondents.

Now, as you see from the above address [At Camp in the Carolina Mountains] I am pecking away on a typewriter in a tent with poor light. The resultant mistakes are only too obvious . . . . My last two nights have been spent with real mountain fiddlers, and I have some seventy phonographic recordings of mountain songs here . . . .<sup>30</sup>

While he was in Asheville, Gordon recorded a wide variety of musical forms, emphasizing those items which he felt other collectors had "made little of," particularly dance tunes and American "ballets."<sup>31</sup> Of the many cylinders he had made he speculated that only three or four might be of commercial value. He did not indicate whether he based his judgement on their recording quality or his notion of

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<sup>29</sup>#1207 to Ian Campbell, October 18, 1925.

<sup>30</sup>#1241 to Miss Ellison Harper, October 26, 1925.

<sup>31</sup>#1373 to R.M. Patterson, December 3, 1925.

commercial appeal. In terms of his own purposes, Gordon was delighted with both the amount and sort of material he was recording.

Gordon was interested in the folk culture of the region in a broad sense. His active photographing of grave-stones and folk architecture served a dual purpose. Gordon used them, as well as pictures of his informants, not only to document his studies, but to pass out to his correspondents as souvenirs of his expedition. They served as gestures of his appreciation for his readers' help. The following excerpt comes from a letter which he wrote to thank a reader who answered the plea for field leads and tips which he had printed in the "Old Songs" column of September 10, 1925. Like many who had responded, Jackson Taylor, Jr. had once lived in the South and was eager to reminisce about his childhood and to point out to Gordon likely persons and places to contact. Gordon included this particular passage, with minor variations, in many of his letters in early December 1925; evidently he had printed many copies of the photograph it described:

Glad to hear from you again. I'm obliged for the tips and will do my best to run them down.

Hope the enclosed may bring back recollections. I spent a day not long ago with the old mountaineer whose picture is on the enclosed post card. Pure American stock undiluted, and of the best kind. There's real character in his face. The old house is not his, but is an interesting example of the double log house. It's really two separate

houses joined together under one roof. If you look closely just behind the posts in the foreground you'll see the opening between the two houses.<sup>32</sup>

Gordon's letters also described the folklife and customs of the people he was meeting. His personal friends were often the recipients of witty descriptions of his experiences in the mountains. In letters such as the one to Odell Shepherd which is quoted below, Gordon exploited the quaint or curious aspects of folk custom in order to entertain and amuse an intellectual and social equal:

Just for that unkind dig in your last letter I enclose a couple this time, -- also pure Americans. Best-hearted people in the world but not much on looks! Wish I had you along on the trip. You'd enjoy mountain etiquette, which demands that the chairs be reserved for 1 the head of the house, 2 eldest son, 3 all other sons, and 4 the visiting "furriners" provided they be of male sex, while women and all sich small deer stand and wait on their lord and master. They, however, have the privilege of unmitigated use of snuff sticks and the right to expectorate with precision over the legs and smaller limbs of guests provided they eventually hit the fireplace.<sup>33</sup>

While his reportage of events, objects, persons and customs varied according to the use to which he put them in his letters, Gordon's prolific quotation of his experiences reflected his keen appreciation and awareness of the culture in which he was working.

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<sup>32</sup> #1383 to Jackson Taylor, Jr., December 8, 1925.

<sup>33</sup> #1358 to Odell Shepherd, December 4, 1925.

He may have been satiric in describing his informants, but he had tremendous respect for them. He expressed his high opinion of the North Carolina mountaineers clearly in a letter to correspondent Reuben Potter two years later in 1927. At that time, looking back on his experiences in the mountains in 1925, he reminisced:

Mountain hospitality! Oh man! Give me some "hawg" in all its varieties from bacon to sausage, and plenty of corn in all its varieties -- hominy, pones, cornbread and liquid corn -- and I'm "sot for life." Never had such a good time as I did way up in the North Carolina mountains. I'm not throwing boquets, but I'd rather have the respect and esteem of mountain folk than that of any class of people I've ever met or ever hope to. They're square -- good friends and bad enemies -- and they let you know right out where they stand. Moreover they are infernally good judges of character. A man who's yellow or lying can't go very long without being found out. As far as I'm concerned you couldn't possibly give a better statement that you are a mountaineer.<sup>34</sup>

Gordon in fact credited his success as a field worker to his sincere love of the old songs and his respect for the mountaineers themselves. He found it easy to fit in. While he came prepared with a new hand-made fretless banjo to instigate a musical evening and a panoply of signatures from Harvard University and the White House to gain co-operation for his project, it is most probable that his sensitivity in dealing with his informants was responsible for his success. He took everything that was offered,

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<sup>34</sup>#2487 to Reuben Potter, February 4, 1927.

careful not to hurt feelings or to arouse jealousy, although he was not above attempting to tactfully guide singers or musicians to what he considered to be "folk" material. Gordon commented on his status in the Asheville area in a letter to a correspondent a few months after his arrival:

Possibly you've already suspected that I was (it's true) a "perfesser" -- but I try to hide the sad fact as much as I can. So far I've seen no offishness on the part of the folk. After a few minutes they have "caught on" to the fact that I was myself quite as interested in the old songs as they and that unless someone took them down they would be lost. Nor has the "corn" been hidden when I've come around. They're a bully set of folk, and I'm proud that so far I've been able to "fit in."<sup>35</sup>

One of his first informants was Bascom Lamar Lunsford, a man who was not likely to be put off by the fact that Gordon was a "perfesser." Lunsford was a lawyer in Asheville, and had been identified to Gordon as the best banjo picker in town.<sup>36</sup> The first thirty-three cylinders that Gordon recorded in the Asheville area were of Lunsford. Before he left the area, Gordon made forty-one cylinders containing sixty-seven of Lunsford's banjo tunes and songs. Lunsford's interest in folksong was encouraged by Gordon, and the two men did some collecting together. Loyal Jones, in an article on Lunsford, described

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<sup>35</sup> #1373 to R.M. Patterson, December 3, 1925.

<sup>36</sup> #1368 to Theodore Edison, December 2, 1925.

the relationship of the two men:

Gordon was impressed both by Lunsford's contacts and by his methods of collecting songs. He emphasized the need for Lunsford to be as thorough and systematic as possible in collecting and preserving the songs. Gordon's encouragement and advice fanned Lunsford's enthusiasm and bolstered his belief in the value of music. Furthermore, Lunsford gained new insights that moved him into true scholarship in the field of folk traditions . . . .<sup>37</sup>

Gordon evidently travelled a good deal. Camped in his tent above Asheville, he planned side trips to Boone, Murphy, Hendersonville and the surrounding territory,<sup>38</sup> and by the seventh of November he had recorded over 140 cylinders in the area. In less than one month he had nearly exhausted his first supply of recording blanks. He was forced to write to Edison to request a second shipment of 150 cylinders on credit as he could expect no funds until his next fellowship payment in January.<sup>39</sup>

The weather grew colder and more inclement, making writing -- which had in large part to finance the trip -- impossible. By November 27, 1925 Gordon had moved into a small room in town. There he could develop film, answer Adventure correspondence and type transcriptions of his

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<sup>37</sup> Loyal Jones, "Bascom Lamar Lunsford, 1882-1973: 'Minstrel of the Appalachians'," North Carolina Folklore Journal 25:1 (May 1977), 9.

<sup>38</sup> #1268 to Steve L. Watts, November 7, 1925.

<sup>39</sup> #1290 to Theodore Edison, November 11, 1925.

collections, but he was still encountering problems.<sup>40</sup> There were long delays in receipt of blank recording cylinders. Writing to Theodore Edison on December 2, 1925, Gordon explained his reasons for complaining.

On Saturday night, when I went to Morgantown, I was obliged to stand by and witness much material of real value be lost because I was unable to record it. Singers and fiddlers were gathered from all sections, many of them living in remote and well-nigh inaccessible mountain districts into which I cannot at this time of the year penetrate. I would have given much to have been able to record them.

Last night a singer came all the way from the remote southwestern part of the state just to sing for me. All I could do was to show him your telegram and explain that something had gone wrong. He had travelled some ninety miles and was obliged to return, since I could give no assurance when the records would be here.<sup>41</sup>

Gordon was also bothered with mechanical problems -- in mid-November his car broke down, a major disaster for a budget which was already strained.

Although his trip had barely started, Gordon found his financial situation nearly desperate by the winter of 1925. He attempted to utilize every conceivable source of income available to him, even calling in old debts as demonstrated in the following excerpt from a letter to John Rasmussen, a California acquaintance.

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<sup>40</sup> #1347 to Odell Shepherd, November 27, 1925.

<sup>41</sup> #1368 to Theodore Edison, December 2, 1925.

Probably you still remember the "highbrow" and college professor who wasn't afraid to work for you building Batcherder's chimney when you were in a pinch and needed men. At the time, and on several occasions since . . . you offered to pay me off, and I laughingly refused saying I preferred to wait until I had enough to buy a boat from you. Now I'm in a pinch myself, and if it's possible, and you are able to do so without hurting, would be mighty glad to be "paid off."

. . . this year I'm attempting a long trip through the mountains collecting old songs. I'm working for Harvard University, but although the honor is great the amount of money they have placed at my disposal is small, and I'm having to depend largely on my own resources. A breakdown in my auto put me in a bad hole, and I cannot draw on the university funds until the first of January. In the meantime I'm living on faith and hope: haven't yet come to the "charity" part but am mighty close to it. Hence I'm shamelessly drawing on every available sum that I can find to tide me through.

If you can without wrecking your own self send the amount you think due and proper for the five or seven (five I think) days that I served as stonemason, it would help greatly . . . . 42

At this time Gordon also approached the Asheville Chamber of Commerce, asking that they provide funds to enable him to continue his work in the district. He pointed out the importance of the music he was recording, and the value of the publicity that the city would receive for providing him their support. His arguments were successful. The Board of Directors voted to assure him the necessary funds. They gave him one hundred dollars that December and promised him more money after January first -- enough to

enable him to make five hundred additional recordings in the area. This group of recordings, although part of Gordon's Great Collection and intended for deposit with it at Harvard University were to be known as the Asheville Collection. Thus, Gordon was able to add significantly to his collection with the full support of the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>43</sup>

Gordon also benefited from the support of the Rev. Dr. Clarence Stuart McClellan, Jr. who became Gordon's host in Asheville by December 14, 1925. McClellan possessed a mass of important material bearing on the history of the song "Dixie," one of the American "ballets" in which Gordon was particularly interested. The Asheville Times of December 14, 1925 reported that the two men intended to collaborate on a volume about the song.<sup>44</sup> No such volume appeared, but McClellan's collection of rare manuscripts and pictures was helpful in bearing out Gordon's thesis concerning the development of the song, the details of which are discussed further in chapter nine.

By December of 1925 it was obvious that Gordon was hopelessly behind his original itinerary. He found it impossible to turn away from willing informants and plentiful material. He decided to leave his Asheville station temporarily

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<sup>43</sup> #1372 to Thomas Edison, December 2, 1925.

<sup>44</sup> "Folk Songs of Section to Be Compiled Soon," Asheville Times, December 14, 1925.

in order to spend the Christmas holidays with his family, but immediately after this brief vacation he intended to return to the mountains. Gordon's wife and daughter were staying in Jacksonville, Florida with members of his wife's family; he went to join them there. The Gordons had not been together for over a year, and all of them were undoubtedly feeling, as Gordon had written earlier in December to Odell Shepherd, that "This matter of carrying on extensive and expensive research on a shoestring [was] hard work."<sup>45</sup> The separation of the family and the attempt to maintain two households on a precariously balanced budget was a great strain on everyone involved.

During his Christmas vacation Gordon changed his plans. Roberta Paul Gordon had been born and brought up in Darien, a small coastal community in Southern Georgia, and the decision was made to locate the entire Gordon family there. Gordon's interest in Black folksong traditions had prompted him to include the area in his original itinerary. As Gordon's brother-in-law Carruthers Paul pointed out, the area's residents were likely to accept Gordon because he was married to Roberta Paul; her knowledge of the area also made it an ideal field station.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>#1358 to Odell Shepherd, December 4, 1925.

<sup>46</sup>Taped interview with Carruthers Paul, Darien, Georgia, May 22, 1976.

A field station it was however -- living conditions for the family were primitive. In letters to Fiswoode Tarleton, a fellow Adventure writer who became an "Old Songs" correspondent and eventually a close friend, Gordon described his Darien quarters:

The wife and I are half-camping in a tiny two-room shack in the "city." Most of the space taken up with untidy manuscript, phonograph records, etc.<sup>47</sup>

Now then, -- come on down! We'll see that you have the necessities of life, and a good time in the bargain. No luxuries!

I am living on a street in Darien, but what street I have no idea, -- not does anybody else. They were once named, I suppose, but that was years ago, and long forgotten. Anybody in the whole city (it does have a mayor who gets a salary of about \$10.00 a year -- maybe only \$5.00) can direct you at once to where I live. So that's that.

There is a telegraph office, and we have a telephone of a sort. But both are slow. A night letter usually gets around when the operator goes home to dinner -- about 2 o'clock! Special delivery letters have been known to wait two days in the post office! And it is harder to hear Savannah over the phone (68 miles) than it is to call up Australia from New York. Boy, this is the real primitive!!!<sup>48</sup>

Tarleton eventually paid Darien a visit in order to talk songs with Gordon. The two men discussed collaborating on various projects then, an enjoyable experience for Gordon as few Darien citizens evidently understood much of what he was doing. At best, they apparently thought him to be

<sup>47</sup> #2779 to Fiswoode Tarleton, May 5, 1927.

<sup>48</sup> #2782 to Fiswoode Tarleton, May 21, 1927.

eccentric.<sup>49</sup> One neighbor, Mardis Clarke, did see the Gordons often. She was interested in Gordon's projects and had accompanied him on several trips to investigate and photograph graveyards in the area. Frequently she spent evenings at the Gordon's home, playing cards or listening to the recordings which Gordon had made:

Well, the Gordons lived across the street in a little house that's no longer there. It was a little house that they had; it was an old house that they had built a kitchen onto -- just a little two room house, and the kitchen he used for a study. And Roberta just had a little kitchen over in a little corner. But she turned out very nice meals in there.

And, uh, they lived on a very small appropriation. They didn't have much to live on. And everything he did was centered in his work. He wasn't mu -- too much interested in, in doing anything else, but getting the information and it was, uh, recording Negro folk-songs and he had a great amount of material. I don't know how much he ended up with, and he, he was interested, and I liked him, I liked all of them, and little Roberta -- who is now the Roberta you know -- was just a child . . . . I found 'em very congenial people . . . . I came down here from New York and I was a widow. I was just in my early twenties . . . . They were a good deal older than I was. But they were good friends and we were congenial . . . .

. . . they didn't have too much company, they . . . kinda lived a rather secluded life. I imagine part of it due to lack of finances . . . . I know that he worked very hard and he went out in the outlying districts which were much more secluded than they are

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<sup>49</sup>Evey White, Carruthers Paul, May 23, 1976, Author's Field Notes.

now, and went to churches, Negro churches, and uh, various things like that . . . and he got 'em to sing for him.<sup>50</sup>

Besides recording, photography and collecting, Gordon was busy writing his "Old Songs" column and other articles. His family felt that his work was everything to him; he expected them to help him in it.<sup>51</sup> Gordon would wait until the last minute with an article; Roberta and her mother would be up all night proofreading it.<sup>52</sup> Occasionally the family went with him on a field trip. To them the project was less than glorious. Often they would simply sit in the car and wait. They couldn't help him; there was nothing for them to do and little Roberta was horrified by what she saw at revivals and camp meetings. For her the singing was inextricably bound with misshapen children and people writhing on the ground. It held no magic for her as a tradition to study.<sup>53</sup> Roberta remembered that her mother was very patient even if she, at about thirteen, was not.

Gordon himself was fascinated with the area. He photographed old Spanish missions and forts, examples of early pioneer architecture, cabins and ruins of buildings.

<sup>50</sup>Taped interview with Mardis Clarke, Darien, Georgia, May 22, 1976.

<sup>51</sup>Roberta P.G. Nye, May 25, 1976, Field Notes.

<sup>52</sup>Roberta P.G. Nye, May 24, 1976, Field Notes.

<sup>53</sup>Roberta P.G. Nye, May 23, 1976, May 24, 1976, Field Notes.

So thorough were his investigations into the material culture of the area that he suggested to Lester Markel of the New York Times that he be commissioned to write articles on the building materials "coquina" and "tabby," the Spanish missions of Georgia, and other "early and forgotten Americana."<sup>54</sup>

Odell Shepherd, who shared Gordon's interest in graveyards and burial customs, envied his friend's trip into the "so-called Puritan settlements of Georgia," and hastened a guess that Gordon's own interest would lead him into a graveyard in Darien to see how they managed things.<sup>55</sup> It did. Shepherd and Gordon were both interested in the development of style, graphics and motifs of gravestones. Gordon turned to Mrs. Helen von Kolnitz Hyer, an Adventure correspondent, information about some of his Darien discoveries:

Then just look at this rough sketch of an old negro gravestone! Got it three days ago from a man in Savannah who, though he appreciated it, had the enlightened point of view that he who knows should have. It was dug up when a new street was being opened. An old forgotten slave burying ground. Material "lightwood." Height a little less than three feet. Wonder if you can interpret the curious circles? They may be mere decoration, but I suspect something more. The cross seems to be Christian, perhaps also the heart. Every knife cut is plain, yet the lightwood has rotted away at the bottom and

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<sup>54</sup> #3208 to A.S. Hoffman, September 24, 1927.

<sup>55</sup> #1347 to RWG from Odell Shepherd, November 26, 1925.

the grain is heavily weathered at the top. That would seem to indicate age for light-wood lasts a long time. Once it was painted with a deep red paint. Only a few patches in protected places still remain. Could it by any possible chance have been Indian instead of negro? Do you know of the existence of any other decorated wooden grave-stones in the south? In the old Midway burying ground in Liberty County are white gravestones of wood that still show plainly the name and date 1790. Not in quite so bad a condition as this one I have. Hence I am certain that it may be very old. The man who owned it thought it possible that the symbols had phallic significance. This I rather doubt.<sup>56</sup>

Gordon was excited by other discoveries he had made in the Darien area. He collected shards, pipes and other remains from burial mounds -- and knew the location of every great yellow sand mound or oyster shell mound within a ten mile walk from Darien.<sup>57</sup> It may have been at this time in their lives that Roberta remembered her father bringing home parts of human skeleton and assembling it -- right in the middle of the living room floor.<sup>58</sup> Mardis Clarke recollected that Gordon was interested in contemporary burial customs and beliefs as well:

He was interested in primitive cemeteries. He would go to the cemeteries and a child's grave would have, oh, kind of little toys that they might have played with, and, uh,

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<sup>56</sup> #1890 to H. von Kolnitz Hyer, September 28, 1926.

<sup>57</sup> #1890 to H. von Kolnitz Hyer, September 28, 1926.

<sup>58</sup> Roberta P.G. Nye, May 23, 1976, Field Notes.

people's grave where they have china on them. And it was always broken, and he, got a lot of, you know, he talked to the old ones. We had some quite old ones here then . . . . And anything that was pertainin' to Negro -- oh what do you call it now -- the development in this country, I might say, from the primitive songs they used to sing . . . that came over with 'em I suppose . . . . He was interested in the, the, I think the, everything that happened to 'em.<sup>59</sup>

Gordon's first and foremost interest was folk-song and he did not spare himself in his efforts toward the great collection, working hard and constantly. Just as he had been somewhat apprehensive about his ability to manage in the unfamiliar mountain culture, so did he have doubts about working and living with Blacks. He had prepared himself with extensive research on the origin and development of Black spirituals and was anxious to be successful in his field researches. His first visit to the district gave him reason for optimism about his prospects in the Darien area. He described his first field experience to Louise Pound in a letter dated February 21, 1926.

They held a special song service for or over me at a tiny negro church on St. Simon's Island. I followed the preacher's instructions and set up my recording phonograph immediately in front of the altar. After a couple of conventional hymns and a rather long prayer, "preacher" addressed his congregation something like this.

"Bredern an' sistern we is highly honored dis day! We has amongst us two

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<sup>59</sup>Mardis Clarke, May 22, 1976, Field Notes.

strangers; dey jus' dropped in unexpectedly. Dey comes to us like angels. In some ways I 'spec' dey is angels, -- an' in some ways I spect not. I'se gwine take as my tex' -- 'No man knoweth w'en de Son O'God cometh.'"

I never had such difficulty in keeping a dignified face. After the sermon, which was brief, he called on the older members to come forward, each to sing the very oldest song he or she knew. I recorded then and there, afterwards playing back the records so that the congregation might hear how well I had caught the singers. Interested as they were when the singer was recording, it was nothing to the excitement when the records "came back." The church rocked with "Amen!" "Glory!" -- "Praise Jesus!" On the whole it was a great success, and I was invited to repeat, with the promise that every negro on the whole island would attend for the next meeting. A committee was appointed to "make arrangements" and to round up all of the old songs for me."<sup>60</sup>

If this first experience had raised his expectations he was not disappointed. Three months later, in May of 1926, Gordon had made 550 recordings and was continuing to discover so much valuable material that he had abandoned plans of moving on in the near future. He felt that the recordings he was making around Darien would someday be famous for they represented material that had heretofore not been found by other collectors. Both the quality and amount of material would, he felt, be "eye-openers" when they appeared.<sup>61</sup>

The importance of his work seemed to him to be immense, yet as always, financial support was negligible.

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<sup>60</sup>#1622 to Louise Pound, February 21, 1926.

<sup>61</sup>#1637 to Fred P. Richmond, May 29, 1926.

Gordon felt that if sufficient funds could only be assured he was the right man to make "a mighty big clean-up on the job."<sup>62</sup> Writing to correspondent Dr. W.C. Judd on May 30, 1926 Gordon described his particular position in the Darien area:

Man, what a trip this is! If I could capture a millionaire to finance a year or so more it would be really big. As it is, I've made over five hundred and sixty phonographic recordings of old songs and collected a bunch of manuscript. Have just begun to scratch the surface. Three hundred and sixtythree negro songs, over half of which no other collector has ever heard in any form. Somehow they all seem to realize just what I'm trying to do, and that the work is worth all the personal sacrifice. Not one has even suggested that he be paid for singing, and when a negro is willing to give without return he's really interested. I wonder whether I'd be able to handle them at all, for I had no experience till three months ago. However, my training with sailors, and the fact that I'm a fair mixer in general has helped. Luckily I can keep the necessary dignity and demand their respect without seeming formal. Cap't, they usually call me, tho some prefer Boss and a few go to the extreme with Massa. Wish I had the time to write a real account of some of my experiences. Some day some where I shall.<sup>63</sup>

Gordon fancied that he held a privileged relationship with the local black community, suspecting that they took him as "a sort of combined cunjurer and god."<sup>64</sup> He

<sup>62</sup>#1748 to Ruth Shannon, June 3, 1926.

<sup>63</sup>#1681 to Dr. W.C. Judd, May 30, 1926.

<sup>64</sup>#1748 to Ruth Shannon, June 3, 1926.

believed that he had news of all that went on -- news that no other white man was trusted with.<sup>65</sup> If he simplified his position in the black community and underestimated or stereotyped his black informants, he also deeply appreciated their music.<sup>66</sup> His stereotypic understanding of the southern black was in large part the understanding of the white Darien community. Gordon was a salesman. His livelihood depended on his success in marketing himself and his project to the communities within which he worked: often this meant appealing to several social classes within the community. It also meant taking care not to offend either the class within which he hoped to record folksong, or the class whose support he needed in order that he might record. In Darien he successfully tread this delicate line, and while he was treated as someone extraordinary by both whites and blacks in the area, he was able to successfully operate among both groups. He had managed the same sort of thing in Asheville -- living in a tent and participating in mountain moonshine parties as well as living in town and associating with ministers, lawyers and the Chamber of Commerce.

In Darien the work continued and time stretched on. Gordon found the hot Georgia summer of 1926 a most disagreeable

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<sup>65</sup>#1748 to Ruth Shannon, June 3, 1926.

<sup>66</sup>Perhaps like H.C. Speir, a commercial A & R man and field worker, Gordon combined stereotype with understanding. See David Evans, "An Interview with H.C. Speir," JEMFQ 8 (1972), 117-118.

experience, and complained of the heat in numerous letters to correspondents.<sup>67</sup>

Gordon continued to collect and record, to answer the Adventure correspondence which kept arriving, and to maintain his column. He worked also on the series of New York Times articles which were scheduled to begin appearing in January of 1927. His writing was hampered by a number of factors, as he pointed out in a letter to Alson Baker on November 9, 1926:

This "travelling light" because of the trip constantly irritates me. There are so many things I could do if I had my materials where I could get at them! As it is, I send away nearly everything as fast as it comes in. No room for it with me, and I feel also that it should be stored in safety and not hauled about the country in a Ford. So memory and "willingness" is about all I have to work with. The first is in my case not too trustworthy.<sup>68</sup>

His apprehension about the safety of his material was not misplaced. In January of 1927 Gordon's automobile "committed suicide" in a big fire. No manuscripts or recordings were damaged, but Gordon was obliged to work doubly hard, searching for commissions and attempting to place articles in magazines in order to "write himself into" another car. By begging advances, counting on futurities and borrowing money, he managed to acquire a Chevrolet

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<sup>67</sup>#1870 to W.T. White, September 14, 1926.

<sup>68</sup>#2079 to Alson Baker, November 9, 1926.

Landau after a short time. The financial situation remained precarious -- for a time Gordon was unable to plan any trip more than a short distance away from Darien as he didn't have enough money to buy gasoline and was obliged to return home to fill the tank on credit at the local station.

If Gordon's travelling was somewhat curtailed, the Gordons received visitors aplenty in their two room home. A fiddler from Van Wyck, South Carolina, with whom Gordon had struck up an acquaintance, travelled down to pay the family a visit. He brought his fiddle and wrote back later to thank them for the enjoyable party which had occurred in his honor.<sup>69</sup>

Carl Sandburg was another one of their visitors. In March of 1927 he spent three days with Gordon, talking and singing folksong steadily until two o'clock each morning.<sup>70</sup> Sandburg was working on the American Songbag, and Gordon found a great deal to comment on in the volume. He supplied the poet with a number of texts and tunes, and was full of high expectations for what Sandburg was attempting to do, although later he became somewhat disillusioned. Mardis Clarke remembered that Gordon's daughter was more interested in other aspects of Sandburg's visit:

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<sup>69</sup>#2566 to RWG from Judge W.J. Crenshaw, February 13, 1927.

<sup>70</sup>#2791 to Fiswoode Tarleton, April 23, 1927.

And I remember little Roberta was very much -- put out one night. Carl Sandburg was staying over on, uh, St. Simon's Island, and he was a friend of Robert Gordon's, and he came over and spent the night and ate supper and they invited me over for supper to meet him. And he took his bread and made a set of dice with them, and threw them on the -- you know, just was playing with them on the table. Well, little Roberta was very much outdone at that. You know, she was just a child, and she thought that was showin' very poor manners.<sup>71</sup>

Visitors may have cheered Gordon in some ways, but they did nothing to lessen the pressures he felt. Eight manuscripts were returned one after the other by editors who claimed to be "overstocked at present."<sup>72</sup> Gordon, attempting to open new avenues for himself, considered the establishment of an "American Song Bureau," a syndicated newspaper column which could print the texts he was collecting with brief articles about folksong. He expanded on the idea in a letter on March 13, 1927 to Ruth Shannon, a newspaperwoman and "Old Songs" correspondent.

Think that a newspaper "collyume" might go, either alone or syndicated. And I believe it could be handled in such a way as to bring considerable fame and dinero. Ought to go in say five scattered metropolitans and as many locals as wanted it . . . . A "give and take" question and answer affair with some commentary by the editor. Quite different from the cheap sort now used by a few papers. No reprinting of modern or old cheap author stuff. Just a freer and longer reproduction of

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<sup>71</sup>Taped interview with Mardis Clarke, Darien, Georgia, May 22, 1976.

<sup>72</sup>#2779 to Fiswoode Tarleton, May 5, 1927.

ADVENTURE type. Might even be done in several sections covering local needs. That is a "southern" group confined to southern material, and a quite different edition (same date) to hit the local interests in the northern border. One would run heavily to Great Lakes songs and broadsides of the woods. The other to negro material and also to the older ballads . . . .<sup>73</sup>

Gordon deeply believed that amassing a canon of American folksong could not be a solitary enterprise. His schemes to "bring in dinero" always attempted to reach more and more groups of people. Although later, as director of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, Gordon turned to established academic bodies to help in collecting, it was not the academics upon whom he depended. He had gone to retired sea captains and hoboes when he wanted sea chanties and hobo songs. When he began collecting in earnest on a grand scale he turned to those established organizations which he felt were in touch with the groups whose songs he wanted to document. He had turned to the Seaman's Union in San Francisco; he approached the Cattle Drivers Association of Texas,<sup>74</sup> and worked with the Society for the Preservation of the Negro Spiritual in Charleston, North Carolina.

Involving more people did not relieve Gordon of the work in front of him. Nor did dreams of collecting

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<sup>73</sup>#2668 to Ruth Shannon, March 13, 1927.

<sup>74</sup>#2636 to Charles Roe, February 26, 1927.

the entire mass of American folksong produce the money to carry on the great plans. Letters to correspondents in the spring of 1927 reflected his frustration:

Wish I could be in a hundred places at once. This trying to gather all there is -- everywhere keeps me humping all the time.<sup>75</sup>

There's just one consolation. It really seems as if those who have the dough never accomplish the real stuff. Something in the poet and the garrett idea. There is a certain urge to do that comes from the almost impossibility of doing. Maybe if I had more funds I'd get lazy. But it sure makes me mad to have to stall real work just because there isn't enough dough in the treasury to go on. It's a great life if you don't weaken.<sup>76</sup>

By the spring of 1927 Gordon had been using Darien as a field station for more than a year and still saw no end to the work in front of him -- in terms of the collecting to be done in that area alone. Writing on April 27, 1927 to H.E. Greenough -- an elderly retired sailor from Nova Scotia who had an immense repertoire of songs -- Gordon indicated that he would certainly not make it to the Canadian Maritimes that spring either. He portrayed himself as being tremendously busy:

Yes, sir, Darien still -- and still busy, as you've probably already guessed by my slowness in replying. Gosh, gosh, I want to do so many darned things all at once. Can't be

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<sup>75</sup> #2552 to Theo. Lancaster, February 14, 1927.

<sup>76</sup> #2779 to Fiswoode Tarleton, May 5, 1927.

done. Among other things I really want to loaf a bit, -- fish, hunt, talk, smoke.<sup>77</sup>

While Gordon's field research can be documented by few witnesses, a considerable amount of his collection was gathered by correspondence. The 3847 letters which Gordon received and answered between 1923 and 1928 reveal much about his methods, plans, and theories during this portion of his life. It is to these which we turn next.



Figure 11. Robert W. Gordon and his daughter Roberta rowing on a lake near Darien, Georgia, c. 1926-1928.

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<sup>77</sup>#2729 to H.E. Greenough, April 27, 1927.

## VII

### "ONE COG IN A BIG MACHINE": GORDON'S ADVENTURE COLUMN, 1924-1927

Gordon's use of the media was given a unique character by the era in which he worked. The 1920s saw an explosion of media catering to new audiences. The pulp magazine industry enjoyed just as rapid growth then as did radio and the recorded disc. At the end of the first world war approximately two dozen pulp magazines were being published. By the middle of the depression more than two hundred such magazines were on the market, as most of the major publishing companies entered the field.<sup>1</sup>

The pulps claimed to provide the public with entertainment -- "the best source of cheap thrills" available.<sup>2</sup> Magazines began to specialize in certain types of fiction; the love story, western, detective, sea, railroad and science fiction tale emerged as genres of pulp fiction. It was in the genre of action and adventure story that Adventure magazine excelled. It was the "aristocrat of the cheap magazine, the Atlantic Monthly of the pulps."<sup>3</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup>Ron Goulart, A Popular History of the Pulp Magazine (N.Y.: Ace Books, 1975), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>p. 32.

1920s -- the Golden Age of pulps -- these competing magazines vied for the public's loyalties by offering special clubs and services to their readers. Adventure offered not only special services, good fiction and involvement; it marketed a special brand of Americanism. It stood strong for patriotism, industry, morality and good clean fun -- All-American virtues.

The character of Gordon's song column was influenced by the special character of Adventure magazine, and above all, by the character and intentions of its editor, Arthur Sullivant Hoffman. Gordon was aware of the image that Hoffman was trying to build for Adventure long before his association with the magazine. Writing years later, in 1927 to correspondent Charles Roe, Gordon commented:

I read ADVENTURE years before I had the slightest idea I should ever be in any way connected with it. Camp-Fire and Arthur Sullivan Hoffman are very big factors in this country for genuine Americanism. Bigger than all I can ever do. And I'm mighty proud to be connected with them. Mighty proud.<sup>4</sup>

Writing to other correspondents about his association with Hoffman's Adventure, Gordon reflected that the group was "so darned fair, square and CLEAN" that he was proud to work for the magazine.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>"Old Songs," Adventure (December 20, 1924), 191-192.

<sup>5</sup>#2089 to Alan LeMay, November 14, 1926; #2551 to J.J. Burke, February 14, 1927.

A.S. Hoffman became editor of Adventure in 1911. The magazine had been started in 1910 by Trumbell White, but Hoffman, who remained with Adventure until 1928, was responsible for its reputation and character. He believed that action stories could be highly literary and still saleable and he hired fine writers to prove it.<sup>6</sup> Hoffman was dedicated to making his magazine more than the run of the mill "cheap thrills" pulp. He instituted other features, including the Camp-Fire -- a forum for readers, writers and adventurers. In this column Hoffman often took center-stage himself, editorializing on serious topics. He intended that the Camp-Fire column provide a meeting-place for diverse types of persons. It exemplified the ideals of camaraderie, friendship and involvement that he sought to build into the magazine.

Hoffman also instituted the "Ask Adventure" section which provided a panel of experts willing to give their expert advice on a variety of topics -- free to any Adventure reader. The "Old Songs" column had been expanded from an "Ask Adventure" section into a full department which appeared every other issue, once a month. Robert Gordon was eventually the person hired to provide the expert advice, as discussed in chapter five. Along with his co-workers -- editors, department heads, writers, and readers -- Gordon

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<sup>6</sup>Goulart, pp. 33-37.

formed Hoffman's "Adventure family." More than many of them, Gordon exploited the image that Hoffman had built for Adventure. Perhaps he recognized the fact that more than two million readers enjoyed the brand of Americanism that Hoffman marketed. In any case, he was quick to point out to those readers, both in his column and in personal letters, that the "old songs" embodied all the virtues of the pioneers.<sup>7</sup>

Gordon's readers, however, were not a homogeneous lot, nor did they necessarily respond to the column because of the aesthetic put forth by Hoffman or Gordon. For example, a correspondent in Florida was eager to meet Gordon and to sing some songs for him because he felt that Adventure -- and particularly the "Ask Adventure" portion of the magazine -- was "more fair to socialism."<sup>8</sup>

In general, Gordon's column was unique in its appeal to individuals of diverse social, economic and regional backgrounds. Previously, other folklorists had utilised newspaper and periodical columns as aids to collecting.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> #2624 to August Vollmer, February 24, 1927.

<sup>8</sup> #1177 to RWG from George Omweg, May 10, 1925.

<sup>9</sup> Gavin Greig ran a series of weekly articles in the Buchan Observer from 1907-1911 devoted to songs. He later recorded correspondents. Sam Henry, Vance Randolph, Ray Wood, Gordon Wilson, Paul Brewster and Franz Rickaby were among those folklorists who used newspaper or magazine columns to collect folklore, informants and leads. See Kenneth S. Goldstein, A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore (Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates for the AFS, 1964), p. 148.

None had attempted to establish rapport with so wide an audience.<sup>10</sup> Non-folklorists too ran old song columns. Many newspapers and periodicals such as the Family Herald featured regular columns of song and verse. Gordon's audience was also diverse in that it consisted of people who had many different conceptions of (and interests in) folksong. Gordon courted the scrapbook keeper, avid listener, audience member and apprentice musician as well as the star performer.<sup>11</sup>

Even a few scholars viewed the column with interest, although Gordon felt that the bulk of his colleagues "failed to wake up to the fact that ADVENTURE was not just the ordinary cheap story magazine."<sup>12</sup> Gordon also complained that because libraries had failed to wake up to this fact, back issues of the magazine were scarce and it was difficult to refer correspondents to previous numbers. It was for this reason that Gordon presented Kittredge and Louise Pound with complete sets of tear-sheets of his department. Some "Old Songs" columns were also sent to Guy B. Johnson, Reed Smith and H.M. Belden. H.H. Fuson and Mellinger Henry were already among Adventure's regular subscribers, frequently

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<sup>10</sup>As Archie Green points out in Only a Miner, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup>Distinctions between various arenas of performance and types of performers are made by Neil V. Rosenberg in "Repertoire, Style and Role: Amateur and Professional Folk Musicians," Unpublished paper read at the 1972 meeting of the American Folklore Society at Austin, Texas.

<sup>12</sup>#3292 to Albert L. Leman, February 7, 1928.

corresponding with Gordon in regard to the "Old Songs" column. They were enthusiastic about Gordon's efforts.

Most of the scholars who corresponded with Gordon, however, did so to arrange academic conferences or to ask for texts, advice or references rather than to respond to his column, despite the fact that Gordon repeatedly offered to put his network of correspondents to work collecting versions of any songs of particular interest to his colleagues. He himself used the column effectively to collect specific songs. Much of his preliminary research for his New York Times articles and for future Adventure columns was carried out through the column.

Gordon, in fact, had intended to develop the "Old Songs" department into an effective research tool from the beginning. He had eagerly taken on the job because he realized that with such an outlet he could reach many more people than he ever could have hoped to reach by personal contact alone. Reflecting on his column in a letter in February of 1927 to correspondent Charles Roe, Gordon commented:

I sure love ADVENTURE but for the purely scholarly purposes of the big work it is simply one of the many drawing sources to get me more and more in touch with the folk -- everywhere. One cog in a big machine. A big cog, I'll admit, for it has done much for me. And I don't need to say that the friendships that have come from it mean very much to me personally. Life would be

a sad thing if it were mere mechanical work without pleasure.<sup>13</sup>

Gordon was constructing his "big machine" to do a scientific job, as his metaphor suggested. Unlike other collectors he was not interested simply in texts or in Child ballads. Instead, he was problem oriented. He saw the column as a means through which he could collect all the versions, fragments, data and information extant which bore upon the history of specific songs. He also saw the column as a means through which he could learn what sorts of songs were being actively sung in folk groups. The "Old Songs" column was a big machine specifically designed to enable Gordon to scientifically investigate the development of folksong.

The machine ran through the efforts of dedicated correspondents -- from hoboes and hard cases to steelworkers, secretaries and executives. The machinist, plain old Bob Gordon, the "'Old Songs' man," portrayed himself as "just another of the men about the Camp-fire." His part was to serve as "the humble scribe and editor."<sup>14</sup> Although this was the role he claimed, he didn't fool everyone. His columns contained learned if brief discussions of the background and development of songs. Few other scholars in the 1920s wrote so clearly about the interplay between

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<sup>13</sup>#2602 to Charles Roe, February 19, 1927.

<sup>14</sup>#2096 to Miss A.D.L. Robinson, November 15, 1926.

author and folk song, about the processes by which folk-songs developed. His genius in writing for a popular audience without sacrificing scholarship was the point of great praise by Archer Taylor when he called Gordon's Adventure columns the most important contribution to American folksong that had been made to that date.<sup>15</sup>

A few correspondents guessed that Bob Gordon was more than he seemed, but it was only when he felt that he could profit by disclosing his credentials that he revealed his scholarly training. For the most part Gordon felt that he would be able to use the column most efficiently if he presented himself as one of the group rather than as a professor with vested interests. Following Hoffman he emphasized that his column was a meeting place for all those who were interested in the "old songs." He commented to a correspondent who wanted to buy some folk-songs that it was a free party, not a concert with paid admission. To enter one only needed a love of the songs and a willingness to send in any versions, fragments or bits of information that might help the next "comrade" looking for the rest of a half-forgotten song. So, Gordon stressed the collective nature of the undertaking: taken

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<sup>15</sup>Quoted by Arthur Brodeur in taped interview, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969. Taylor said this in recommending Gordon for a position as head of the University of California at Berkeley's Library School.

all together, the readers of the "Old Songs" column were the greatest experts on American folksong.

Emphasizing the friendly, cooperative nature of his project was an astute judgement on Gordon's part. He took advantage of his audience's response, but he was not insincere. He formed some real friendships through Adventure. The support, praise and encouragement that he received from his fans must have been welcome as he pursued his solitary vocation.

The Adventure correspondence documents Gordon's attempts to establish close relationships with his correspondents. The following incident was the subject of great concern to Gordon. In the February 4, 1927 issue of his column, Gordon asked his readers for "real hobo songs." He learned about a young boy who possessed a large scrapbook of such songs. The boy supposedly had an aunt in the Berkeley area and Gordon, now living in Darien, Georgia, contacted Police Chief August Vollmer of the San Francisco Police Department in an effort to locate the boy and the book. The well-meaning chief publicized Gordon's search in the Bay area newspapers. He sent Gordon the following clippings as proof of his efforts.

Gordon was furious. He felt that the Chief had betrayed a confidence, and that the "fraternity of hoboes" would no longer be likely to put much trust in "that man

# Fortune Awaits Boy "Hobo"

◆◆ 2624 ◆◆

## Has 300 Old Minstrel Songs

A nation-wide search was instituted yesterday by Chief August Vollmer of Berkeley for a treasure chest of 300 hand-written old minstrel songs.

In connection with the quest for the songs a search is being conducted for "Buddie" Williams, 18-year-old "knight of the road," who is declared to have followed in the footsteps of his grandfather as a roaming minstrel shortly after the grandparent died, leaving a suitcase containing the original minstrel ballads to the boy.

R. W. Gordon, national authority on songs and ballads and a former professor of music at both Harvard and the University of California, through an appeal to Chief Vollmer started the search for boy and songs.

Gordon is anxious to acquire the collection, declared most rare. The musical authority already has secured specimens through an agent in New Orleans, who heard young Williams perform, but lost track of the boy.

As the story comes to Chief Vollmer from Gordon, the elder Williams had been a wandering singer and violinist before his death.

When the grandson took the road as a minstrel he is declared to have left the rare collection in possession

of an aunt by the name of "Mrs. L. Johns," supposedly living in the Sacramento valley. This woman could not be traced.

"Very old and very important" and "not from an ordinary source" are some of the expressions used by Gordon, the music expert, in commenting on the samples of the collection he has received. He indicates he is willing to purchase the collection from young Williams if he can locate the nomadic boy.



"Buddie" Williams

The father of "Buddie" Williams, known as Bill Williams, met death in the prizefight ring, supposedly in Denver in 1912, according to meager details furnished Chief Vollmer by Gordon.

The boy also is declared to have a legacy of several thousand dollars being held in trust for him until he is 21.

Gordon for the past fifteen years has been recognized as a national authority on the matter of songs and ballads. He taught at Harvard 1912-18 and was assistant professor at the University of California, 1918-25. In 1925 Harvard sent him out as Sheldon traveling fellow to collect old songs and ballads of America, and the Williams collection is declared one of the rarest of the lot.

# THE OTHER FELLOW

By — 2624

Ad Schuster

There are romance and pathos in the story of Bill Williams, wandering minstrel, prize fighter, and tramp. Over the roads he went, from New Orleans to Seattle and eastward across the plains, and when he was in need of money he sang.

When Bill Williams came to die he had nothing to leave his son, "Buddie," save three hundred hand-written songs. The boy, with the songs and the wandering disposition of the father, is thought to be roaming the countryside with no idea these manuscripts are considered valuable.

There are men who study songs, specializing on folk and original ones, and of such is Bob Gordon, former Berkeley resident and now R. W. Gordon, of Harvard, authority in his field. Gordon revels in the spontaneous outpourings of cowboy song, in the plaintive strains from the cottonfields, in any songs which come out of the people and would like to see those which Bill Williams sang. He is looking for Buddie and if he finds him, a bargain will be made.

So, if you know of Buddie Williams and his three hundred songs, send the word to Chief Vollmer of Berkeley who will pass it along.

Figure 12. #2624 Adventure Mss, from San Francisco area papers. Sent by August Vollmer, February 1927.

Gordon's" promises that their letters were confidential.<sup>16</sup> Gordon was also incensed at the misstatements in the papers. Particularly disturbing to him were the intimations in the news releases that the boy's scrapbook was very valuable. Gordon explained his reaction in a letter to the chief on February 24, 1927:

. . . it is very necessary, if I am to do any collecting not to raise false hopes of value (from a money point of view) in the mind of those who have material. Those songs, of great value to sober research, are not worth one copper cent of money to the man who has them. I'm not bluffing! I wouldn't give a ten cent piece to him for them, -- nor will any other collector, or any library I know. Fact! Why? Because first of all probably not a single one is unknown, because probably I have now in my possession perhaps twenty to one hundred texts of each of them. Because no collector would dare to block all further channels for himself and others in the field by buying songs. Now let me explain. When I say I have copies, I do not for a second mean that my copies will be just like his. Not at all. No two versions of any genuine folk song are twice alike. That [is] why scholars want all versions. The study of variations is one very big factor of the research . . . .<sup>17</sup>

While Gordon may have been mistaken in stating that his fellow scholars would not buy songs, it is apparent that he was concerned that offering money for songs would encourage spurious compositions. Ad he understood it, such phenomena would becloud a scientific understanding of how folksong

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<sup>16</sup>#2624 to August Vollmer, February 24, 1927.

<sup>17</sup>#2624 to August Vollmer, February 24, 1927.

developed rather than illuminate the problem. Most of Gordon's anger, however, came from his fear that the efficiency of his machine was damaged.

Generally, in return for his correspondents' contributions Gordon offered nothing but his interest, his appreciation and his aid in locating desired songs. Occasionally he sent songbooks, multigraphed copies of songs or photographs from his field research as special gestures of appreciation.

Nevertheless, his interest, aid and appreciation were considerable. Gordon wrote long and enthusiastic letters, seizing on each as an opportunity to gain an active accomplice, another covert to the Great Plan. While letters allowed Gordon a better chance to establish and maintain rapport with his correspondents, they were in some ways a mixed blessing. The sheer bulk of mail he received demanded a great deal of time. While living in Darien in two small rooms with his wife and daughter, Gordon answered individually more than three thousand letters, often giving long and detailed responses. Although he was hampered by the lack of reference works, Gordon frequently responded to readers' questions by referring them to a published source.

Although they may not have been aware of it, some of his fellow scholars received a good deal of publicity

this way. If a correspondent wished to become more familiar with the field of modern American folksong, Gordon often recommended the books of Lomax, Cox, Colcord, Shaw, Masefield, Whall, Scarborough and Dean.<sup>18</sup> Gordon estimated that he mentioned and praised Lomax's Cowboy Songs in one out of every three letters. At one point, Gordon bought the Haldeman-Julius publication of Finger's Sailor Chanties and Cowboy Ballads in quantity and passed them out to select correspondents at his own expense.

To the reader who wanted an understanding of older folksong traditions, Gordon recommended Campbell and Sharp, the full-volume set of Child and Kittredge abridgement. He did not refer his correspondents solely to scholarly publications, or even solely to printed sources. Frequent reference was made to W.W. Delaney's extensive series of songsters, and to the rapidly increasing productions of commercial record companies. In particular, the recorded

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<sup>18</sup>#980 to Louis B. Hart, Buffalo, N.Y., March 17, 1924. Volumes mentioned by Gordon are John Harrington Cox, Folk Songs of the South (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925); Joanna C. Colcord, Roll and Go, Songs of American Sailormen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1924); Michael C. Dean, The Flying Cloud and 150 Other Old Poems (Virginia, Minn.: The Quickprint, n.d.); John Masefield, A Sailor's Garland (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1928); Dorothy Scarborough, On the Trail of the Negro Folk-Songs (Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates, 1963 [reprint of 1923 edition]); Frank Shay, Wooden Ships and Iron Men: Deep Sea Chanties (N.Y.: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1926); W.B. Whall, Ships, Sea Songs and Shanties (Glasgow: Brown, Son and Ferguson, Ltd., 1910).

performances of Bascom Lamar Lunsford and Fiddlin' John Carson frequently were recommended and praised by Gordon.<sup>19</sup>

Gordon referred his readers to songs. He also taught them how to add more songs to the repertoire of "those about the Camp-Fire," and he did not settle for partially documented, edited or emended texts. He wanted songs, but he wanted them delivered whole. He wanted live specimens, so he treated his readers to an introductory folk-song course. It was a credit to Gordon's ability that many of them passed with flying colors.

Gordon passed on his own rigid scholarly standards. For him accuracy was imperative. Interested in the tracing of song histories, Gordon felt that editing ruined whatever value there was in a genuine folksong.<sup>20</sup> Variation was "one very big factor of the research."<sup>21</sup> On the few occasions in which Gordon in any way altered a text he quite clearly indicated what he had done and why he had done it. For example, in order to make the whole story of "Sam Bass" understandable to his readers he added some verses from Lomax to contributor Lee Herring's text, surrounding the conflated verses with parentheses.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>#2343 to Charles E. Roe, June 1, 1927.

<sup>20</sup>#2190 to Charles F. Hendrick, December 13, 1926.

<sup>21</sup>#2624 to August Vollmer, February 24, 1927.

<sup>22</sup>"Old Songs," Adventure (December 20, 1924), 191-192.

Gordon constantly emphasized that his correspondents imitate him in writing down songs exactly as they were sung. Feeling that much of his audience had bawdy material in their repertoires, Gordon asked that they send in all of their texts unemended. In letters he further encouraged the contribution of bawdy material. To allay the suspicion that such a request might invite, Gordon sometimes gave his own credentials and explained both the science of folksong and his interest in tracing bawdy song histories. He pointed out to his correspondents that since bawdry was often unprinted it offered the scholar an excellent opportunity to study song development and oral tradition. He guaranteed contributors that they could remain anonymous and that he would do nothing amiss with their contributions, as in the following excerpt from a letter written on January 15, 1927:

It's all fish for my net, and I can assure you that whatever you send will neither be misunderstood nor misused.<sup>23</sup>

Gordon's attitude toward bawdy song and his "Inferno" collection is discussed further in chapter nine. I briefly mention it here as additional evidence of the breadth of approach which Gordon encouraged his correspondents to take.

Gordon asked his readers to send in basic documentation with their songs. He asked them to tell him

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<sup>23</sup>#2632 to Robert E. Howard, January 15, 1927.

about the contexts for singing, about their families and about themselves, as in the following letters to correspondents Terrell MacKay on June 1, 1926 and to Esther C. Colin on January 20, 1927:

And I'd like to know who, where, and when. That is the name of the singer, the place and the date, and the circumstances under which the song was sung. I believe sincerely that those who come after us will thank us for aiding in preserving a very real part of our American heritage that is passing rapidly now from present to past. Not always will "jazz" hold, there will come a time when some future generation will prize highly these things. And, by way of footnote, should you be willing to help in this please send in songs just as they are sung . . . .<sup>24</sup>

And write me, too, a brief biography of your mother and of yourself to go with them. Where she was born and lived, and when, and from what part of the country her family came, etc. Just as a help to those who later will have an interest in the songs and want to know their date and location and a bit about the singer who sang them.<sup>25</sup>

He took an interest in his correspondents and his friendly letters brought him a wealth of material in return. Songs arrived annotated with the personal associations which they stimulated in the memories of the readers. His correspondents included a wealth of local and family history, legend, memorat and anecdote along with their contextual detail and their texts.

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<sup>24</sup>#1720 to Terrell MacKay, June 1, 1926.

<sup>25</sup>#2421 to Ester C. Colin, January 20, 1927.

Esther Colin, to whom Gordon had written in the quotation immediately above, responded with a description of her childhood, of the prized evenings when her mother would sit quietly singing on the front porch, soon surrounded by children requesting favorites and listening intently.

Colin continued:

I have written a little sketch of mother. I have not tried to make anything "Biographical" of it, only a little picture of the singer and the audience, the stage and lighting effects you might say . . . . She had worked for six months to get a song while in Western New York that she had heard of over in another county. A song was prized when you got it that way . . . .<sup>26</sup>

Gordon's response to her efforts was enthusiastic.

That's a marvelous start! The little sketch just right and exquisitely done. It carries atmosphere as well as the essential facts that will be useful in later generations to "place" the songs in their proper time and district.<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes Gordon solicited detailed descriptions of actual singing contexts because he was curious about the repertoire of his informants -- or their informants. The following suggestion came from a letter which Gordon wrote on March 20, 1928 to Frank Partridge, a correspondent with a large repertoire of bawdry.

Wish I had your chance to listen in on the singing in the evening. Imagine that there is many an old song (possibly in pretty broad form) sung there. Why not, careless like,

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<sup>26</sup> #2492 to RWG from Esther C. Colin, January 26, 1927.

<sup>27</sup> #2492 to Esther C. Colin, February 4, 1927.

take down a bunch of them. It would be a darned interesting thing to keep a sort of song diary -- a list of each and every song sung day by day by that bunch. Of course, in nine cases out of ten they would be just plain popular songs. And in these cases a mere notation of the title would suffice. In the remaining cases the stuff out to be taken down word for word just as it is actually sung. The result would sure be interesting. Almost worth the risk of trying. Though I imagine you'd get in Dutch if you were caught at the scribbling.<sup>28</sup>

So Gordon educated his readers to report their texts in as accurate a fashion as possible and to supply supporting contextual information. This was just the beginning -- just one of the cogs in the machine -- for Gordon hoped to collect the extant mass of American folksong. He hoped to establish a network of field workers stretching across the nation. To this end, he encouraged his correspondents to gather songs from other people they knew, to become collectors themselves. He trained them in this, as well, suggesting guidelines, as in these letters of November 14, 1926 and March 17, 1927:

Know you will succeed in getting hold of some real stuff for me. It's there and no question about it. But it does take a deal of patience sometimes to pry it loose, especially as the folk often feel that the collector is trying to make fun of their foolish and humble songs. They are tremendously sensitive, and will say again and again that they have "forgotten" when as a matter of fact they are simply timid.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> #3484 to Frank A. Partridge, March 20, 1928.

<sup>29</sup> #2094 to Fred L. Bowden, November 14, 1926.

There are only two requisites for a successful song prospector -- curiosity and a real liking for the old songs. No one will want to talk to you about them unless you yourself love them. I'm betting you'll be successful.<sup>30</sup>

He suggested many possible techniques for the beginning collector. Help in collecting could be gained by appealing to local pride through advertisements in regional papers. Old-timers and school teachers could be enlisted to prod the memories of their associates or students. Encouraging competition between towns when calling for local versions of old songs often brought good results, Gordon suggested. He reminded the collector to follow up all the tips, leads, and texts that would be forthcoming.

Using his "Old Songs" contacts as a base, and the column as a means of advertising his Great Plan, Gordon expected to set up his network of "district collectors." Each would be a right arm for Gordon, acting as on-going directors of regional collecting projects all destined to be deposited eventually in the great collection. The district representatives would also serve as a sort of personal news and information service for Gordon, clipping from their local papers any items which pertained to folk-song -- from reviews of new publications to articles on fiddle and banjo festivals and contests -- and forwarding them to him.

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<sup>30</sup> #2686 to Horatio C. Wood, March 17, 1927.

Gordon first approached his own star informants -- those readers with whom he had already established firm and cordial relationships through "Old Songs" correspondence. As he progressed on his field trip he hoped to appoint additional district collectors who could continue to collect material in their areas after he was forced to move on. Bascom Lamar Lunsford was one such individual; there were many more, most of whom Gordon had never met.

When Gordon had taken on the "Old Songs" column, it was with the hope that he would someday meet and record in person some of his contributors. His field trip was undertaken in the hope that Adventure readers would provide tips and contacts in the areas he hoped to visit; it was also undertaken in the hope that Gordon would finally be able to meet some of the individuals with whom he had been corresponding for more than two years when the trip started. He expressed this hope in a letter written on January 1, 1925 to H.E. Greenough, a reader from Nova Scotia who frequently sent Gordon handwritten manuscripts of more than forty pages, full of songs and valuable reminiscences:

I'm looking forward to the time when I shall be able to hear you sing the songs, and then, a minute afterwards, play them back to you and let you hear your own voice as it will be still heard hundreds of years from now.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>#1355 to H.E. Greenough, January 1, 1926.

As the time passed and Gordon's field trip progressed no farther than Darien, Georgia, he may have realized that for the moment these dreams and plans would remain unfulfilled. However, his correspondence with his informants had developed into many strong relationships. That he could prevail upon people he had never met to collect songs and to clip newspapers on his behalf testified to the importance which members of a large pulp magazine audience attached to folksong, and to the fan-like commitment and dedication they brought to their correspondence with the column editor. Gordon recognized and tapped a large and willing audience. It was with a great deal of work and commitment on his part, however, that such a tremendous impression was made and such an appeal exercised upon hoboes, businessmen, convicts and housewives alike.

The first encounter that most of his diverse audience had with Gordon was in the "Old Songs" column. While letters offered him considerably more freedom in encouraging and educating individual readers, the column was his primary means of instructing them. What he chose to print in the column was close to a cross-section of what he received by mail and collected in person. It included a variety of songs -- from blues and broadsides to play-party and cumulative songs. Texts were printed with contextual information as supplied by the correspondent, or with

Gordon's description of common contexts for performance. A good ethnographer and a good journalist, he included human interest to make the songs come alive. He didn't restrict himself to instructing his readers -- by his own example he encouraged them to send in contextual detail.

The texts which Gordon chose to print all had some value "from the folk point of view."<sup>32</sup> They provided good examples of folk technique, of the way folksong developed, or of the interrelation between folk and author song. Although he tried "to keep out the plain and general run of old author songs that are easily found in printed books,"<sup>33</sup> he tried to present a variety of texts. He included "author and broadside types whenever they [were] at all related to the folk."<sup>34</sup>

Gordon sometimes had to defend his eclectic publishing policy to readers who felt that he did not include an adequate amount of old ballads. To a woman registering such a complaint, Gordon responded in a letter on November 15, 1926:

Now as to the types of songs I'm trying to get. The name of the department "Old Songs That Men Have Sung is an inheritance from Lomax and Frothingham, my predecessors.

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<sup>32</sup> #2096 to Miss A.D.L. Robinson, November 15, 1926.

<sup>33</sup> #1949 to Mr. L.B. Corey, October 20, 1926.

<sup>34</sup> #1949 to Mr. L.B. Corey, October 20, 1926.

It seemed best not to change it, though the department is run rather differently since I took it over. As a matter of fact it now contains very little that has not some interest from the purely folk point of view. That is, songs that have been learned and passed on from mouth to mouth, from singer to singer, over fairly long periods of time -- not those that are learned from print.

. . . now all of this is . . . merely to show you that there really is an object behind it all, that I'm not printing trivial doggerel because I believe it to be literature. If I had more space, and if it were possible to print music as well as words, there is nothing I should like better than to have in every issue at least one song that was chosen solely for its literary and musical merit.<sup>35</sup>

The space constraint which Gordon mentioned was a constant problem. His department appeared every other issue -- once a month -- and took up a page and a half in the magazine. This was barely enough room for one long song and a bit of commentary. The bulk of material which Gordon received by mail alone provided songs for issues many months ahead. Gordon frequently had copy for six or eight issues prepared and waiting to make appearance.<sup>36</sup> Copyright was an additional consideration affecting Gordon's choice of texts for the column. He explained the problem in a letter to another correspondent in February of 1927.

I want of course to be most careful as to copyright in the case of the magazine, and not to print any song that so far as I know has already been printed in just that form. All

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<sup>35</sup> #2096 to Miss A.D.L. Robinson, November 15, 1926.

<sup>36</sup> #2497 to H.H. Fuson, February 4, 1927.

true folk-song has variants . . . . Printing another version of a song already in print is all right, provided the other version is genuinely from the folk and not made by the editor just to evade copyright. Most of what I have printed in the department has appeared somewhere in print in some form or another. But I've never myself changed a text in order to make it differ, and I've tried mighty hard to see to it that only new versions were published.<sup>37</sup>

Gordon was superbly able to judge the relation of his readers' texts to popular copyrighted versions, as his familiarity with songsters, folios and discs would suggest. Further proof of his awareness of copyright problems, and of his interest in the implications of copyrighting folksong texts was demonstrated by his work at the Library of Congress and on behalf of the Victor and Shapiro-Bernstein Companies, as discussed in the following chapter.

Gordon wrote the detailed responses quoted above in answer to the often simple requests of his readers. The letters provided a forum for Gordon, although the recipients may not have realized this. Perhaps Gordon's lengthy and personable replies surprised his readers; they certainly brought them back for more. The amount of dedication which correspondents brought to the "Old Songs" column was astounding.

Like other scholars working in the shadow of Harvard, Gordon attempted a monumental task of collection,

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<sup>37</sup>#2498 to Charles A. Schwartz, February 4, 1927.

classification and analysis. His Great Plan was comparable to Child's study of the English and Scottish popular ballads, to Stith Thompson's Motif-Index and to Archer Taylor's publications on the riddle and the proverb. Gordon, however, deserted the academy to work in the field and through the popular press. He saw himself as a scientist and a technologist; he built a big machine to carry out his Great Plan. Adventure magazine was an important part of that machine.

The following chapter examines Gordon's involvement in the establishment of a national research center for folk music, the next step in his Great Plan.

## VIII

### "THE CHANCE TO RUN DOWN PURE SCIENCE IN [HIS] OWN SWEET WAY": GORDON AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS AND AFTER, 1928-1961

Since at least 1923, Gordon had worked steadily and practically to establish broad-based support, attention, and co-operation for the collection of folksong. Conceiving of his work on a large scale, he did not restrict his efforts to communication with other scholars, although he believed that their support was essential. Amassing the canon of American folksong was not a one-man job, he well knew. When the "Old Songs" column was terminated, he did not abandon his commitment to organizing a working nationwide network of contacts and collectors. Instead, he considered how best to transfer his entire project -- his Great Plan -- to another agency.

Arthur S. Hoffman left Adventure in September of 1927. The new editor, Anthony Rud, decided to eliminate many special departments in order to make room for more fiction. The "Ask Adventure" section went -- and with it "Old Songs." In a letter to correspondent Fiswoode Tarleton on September 21, 1927, Gordon mentioned that he was on the lookout for other outlets.

"Goodbye "Old Songs!" I think it's a big mistake, but I shan't argue the point at all. That's up to them. Meanwhile I am writing

to several places in the hope of transferring the department to a bigger magazine. Even to the editor of GOLDEN BOOK. Funny how that idea came. After all the old traditional songs of the AMERICAN FOLK are "reprint stuff." Not fiction, I grant, but quite in line with their general idea, -- reprints of folk literature to add to their reprints of the best in author literature. The best, the golden nuggets of "anonymous literature."<sup>1</sup>

Although, as usual, Gordon teetered on the brink of financial disaster, he seemed to accept the column's demise with equanimity. This suggests that some prospects were in the air. In fact, earlier that year, in January of 1927, Gordon had fulfilled a promise to Carl Engel, Chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, by sending him a set of Adventure columns. Ostensibly, the set of "Old Songs" sheets had been offered because of their rarity. Few libraries included the pulp magazine in their collections. For Gordon it would be a convenience; henceforth he could refer readers to the copies on hand at the Music Division of the Library of Congress. He explained his gift as an attempt to repay some of the favors he had received from the Music Division. Stuck in the swamps of Darien, Gordon had had no recourse to any library. Travelling light, he was hindered in his own reserach as well as in his attempts to answer readers' questions. On many occasions he had requested library checking, aid, and the loan of

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<sup>1</sup> #3268 to Fiswoode Tarleton, September 21, 1927.

books from the Music Division.<sup>2</sup> He also had done a great deal of research in that portion of the library; both he and his work were well known there.

It is most likely that the "Old Songs" tear sheets were not given out of the purest motives. The exchange of letters between Engel and Gordon which followed his gift reveal some of the intentions of both men. While collection remained a priority, it is evident that Gordon felt that he had amassed unique and valuable data. It was time to begin implementing the next part of the Great Plan. Gordon had always considered his study scientific; he saw himself in the image of Edison and other researchers, and now he wanted to be able to proceed in the study and classification of his materials with the freedom of the scientist. His letters to Engel reflected his desire to conduct pure research without institutional pressure, without financial worry. His "gift" to the Library was not without its motives, and both he and Engel knew it. By January of 1927 the two men had had many discussions about their mutual concerns. In a previous visit to Washington Gordon and Engel had "whispered a bit" about the possibility that Engel might turn some special funds Gordon's way. In his letters to Engel, Gordon continued to stress many of the same ideas he had used to

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<sup>2</sup>RWG to Carl Engel, March 8, 1928; RWG to Carl Engel, undated letter written before Christmas 1927; RWG to Whittlesey, September 16, 1927. All LC/AFS Pers.

advantage in Adventure, notably, conception of his work on a grand scale, emphasis on building a nation-wide network to pursue the work, stress on the inherent healthy Americanism of the subject and the nobleness and importance of the project. Engel was also aware that Gordon's perpetual financial difficulties prevented him from attempting serious work on any projects of book-like scope or major theoretical importance.<sup>3</sup>

Engel believed both in Gordon and in his research. He gratefully acknowledged the gift of "Old Songs" columns in a letter written on January 28, 1927, and indicated that he was doing all he could to help Gordon:

I received today your batch of sheets from the Adventure Magazine with your valuable contributions. This is a highly appreciated gift. As I told you, we shall have it bound and properly indexed. Anything else that you may have in this line will be welcome.

Yes, I have done more than whisper about new funds to enable your going on with the work. I have on several occasions fairly shouted about it to Thomas Whitney Surette, who is one of the advisors in the Guggenheim Foundation. I should think they are the very people to support your research. I was happy to see Surette very much interested. The New York Times article had impressed him . . . . I do not think it would be a mistake if you were to write him frankly what the situation is, and ask him if he can hold out any hope for a Guggenheim fellowship.<sup>4</sup>

No further progress was made in turning dreams or plans into

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<sup>3</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, January 27, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, January 28, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

reality that year, although the whispering -- of both men -- went on.

Towards the end of 1927, in September, Gordon decided that he would have to give up his continuing field trip. The strain of trying to "do good work and have at the same time to earn bread and butter for the family" was too much.<sup>5</sup> At this time he wrote a lengthy personal letter to Engel. He summarized what he saw as alternatives, asking Engel for his advice as to the best course.

He considered lecturing. He was sure that he could easily "write off a series of perhaps five or six that [he thought] would go"; and he had "plenty of immensely striking text stuff to quote." While he had many good anecdotes and "a lot of darned good pictures that could be used for slides for bigger work" the recordings he had made were not strong enough to be used in a big hall -- and he was not a singer. In 1925 he had approached some New York lecture bureaus with the same idea and he was sure that they would be just as skeptical two years later. Though his material was splendid there was only a market for people who sang these folksongs or who had big reputations. He was not Carl Sandberg.<sup>6</sup> Gordon was willing to continue his free-lance writing. He foresaw great possibilities in the field, for he was not

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<sup>5</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, January 27, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>6</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, January 27, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

limiting himself "to one tiny manifestation of folk, as most other men [had] done." A wide range of subjects were open to him, much of them "pure pioneer stuff, stuff that [had] remained unsuspected to date."<sup>7</sup> While he was afraid that "some fool would jump him" he felt that he needed to do some library checking before he could begin to publish any of the "longer and more basic articles" he had in mind.<sup>8</sup> He needed to test hypotheses and to formulate theories before he could consider several additional alternatives.

. . . many real things not to be touched on at present. Radio- Books- Sheet Music- Phonograph. Etc. There are possibilities for acting as "advisor" with fixed retaining fee "as expert on folk" for many fields. Even Motion Pictures, strange as that may seem. But these require first a fixed and acknowledged standing on my part. And they take some intervening years yet. When the time comes I'll be there and ready for them.<sup>9</sup>

It was obvious that what he really wanted was a regular income and the freedom to carry on his research, to develop a "fixed and acknowledged standing." He continued in his letter to Engel:

. . . I can go back again to college teaching. Later I shall, but not now. A good teacher under our present damnable system has no real time for research in a line like mine where the materials are not codified and locked up in libraries. No field work

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<sup>7</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>8</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>9</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

possible. Hope some day that there will be an opportunity for real research men in our colleges. Men who can lead in their fields, who will have adequate salaries, time off for necessary trips, duties only to a small group of highly trained graduate research students. That would be Heaven! Why colleges let big business firms lead in this I can't see. Look at the men in General Electric, in the Eastman Kodak laboratories,-- look at their freedom from petty routine, the chance they are given to run down pure science in their own sweet way. And look at the results that come from it. Enough! That is out of the question now.<sup>10</sup>

While the opportunity for a "real research man" was out of the question in a university, Gordon was not deterred. He began to explain his own "impossible scheme" to Engel. He wanted the support of an individual or group who would "stand back of him," allowing him to write articles as he went along with no pending obligations, simply assuring him help when "the articles failed to budge."<sup>11</sup> Fellowships, endowments or private backers might provide this necessary stipend. Possibly a government agency would support him. No matter where the money came from, Gordon wanted the additional assurances that he would receive credit for his work and that he would have control over its eventual publication. He had given "a life of time and money to this stuff," and felt he was better able to judge what should be

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<sup>10</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>11</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

done with it than any government official.<sup>12</sup> He made it clear that his hesitancy to become involved with government agencies was not intended to reflect on Engel, and used Smithsonian policies as his example. In an earlier letter to Engel, Gordon had hinted that his important project could "well be conceived as falling upon musical funds for support."<sup>13</sup> Short of saying that the Music Division of the Library of Congress was the right government agency to sponsor his project, Gordon made himself quite clear in finishing his letter of September 14, 1927. He believed that his "impossible scheme" was very possible, and that Engel was the sort of man who was in a position to make dreams come true.<sup>14</sup> Gordon delineated his dream in the September letter to Engel:

Personally I think eventually the whole scheme ought to be funded. That it ought to be a national project with many workers. Let the best man have charge over it. I'll bid for the place, but cheerfully resign all claim if a better man can be found. Eventually I think the study and preservation of American materials is quite as important as the collection and preservation of our Indian materials. And they are passing just as rapidly now. I'll bet a cookie that a hundred years from now the backers of such a national project would be better remembered by this nation than the man who offered 10,000 or 15,000 or 25,000 for a new stunt aeroplane flight. That's what I'm going to fight hard for later. Whenever I get the chance. I could

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<sup>12</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>13</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, January 27, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>14</sup> #3268 to Fiswoode Tarleton, September 21, 1927.

organize right now a group of real workers, trained collectors, a national bureau if the funds were available. But most important for the second is, I think, the perpetuation of what I am doing,— seeking out, peering into new fields. Orientating material, preparing what I hope will be a sort of "Prolegomenon to Folk-Song." I shan't catch it all, but all I do catch will serve to make more possible the later "big plan." No one yet has ever taken a real survey of the field, outlined what was to be done, made clear the relationships and inter-relationships of types widely scattered in time and place. And I've made real discoveries there. No time to list them, and I don't want to breath a few of them yet anyway . . . <sup>15</sup>

Botkin, Seeger and Frankenstein all felt that Engel was responsible for originally conceiving of a national center for the study of folksong.<sup>16</sup> The Gordon-Engel correspondence suggests that Gordon was closely involved in developing the idea of such a center. Engel, however, was in a position to make the idea a reality. He gave Gordon's long letter a warm welcome and saw Gordon's work as a natural part of the larger institute which he hoped to build. He answered Gordon's "pamphlet" at length two days after it was written -- on September 16, 1927.

My dear Gordon:

I have your valued pamphlet of the fourteenth. Had I time and your gift of writing, I should return the favor in bulk as well as kind. But what my answer may lack in length

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<sup>15</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>16</sup> Taped interview with Benjamin A. Botkin, Bloomington, Indiana, November 9, 1968; Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969; Taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976.

or explicitness, it tries to make up for in promptness.

What I really want is a magic carpet to take me instantly to your "swamps." I should want to discuss your letter, your finds, your plans, by the hour and for days. You know how thoroughly interested I am in the work you are doing and how firmly I believe in the necessity for it.

But let us come to the main point at once.

You want an assured income for the next two or three years anyway, with ample chance to do your research and writing in the way you feel it should be done, with the assurance that the results of your labors will be presented in accordance with your ideas and credited to your own initiative.

Of course, on at least two occasions, I've talked myself hoarse in reciting your praises to Thos. W. Surette, who is connected with the Guggenheim Foundation. The last time I thought I perceived a glimpse of understanding, appreciation, and willingness to help. Your N.Y. Times article had apparently made an impression that my most impassioned pleading would never have achieved . . . .

Next thing: I should like to find a way of getting Mrs. Edward W. Bok to give you a grant to ten thousand dollars anyway, spread over a period of three years, with an additional appropriation for travel expenses. The stipulation would be that at the end of the first three years there would be ready for publication -- under the auspices of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia -- the first portion of your "History of American Song, in its relation to the folk." Further endowment should then be forthcoming to continue the work in accordance with a carefully devised scheme that would be submitted in the very beginning. But here is another thought.

In 1928, I hope to see inaugurated at the Curtis Institute a Department of Musicology with working headquarters at the Library of Congress. Post-graduate courses in the research (not in the making or faking) of music. That is my dream. And here is the only place in America to realize it. There is no college or university that has our library and our source material.

This means that I should like to see you appointed as a member of this hoped-for musicological faculty, to occupy the important chair

of American Folk Music. Not only a "living wage," but a comfortable income. Freedom to lecture outside the department courses, if the spirit moves you. Time to wander about, collect, collate, and write.

You see, I'm no tiro when it comes to pipe-dreamstuff. But I've seen some of my dreams turn into deeds. And I shall certainly work on my dying breath to make this one a reality . . . .

These two things, failing, I should make a strong bid for combined support of the Carnegie Foundation and the Victor Talking Machine Co. And I should do it straight from the shoulder for the sake of the Music Division in the Library of Congress. The Smithsonian has its collection of Indian records - genuine and alleged. I should want to see made, under your direction, an eleventh hour attempt at recording for the Library whatever may still exist in the way of living examples of (often untranscribable) folk tunes, ballads, etc., to illustrate that "History of American Song" which has got to be written very soon . . . .

. . . If I could manage it, I should try to find someone to endow a "chair" for American folk-music right here at the Library, and see that you got it. Then the Library could undertake to publish, in a dignified manner, whatever you produce along those lines . . . .<sup>17</sup>

Gordon, elated, but conscious that it was all in the way of "futures" continued to work on producing his New York Times articles, and "pot-boilers." He travelled to Washington, D.C. in late December of 1927 for a meeting with Engel and Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress. Engel reported shortly afterwards that all was "still quiet along the Potomac."<sup>18</sup> When two attempts to secure outside

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<sup>17</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, September 16, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, January 20, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.; Carl Engel to RWG, February 18, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

funds for Gordon's project failed, Engel wondered whether the Library might aid Gordon by purchasing some portion of his collection. Writing on February 18, 1928, Engel suggested that such an acquisition would lay the foundation for the collection they hoped to eventually gather, and would serve as another excellent reason for obtaining Gordon's services as curator for that collection.<sup>19</sup>

The Library was to follow a similar pattern five years later, offering John Lomax recording equipment for his projected Southern field trip, and later attaching him to the Library as the Honorary Curator of the Archive of American Folk Song.

Engel's offer in this case was, in many ways, discomfoting to Gordon. From a purely mercenary point of view making his collection public by turning it over to someone else, would cheat him of his big investment -- the many years of effort, the discoveries, and the "brain work."<sup>20</sup> There were technical problems as well. Much of his collection was in manuscript form and would require transcription and recopying. He hadn't the time for such projects and to send the originals to Washington would mean the cessation of his own work -- and his imcome. Gordon answered Engel on March 2, 1928:

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<sup>19</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, February 18, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>20</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, March 2, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

I think on the whole we had better let things remain as they are for the present. Something may turn up that would make possible the original scheme or something like it. I should welcome the possibility of having my stuff in a safe and fireproof place, where it could be consulted under my direction, and where I myself could have access to it constantly. But my material and I are pretty much inseperable. We go together. And I'm not yet ready for a divorce!

. . . Most of all I want the work itself to go on. I'm interested in the money side only because I have to be. If it were possible to get the stuff as it should be interpreted I should be very happy. At present I can do this only in small part and only by unremitting attention to raising the funds necessary by a combination of "pot-boiler" plus scholarship. I think so far I have never made public a single thing that did not contain in it somewhere some positive and worthwhile contribution for the serious student. And I've never dropped to the grade of the anthologist or the scissors and pastepot writer who rides the work of other men. What I have used has been mine, and not dipped out of some other fellows' bag.

By the way, I'm sending you under separate enclosure the remainder of the ADVENTURE sheets. Think this will bring the L.C. file up to date. In order to make sure that no issues are missing I may have "overlapped" one or two. Please check up with your file and destroy or otherwise dispose of any duplications. These have absolutely nothing whatever to do with the rest of this letter, and are not for sale. They are, as were the others, just an indication of my appreciation of the Library and of the good men one and all who frequent it.<sup>21</sup>

Gordon was unwilling to compromise; soon there was no need to. His letter crossed in the mail with a letter from Engel on March 2, 1928, the same day, which reported that prospects

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<sup>21</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, March 2, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

were beginning to brighten. Speaking at a luncheon given by the Women's Committee of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, Engel had aroused a good deal of interest -- and had raised a portion of the five-year stipend he was attempting to gather for Gordon. He had scheduled other such talks and wrote optimistically that he had not intended to rest until they had reached their goal.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 13. Gordon at the time he was appointed in charge of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, 1928.

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<sup>22</sup>Carl Engel to RWG, March 2, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

Sufficient funds were raised to convince Engel, Putnam, and the Library that the project could go forward. On April 20, 1928 Carl Engel announced that the Library of Congress planned a national collection of American Folk-Songs, to be directed by R.W. Gordon, "the one scholar most intimately conversant with the whole extent of [American Folk-song]." <sup>23</sup> In the U.S. Daily's report of Engel's announcement, Gordon was further described as "one of the most successful collectors of American folk-songs, because he was best fitted for the task by temperment and training . . . ." <sup>24</sup> It looked as if the Great Plan was going to continue.

Gordon's letters to Engel began to discuss the "archive idea" in earnest. He reported the progress he was making in gathering the support of other collectors and groups. Reed Smith, Dorothy Scarborough, Louise Pound, H.M. Belden, H.H. Fuson and Josephine McGill were "decidedly enthusiastic." <sup>25</sup> Publicity was his first priority for the time being. Writing to Engel on April 27, 1928, a week after his appointment, Gordon was also decidedly enthusiastic about the warm initial reception his idea was receiving.

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<sup>23</sup>"Library of Congress Plans to Preserve American Folk-Songs in National Collection," Washington, D.C. U.S. Daily, April 21, 1928.

<sup>24</sup>"Library of Congress Plans."

<sup>25</sup>"Library of Congress Plans."

Chief of Music Division Says Advance of Civilization Is  
Eliminating Original Haunts of Lore.

Plans for a national collection of American folk-songs, through co-operation of citizens, were announced by the Chief of the Music Division, Library of Congress, Carl Engel, in a statement April 20.

Mr. Engel said that \$1,000, one-fifth of the amount required for one year of the five-year task, already has been contributed. He expressed the hope that additional gifts soon would enable systematic organization of what, he said, should prove one of the Library's most important collections. The full text of Mr. Engel's statement follows:

There is a pressing need for the formation of a great national collection of American folk-songs. The logical place for such a collection is the national library of the United States, the Library of Congress in Washington. This collection should embody the soul of our people; it should comprise all the poems and melodies that have sprung from our soil and have been handed down, often with manifold changes, from generation to generation as a precious possession of our folk.

Countless individuals, numerous walks of life, several races, have contributed to this treasure of songs and ballads. It is richer than that of any other country. Too much of it has remained scattered or unrecorded. The time has come when the preservation of this valuable old material is threatened by the spread of the popular music of the hour.

The native haunts of our folk-songs have been disturbed. In the mountains of Kentucky, in the negro cabins of the South, in the lumber camps of the North, in the plains of the West where the

cowboy roamed, on board the ships where sailors used to sing endless varieties of ditties and chanties, the radio and the phonograph have penetrated. Where heretofore the old familiar songs were transmitted from parents to children as necessary and jealously-kept heritage, the marvellous technical inventions of our age are diffusing much music that never before reached these places and people. If it is good music, the diffusion is indeed commendable. But it must not be at the price or risk of losing irretrievably what is the most characteristic product of a civilization and the most spontaneous expression of human thought and feeling.

*Native Haunts  
Of Songs Disappearing*

The Music Division of the Library of Congress is vitally interested in the collecting of these old verses and tunes. The collecting must be done in a scholarly manner and the collection should be made freely accessible to scholars. There are now in print a number of American folk-song collections, some of them specializing in certain fields, others of a general nature. None of them is exhaustive. Although there are some that are excellent in their way, a good many are gathered at random and without discrimination. The fact that there is at present no centralized direction, leads to much spurious production and wasteful duplication. Folk-lore is a science; it demands organized effort bent upon a scientific and critical approach.

One of the most successful collectors of American folk-songs, because best fitted for the task by temperament and training, is R. W. Gordon, who in 1922 took up the editorship of a special folk-song department in a monthly magazine. The department, continued for several years, was called "Old Songs which men have sung." It brought Mr. Gordon in touch with over 3,700 correspondents scattered throughout the land. These collectors and contributors covered the entire range from hobo to college professor. Mr. Gordon himself has been a teacher at Harvard; and from 1918 until 1925 he was Assistant Professor of English at the University of California. He received the Sheldon Fellowship from Harvard in 1925 for the purpose of doing field work in the collecting and recording of folk-song material.

*Gift Provided  
One-Fifth of Funds*

Extraordinary interest in Mr. Gordon's work has been shown by one of the largest New York dailies, which contracted with him for eighteen feature articles on American folk-songs which have appeared in its Sunday magazine section. Each one these highly illuminating and thoroughly entertaining articles has advanced the scholarly knowledge of the subject. These articles conclusively proved how wide an area the term "American folk-song" covers. They also proved that Mr. Gordon is probably the one scholar most intimately conversant with the whole extent of it.

The Library of Congress is desirous to offer Mr. Gordon the possibility of completing his work in the field, with a view of bringing to Washington Mr. Gordon's own large collection and similar private collections that may be available. The work is estimated to take at least five years. This is a special task which does not come under the regular functions of library routine. In its present appropriations the Library of Congress has no funds to carry out a project of this kind.

The cooperation of public-spirited citizens is needed for it. One such person, in Philadelphia, who happened to hear of the project, has just sent to the Librarian of Congress a check for one thousand dollars with the pledge to give the same sum annually for the next four years. This is one fifth of the amount required. It is hoped that additional gifts will soon enable the Library to proceed with the actual formation of what should eventually be one of its most important collections. Delay may endanger success.

Figure 14. Announcement of establishment of national center for the collection and study of folksong. [Washington, D.C.] U.S. Daily, April 21, 1928.

On the whole, then, prospects for success in gathering together substantially the whole mass of the American song material in one great archive look even brighter than when we last talked . . . .<sup>26</sup>

Gordon had gained the government support he wanted. He placed his project -- lock, stock and barrel -- aims, goals and methods intact -- firmly and loudly under the aegis of the Music Division of the Library of Congress. Other than that he did nothing differently. As far as he was concerned he now could proceed in the image of other research scientists. He stayed in Darien and carried on his work.

At the end of May, 1928, Gordon travelled from Darien to Washington to address a select audience in the auditorium of the Library of Congress. He spoke of the provenance and variety of many types of folksong, illustrating with quotations from his field work. Talking about his efforts towards the collection of the corpus of American folksong he ended with a rousing plea that those who could not themselves go into the field to collect and preserve, donate funds to ensure that others be able to do so. The Washington Evening Star of Thursday, May 24, 1928 gave the following report of the evening:

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<sup>26</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, April 27, 1928, LC/AFS  
Pers.

## MUSIC

### FOLK SONGS OF THE U. S.

One of the most intellectually comprehensive and yet one of the most fascinating lectures heard in Washington in a long time was that given yesterday afternoon at the Library of Congress, in the chamber music auditorium, by R. W. Gordon, on the subject of "Folk Songs of the United States." Mr. Gordon was formerly instructor at Harvard University and assistant professor at the University of California. The audience showed keen interest and evident appreciation of the years of detailed research in various parts of the country involved to make such a talk possible.

Mr. Gordon gave a short introduction touching upon the many-faceted heritage of folk song in this country. He showed how the people of the United States, without doubt, possess the greatest body of folk songs of any nation in the world. In some instances, such as among the mountain folk of North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia, Mr. Gordon pointed out that the English and Scotch folk songs are more accurately and fully retained than in the native countries.

The speaker divided his groups of differing folk songs into interesting and largely occupational headings. He spoke of the song ballad, the banjo song, the camp meeting or revival songs from which the outstanding development was the negro spiritual, songs of the Middle West, frontier songs, songs of the Gulf of Mexico, songs of the sea, Creole songs, Canadian songs, lumberjack songs, cowboy songs, corn-shucking songs, railroad songs, Army and Navy distinctive folk songs and Indian songs.

Occasionally, to illustrate some of the more unusual and less familiar folk songs of our country, Mr. Gordon gave a short unaccompanied musical reading. Among the most interesting of these were "Charlotte Town" and a discussion of the song called "President McKinley."

At the conclusion of his lecture Mr.

Gordon announced that the music division of the library is emphasizing one of its prime aims the collection of authentic and unpublished American folk songs and the desire to keep such manuscripts and also record them on phonograph records in accurate interpretations so that the posterity of the country may have this really valuable background of real American music available.

Figure 15. Report of speech made by Gordon about the Archive of Folk Song. [Washington, D.C.] Evening Star, May 24, 1928.

Gordon's official appointment as specialist and consultant in the field of Folk Song and Literature for the Library of Congress began July 1, 1928. For pursuing "investigations especially in the music and literature of Folk-Song" and acting as the representative of the Library

of Congress for the "acquisition of material for its collections" in that field, Gordon was to receive \$300 per month. The first period of appointment was one year.<sup>27</sup>

In advertising his "new" enterprise, Gordon continued to utilize the contacts he had gained personally or through Adventure. He hoped that existing organizations with similar interests -- such as university centers, and area branches of the American Folklore Society -- would cooperate, but he continued to reach beyond academics and organized interest groups. Developing his scheme to establish a network of active "district collectors," Gordon began planning a system of local folksong organizations, each responsive to the desires, needs and interests of its membership and locale. He wrote to key individuals, asking if they would like to help. The following excerpt from a letter written on May 20, 1928 to Carl Bohnenberger was typical. There he suggested that local organizations might

. . . report matters of interest, suggest definite places to which field trips might be sent with greatest chance of success, sponsor lectures and possibly recitals, and in general bring notice of the national work before the local public. . . . It must be utterly independent, neither drawing any authority from, not having any set duties toward the national project.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Memorandum, Herbert Putnam to RWG, May 25, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>28</sup>#3521 to Carl Bohnenberger, May 30, 1928.

By building a connection between local centers and the "great national archive of folk-song" which Gordon was engaged in forming,<sup>29</sup> he expected to put himself "in intimate touch with every section of the country and with every class of the American people."<sup>30</sup> At the same time that he developed the reach of his archive, by keeping that connection loosely structured he prevented well-intentioned amateurs from doing it any disservice.<sup>31</sup> Collecting was still the sphere of the trained individual. Eventually he hoped to train a corps of collectors.

In the meantime, he continued his own collecting activities in Darien. He was busy, but he evidently was not keeping in very close contact with his superiors. On July 17, 1928 Engel wrote that it had been nearly two months since the speech at the Library; he was anxious to know what Gordon's plans were.<sup>32</sup> Gordon responded with a brief survey of his accomplishments in the preceeding two months. He had travelled over 5000 miles, largely to isolated districts near Darien, pursuing researches on some of the following topics:

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<sup>29</sup> #3521 to Carl Bohnenberger, May 30, 1928.

<sup>30</sup> #3521 to Carl Bohnenberger, May 30, 1928.

<sup>31</sup> #3521 to Carl Bohnenberger, May 30, 1928.

<sup>32</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, July 17, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

1. The tracing of the "Cooney Killed Delia" song -- one which will be of the greatest importance in clearing up just how folksong starts and how it spreads. With the assistance of Chief of Detectives McCarthy of Savannah, who has loaned me plainclothes men and in every way aided my search, I have combed the Savannah underworld of the Umacraw section and have obtained the first hand facts of the murder. Many false clues had to be eliminated, for all I had at first to go on was the first names of the principals, Delia and "Cooney" a nickname. Got the dope at last, interviewed and photographed Delia's mother, had copied fifty pages of court records, discovered over twenty different versions of the song, etc., etc., etc. Still going on with this. More later!!

2. The collecting of the older shouts from the family of "John Bull" a famous old-time preacher near Townsend. Have about fifteen members of his family working and writing out for me.

3. Tracing the oldest boatmen of this district, -- men who used to row the great dugouts in plantation days, and getting from them the "rowing songs" -- almost entirely uncollected to the present time.

4. Discovering "box-pickers" and other worldly men who know and can play the genuine old "rags" "reels" and "turning songs." Much of this material now coming in.

5. Sorting and codifying letter material returned to me from the ADVENTURE office and getting it ready to send in to you. A bunch now on hand which will be shipped promptly as soon as I can get it off . . . .<sup>33</sup>

Engel seemed to be satisfied. The two men straightened out bureaucratic details; Engel agreed to investigate immediately the whereabouts of the paychecks Gordon had not received.

Correspondence then seems to have lapsed until the early fall.. In August of 1928, Engel wrote Gordon at

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<sup>33</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, July 29, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

the request of Herbert Putnam, asking for a clearer idea of Gordon's plans. He wondered when Gordon intended to establish headquarters in Washington. As far as the Library was concerned the present situation was proving very unsatisfactory. They had hoped to stay more closely in touch with Gordon and the folksong project.

Gordon's correspondence to those unconnected with the Library was ample in the fall of 1928. His letters to Archer Taylor and to Carl Sandburg enlisted their support and developed his ideas and plans. Gordon was busy collecting, investigating and proselytizing. Evidently his superiors were unaware of his activities. They were more than annoyed at the silence on Gordon's part.

On November 13, 1928, Herbert Putnam sent a telegram to Mrs. Gordon in Darien, inquiring as to her husband's current whereabouts.<sup>34</sup> The Librarian was losing whatever appreciation he had had for the benefits of field research.

The following day, November 14, 1928, Gordon mailed a twenty-point project report which discussed the progress he had made, suggested plans for the future and solicited Library comment. Ongoing projects included the consolidation of his Adventure collectanea, the transcription of song manuscripts from his own and from others' collections, and

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<sup>34</sup>Herbert Putnam to Mrs. R.W. Gordon, November 13, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

the field collection of special forms of folksong, particularly those lesser known or previously uncollected types. Gordon also had continued to study folksong origins and development, concentrating on the histories of outlaw and murder songs. He had maintained his habit of photographing singers and "folk types," and was engaged in constructing an index of correspondents and leads for future field trips. He continued to plan for the support of other scholars, universities and learned societies, both nationally and internationally; he proposed to continue his work toward the development of a phonographic recording apparatus which would be suitable for highly accurate field recording.

Gordon also wrote that he was working on an index of those commercial records which, in his opinion, contained material important for the study of folksong. He saw great value in the discs themselves, and in the study that such an index would facilitate.

As a part of the final collection of folksongs in the Library should appear a complete collection of the folk-song records made and sold commercially by the various companies. In many cases I feel sure that direct gifts can be obtained.

These are of great importance not only because of their value as folk-songs but because, more than any other factor today with the possible exception of radio, they are changing and modifying modern trends in true folk-song composition.

What can easily be obtained at little cost now will be of inestimable value to future students. Hence I am working sporadically at indexing from various catalogues such records

as have, in my opinion, real folk values or are likely to modify folk fashions. This work will continue as time permits for the present. At a later date I shall attempt to make the index complete and to secure the records needed.

It is also worth noting that each company has a huge number of "trial" or "unreleased" recordings. In a conference with Mr. Carnes of the Victor Talking Machine Company some three years ago, I asked if it might in some way be possible to obtain copies of these for the use of serious students. He expressed himself as entirely friendly to such a scheme and offered his services at a later date in putting through the required permits. I plan to take this up with each of the larger companies on my next visit to New York.<sup>35</sup>

In the future, Gordon considered sending circulars to schools and churches in an effort to collect songs. He also thought of distributing a series of printed syllabi, each

. . . dealing with a separate and distinct type of folk-song. Each would describe briefly the type, illustrate it by three or four examples, list a large number of titles of songs falling under the type and request that versions of these or similar songs be sought and reported. These would be of use in many ways, particularly in answering correspondence and in arousing collecting interest.<sup>36</sup>

Gordon outlined another projected publication -- A "Prolegomenon to Folk-Song" -- which would have the same sort of practical uses as the syllabi. It would be:

A compact but comprehensive guide for collectors, orientating the entire field and

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<sup>35</sup> #3548 to Carl Engel, November 14, 1928.

<sup>36</sup> #3548 to Carl Engel, November 14, 1928.

laying down the definite tasks to be pursued and the methods to be used. Nothing of the sort has yet been done for American folk-song.<sup>37</sup>

Continuing on in his letter to Engel and Putnam, Gordon discussed the next step in his plan. After material had been gathered and codified, he would begin to develop a Research Center at the Library, a place where students could come to receive training, personal instruction and direction. Gordon considered it important for collectors and field workers to be well trained before they ventured out into the field. He suggested that he himself could accept positions as visiting summer lecturer in locations where, in addition to offering instruction, he could pursue his recording and research projects. Even at this preliminary stage, he wrote Engel and Putnam, he stood ready to provide what information he could to visiting students, correspondents or scholars.

Someday, Gordon wrote, he hoped to acquire a trained assistant to aid in the transcription and study of the music of the songs. He foresaw the publication of uniformly edited texts from the Archive's collection.

It was in this report to Engel and Putnam that Gordon suggested the name for the nascent center. Considering a number of other possible names and their implications for

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<sup>37</sup>#3548 to Carl Engel, November 14, 1928.

the common man, Gordon came up with the "Archive of American Folk-Song" as the most preferable alternative. He had been using that phrase occasionally and unofficially in his correspondence since at least May 30, 1928.<sup>38</sup>

The burgeoning commercial publication of sheet music and discs of "folksong" suggested another important area of investigation. In his report to his superiors Gordon wrote that he hoped to instigate test cases on the matter of folksong copyright. A letter written to Carl Sandburg on October 29, 1928, although still vague, gives slightly more detail about his idea.

And, believe me, the time is not far in the future when there will be a real showdown on folk-song copyright. I can't say much, but I will say that I've talked things over pretty thoroughly with the legal force of the United States Copyright Office, and that I shall have some pretty real backing officially and unofficially when it comes to protecting the great collection now being made under my direction in the Library of Congress. It is a part of my plan to have one or two cases tried in the courts and carried on appeal to the very highest tribunal. If they win, and I think they will, a precedent will be established for all time . . . .<sup>39</sup>

Although Gordon's project report was detailed, innovative and thorough, it apparently only temporarily stemmed the rising feeling of dissatisfaction within the Library. Communication lapsed again. If Gordon and the

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<sup>38</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, April 27, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>39</sup> #3543 to Carl Sandburg, October 29, 1928.

Library shared similar expectations of what the Director of the Archive should be doing, they seemed to have different understandings of how he should be doing it. Gordon suggested that this was the case in the long cover letter that accompanied his November 14, 1928 "twenty point plan." The letter stressed his understanding of folklore as a science, and viewed his role as that of the research scientist. He eschewed the indiscriminate collection of texts in favor of those investigations which would help to "solve the problems of the origin of folksong." By "trial and error," "fact and hypothesis" he expected to produce a "sane and scientific interpretation" of his subject. He described himself as working "beyond the frontier of knowledge." He was carrying out the "impossible scheme" he had envisioned to Engel the previous year; his backers were uncomfortable with his role as a "real research man."<sup>40</sup> He justified his position in the cover letter:

This sounds dreadfully unsystematic. I admit it. But I'd like to call attention to one or two things that tend to justify it. First, we both want not mere unrelated facts gathered indiscriminately or unintelligently. It would be easy enough to "get texts," say ten a day or twenty a day, and pile up a respectable number in an "official report." That is not what we are after. We want texts that will represent as fully as possible the whole progress of American folk-song, that will incorporate phases of the subject not yet

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<sup>40</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, September 14, 1927, LC/AFS Pers.

discovered or collected by others, that will eventually help to solve the problems of the origin of folk-song. We want also to have eventually the materials that will form the basis for a great history of national folk-song, -- and that means that we must have not only the facts, the texts, the music, but also the materials needed for a sane and scientific interpretation of them.

And this leads to my second justification. The whole work lies largely beyond the frontier of knowledge. It is an advance into unknown territory. The method must be that of trial and error. Errors of judgement will be frequent. It will be a juggling of fact and hypothesis. Once the task is done it will be only too clear what the right method should have been. But it cannot be predicted in advance. The best I can do is attempt to avoid the errors of those who have gone before me and to label clearly the false clues and the blind paths I follow that those who come after may avoid them.

That sounds sentimental. But I think it will be found to contain also cold scientific fact. At any rate it is a sort of "credo" that I have long followed and shall believe and follow until someone can show me a better one.

I realize that while we may both agree on the general principles laid down above, we have and must have certain points of difference. Or, rather, certain points that we should stress differently. I am most interested in pushing unhampered a task that I have chosen as a life work. I assume its validity and the validity of the work that is being done in it. You, naturally, want as an executive tangible evidence that the work is progressing satisfactorily and tangible proofs on which you may base a report to Congress and the American people of money expended and materials added to the Library. Both of us want most of all accomplishment.

There is nothing incompatible, I think, in our insistence on both our needs.<sup>41</sup>

Gordon realized that often he would be delighted with "'progress' that [was] no more tangible than 'thinking'," but insisted that

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<sup>41</sup>#3548 to "Chief" [Carl Engel], November 15, 1928.

such progress was not only absolutely necessary, but the backbone of what he was doing. Stressing that he was not giving his time to daydreaming about hypotheses and theories, he wrote that in science nothing was tangible until the very last. Gordon illustrated his case with an example of the extensive investigation he had recently done into the "Cooney Shot Delia" song complex. His attempt to discover the historical basis of this song directly related to his attempt to shed light on song origins in general. A month of sleuthing and more than 2500 miles of travel, had yielded great gains in Gordon's eyes, in terms of solving ultimate questions. In terms of actual tangible results, the effort had produced twenty-eight garbled and fragmentary texts, "three newspaper excerpts, fifty pages of criminal testimony and one photograph."<sup>42</sup>

Nor was Gordon's investigation of recording equipment likely to provide immediate tangible results. The time and effort he put into his technological experimentation was also intended to yield ultimate results -- improved field recording equipment. Toward this end, Gordon was in active consultation with scientists and with manufacturers of disc recording machines, as discussed in chapter three.

Gordon's few letters to his superiors continued to justify his methods and his idea of pure research. He

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<sup>42</sup>#3548 to "Chief" [Carl Engel], November 15, 1928.

travelled to Toronto in December 1928 for the MLA meeting where he was re-elected Secretary of the Popular Literature Group. During the trip, he conferred with Marius Barbeau in Ottawa and inspected Barbeau's collections and recording apparatus. He also visited other collectors, prosylytized for his Archive and inspected various methods of recording discs. On his way back to the swamps of Darien, Gordon rendered a "meteoric visit" to Putnam and Engel.<sup>43</sup>

Within three months -- on April 3, 1929 -- Engel wrote to Gordon asking when they could expect to see or hear from him again.<sup>44</sup> Two days later Engel received a letter from Mellinger Henry which made him lose all patience with Gordon. Henry had written to inquire of Engel if ill health had befallen Gordon, as Henry had posted several packages of manuscript but had received no acknowledgement in return from Gordon. Engel's subsequent letter on April 5, 1929 demanded a change in Gordon's ways.

The enclosed note is not the first indication that our well-intentioned "contributors" have not always received from you the prompt replies they are entitled to.

It it is not possible for you to attend to such correspondence, then all contributions should be addressed to, and acknowledged by, the Library of Congress.

I trust your silence has not been due to

<sup>43</sup>Carl Engel to RWG, April 3, 1928, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>44</sup>Carl Engel to RWG, April 3, 1929, LC/AFS Pers.

illness, but that you are merely on one of your periodic trips into the wilderness. Whatever the reason, I may as well say that both Mr. Putnam and I would feel a great deal more reassured about the progress of our folk-song project if you would keep us regularly informed of your activities. The present method, I am afraid, will not do . . . .<sup>45</sup>

Two weeks later on April 18, 1929, a night letter from Engel asked that Gordon kindly inform him of his whereabouts, and that he acknowledge receipt of Engel's own letters.<sup>46</sup>

Although another short-term reconciliation was affected, by September 1929 the Librarian and Engel were again perturbed over Gordon's delay in communicating with them. This time the issue was Gordon's tardy submission of his portion of the Annual Report. Engel wrote to Gordon on September 1, 1929:

The Librarian told me today -- with evident disappointment -- that so far as he had not heard from you with regard to your report. The Librarian's Annual Report is now taking shape, and to delay your contribution much longer would cause inconvenience.

Apart from this, I think I should tell you that, in talking with the Librarian, I gained the impression that he is not pleased with the way things are going. While he has not lost interest in the project, he fears that its future will be seriously endangered and that, in fact, it might be brought to an abrupt end, unless those, upon whose support we must rely, can be shown a methodical handling of affairs and a substantial progress.

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<sup>45</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, April 5, 1929, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>46</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, April 18, 1929, LC/AFS Pers.

Obviously, your report is expected to do this . . . .<sup>47</sup>

It became obvious that field work in far away Darien was not satisfying the Library of Congress' expectation of how their Archive should be built. Gordon posted his contribution to the Annual Report on September 16, 1929. The following day he and his family moved to Washington, D.C., where they found quarters in the home of Mr. and Mrs. White, on Georgia Avenue. John White, their son, was a student living at the University of Maryland at the time, and destined to make his own mark in the field of folksong as the "Singing Cowboy."<sup>48</sup>

Gordon was optimistic about the change, and set away two guest rooms in their small home, hoping to make it a real meeting place for "those who are interested in the American folk."<sup>49</sup> Both Phillips Barry and Louise Pound soon spent some time there, and Gordon, in a letter to Joanna Colcord, pleasantly contemplated the long talks on folksong he hoped to enjoy. He happily installed himself at the Library, revelling in having "a magnificent room nearly sixty feet square" in which to store his "varied

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<sup>47</sup> Carl Engel to RWG, September 1, 1929, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>48</sup> See John I. White, Git Along, Little Dogies. Songs and Songmakers of the American West (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

<sup>49</sup> #3771 to Joanna Colcord, January 16, 1930.

plunder"<sup>50</sup> after nearly four years of both living and working in the same small two rooms.

There is little extant correspondence to document the relationship between Gordon and the Library after late 1929. Gordon had already proven that he was not an organization man, that he preferred to be treated as a scientist. Alfred Frankenstein, a student of folk music and a friend of Engel, Putnam and Gordon, suggested additional sources of friction. When Gordon moved to Washington, he apparently acted the role of eccentric scientist in his dress and behaviour, as well. Frankenstein felt that the matter of dispute was that of image. Gordon continued to do the job, but he did not do it in the manner preferable to the Library.

And, uh, Gordon was not popular at the Library of Congress with the other, other members of the staff, for a number of reasons. One was, that he was personally sloppy. His appearance was always against him. His hands were dirty, and he was half shaved, or unshaved a great deal of the time, and in a place like the Library of Congress you take care of yourself. Physical appearance counts for something. But<sup>51</sup> that wasn't the -- the main count against him.

Gordon looked at the Archive as his laboratory; he had demanded control over his materials from the first. Frankenstein suggested that this attitude was not appreciated

<sup>50</sup> #3771 to Joanna Colcord, January 16, 1930.

<sup>51</sup> Taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976.

by his superiors:

The main count against Gordon was -- that he was the kind of archivist or librarian who h -- squirrels things away. The archive became, in a sense, one of the great secrets of Washington. He had all these things, things of his own which he'd collected for many years. Things that, ultimately, other collectors began to send him. But he would, he would be very, he had a very paternal attitude toward all of it. He had to -- he didn't want to open it up to everybody, or anybody. The idea of making public recordings such as the library has since done would have been, would have been anathema to Bob Gordon. So, ultimately, he and . . . and the library crowd came to the parting of the ways . . . .<sup>52</sup>

To be fair to Gordon, he was intensely committed to publishing and disseminating Archive materials. He was unwilling to release his own materials until he felt that it was time to "open the bag," until he felt that he could support collectanea with well formulated theories. As Frankenstein mentioned, Gordon had also acquired material from other collectors. He had a reason to be concerned over copyright. He was certainly aware of -- and most likely identified with -- the patent problems of Edison and other scientists working on improving disc recorders. Gordon was committed to protecting other collector's contributions from premature publication before they had had the opportunity to receive credit for their researches and collections. No

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<sup>52</sup>Taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976.

such national center of resources had ever existed in the United States. For the convenience of students of folk-song, and in the interest of the progress of scholarship, Gordon was anxious that collectors be willing to deposit their materials in the Archive. Therefore he felt compelled to assure contributors that they would retain certain rights to their contributions.

As Arthur Brodeur had suggested in connection with Gordon's days at Berkeley, the man could be unyielding on principle. He had demonstrated that he was not likely to change his dress or behaviour just to satisfy his colleagues. In this case, Brodeur felt that "Gordon was too much the scholar to allow politics to interfere with anything he did at the Library of Congress."<sup>53</sup> Brodeur implied that personal politics or Library politics were involved in Gordon's troubles with the Library of Congress more than overt or covert National party politics.<sup>54</sup> Brodeur was sure that Gordon would simply have continued to carry out his investigations regardless of the currents of favor or disfavor directed at him. I believe that Gordon's letters demonstrate that he was not totally intransigent. He

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<sup>53</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>54</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

continually made an effort to explain and to justify his methods of research.

At the end of 1931, the initial funds pledged to the Archive of American Folk Song were exhausted. The Carnegie Corporation of New York contributed \$2,500 to enable the project to continue under Mr. Gordon's direction until June 10, 1932. No other monies were forthcoming -- it was deep in the depression -- and in March, 1932 Gordon was notified that it would not be possible for the Library to retain his services after the end of the fiscal year, June 30, 1932.

The report which Gordon submitted on March 18, 1932 summarizing the state of the Archive listed approximately 8000 texts with music for some 700 titles. Four thousand of the items were from Gordon's own collection. The Archive also held 900 songsters, more than 1500 volumes of pulp magazines with folksong oriented columns, large bundles of additional manuscript on loan from N.I. White, Joanna Colcord and Gordon himself, and a number of theses, books and journals, as well as photostatic copies of other collections which had been permanently acquired. Three hundred and fifty double faced records had been donated by the Victor Company, and Gordon had placed on deposit approximately 1000 wax cylinders which he had made between 1923 and 1928. Also in the Archive were bibliographic

aids consisting of indices of more than 25,000 index cards.<sup>55</sup>

In this report Gordon summarized what he felt had been the most important accomplishments of the Archive to that date. This, ironically, was his ultimate major theoretical statement. Point-by-point it has been verified by research since then.

Probably the most important accomplishments of the Archive, though unfortunately they cannot be codified and itemized, have been in (1) the general assistance to workers and students in the field, particularly to such as were actively collecting or preparing to publish their results, and in (2) the development and interchange of theories basic to any definition of folk-song or to any general investigation of its inter-relation with author material.

In connection with the first of these intangible accomplishments mentioned above, it is perhaps worthy to notice that thanks for assistance have appeared in the program of the Yorktown celebration and in the publications of the George Washington Bicentennial Commission, and that the work of the Archive has been favorably mentioned, usually with a definite statement of thanks for aid and assistance, in practically every important book on American folk-song published since 1928.

The second of these two accomplishments is more difficult to summarize briefly. The bringing together of scattered materials, many of them unknown to previous students of the subject, has greatly broadened the whole concept of American folk-song, has brought to light countless problems which had up to this time remained undiscovered, and had shown definitely where the material may be found which will eventually result in their solution. Among such finds may be mentioned

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<sup>55</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, March 18, 1932, LC/AFS Pers.

by way of illustration only (1) the discovery of a very close inter-relationship between genuine folk material and vaudeville songs in the period 1840-1890, (2) the finding of certain genuine folk texts otherwise unrecorded which had been preserved in comparatively pure form in vaudeville repertoire, (3) the certainty that much burlesque and pseudo-folk material, gradually developed by white minstrel troupes for stage use, eventually found its way back to the folk and became in turn the basis of further genuine folk composition, (4) the discovery of the definite origins of certain folk tunes and of their gradual change and growth, resulting eventually in apparently new tunes, (5) important discoveries as to essential differences in rhythm and pitch between the true folk-song and conventional author songs which may result eventually in a much closer definition of what folk-song really is, (6) the recognition of the parts played by individual authors in the spread and development of folk-song tending toward a reconciliation of the apparently opposite theories of such students as Professor Louise Pound and the late Professor Gummere.<sup>56</sup>

At this time Gordon also made several suggestions to Engel concerning the fate and future of the Archive. He hoped that his assemblage of songsters and his indices would remain undisturbed. More than reference tools, the songsters and indices offered great insight into many of the questions Gordon had been considering in his summary of the accomplishments of the Archive.

Gordon suggested that work continue in the duplication of his wax cylinders onto metal discs. He had

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<sup>56</sup> RWG, "Report of the Archive of American Folk-Song," May 10, 1932, LC/AFS Pers.

begun this with a loaned Amplion machine, subsequently returned to New York. Unfortunately no duplication of his recordings was undertaken for nearly fifty years, until 1976, when Memorial University placed an order which provided funds for taped duplication.<sup>57</sup>

In order to facilitate the use of the materials gathered in the Archive, Gordon hoped that indices could be made to the manuscript texts in his collection. In terms of further progress in folksong scholarship, Gordon suggested that the Betty Bush Winger collection -- which he had recently recorded on discs with the Amplion in Point Pleasant, West Virginia<sup>58</sup> -- be studied as it promised to shed new light "on an unexplored section of Negro folk-song,"<sup>59</sup> Further summary, and suggestions relevant to the work of the Archive were contained in Gordon's "Appendix" to the Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress.

Although Gordon's official position as Director of the Archive terminated with that fiscal year, Engel and Putnam seemed to feel that his suggestions about the future

<sup>57</sup> Herbert Halpert and the Folklore Department were generous in making funds available to ensure that Gordon's original recordings could be copied.

<sup>58</sup> "Archive of American Folk-Song. From the report of R.W. Gordon, in charge," Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Year Ending June 30, 1932 (Washington: G.P.O., 1932), 322.

<sup>59</sup> RWG to Carl Engel, May 4, 1932, LC/AFS Pers.

of the Archive had some merit. As a small sum of money was still unused on behalf of the Archive, Gordon was hired to undertake

. . . a separate and independent piece of work, to be completed in not more than six months . . . the important and intricate work of indexing the Folk-song collection brought together in these four years.<sup>60</sup>

Gordon was furnished one clerical assistant, and paid \$800 for the project -- \$66.66 twice a month. He accepted the Library's condition that if the job took longer than the projected six months he would complete it promptly without further monetary compensation or clerical assistance.<sup>61</sup> The index to the manuscript materials was finished in close to the allotted time and consisted of approximately 20,000 index cards listing the titles and first lines of texts. It is again ironic that in allocating the remaining money the Library chose to retain Gordon to do some routine indexing rather than to bring to conclusion any of his theoretical points.

Between 1928-1932 Gordon had accomplished a number of additional things that he did not cite in his report to his superiors. Working as a research scientist, Gordon was careful to keep totally separate the work which he did on

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<sup>60</sup>Memo from Carl Engel to RWG, July 8, 1932, LC/AFS Pers.

<sup>61</sup>Memo from Carl Engel to RWG, July 8, 1932, LC/AFS Pers.

his own and the work which he did for the Library. Therefore the summary he prepared for his superiors mentioned nothing about the extensive research or testimonies which Gordon prepared in defense of the Victor Company's copyright of the Wreck of the 97, as discussed in chapter nine. Nor did his summary mention the thirty page paper on the "Negro Spiritual" which Gordon had published in a volume of the Society for the Preservation of the Negro Spiritual called Carolina Low-Country. Neither did it mention the extensive research he was doing on the song "Mademoiselle from Armentières."

In any case, in 1932 when the funds ran completely out, Gordon offered his continuing services to the Library for free. To support his family, he expected that he would turn to free-lance writing again.

Gordon had not yet given up. He hoped that Harvard, which had sponsored the first year of his field trip, might again support his great project. In a letter to Joanna Colcord on January 10, 1933, Gordon mentioned some of the alternatives which he saw open to him.

Now I'm turning to free-lancing -- books and articles -- to keep the pot boiling. Five books are on the ways, -- three of them perhaps for fall publication. I'm determined that whatever happens the work shall go on. And perhaps the forced bringing out of some of the materials I have been collecting and of the theories that have gradually been forming in my mind will not come amiss. Then, too, I may be able to pick up a few lectures that will help

to "spread the gospel" and at the same time bring some financial return.

. . . None of the materials, either my own or those of other collectors, have yet been moved from the Library. I am still using the office, and I have offered to serve for a year -- more if necessary -- at a salary of one dollar per month. This is in the hope that the project may still be revived when times are better. Meanwhile, much as I detest it, I'm getting drawn into politics. Certain friends of mine have started a quiet but determined lobby. I shall, I think, have a fairly good personal standing with our new president after March 4th. It is quite possible that influence will be brought to bear to continue the skeleton of the project without drawing at all on government funds.

I've been canny enough to keep title to all my original records and documents. The Library has copies, but does not in any way control the originals. Hence it is not impossible that the whole project might be transferred, lock, stock, and barrel, to some other center -- perhaps even to Harvard.<sup>62</sup>

By September these hopes were failing. The five books that had been "on the ways" in January failed to materialize -- although his collaboration with Milbert Cary on a volume called Mademoiselle From Armentières eventually was privately published in 1935.

One other volume came close to appearing. Gordon and two other men -- John Strachan and Paul Chancellor -- had collaborated on an introduction to the breadth of American folksong. The volume was to include discussion and examples of both Anglo- and Native-American song traditions. Apparently

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<sup>62</sup> RWG to Joanna Colcord, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

Macmillan had tentatively accepted the book for publication. About this time, in the fall and winter of 1933, John Lomax had evidently approached Gordon, asking for help in his own new book (which would be American Ballads and Folk Songs). At the same time Gordon had agreed to help Sandburg revise The American Songbag. He was also working on his own book. Gordon felt that the simultaneous publication of the three volumes put him in an awkward position.<sup>63</sup> When Macmillan unaccountably rejected the Gordon-Chancellor-Strachan book, Gordon was suspicious and bitter.<sup>64</sup>

A third defeat came to Gordon when the Library took away his last connection to the Archive. He had been donating his services as 1933 wore on, hoping to maintain his association with the Archive. In a letter dated September 14, 1933, Putnam informed Gordon that he need no longer feel responsible for the Archive, as the Library had accepted the assistance of Professor Lomax in such matters.<sup>65</sup>

Some folklorists, among them Stith Thompson, had felt that John Lomax was responsible in some way for Gordon losing his position as Director of the Archive of American

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<sup>63</sup> John White diary entry for December 24, 1932. Communicated in letter to DK.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Chancellor to RWG, [early 1933]. UO Collection.

<sup>65</sup> The Librarian [Herbert Putnam] to RWG, September 14, 1933.

Folk Song.<sup>66</sup> I have not been able to confirm that either Lomax or politics were involved.<sup>67</sup> The history of the relationship between Gordon and the Library suggests that the break would have occurred irregardless of the Depression, politics or John Lomax.

Gordon had mentioned early in the year in his letter to Joanna Colcord, that he expected to have some influence with "the new president." Considering the suggestion that politics had something to do with Gordon leaving the Archive, Brodeur had commented that Gordon just wouldn't have had anything to do with that sort of thing. Alfred Frankenstein made a similar point, suggesting that the only sort of politics involved were those involving political acumen and style -- which Gordon did not have and which Lomax had aplenty:

Lomax was flamboyant and Gordon wasn't. It hadn't much to do with politics -- it had to do with personal style. Gordon was the kind of scholar who locks himself up in his office. You know, Gordon had another terrible fault -- he never finished anything. Gordon had tons of material which would have made marvellous books -- marvelous articles. But he was always waiting for the next little thing -- and the

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Stith Thompson, Bloomington, Indiana, June 27, 1968.

<sup>67</sup> Legend has had it that John Lomax somehow conspired to do Gordon out of the job, possibly with the help of Sam Rayburn or other political friends. See taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969; interview with Stith Thompson, Bloomington, Indiana, June 27, 1968.

next little thing never came . . . . He was always waiting for the next thing -- and that also, I think, didn't sit well with the Library of Congress. For one thing the Library of Congress wanted publication. Gordon wasn't giving them any publication. And they blamed Gordon -- they said Gordon was lazy. Gordon was taking a free ride on the library -- that Gordon wasn't really working as he should . . . . And the attitude was that Gordon, as I say, should have produced more than he did. Sadly enough, Gordon really produced nothing -- so far -- anything in hard covers, I mean. And, uh, but that didn't sit well. Now the question of politics -- is not a question of view -- not a question of political principles, but a question of how to play the game of politics. Lomax knew how to play the game. Gordon didn't. Lomax knew how to interest the proper senators and the proper, the proper Librarians, and all of that. And he'd come up from the University of Texas where he'd been absolutely God -- and for this reason, this is one of the things -- if there were any question of political pull with Congress or anything of this sort, or with the President's office or who -- ever has, may have had any influence there, Lomax would have had it . . . . But Gordon -- Gordon couldn't have cared less. And he could -- he would -- he didn't even know how to handle it -- b- wouldn't even have known how to go about it. So Gordon was, was out. And he was out for a very long time.<sup>68</sup>

Gordon's anticipated success with "the new President" (Roosevelt) evidently came to nothing, if indeed he ever did make any such efforts on his own behalf.

Political involvement or not, there were no funds available in 1933. John Lomax was hired then as Honorary Consultant for a dollar a year rather than Gordon. When funds

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<sup>68</sup> Taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976.

finally became available in 1937 -- from the government this time instead of private benefactors -- it was Lomax who received them. Harold Spivacke was involved in that decision:

DK: Did that -- was there any reason why he was never, um, asked again to be head, even when money was around for it?

HS: Well, money wasn't around, really, for ages. I mean, because Alan Lomax, when he was appointed, he was the first be -- Y'See John never got -- Twelve dollars -- he used to say to people that he was the man with the longest title and shortest pay in the United States Government. He got a dollar a month. And when I appointed Lomax -- now and I'm not sure, it was either sixteen hundred and twenty a year -- gross -- minus deductions -- or eighteen hundred. I couldn't offer that job to Gordon. As I wrote you there just never was a job . . . . By that time, Charlie Seeger had showed up. And I wanted Seeger . . . . He was an old friend of mine. But, uh, never had money for him. And, I was chairman of the committee that put him on the Pan-American Union. Oh -- I was a great admirer of his. The, uh, no, there was no opportunity really, to consider Gordon. By this time he had drifted off into other pursuits.<sup>69</sup>

Spivacke began supervising the Archive of American Folk Song shortly after Gordon left, in 1934. Even if, as he says, there was really no opportunity to consider Gordon, it seems obvious that no one was ready to consider him. Still more impressed with items than theories, the Library seems to have preserved an unfavorable impression of Gordon. Spivacke even doubted his veracity:

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<sup>69</sup> Taped interview with Harold Spivacke, Washington, D.C., November 9, 1976.

I can't make out, -- In all fairness to Gordon, I will say he did more than people said he had done. But when I came in I was sort of told that he hadn't done anything for four years, just sat around, fooling around. Well, it wasn't that simple. He did some work with the -- I'm sure you saw the bibliography he started to -- compile with cards.

DK: The one of the songsters, and everything.

HS: Everything -- all sorts of stuff from all over the library. I saw that. And then there was a rumour that he had made some records. And you won't believe it -- they weren't found until after I left -- in 1972. (laughs) He had made -- he said he had made 26 records, and I said, "I can't find them, Mr. Gordon." "Well, I left them there," he said. I wasn't sure he was telling the truth but it turned out he was.<sup>70</sup>

Part of the mystery surrounding Gordon's materials and activities came from the fact that his collection was largely "on deposit" in the Library. Technically not the Library's possession, it presented a problem. No one -- for many years -- was quite sure what to do with the material, to what extent it could be used, or what rights the Library had in regard to it. Stored in boxes, tucked away eventually, the Gordon manuscripts and recordings became a touchy secret for years. That his efforts and activities continued to be minimized reflected the Library's continuing emphasis on concrete results.

Gordon and his work dropped into obscurity. Any further development of his hypotheses was arrested when

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<sup>70</sup>Taped interview with Harold Spivacke, Washington, D.C., November 9, 1976.

Gordon suffered a severe depression and breakdown in late 1933. It was unfortunate, but perhaps to be expected that his summary report was all that remained to document the first attempt to build a scientific discipline of American folklore with the support of a national, if not federal, sponsor. L. Bert Nye, Jr., Gordon's son-in-law, put the story firmly in perspective, talking about the Depression and Depression victims. To his mind, Gordon "never got over the Depression, really. It was the Depression that did it."<sup>71</sup>

Gordon had given up hope of continuing the project he had made his life work. The Great Plan, the big machine, the many cogs -- all ground to a halt. He virtually locked himself in his room. Mrs. Gordon and Roberta felt that he would never emerge from his depression. For his family, who had not had an easy time living with the past ten years of field work and dedicated research, it was another hardship, another sacrifice. After the family's savings were exhausted, Roberta took up the responsibility of supporting the family. They moved from their apartment over the White's to Sherrier Place; there Gordon began drinking heavily.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Interview with Bert Nye, Shallotte, North Carolina, May 21, 1976.

<sup>72</sup>Interview with Roberta Nye, Shallotte, North Carolina, May 21, 1976.

Finally, in March 1934, Gordon was persuaded to take a WPA job. It was a special six month Government Geologic Survey project doing research on a diamond bibliography. Alfred Frankenstein saw Gordon once during that time.

The last time I saw or heard of Gordon was one of the most tragic afternoons of my life . . . . The last I saw of Bob Gordon, he was working at the library on some kind of bibliography of gems and jewels. There was a jeweler in New York who had collected an immense library in jewels and precious stones and so forth. He'd given it all to the Library of Congress and the Library of Congress hired a number of people, a number of starving, unemployed people with library experience to put this collection in order and Gordon was working on that. Complete waste of his talent . . . . This was just a -- it was practically a ha- a government hand-out, practically. Practically a WPA sort of thing, the sort of thing that's to keep body and soul together . . . . He pretended it was important and of course he knew damn well that I knew perfectly well that it wasn't important, and we dropped the subject as soon as possible and got onto folksong again.<sup>73</sup>

In September of 1934 the \$24.90 a week which Gordon was earning for the diamond bibliography stopped, and he found a part-time position teaching English composition to adult night classes at the George Washington University. Two months later he found full-time employment as well, and began working for the Department of the Interior, first as Junior Clerk, later rising to Supervisor of the Application File

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<sup>73</sup>Taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976.

Room and to Docket Examiner. His duties were largely administrative and clerical.

In the late 1930s Gordon became a member of the Palaver Club, a social group which met periodically and entertained discussion and speakers. Gordon had the opportunity to speak about folksong there, and in 1941 a fellow member of the club secured Gordon a job in the Sound Section of the Naval Research Labs. He began as an Administrative and Editorial Assistant, and eventually became a Technical Editor.



Figure 16. Gordon and his colleagues at the Naval Research Labs, c. 1950s.

As Frankenstein mentioned in describing his 1934 visit with Gordon, the man was still eager to talk about folksong. His Palaver Club associates also attested to his continuing interest; he collected songs from them. He also

collected songs at the Washington Cosmos Club.<sup>74</sup> Gordon attended White Top Mountain Festivals in the 1930s, giving courses of lectures there.<sup>75</sup> He still required that his family be interested in folksong; they went with him to the festivals despite Roberta's distaste for both square dances and the attentions of young men from the mountains.<sup>76</sup>

Stith Thompson felt that after Gordon lost his position at the Archive he became "disgruntled" with folklorists and refused to have anything else to do with the discipline.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Gordon had sporadic contact with folklorists. Melbert Cary published their collaboration, Mademoiselle from Armentières, by private subscription in 1935. He served successfully as toastmaster at the 1937 AFS meetings. Through the efforts of Herbert Halpert and the Federal Theatre Project of the WPA Gordon's New York Times series of 1927-1928 was republished in 1939 and received favorable scholarly comment. Reviewing the volume, Reed Smith felt that in the breadth and scope of Gordon's

<sup>74</sup>Frederick Shelton to RWG, January 6, 1942. Nye collection.

<sup>75</sup>Mabel S. Wall, "Folk Music Echoes from White Top Mountain," Tempo I:10 (October 1934), 21-23; United States Government Employment Applications, undated. Nye collection; Taped interview with Charles Seeger, Bridgewater, Connecticut, July 10, 1976.

<sup>76</sup>Interview with Roberta Nye, Shallotte, North Carolina, May 21, 1976.

<sup>77</sup>Interview with Stith Thompson, Bloomington, Indiana, June 27, 1968.

articles no better introduction to American folksong existed.<sup>78</sup> Joseph W. Hendren felt the republication was valuable, useful and a work of authority, particularly as so few critical or descriptive syntheses existed in the field of folksong studies.<sup>79</sup>

In the same year, 1939, Gordon cogently reviewed The New Green Mountain Songster and published a theoretical article on "Folk Songs of America" in the magazine Caravan.

An honorary life membership in the American Folklore Society was presented to Gordon in 1955 when Herbert Halpert was President, a gesture which evidently meant a great deal to Gordon.

It was in the forties that Spivacke, at a party of scientists and engineers, was surprised to learn through a mutual friend that Gordon was writing, editing and teaching English at Naval Research Labs. While he evidently had had no idea of what Gordon had been doing he used the information to rationalize the Library of Congress' continued avoidance of Gordon.

So he had those jobs going at the time, you see, and lived on that. It was a better job

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<sup>78</sup> Reed Smith, [Review of] "Folk-Songs of America" by Robert W. Gordon," SFQ 3:1 (March 1939), 60-63.

<sup>79</sup> Joseph W. Hendren, [Review of] "Folk-Songs of America," JAF 53 (April-September 1940), 201-202.

than he ever would have had at the Library of Congress . . . . He didn't do anything after all. His interest was the -- in the past.<sup>80</sup>

His interest was not in the past although the two jobs which he continued to hold from 1934 to 1939 did not allow much time for investigating problems in folksong. For many reasons it was understandable that Gordon's involvement with folklore and folklorists was peripheral for the last twenty-seven years of his life. After the collapse of his dreams and the painful rebuilding of his life, it was not surprising that he was unwilling to again make the study of folksong the center of his life.

Gordon was drinking heavily. Stories circulated about his erratic behaviour.<sup>81</sup> Possibly his drinking was partly responsible for what Arthur Brodeur described as Gordon's withdrawal. Gordon had been invited to give a series of lectures at the University of California at Berkeley -- a fitting gesture considering the circumstances under which Gordon had left many years before. Brodeur was involved in the negotiations:

He wanted to invite Gordon here for a series of lectures, and I wrote Gordon and asked him whether he would consider it. I wrote at the insistence of President Sproul, and Gordon wrote back -- that was the second communication I got from him -- a postcard saying he'd be happy to

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<sup>80</sup>Taped interview with Harold Spivacke, Washington, D.C., November 9, 1976.

<sup>81</sup>Taped interview with Harold Spivacke, Washington, D.C., November 9, 1976; taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969; taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976.

consider it. So the offer was made. By that time he had reached that stage of complete withdrawal, and we never heard from him . . . .<sup>82</sup>

Friends approached him with schemes. Douglas Bement and William Doerflinger hoped to contract Gordon to write a book dealing with the stories behind various well-known folksongs, but Gordon never responded.<sup>83</sup>

Brodeur remembered that at one point in his later years Gordon was considered for the position of head of the Library School at Berkeley. It was then that Archer Taylor wrote a letter of recommendation on Gordon's behalf that stated that

Gordon's contributions to the "Old Songs" department of Adventure magazine constituted the greatest single contribution to the knowledge of folksong that had been made in America to date.<sup>84</sup>

In 1957 Mrs. Gordon, Roberta Gordon Nye and her son were involved in a serious car accident. Mrs. Gordon had sclerosis of the brain and severe injuries from the accident. Although Gordon was furious and tremendously upset at the thought of her admission to St. Elizabeth's, the

<sup>82</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>83</sup>Douglas Bement to RWG, August 17, 1942. Nye Collection; William Doerflinger to RWG, August 28, 1942. Nye Collection.

<sup>84</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

mental hospital near Washington, the family prevailed.

Gordon was in no condition to help his wife.

Gordon's drinking and depression did not improve. He spent the last years of his life with his daughter's family in McLean, Virginia. Said Brodeur:

For all the years of our acquaintance I regarded him as my best friend, and I know he regarded me as his best friend. When my first wife died, he called me up from Washington, and that was before long distance rates are as low as they are now. And he managed somehow to give me enough encouragement to go on. Well, I wrote him frequently for all the years he was away from Berkeley, from 1924 until the last of his life. All I ever got from him on the way of reply was two postcards, one of them sent to me to introduce a man. He couldn't communicate anymore. He was just broken, completely broken. I wish I could have found -- I tried to find and couldn't -- that group photograph -- photograph of his daughter's family . . . . And they got Bob . . . out to get into the group. And when I saw that picture it just about broke my heart. He was a completely broken man, physically as well as otherwise. He was a man who was made for success. He had the qualities that bring success. And failure he couldn't stand.<sup>85</sup>

Gordon died on March 29, 1961 and was buried in Darien, Georgia. The bulk of his collection was given to the Library of Congress, although the feeling of ambiguity surrounding it did not disappear until years after his death.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>86</sup>Taped interview with Joseph C. Hickerson, Washington, D.C., July 14, 1976.

His personal correspondence, extensive research notes, notebooks, and transcriptions, as well as many carbon copies of material at the Library of Congress later was given to the University of Oregon Library, where Arthur Brodeur was teaching.

It was through the interest of Brodeur and his students that Gordon was brought to the attention of the current generation of folklorists. At the 1968 meeting of the American Folklore Society in Bloomington, Indiana, Karen Grimm (a student of Barre Toelken who was a student of Brodeur) read a paper on Gordon which inspired much excitement, controversy and interest, and reopened the subject.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>The momentous meeting is described briefly by Barre Toelken in the taped interview with Benjamin A. Botkin, Bloomington, Indiana, November 9, 1968.

IX

"A SONG WHOSE HISTORY HE CAN TRACE FROM ITS  
BEGINNING TO ITS PRESENT VARIED FORM":  
GORDON'S CASE HISTORIES

Gordon's investigations -- as demonstrated in the summary report handed to Putnam and Engel at the end of his tenure at the Archive of American Folk Song -- focused on the development of folksong. He was primarily interested in "the more genuinely American songs" such as local, outlaw and "underworld" songs, lyrics, love songs and tragedies.<sup>1</sup> The neglect that scholars had shown these song traditions was disturbing to Gordon because he felt that they represented living song traditions. As well, he remarked to a correspondent that it was "a disgrace to our national scholarship" that American traditions should take second place to British folksong traditions.<sup>2</sup> He made his point of focus clear to a correspondent in a letter dated February 7, 1928 in which he also identified his scholarly "fraternity":

We need sadly at present more [studies] of the practical type, and more which take into consideration modern local material and deal less with primitive man and the early ballads. Of course,

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<sup>1</sup>#2067 to Nevil G. Henshaw, November 7, 1926.

<sup>2</sup>#2067 to Nevil G. Henshaw, November 7, 1926.  
Gordon's nationalism here is reminiscent of Sharpe's.

I am as you may suspect a "communalist" -- though Miss Pound and I are fast personal friends.<sup>3</sup>

Gordon set himself to do those practical studies which considered modern local material. First he attempted to define American songs into types, based on their use in particular contexts by particular groups. His New York Times series was divided into several sections using such categories as work songs, lumberjack songs, nursery songs, jail ballads and cowboy songs. To Gordon these categories were not definitive or prescriptive, but served as working hypotheses about the sorts of situations within which songs thrived. Gordon was willing to admit when his hypothetical categories were not functional:

If the selection I have made has no real unity -- and I frankly believe it has not -- it is due solely to the fact that there is no real unity in the type, no real distinction that separates "jailhouse songs" from other songs sung by the same men when they happen to be "outside the stone wall."<sup>4</sup>

By working with groups of men -- hoboes, sailors, coastal blacks -- Gordon was aware that some songs existed, or persisted, because of their utilization by a group, or their meaning for a group. In a discussion of chanties and work-songs in Adventure on November 10, 1923, Gordon tied

<sup>3</sup>#3293 to Paul M. Wheeler, February 7, 1928.

<sup>4</sup>Robert W. Gordon, Folk-Songs of America (N.Y.: National Service Bureau, 1938), p. 54.

the existence of songs to social situations: songs could live "only in the group."<sup>5</sup> Although Gordon may have thought that outmoded types of song were more "valuable" than the bulk of material he gathered,<sup>6</sup> still he collected living folksong, playing particular heed to demonstrated folk traits.<sup>7</sup>

Many American outlaw ballads were Gordon's "special pets" -- songs which he went out of his way to collect. "Batson," "Railroad Bill," "Brady," "Dixie," "Casey Jones," "Home on the Range," "Frankie and Johnnie," "Mademoiselle from Armentières," "The Wreck of the Southern Old 97," "Omie Wise," "John Henry," "John Hardy," and "Stackolee" were among those songs on his "most wanted list."<sup>8</sup> His collections of these particular songs were enormous -- he had many more than 100 versions of "Frankie and Johnnie." His studies of many of these song histories were extensive. Still, Gordon released publicly -- in one way or another -- only his work on "The Wreck of the Southern Old 97," and "Mademoiselle from Armentières,"<sup>9</sup> By September of 1927 his work had reached such a point that he began to

<sup>5</sup>OSTMHS, Adventure, November 10, 1923.

<sup>6</sup>OSTMHS, November 10, 1923.

<sup>7</sup>Folk-Songs of America, p. 42; OSTMHS, Adventure, March 10, 1924.

<sup>8</sup>See for example, letters #3469 to Louella D. Everett, March 17, 1928; #3280 to Leoti F. Creager, January 25, 1928.

consider trying to "get out" some of the other studies. He worried to Carl Engel that some other fellow would jump him on the raft of articles he had nearly ready if he didn't publish rapidly. To his mind, however, the studies all wanted a bit more library checking, and he was in the swamps of Darien, far from such facilities. Alfred Frankenstein had the following comments on the man and his investigations:

Well, mostly it was his showing me his collections. Mostly his showing me his endless material. I remember one thing very vividly -- and that was a collection of photostats, photostats, original documents, photographs, all kinds of stuff, having to do with the fact that Dixie was named after a singer, not after the Mason and Dixon line. There was apparently a very well known, popular, shuffling singer, blackface singer named Dixie. And as you'll remember the pa -- uh, the song is called Dixie's Land. He pointed out -- oh he had all kinds of very interesting stuff -- including quotations from the Southern, Confederate papers, showing, saying, that the Northern troops were invading the South singing a strange song called Dixie's land. "And what on earth was Dixie's Land," said these newspapers. Well, within a very short time, Dixie's Land was, of course, the South. And then, shortly thereafter, Dixie's Land became Dixie. And it had nothing to do with the usual theories about the Mason and Dixon line, and nothing to do with the French currency -- the ten-spot, the dix -- and so forth. . . . anyway he had a, he had a marvelous article there -- but he never published. He never wrote. He never put it together. And, that was so characteristic about him -- There was some one picture he wanted, or some one document, or some one quotation from somebody that he hadn't had, or he didn't have and needed to complete his

article. And the result was the article never got completed . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Frankenstein was not the only one to whom Gordon revealed his nascent theories. Other scholars were under the impression that Gordon had in fact published articles dealing with several song histories.<sup>10</sup>

Gordon's untiring investigations into song included efforts to establish their factual bases and backgrounds. He overwhelmed correspondents with questions relating to the particular individuals, places, and times involved. He included diagrams of the Kitty-Can Saloon in his exploration of the "Frankie and Johnnie" song-complex.<sup>11</sup> His 5000 mile quest of the facts behind "the Cooney and Delia song" was mentioned in chapter seven. Gordon considered sheet music, songsters and other ephemeral publications as well as newspapers, and court records in his desire to understand the factual and contextual backgrounds to songs.

As well, Gordon was curious about the climate of belief surrounding song complexes. On March 12, 1928 Gordon

<sup>9</sup>Taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976. Also see taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

<sup>10</sup>Brodeur referred to a book which Gordon had written on "Dixie" in a taped interview, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969. Charles Seeger thought that Gordon had "broken" court cases dealing with "Casey Jones" and "Home on the Range" in taped interview, Bridgewater, Connecticut, July 9, 1976.

<sup>11</sup>See #2200 to Theo Lancaster, December 14, 1926.

wrote a long letter in response to correspondent Ed Leigh McMillan, son of a sheriff who tried to kill "Railroad Bill":

The whole affair interests me greatly because it is such a clear case of the changing of facts to suit a more or less mythical and supernatural demand on the part of the folk and because the song itself has changed so much in the course of the years . . . . But I want to delve a lot more into the "traditional" and very likely mythical side. I want not only the facts as they were, but I want as well the negro superstitions. Some of these were, apparently, remarkable. You spoke of the idea that Railroad could not be killed by an ordinary bullet. According to popular tradition he also had the reverse trait of being himself able to kill miraculously. And that is the reason for the curious account one of my readers sent me of the killing of your father and of Stewart.

According to the traditional account men who sought to "get" Railroad were doomed. Therefore whatever happened to them was, in a way, to be "credited" to Railroad's influence even though he himself did not fire the shots. In accord with this the tradition runs that when your father, Sheriff McMillan, on one occasion succeeded in sighting Railroad, he (your father) "threw down on him with a shotgun and fired, but the gun exploded, killing the Sheriff, and Railroad was quite uninjured and made a clear get away." On the next occasion, the one where Stewart was killed, two posses thought they had Railroad cornered in a hut. They surrounded the place, one posse on either side and rushed it. It was at night. The lightening flashed. Stewart was seen out in front leading the rush. Simultaneously a rifle cracked and Stewart fell drilled through the heart. Yet the hut was empty. And Railroad was seen some twenty miles away at the time. Hence Stewart was killed miraculously, or else shot by one of the members of the other posse. Then the last incident, where the man who killed Railroad was supposed to have got bloodpoisoning and died from handling the body.

So you see, how far apart fact and fancy are -- or rather how the folk will make a story fit their interpretation of a character regardless of facts. In one version of the song this traditional account shows up clearly. A part goes as follows:

Railroad Bill was a mighty man  
 He got McMillan by the sleight of hand  
 And then he made an awful dash  
 And got Jim Stewart by the lightning flash

So you see, there are really at least three distinct chapters to be carefully worked up for the final account of "Railroad." First the facts of the case, which, thanks to you and to Mr. Harlan's article, seem to be pretty well covered. Second will be the popular idea of Railroad among the negroes during his lifetime -- supernatural characteristics which made him somewhat of a "hero" and laid the foundation for the songs about him. And third the growth and remarkable changes in the song itself as it was passed on by word of mouth among people who had no idea of Railroad himself.

From the point of view of the student of folk-song and folklore the second and third chapters are even more important than the first. For they show how the popular mind reacts. Almost always there is a reason for the verses in a song -- that is a true folk-song. They are usually not in accord with strict facts, but they never, so far as I know, deliberately and intentionally falsify. What seems false is merely a reflection of some twist or quirk in the story as it has been passed on.

Let me illustrate for a moment. Take the case of the "sleight of hand" -- the story of the exploding shotgun. Somewhere, somehow, there is an explanation. I am, of course, only guessing in what follows, but here are a few that might any of them be the answer. Railroad may have had such an experience with some other man -- perhaps some years before -- and the incident may have been shifted from the other man and attached to your father. Or, it may even have been another desperado and not Railroad, and yet -- owing to a similarity in the supposedly miraculous character of the two men -- have been lifted bodily from this other man and attached to Railroad. Or, Railroad himself might have circulated the story in denying that he was

the hand that fired the fatal shot. Or, -- but what use in continuing guessing. Anyway, I want to look, at least, for some reason behind the verse. Maybe I'll be lucky enough to unearth an explanation. I'm not just theorizing in all this. Or rather I am theorizing on sound basis. For again and again I have found in the course of many years of scientific investigation that the songs themselves do portray with remarkable fidelity incidents, though often in garbled form . . . .<sup>12</sup>

His many faceted approach to the investigation of folksong, his belief that a scientific evaluation of all of the evidence was possible, and his knowledge of popular commercial publications put Gordon in an ideal position to render professional judgement in copyright questions. As mentioned earlier, he had approached the Victor Phonograph Company with the scheme that he be hired to serve as their expert on retainer and do just that. The misunderstanding between Gordon and Victor was also discussed briefly in chapter six. In 1929 Gordon was hired by Victor to help them in the suit which David Graves George had filed against them over "The Wreck of the 97."<sup>13</sup> The court testimony which Gordon gave in that suit was one of the fullest representations of Gordon's ideas and methods.

Gordon's research for the case was both extensive and many-sided.\* He had searched every available

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<sup>12</sup>#3442 to Mr. Ed Leigh McMillan, March 12, 1928.

<sup>13</sup>See Norm Cohen, "Robert W. Gordon and the Second Wreck of 'Old 97'." JAF 87 (1974), 12-38.

paper in the Eastern U.S. from Boston to Atlanta for one month from the date of the wreck for the facts and rumours in circulation at the time. Newspapers and magazines were thoroughly searched for texts of "97" and variant or influenced versions. He examined vaudeville songbooks "covering better than 25,000 songs between 1868 and 1920 as well as some 5 to 8,000 broadsides,"<sup>14</sup> and conducted extensive interviews with survivors of the wreck and men connected with the train itself as well as with those involved immediately with the song. Detailed transcriptions were made of these interviews as well as of the phonographic recordings of "97."

Gordon then prepared a chart of all the versions.

All texts reduced to index cards and sorted to make complete composite. Texts then retyped on long slips bringing all similar verses side by side. Texts then arranged in all possible permutations and combinations and studied to discover which were early and which late and to establish the relative times at which certain changes or innovations occurred (While this sounds simple it took an immense amount of time.)<sup>15</sup>

He clearly identified his technique as similar to the historic-geographic method:

I will gladly chart and study the differences in accord with a method which often brings surprising results. This method is similar to one now recognized as standard in all

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<sup>14</sup> [Report to Victor] UO 11/3.

<sup>15</sup> [Report to Victor] UO 11/3.

studies of folk-tales. (See an article by Archer Taylor in MODERN PHILOLOGY, Vol. XXV, No. 70.) The method is most delicate and not usable except by one trained in the subject. Also there are certain differences necessary in the study of songs as opposed to tales since the laws of growth and change tend to reverse somewhat.<sup>16</sup>

Gordon's testimony at the trial, as Cohen mentions, also discussed the scientific method of approach to folksong which enabled the expert, given a sufficient number of texts and available evidence, to determine the relative date of any given text.<sup>17</sup>

The test is entirely on internal evidence, not taking into consideration the testimony or alleged statements of the versions, but treating them all as a possible early or a possible late. They are examined internally for the presence of absence of verse, for changes or variations in phrasing, the presence of misunderstanding, obvious misunderstanding or errors, and treated, in other words, as the philologist goes about the study of language.<sup>18</sup>

Gordon brought all of the internal evidence together in a chart, as mentioned above. He arranged all the verses he had into a composite; verses dealing with substantially the same event went into the same "box." The

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<sup>16</sup> RWG to Mr. Murphy, Legal Department, Victor Talking Machine Company, Camden, New Jersey, March 6, 1929. UO 11/4.

<sup>17</sup> Victor Talking Machine Company Defendant-Appellant vs. David Graves George, Plaintiff-Appellee, Transcript of Record No. 5169 ([Camden, N.J.]: U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, October 1933), I, p. 357.

<sup>18</sup> I, p. 359.

composite imaginary version was solely designed "to indicate the place up and down on a sheet where a verse similar to the one in the index will appear in other versions of the song."<sup>19</sup> Using colored stars, Gordon then marked each verse to indicate the comparative frequency with which it appeared.

Gordon's second step, after preparation of his chart, was to place the texts roughly in the chronological order of the appearance to facilitate their examination.

In presenting his results to the court, Gordon arranged the texts slightly out of chronological sequence in order to more clearly display his findings. He distinguished four groups of texts of the "97,"<sup>20</sup> noting that the last group -- texts appearing after phonograph records were issued -- all exhibited some influence from the recorded versions. Noting the great variety within versions, Gordon went on to distinguish certain phrases probably derived from Dalhart's particular recording such as "mighty rough road," "broke into a scream," "and scalded," "Pete," "black greasy fireman," "lost his average," and "now ladies."

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<sup>19</sup>I, p. 359.

<sup>20</sup>I, p. 362. The four groups were: 1) Six printed versions all collected or printed before the first phonograph records were released (starting with the January 1924 Whitter version on Okeh); 2) Four versions "which are claimed or alleged to be very early"; 3) Phonograph records in chronological order (Whitter, Dalhart, Tanner, Singer, Harrell, Thompson); 4) A group of texts collected after records began to appear.

Using colored circles Gordon annotated his chart to indicate which forms were related to each other. As well, he used circles to mark out certain extraordinary or maverick words and phrases which appeared nowhere else. Such phrases included "bad," "average," and "broke into a scream" which were present only in the Dalhart and George versions.

Using his multi-colored, starred and circled chart, Gordon pointed out some of the following conclusions to the court.

Now if we bring, for the moment, the George record up and place it besides Dalhart the extreme identity of those two records in certain respects is obvious. The Dalhart version in all these tests we have gone through does not have one single red mark in it. Not one single phrase we have shown occurring regularly, or in standard form in these early versions. It has three cases where it shows the peculiar mark of the phonographic group "rough" and "a scalded" and "now ladies". It has two cases, "bad" and "average" that occur in no other place in the world except Mr. George's. I call attention to the identity of those. Some time ago it was said [by Gordon] that a Folk Song grows naturally and changes and not two versions are ever the same, and if we do find two versions practically identical we are forced at once to believe there is direct connection between them.<sup>21</sup>

Gordon felt that clearly George's version was "suspiciously tied" to Dalhart's.<sup>22</sup> Gordon's investigation of the events surrounding the actual wreck of the Southern Old 97, as well as the conditions of other train wrecks

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<sup>22</sup>I, pp. 376-377.

led him to further suspect George's claim to authorship of the song. The two verses of George's text which were not clearly tied to phonographic renditions seemed to Gordon to have come from other songs about train wrecks. The weather conditions on the day of the "97's" demise were not frosty; George's line to that effect belied his claim that he wrote the song about this specific train wreck. Gordon had gathered other external evidence which cast doubt on George's claim. As Cohen mentions, he was warned by Victor lawyer LeDuc that the court would only permit his report on internal evidence.<sup>23</sup> In fact when LeDuc, in court, asked Gordon, as a result of the scientific tests he had applied, to give "his best opinion as to when the George version P-1 was first written"<sup>24</sup> the prosecuting attorney objected and the court upheld his objection. Gordon was allowed to list the versions of "97" and to point out their peculiarities; he was not permitted to analyze the data scientifically.

[Gordon]: In my opinion, that version --  
Mr. Fulton: Now if your Honor please, I do not think this witness is qualified to pass on that question.

THE COURT: I do not think that he is, Mr. LeDuc. I think his explanation has been very fine, so far as the opportunity to see all of it is concerned -- as that is what I wanted to see.

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<sup>23</sup>LeDuc to RWG, October 6, 1930. UO 11/4. Also see Cohen, 32.

<sup>24</sup>Victor vs. George, Transcript #5169. I, p. 385.

Mr. LeDuc: Well, that is the most important thing, the demonstration.

THE COURT: I think that is a better demonstration than any attorney could prepare, but unless you have some precedent for it I would not want to qualify Mr. Gordon as an expert on it to be able to say when it was written. He has drawn all his comparisons, and they have been interesting, and I think that the objection is well taken. You may have an exception of you wish it.<sup>25</sup>

Judge John Boyd Avis, unimpressed by the authority of Gordon's judgement or the insights available through the "science of folklore," ruled on March 10, 1933 that David Graves George had written the "Wreck of the 97." Avis felt "morally certain" that George had authored the song at about the time of the wreck and that it was later "reproduced" in the many variant versions.<sup>26</sup> Cohen summarizes Avis' conclusions succinctly, pointing out that the judge had simply rejected Gordon's interpretation of the relationships of the versions, stating that both experts -- Gordon and Melcher (the handwriting analyst) -- had "erred in their conclusions."<sup>27</sup>

That "the striking testimony of a recognized expert" was ignored and reinterpreted by Avis is indicative

<sup>25</sup>I, pp. 385-386.

<sup>26</sup>David Graves George; Plaintiff, vs. Victor Talking Machine Company, Defendant. United States District Court, District of New Jersey. Memorandum. [Filed by Judge Boyd Avis, District Judge] Unpublished memorandum, filed March 10, 1933 at Camden, New Jersey, pp. 15-16.

<sup>27</sup>Cohen, 33.

of the status of folksong as a scientific discipline. Gordon's findings were not regarded as being either particularly conclusive or deserving of respect, although they were admittedly interesting, and much better than an attorney could do.

The popular press was predominantly on George's side, sympathetic to a hillbilly exploited out of millions by a recording company.<sup>28</sup> Alfred Frankenstein suggested, too, that the first court decision was given to George because it was generally felt that the Victor Phonograph Company could pay.<sup>29</sup>

If the general public and a court of law were not impressed by Gordon's work, Elliott Shapiro of Shapiro, Bernstein and Company, certainly was. When his company, holder of copyright on the Newton Seibert version of Casey Jones, expected to bring suit against E.C. Shirmer Company in 1941, Shapiro approached Gordon for help in the copyright case. Although the case was settled out of court, Gordon had begun to assemble the same sort of evidence on

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<sup>28</sup>See "Balladist vs. Victor," Time (December 31, 1934), 26; "Court Records in 'Old 97' Litigation of Interest Here," Danville Register (November 9, 1930); "Gretna Man Begins Suit in '97' Case," Danville Bee (October 16, [1930]); "Old 97," Time (January 15, 1934), 48-49; "Plaintiff Scores in Phonograph Suit," [Camden, N.J.] Evening Courier (November 14, 1930), 24; "Suit Won," Time (March 20, 1933), 36.

<sup>29</sup>Taped interview with Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco, California, May 12, 1976.

Shapiro and Bernstein's behalf, dividing a great mass of printed and recorded versions into roughly chronological groups and identifying the characteristics of each group.

The shoe was on the other foot this time -- Gordon sent Shapiro a preliminary summary of his findings, commenting that he felt sure that he could establish that there were enough "significant changes" in the Newton-Siebert text to enable them to claim authorship.<sup>30</sup>

Gordon's belief that folksong developed organically in response to its milieu lay behind his case studies in the 1930s and 1940s of "The Wreck of the Southern Old 97" and "Casey Jones." The same basic assumption inspired Gordon's treatment of whole bodies of song.

Between 1927 and 1931 Gordon was particularly interested in Black folksong, oral literature and folk culture. Many of his contemporaries had also turned their attention to black song traditions in the hope of unravelling the question of the origin of folksong. Gordon attacked the problem with his usual thoroughness. He filled nearly a dozen notebooks with excerpts from fugitive sources documenting life in the South before the Civil War, the evolution of the minstrel show, and the spread of musical traditions in the nineteenth century South in general. The scope of his attention was far greater than that of most

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<sup>30</sup> RWG to Elliott Shapiro, November 13, 1941.

of his colleagues, although he came to some of the same conclusions. He felt that blacks and whites, folk and pseudo-folk material, vaudeville and burlesque shows all combined during the nineteenth century -- and particularly between 1840 and 1890 -- to contribute to and affect the body of material which folklorists in the twentieth century retrospectively considered to be traditional southern folksong. Gordon minutely documented his essential point: that there were no color lines in tradition.

Because of the medium which he used -- a volume by a popular non-scholarly group and articles in a mass circulation newspaper<sup>31</sup> -- Gordon chose not to emphasize his "radical" opinions about the origin and development of the so-called black spiritual, but he demonstrated his grasp of the subject and his years of extensive research both in the field and in the great libraries. In his essay on "The Negro Spiritual" which appeared in the volume Carolina Low-Country in 1931, Gordon emphasized that spirituals were only one small part of black repertoires:

While recognizing the importance of the spiritual in plantation life, we must be on our guard against the common but erroneous idea that the spiritual was almost the only type of song known and sung by the southern negro. Numerically at least, it occupied then, as now, only a small part of his extensive repertoire. The various songs alone, if brought together, would probably far outnumber the spirituals. The negro had

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<sup>31</sup>"The Negro Spiritual," The Carolina Low-Country, ed. Augustine Smythe et al. (N.Y.: Macmillan Co., 1931), 192.

special songs for cotton-picking, for hoeing, for threshing, for turpentine work, for heavy lifting, for loading and unloading cargoes. He knew and sang the songs of the riverman and of the sailor. The popular hits of the day, sentimental love songs, humorous minstrel songs, fiddle and banjo tunes, were his if he desired to sing or play them.<sup>32</sup>

Gordon went on to discuss how such extensive repertoires were formed. He drew from his impressive knowledge of nineteenth century Southern life and culture and discussed the effect of visiting guests, travelling "masters," itinerant shows, and popular sheet music upon traditional repertoires and song traditions.

Gordon made it quite clear that the great religious revivals of c. 1797-1805 and the music which arose as a by-product of these revivals were widely known in the South by blacks as well as by whites. Discussing the history of the music involved, he pointed out that the old and accepted hymns had proven inadequate in the emotional camp meetings. New sorts of songs with repetitive and simple structure had begun to catch on.<sup>33</sup> By 1808 these new sorts of songs began appearing in print, first in rude camp-meeting books, then in more substantial publications. In attempting to piece together the history of the spiritual, Gordon examined these volumes for music as well as texts. He commented about the hymn books of c. 1850-1870:

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<sup>32</sup>192.

<sup>33</sup>203-209.

. . . if it represents at all the wild tunes of the early white campmeetings, [it] has been carefully edited and standardized. The fact, however, that some of these tunes even in the late printed form, and a greater number of those taken down from traditional singing by recent collectors, show surprising beauty, are quite unlike the conventional hymn tunes, and show certain musical peculiarities similar to those found in the best negro spirituals, makes it certain that, could the expense of sending out properly equipped collectors in the field be met, important finds would be made.<sup>34</sup>

Gordon did not simplify his conclusions by suggesting that the tunes of the spirituals were African in origin while the words were white and American. He suggested that further careful study might point to the fact that the tunes to spirituals were fragments of every sort of white tune "adapted, assimilated and reproduced in accord with the negro's own musical system, and like many texts were also composite creations. He pointed out the polyrhythms of the spirituals and commented on the difficulty inherent in reproduction of any performance, as each singer often created harmonies, rhythms, and vocal parts somewhat different from the others in the group.<sup>35</sup> That each rendition was particularly unique made the spiritual itself impossible to understand, study, or appreciate through a "standardized version."

Gordon's extensive identification of aspects of black song which derived from camp meeting, minstrel-stage

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<sup>34</sup> 211.

<sup>35</sup> 221.

and vaudeville tradition allowed him to identify the "true folk traits" of the spiritual type, and to discard from any collection of true negro spirituals such items as minstrel parodies. The negro may have sung these songs, but according to Gordon they

. . . do not belong to the negro, though he may have sung them or even adopted them as his own. The spiritual is today the unquestioned property of the negro race. How large a part he played in creating it is not so surely determined. To understand clearly the role he has played in building up and developing the type, we must first of all try to separate the false from the true. Once this has been done, we can attempt to discover what the negro has borrowed from other sources, to what extent he has assimilated these borrowings, and how great has been his own radical contribution. Since the spiritual as a type belongs clearly to the realm of folk-song, any borrowings that have in the process of time become fully assimilated need give us little concern. Folk-song is always borrowing, assimilating, and borrowing again. Only by this process does it keep alive and adapt itself to changing environments and changing fashions. Once folk-song loses its power to borrow and to assimilate it inevitably dies.<sup>36</sup>

Only important, he reiterated, were those songs which were assimilated into tradition, or which took on folk traits.

Both in his New York Times articles and in "The Negro Spiritual," Gordon discussed the structural and contextual differences between standard hymns, spirituals and shouts. Because he was writing for a popular audience, and to laymen he described with painstaking, if romantic, detail. Texts

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<sup>36</sup> 213-215.

were firmly placed in their contexts through such descriptions as of the Church in Darien at Christmas Eve, or of a Carolina mountain cabin. He also described the informant's reaction to the collector, attempting to inform his audience about the way in which a folklorist conducted his investigations. He offered the comment that one should never express too much of an opinion about any song or fact when dealing with a southern black. Used to outwardly obeying the "master," the black informant would not be likely to contradict any white assumptions, figuring that what the white man didn't know he'd never find out.<sup>37</sup>

Gordon rested in the position that the spiritual was truly an American product, a hybrid. Its study was of the paramount importance, for not only did it offer clues to the understanding of the wealth of American folksong, but

. . . it will furnish future historians with several interesting and as yet unwritten chapters on the social development of both races.<sup>38</sup>

He did not restrict his investigation of black culture and song to materials bearing on the spiritual. He pointed out, however, that collection of secular songs became increasingly difficult as many of the older blacks became church members.

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<sup>37</sup> Folk-Songs of America, pp. 27-28.

<sup>38</sup> "The Negro Spiritual," 222.

Any attempt on my part to distinguish between songs which I thought they might with propriety sing to me and those that I admitted they could not, met with little success. They were not interested in hair-splitting distinctions. "Dat song don' belong to de Lord's side; an' ef 'e don' belong to de Lord, den 'e belong to de Debil fer sure!" On the few occasions where my arguments prevailed, they sang with great reluctance. Never, I am convinced, would they of their own free will have sung these songs.<sup>39</sup>

Consistent with his desire to blend the scholarly with the popular in his publications, Gordon felt that he had made important contributions on at least two points of discussion of interest to scholars in his New York Times articles on spirituals. Writing to correspondents in the spring of 1927 he commented:

The next will have something to say on the "shout". More, I think, than has yet been said on the subject. Strange that so many collectors should have passed it by so lightly. For I sincerely believe that it is perhaps the most important phase of negro song from one point of view. It is the negro's own production rather than something adopted from the whites. Most of the rest he has taken over and assimilated; this he seems to have created. But I'm not at all "cocky" on my knowledge of the subject, I have just enough to make me see what a big and important subdivision the "shout" is and I'm anxious to learn more.<sup>40</sup>

Think that I put over a couple of good things in my last two articles for the NEW YORK TIMES -- one on the "shout" and the other on the "endless spiritual". At any rate I said a lot

<sup>39</sup>195.

<sup>40</sup>#2664 to James C. Bardin, March 15, 1927.

that seems utterly to have escaped other workers in the field. It still remains to be seen whether they or I deserve the title of moron.<sup>41</sup>

Gordon's investigations of minstrel show, vaudeville, music hall and burlesque traditions also helped him in his studies of the sea songs and shanties which he had been collecting and recording since at least 1922.

Sea songs had been particularly interesting to Gordon because as a group they seemed emphatically to demonstrate the "folk" (rather than the "author") characteristics which he was trying to investigate. The most choice sea songs, from the folk point of view, were those which were broad or bawdy.

As early as 1925, Gordon could report that he had been studying the songs of the sailor -- particularly the chantey -- for "some years." At that time he had amassed a collection of over 1200 texts transcribed from fugitive printed sources. He had taken down more than 300 texts in manuscript, and made more than 100 cylinder recordings personally. Always interested in solving the problem of ultimate origins, Gordon had traced many chanties back to early minstrel and blackface songs of the 1840s and 1850s, adapted, arranged, and made over by "genuine negroes."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>#2691 to Fiswoode Tarleton, April 23, 1927.

<sup>42</sup>#981 to R.S. Spears, March 17, 1925.

Other chanties he believed had come directly from black "cotton-screwing" gangs in southern ports.

He realized that because bawdry was seldom printed it was helpful to his study of the origin and development of folksong. Therefore he urged his readers to send unedited and unexpurgated texts. He emphasized the scientific aspects of his work -- that he needed to examine texts just as they were sung.

I give this warning [to collect it all, as it is] largely because I well know that the lumberjack songs, the fishermen's songs, and the chanties are all likely to be pretty free in their diction and often broad in their plot.<sup>43</sup>

Suffice it to say that after fifteen years of work in the field I realize that there is much -- if one is going to study folk material -- that cannot be printed, but that is nevertheless of great value to the serious student. I collect it, and preserve it . . . .<sup>44</sup>

Gordon's assiduous collection of bawdry did not start with the Adventure column. Frank Kester, recollecting his days with Gordon on the San Francisco waterfront, spoke of hearing Gordon play back some of his recordings to the Adventure Camp-Fire Group.

To us they are intensely interesting, but I must say that some of the unexpurgated types were hardly the kind one'd want youngsters to learn.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>#2094 to Fred L. Bowden, November 14, 1926.

<sup>44</sup>#2079 to Alson Baker, November 9, 1926.

<sup>45</sup>Taped interview with Frank Kester, Oakland, California, May 11, 1976.

Gordon's "Inferno" -- the "one single carefully guarded manuscript"<sup>46</sup> in which all of the bawdry in his collection was brought together, was intended to preserve such lore for its scientific value as well as its aesthetic worth.<sup>47</sup>

Gordon occasionally waxed quite eloquent in defending the "Inferno." If he overdid the emphasis on the fastidiousness with which he approached his collection of bawdy materials, it can be understood in terms of the times. Gordon was attempting to earn his living from the American reading public; gaining a reputation for eagerly seeking the slightly smutty would certainly endanger his livelihood. If earning a living by collecting and publishing folksong was not quite legitimate and slightly suspect to his Darien neighbors, then dabbling in bawdry could quite possibly endanger the entire project. Therefore, Gordon made his explanations to his informants quite clear.

Gordon kept strictly in confidence any material and information supplied him by an informant which would in any way compromise or embarrass the individual. He, therefore, for a number of reasons, actively built up the "Inferno" and kept it quiet. This led to several humorous

<sup>46</sup> #2046 to Robert Carse, November 3, 1926.

<sup>47</sup> The "Inferno" still exists and is part of the Archive of Folk Song's R.W. Gordon MSS.

interchanges of letters (which I suspect were highly enjoyable to Gordon) with such notables as e.e. cummings, and Newton Gaines of the Texas Folklore Society. Both gentlemen wrote to Gordon for information about songs, the most versions of which were in the "Inferno." Gordon responded in both cases that he would need to know more about the inquirer's motive and character before he could consider divulging such material. Neither gentleman to my knowledge ever pursued his initial inquiry.

Gordon was approached several times by individuals who wanted his help, either in supplying them with songs, or by collaborating with them on volumes of songs "for men." Perhaps this occurred because Adventure was an action magazine aimed ostensibly at a male audience. The term "men's magazine" however, did not carry the same connotations then that it has had since the success of Esquire (established in 1934) and its foldout followers. If Gordon answered Gaines and cummings with well-bred righteousness, he treated this alternate set of inquirers with blistering scorn. Eventually they gave up as well.

Gordon frequently justified his views on the solicitation and collection of bawdy material. The following excerpt from a letter to a correspondent, dated November 3, 1926, was typical. It reveals that Gordon had particular criteria for passing on bawdry.

I'm utterly and completely opposed to printing these songs, even in a limited edition. I'm utterly and completely opposed to helping in any way to keep them alive in oral transmission. I've never passed on an unprintable text, and I never shall, though I often receive requests for them. I will, of course, at any time play one for an old sailor, but not for a man who is not of the initiate, and who would look upon my act as mere amusement.

Still I feel that if the genuine old songs of the sea are lost, and the world will very possibly lose much that is, and may be, of real value. And they will be lost -- forever -- if someone does not collect them. And that soon! But if they are to have a chance at life, a chance of surviving in some way the mortal man who once sang, and created them, it doesn't seem fair to me to force them to live in the maimed condition in which any decent edition, or fiction writer, or collector must preserve them if they are in any way public property.<sup>48</sup>

In the same letter, Gordon likened the "Inferno" to the view of Rome provided by the Pompeii volcano -- this in comparison to Horace's view. The truer and more valuable service was rendered by Pompeii, according to Gordon, and would be rendered by his "Inferno."<sup>49</sup>

Gordon's criteria for proper and appropriate audiences was evidently met in at least one case. With co-author Melbert Cary and illustrator Alban Butler, Gordon, collaborated in the early 1930s on a two volume collection and study of the "life history" of "Mademoiselle from Armentières." The volumes are published by private sub-

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<sup>48</sup> #2046 to Robert Carse, November 3, 1926.

<sup>49</sup> #2046 to Robert Carse, November 3, 1926.

scription to contributors only in 1935, and carried the following inscription on the first page:

WARNING! If you are not an American ex-service man, stop and consider the following before you read this book. It has not been compiled for general consumption. It may offend you, perhaps grievously. It is intended solely for those who have experienced the conditions which gave rise to Mademoiselle from Armentières. These men it will not offend.

Another group of men (and a very few women) whose breadth of sympathetic interest not only embraces matters foreign to their own experience, but extends beyond the amenities to include fundamentals even when crude -- these also will appreciate this reflexion of one phase of the many-sided spirit of the American soldier. All others are warned and counselled to close this book here and now and to read no further.<sup>50</sup>

Gordon's contribution to the collaboration was to be a discussion of the musical origins of the song complex, and a critical and historical analysis of the development of "Mademoiselle." Although the chapter on "Musical Origins" that did appear contained critical and historical material, no other detailed analysis appeared in the published volumes. Possibly Gordon's breakdown in 1933 impeded his contribution of further chapters. Considerable personal correspondence passed between Gordon and Cary; it sheds some light on the understanding Gordon had come to have concerning the song complex.

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<sup>50</sup> Mademoiselle from Armentières, ed. [Melbert B. Cary] (N.Y.: Press of the Woolly Whale, 1935), I, p. iii.

The breadth of the study undertaken by Cary and Gordon was immense. The "Press of the Woolly Whale" (apparently under the direction of Melbert B. Cary, Jr.) solicited verses of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" from ex-servicemen. Samples of the format they used follow.<sup>51</sup> [next three figures] Gordon himself, over the course of his association with Adventure, had gathered numerous versions. Together the editors had "498 separate and distinct verses," discounting duplicates and minor variations.<sup>52</sup>

Gordon separated the verses into what he perceived as a number of discrete sections. First in historical development were the predecessors of "Mademoiselle" -- such songs as "the Farmer's Daughter," "The Little Dutch Soldier," and "The Little Marine."<sup>53</sup> Certain other verses formed a section which Gordon called "Links." Writing to Cary on January 10, 1933 he described them as

. . . verses very obviously written or composed in France, during the war. They show certain changes and revisions of the older songs to fit the new situaion. For example, the farmer's daughter is "hot for a Yankee", etc. and the Little Marine does "come over to France". Unimportant perhaps from your point of view, these verses are of great interest in the

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<sup>51</sup> Figures 17, 18 and 19 are facsimiles of brochures in the Nye Collection.

<sup>52</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

<sup>53</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.



Figure 17. "Do you know Mademoiselle from Armentières?" pamphlet used by Cary and Gordon to solicit verses.

Figure 18. "Help!" pamphlet used by Cary and Gordon to solicit verses.

Figure 19. "Gentle Reader - will you lend a hand?" pamphlet used by Cary and Gordon to solicit verses.

historical development of the song and will, I think, add greatly to a really popular presentation of "how folk song really grows." At any rate I suggest separating them into a group by themselves in the forthcoming book, -- or at least using them in the introduction.<sup>54</sup>

From the bulk of the verses, Gordon was able to distinguish four distinct "Mademoiselles." The protracted discussion which accompanied the announcement of these discoveries to Cary on January 10, 1933 illustrates Gordon's method of study, and his historical orientation. It also provides a sense of the enthusiasm with which he pursued his investigations.

Now comes the real story! I attempted to discover by process of comparison and elimination which were the true verses that belonged to the earliest period of the song, and to separate from these such verses as were made later in the war, and such verses as were "made in America" after the war was over.

Limiting my investigation for the moment to only such verses as concerned Mademoiselle, I first segregated those dealing with Mademoiselle from places other than Armentières. I then studied these with some care to see if they might in any way be dated or placed in any time sequence. At first the task promised some success. I found, of course, several verses that were obviously composed about the frauleins with whom the soldier came in contact during the "occupation" period.

But that's about as far as any real results went. The other verses might have been composed at any time. Some, I'm certain were early, some late, some post-war, some composed

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<sup>54</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

at a recent reunion, some even perhaps deliberate fakes on the part of some correspondent of yours who wished to insure his getting a copy of the book by sending to you at least one verse which he knew you'd never seen. BUT, there was no possible way of separating these classes. In fact, I found that I could myself continue to compose quite acceptable verses using the names of any French or German town that came to mind.<sup>55</sup>

Gordon explained the "geographic sequence" of Mademoiselle with the use of a metaphor from biology, writing to Cary about the "budding process" typical of folksong. He maintained that such "natural buds" made the folksong undateable, unlike the author characteristics which made it possible to pin a song down in place and time:

In other words the whole "geographic sequence" was what we call a natural bud from the song. Once it started it grew of itself. But I won't bore you with theory. Suffice it to say that this budding process is one of the best known folk phenomena, and that its results are always undatable and bear a minimum of what we call "author characteristics." They are part and parcel of the actual living folk growth and cannot be separated from the parent stem.

To return to Mademoiselle. After separating the "geographics" I had an unsorted mass of verses dealing either with Mademoiselle from Armentières or with plain Mademoiselle or with simply she. These were many of them incompatible. She was both old and young, tall and short, thick and thin, etc. etc. From these I attempted to pick out verses which described the original Mademoiselle from Armentieres herself, in person.

I began by assuming that the best known verse of the song, and one which to my personal

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<sup>55</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

knowledge was actually commonly in use by the time the U.S. entered the war gave some lead as to her distinguishing characteristics. This verse (appearing with some minor variations) was:

Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières,  
She hadn't been kissed (?) for forty years.

By verse linkage I was further able to determine that she was ugly, that she traded her favors for souvenirs, that she was intensely loyal to the A.E.F., that she cared little for Frogs, that she preferred the rank and file in general to officers. She was untidy in appearance, seldom washed, had Gargantuan but not indiscriminating appetite, and was quite unmanagable when drunk. She stuck like a leach, and it was practically impossible to shake her. In short, she became epic. An old hag, not less than 52 . . . and probably much older who on account of her lack of sex appeal had had very little real fun till the U.S. troops arrived, but who had done her best to make up for lost time since. Verses that had no value separately, or verses that seemed merely vulgar or dirty became priceless strokes in depiction when grouped in sequence. She was, and is, a WOW!<sup>56</sup>

Gordon went on to describe the four Mademoiselles, women of differing character, taste, and refinement. Verses fitted so well into these four categories that he was left with only five or six stray verses -- "mostly duds."<sup>57</sup> The results of his study so impressed Gordon that he approached Cary with the possibility of producing a publicly issued book, after the two volumes they were preparing were released.

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<sup>56</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

<sup>57</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

The new volume would be primarily an exhaustive study by Gordon of the entire history of the song in all of its stages. "The epic" would come by way of appendix.<sup>58</sup> He was confident that a perfectly proper but eminently saleable book could be prepared, and was "rarin'" to get to it.

The great value of the study, in Gordon's mind, lay in the insight it offered into the "collective soul" of the American soldier, and the repercussions such insight had onto the origin and development of folksong.

To my mind, however, the result is something quite unsuspected and amazingly good. I'm not responsible. It is the great epic of the American soldier. He wrote it, I didn't. And I haven't changed a single word. All I've done is to arrange it so that the results of his composition are apparent.

From the point of view of literature here is something unique. In early times literature with the capital L concerned itself only with heroes and heroic deeds. More recently there came a period of sentiment. Still more recently (Zola, Balzac, the Russians, etc.) a period of realism. But in all these periods it was the individual author, working with a set literary purpose in mind, following certain theories of his own, using an individual style, and constantly conscious that he was writing for publication who was responsible for the picture. He chose deliberately, he packed the evidence. Here we have without any theory, without the intervention of style, without the slightest thought of publication or of an audience the real actual thought of the American soldier. On war, on life, on nearly everything.

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<sup>58</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

If it turns out a poem so much the better. AND the most amazing thing to me is that many verses that seemed to me vulgar, tawdry, ineffective, -- even dirty and disgusting, -- have somehow blended into the picture and no longer stand out as individual.<sup>59</sup>

Gordon understood folk literature to be quite as big a field as "author literature," and one which exhibited just as many defining stylistic characteristics. One of those characteristics was its lack of self-consciousness.

"Mademoiselle" was valuable because it unwittingly documented -- with a minimum of the bias or purposes of the individual author -- the "common thought and attitude" of a group.

Gordon considered himself to be a practical worker -- even if he sought to unravel universal questions -- because he looked for answers to those questions in the present rather than in the mists of the primitive past. Although he admitted that lyric, non-fixed-verse (such as "Mademoiselle") were far different from the complicated ballads he also defined as "folk," he still saw of basic importance the way any song was shaped by its life in oral tradition. Studying "Mademoiselle" was rewarding because it could be discussed in its development from a German student's drinking song to the epic of the American soldier. In an undated draft

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<sup>59</sup> RWG to Melbert Cary, January 10, 1933. Nye Collection.

of his "Musical Origins" chapter on "Mademoiselle," Gordon wrote:

The collector in the field who has seen folk-songs in the making and the student in the library who is acquainted with them in their more finished and literary forms, tend to look at the subject from somewhat different points of view. The library worker is, perhaps, more interested in literary values and in the theory as to first origins in the dim prehistoric past. To him, the ballad, the song that tells a story, is the best example of the literary production of the folk. He speculates on which came first, lyric or epic, and why.

The field worker is concerned largely with the present. He can give you no answer to the question, "How does folk-song come about," or rather he can give you thousands of answers, each different and each equally true. A song whose history he can trace from its beginning to its present varied form interests him far more than one which has literary finality.

To such a practical worker the song Hinky Dinky Parlez Vous or Mademoiselle from Armentières seems unusually interesting and important, not because it has any literary merit but because it illustrates so clearly a number of different ways in which folk-songs originate. It is the production, obviously, not of one individual but of a group covering a considerable period of time. It represents the common thought and attitude of a large number of men. It was not consciously composed, it grew. None of the various individuals who almost unconsciously had a part in creating it, composed their bit with any idea of a literary audience.

Moreover, in music as well as words it reaches back into folk materials of past ages. No matter how far back the student is able to trace any given idea or any given tune, there is always something behind that, something that seems to have come originally from an earlier folk composer.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Undated rough draft of "Musical Origins" chapter. Nye Collection.

The only portion of Gordon's scholarship on "Mademoiselle" which saw print was his essay on the musical origins of the song. Gordon traced the family tree from "die Drei Reiter," a 16th century German song found in many student songbooks through British and American chanties of the 1870s such as "The Little Dutch Soldier Who Crossed The Rhine," "Skiboo," "Snapoo," or "Filantagosheeta,"<sup>61</sup> He related it to the tune of "The Runaway Train," or "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." He attributed tune variation to the leveling effect common in oral tradition, and to the rhythmic emphases peculiar to the keys of differing models for the song.<sup>61a</sup>

In his discussion of the musical roots of "Mademoiselle," Gordon had this to say about its ultimate origins:

The origin or origins of Mademoiselle from Armentières, no matter how recent the incidents that seem to have produced it, are lost in the mists of antiquity. Dissect it, analyze it, and you will find that it is not all of one piece, but rather a combination of some that is new joined with many fragments of older and half-forgotten materials -- stray bits of tune, stray stanzas of text -- set conventions and ways of saying things that have grown up gradually

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<sup>61</sup>Robert W. Gordon, "Musical Origins," Mademoiselle from Armentières, ed. [Melbert B. Cary] (N.Y.: Press of the Woolly Whale, 1935), II, xxiv-xxxv.

<sup>61a</sup>xxiv-xxv.

among the folk till they have become almost instinctive.<sup>62</sup>

Regardless of the complexity of the song, Gordon was interested in tracing the development of folk technique. This remained his priority -- he untangled song histories in order to separate "author" from "folk" characteristics. The individual's part in the ultimate origin of a song became almost an unsequential, accidental, insignificant part in proportion to the evolved whole, the expression of the folk. In his rough draft of the "Musical Origins" chapter of "Mademoiselle" he wrote:

Who is responsible for the origin of the song? Was it the man who perhaps on a certain definite occasion first created the famous version about Mademoiselle from Armentières? Perhaps he, more than anyone else, was responsible for the song that followed, but to my mind he was only the unconscious spark that set off the explosion. The materials were all there ready at hand in words and in music, ready to spring again into renewed life should the urge be given and he, the author, if we may call him that, was certainly not responsible for the inevitable growth of the more than 980 that followed . . . .

. . . and so the song grew with a minimum of individual authorship and a maximum of communal traits. The men who composed it, did it almost inevitably expressing in the verses they added, not their individual characteristics -- though there were a few humorous and individual wisecracks -- but the common point of view.

It is impossible to guess whether the author of any given verse was old or young, white or black, sedate or frivolous -- he was simply a

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<sup>62</sup> Robert W. Gordon, "Musical Origins," Mademoiselle from Armentières, ed. [Melbert B. Cary] (N.Y.: Press of the Woolly Whale, 1935), II, xxx-xxxi.

soldier in France. Without thought of an audience he expressed in simple and often vulgar language the common thought of the mass about the limited number of things that furnished thought: wine, women, life, french manners and customs.

It is at least sincere. It cuts deep into the psychology of men suddenly removed from various ranks of life and various occupations and shoved ruthlessly into a situation that leaves them mentally stunned.

If other wars have appeared to create anything approaching the intensity and magnitude of this song, the records have been lost. Whatever the origin of Mademoiselle, whether its tune be Irish, British, French, German, or American, whatever its words first came, it stands today as the epic of the American soldier.<sup>63</sup>

Thus "Barbara Allen" -- or "Wreck of the Southern Old 97," "Dixie," and "Casey Jones," -- although more complicated in narrative form than "Mademoiselle" shared with her the same birth and upbringing. They did not represent "sports," but individual mutations which had been accepted and which continued to grow and develop, reflecting their milieu. Case histories charted that growth, taking into consideration more than a purely diachronic historic-geographic study ever would. Gordon's case histories delved as well into the fabric of belief, the psychology, history and contexts surrounding the events which presumably inspired songs.

To follow Gordon in using organic metaphor, his case histories were the flower of his collection, examination

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<sup>63</sup>Undated rough draft of "Musical Origins" chapter. Nye Collection.

and theory; they were the product of his broad definition of his realm of study. That broadness, however, was followed with the intention of enabling Gordon to definitively delimit the realm. The fruit of his years of work -- the volumes of theory and collectanea that were supposed to be the result of his Great Plan -- never materialized. Still, Gordon must be seen as a theorist and as a scientist. Regardless of how his hypotheses may have limited him, the methods by which he proceeded and the aims which he had made it impossible for him to be viewed as a prisoner of the "religion of description" which at least one contemporary folklorist accused Gordon and his colleagues of following.<sup>64</sup>

In the following chapter I will briefly summarize Gordon's accomplishments and suggest their significance.

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<sup>64</sup>Interview with Alan Lomax. Field notes.

## CONCLUSION

Trained as a folklorist at Harvard with the men who were to set the course for folklore scholarship in the United States in the next forty years, Gordon seemed destined to make a mark in his subject. Kittredge thought highly of him; his fellows remembered him as being thorough, curious and dedicated. His commitment to rigorous scholarship remained constant through his life. He viewed his subject as a scientist and conducted his research rigorously with the highest regard for its scientific validity. At the same time he appealed to large audiences, using popular publications both in his research and as vehicles for gathering and disseminating folklore.

Few individuals or institutions shared Gordon's imagination or standards, and even fewer had vision enough to allow him to do what he wanted. Desirous of the time and freedom to pursue field research, he left the strictures of Berkeley's English Department and free-lanced to support his field trips and his study. Anxious to examine his data and to arrive at sane and scientific formulations which would broaden the field of knowledge, Gordon gained the support of the Library of Congress and established a national

archive for the collection and study of folksong. Just when it seemed possible for him to spend a few years freely investigating his hypotheses and exploring new ground, his sponsor decided that pure research was only permissible if accompanied by tangible results -- reports, lists, items and visible accomplishments.

Gordon, as usual, refused to compromise. His last report to the Library -- itself an ironic exercise -- suggested some of the hypotheses that Gordon felt he had nearly proven, although he had not been convinced that he was able to show the Library the tangible "results" of the research which had led him to these conclusions. This report also suggested some research areas which he felt should be investigated further. Finally, it suggested that indexes be made in order to make the Archive more usable. Ignoring the "revolutionary" and important hypotheses which Gordon had listed, the Library hired Gordon at less than stenographer's pay to index the collected texts. If Gordon had been left to proceed with his "pure research," the first national center for the collection and study of folksong in the United States would most likely have become something entirely different from what it is today.

As his good friend Brodeur once said, Gordon was "a man who was made for success."<sup>1</sup> Despite his training,

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<sup>1</sup>Taped interview with Arthur Brodeur, Eugene, Oregon, February 15, 1969.

accomplishments and methods he has not remained well-known as a folklorist. This study has suggested several reasons for Gordon's relative obscurity; what it should also suggest is that the scholar who chooses to operate in unorthodox channels is not likely to be remembered by the orthodoxy. Gordon left academia, raised no student disciples, did not publish in scholarly journals and did not restrict his study to one small facet of folksong.

Although Thomas Kuhn<sup>2</sup> suggests that we create our own precursors, this study is not meant to rationalize or legitimize later "young turks." What it does do is illuminate the lines which have traditionally delimited the discipline. By looking at how Gordon "failed" as well as how he "succeeded" we can see what the times, circumstances and his fellow scholars allowed to be the province of the folklorist. The cultural parameters within which Gordon worked are marked by the enthusiasm of his Adventure readers and the condescension of the judge at the "Wreck of the Old 97" trial. Similarly, Gordon's friendship with folksong experts Henry H. Fuson, Phillips Barry and Mellinger Henry is balanced by a total lack of correspondence with any of the folkloristically minded anthropologists of his era. Gordon performed successfully as a folklorist in several arenas; in others he was defeated or achieved partial successes.

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

Gordon was a phenomenal success in many ways. He collected the largest and most diverse body of folksongs that had been brought together by any single American folklorist to that time. Using a variety of unorthodox techniques he advertised his venture to millions of people and gained the active support of thousands. Folklorists and the elite establishment likewise supported him in his establishment of a national archive of folksong.

In many ways, too, Gordon can be considered a failure. His own dreams, his Great Plan, his magnum opus never were completed, never realized. He gained people's support, but his projects never materialized. Gordon's defeats are perhaps more important than his successes, for they provide insight into the enterprise of the discipline.

This study demonstrates that we gain a less simplified view of any discipline by refusing to look at it in terms of polarized conflicts and the steady growth of knowledge. Gordon does not fit neatly into any usual categorization of the folklorists in his generation. He called himself a communalist but proceeded in his researches with the hard-headed pragmatism of a scientist. He came from the same Harvard background as many of his contemporaries, and with them went into the field to answer universal questions. Unlike many of those contemporaries, however, once he was in the field he cast his net much more widely, and felt obliged to learn about vaudeville and minstrel show

material, ephemeral and popular publications. He had little contact with anthropologists in the American Folklore Society but was motivated by many of the same things that motivated them. Like many scholars in the 1920s and 1930s he wanted to be scientific; unlike many he built his own recording apparatus and developed a rigorous approach to the phenomena he wanted to study. He was literary theorist, ethnographer, universalist, popularizer, entrepreneur, scientist, mechanic and field worker. However, he was not just a rebel and non-conformist scholar. Obviously, he had much in common with his fellows, and more than any of them reflected the interests and images of the era. This study justifies Dan Ben-Amos's comment that "folklore, perhaps to a greater extent than any other social science and humanistic discipline, is inter-related with non-academic trends of thought and action."<sup>3</sup> Gordon's efforts are most intelligible in terms of the greater social and cultural contexts which framed them.

Recently, folklorists have been focusing on those documenters of English folklore whose names and work have been overshadowed by what Dorson calls the "Great Team."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Dan Ben-Amos, "A History of Folklore Studies. Why do we Need it?," JFI 10 (1973), 120.

<sup>4</sup>Herbert Halpert and Kenneth S. Goldstein have suggested in conversation that the workers in the field were the real English folklorists and that the noisy theorizing of the Great Team was destructive of the progress of the discipline of folklore in England. Efforts to document the work of the many lesser known English collectors are being made by the English Folklore Bibliography Group at Memorial.

Attention is now being paid to those outside the accepted boundaries of the field of folklore studies -- those who did not choose the usual means of training, study or publication. This reevaluation of the past reflects contemporary concern with the boundaries of the discipline.

Regardless of his status in the eyes of the folklore establishment, Gordon, like these English workers in the field, proceeded in an inclusive manner and amassed a wealth of information. Gordon may not have had much impact on the growth and development of the discipline of folklore in the United States. His researches may not have solved any of the theoretical problems in which he was interested. His collections may have been largely ignored. Reevaluation of the work of the "Great Team," and new attention to the work of other British collectors demonstrates that the changing interests of a discipline make for reassessment of theories and collections. It is also true that new or renewed interest in any individual's work may have little relation to the collector's own intentions in gathering the data.

Regardless of what contemporary folklorists may think of Gordon's theories, or of the sorts of questions he asked, they have found his collection useful. Gordon's scientific thoroughness has provided scholars with early versions of occupational and bawdy

songs.<sup>5</sup> His attempts to bring "still-living specimens" back to his study ensured that his collection remain useful as well as interesting and exciting. Gordon was scientist enough to expect other generations, other scholars, to find other uses in his work. He was imaginative enough to envision many such possible uses. Writing on December 4, 1926 to "Old Songs" correspondent Waller Crow, Gordon said:

What the final result of my work will be I don't know. I want it to be accurate and complete. Hope I may be able to use part of it myself in various ways. If not, then I want it ship-shape for the others who come after me. As Kipling says "After me, cometh a builder -- Tell him I too have known."<sup>6</sup>

Gordon probably would not have expected that a graduate student in folklore would study his work and would find his efforts particularly interesting as indications of the parameters of the discipline in his era. He might have appreciated being held up as an example of the fact that it is difficult -- and even detrimental to our understanding of the past -- to neatly pigeonhole our intellectual precursors. Certainly he would have welcomed renewed attention to the collection he worked so hard to build.

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<sup>5</sup> Archie Green, Only a Miner (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972) and Ed Cray, The Erotic Muse (N.Y.: Oak, 1969) use many texts from Gordon's collection.

<sup>6</sup> #2170 to Waller Crow, December 4, 1926.

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