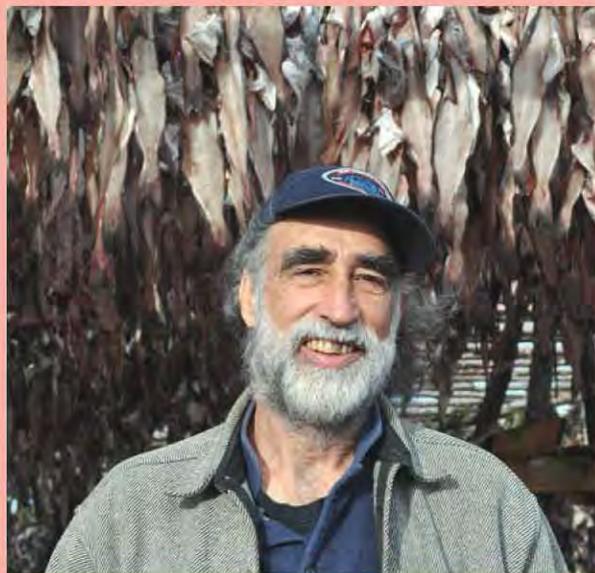


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# Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings from the Upper Midwest, 1937-1946



**Jim Leary**  
University of Wisconsin

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**JULY 18, 2013**  
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# Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings from the Upper Midwest, 1937-1946

James P. Leary, University of Wisconsin

America's Upper Midwest is a distinctive region wherein a staggering array of indigenous, immigrant, and enslaved peoples have collectively maintained, merged, and modified their folk song traditions for more than two centuries. During a critical historical period, Sidney Robertson Cowell, Alan Lomax, and Helene Stratman-Thomas set up field studios in homes, hotels, community halls, church basements, and parks throughout Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to record roughly two thousand folksongs and tunes. They worked in succession, with support the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, armed with bulky microphones, blank disks, spare needles, and cumbersome disk-cutting machines. Excepting a handful of Anglo-American performances, their recordings, captured in more than twenty-five languages, have remained largely unknown and inaccessible, as have the lives of the mostly immigrant, indigenous, rural, and working class people to whom they once meant so much.

Spanning dance tunes, ballads, lyric songs, hymns, laments, versified taunts, political anthems, street cries, recitations, and more, these recordings were made by people born before or shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century. They were captured at a transformative moment: America was in the throes of the Great Depression, World War II was erupting, and media and market-driven mass communication were accelerating. Sometimes extending Native and Old World repertoires into New World cultural enclaves, some songs expressed defiance wrought by the fascist takeover of their homelands. Others were witty or poignant adaptations of familiar genres to unfamiliar settings: an Italian paean to America's grandeur; a Walloon celebration of Wisconsin's abundant beer and ham; a German's account of a skunk mistaken for a *kat*; a Polish immigrant steelworker's despair. Still more were complex creolized performances combining languages, genres, and cultures: Ojibwe hand-drum songs played on the fiddle, a sailor's song of home rendered in Finnish to the tune of a cowboy standard, a comic Quebecois-English mixed language romp about a bumpkin's misadventures.

Since the late 1970s, working incrementally with many generous individuals, partners, and organizations, folklorist Jim Leary has been part of a movement bent on bringing the extraordinary, diverse, neglected folk music of the Upper Midwest to the attention of the larger public. *Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings from the Upper Midwest, 1937-1946*, to be published in fall 2014 by the University of Wisconsin Press, combines five compact disks, a DVD, and a book. Focusing on 175 representative performances by more than two hundred singers and musicians—and including biographical sketches and photographs of performers, as well as transcriptions, translations, and annotations for songs in all twenty-five languages—the CDs are arranged chronologically, commencing with Sidney Robertson Cowell's sessions in Wisconsin and Minnesota in

1937 with lumberjack, Finnish, Scots Gaelic, and Serbian performers. The Wisconsin Lumberjacks, CD 2, focuses on an ensemble from Rice Lake that was recorded by both Cowell and Alan Lomax during successive National Folk Festivals in Chicago and Washington, DC, in 1937 and 1938. Lomax's fall 1938 Michigan recordings with lumberjack, Finnish, French Canadian, German, Irish, Lithuanian, Ojibwe, Polish, and Swedish performers make up CD 3. The even more diverse work of Helene Stratman-Thomas throughout Wisconsin in 1940, 1941, and 1946 comprise CDs 4&5, encompassing the aforementioned peoples while adding African American, Austrian, Belgian, Cornish, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Ho-Chunk, Icelandic, Italian, Luxemburger, Norwegian, Oneida, Swiss, and Welsh performers. Painstakingly transferred from deteriorating original disks to digital formats, then subjected to noise reduction, equalization, and speed correction, these restored performances sketch an almost lost sonic portrait of Another America. The DVD—*The Most Fertile Source: Alan Lomax Goes North*—combines digitally restored silent color film footage, related field recordings, readings from correspondence and field notes, and on-screen text to reconstruct performances and scenes that captivated Alan Lomax during his 1938 Upper Midwestern foray.

Leary will elaborate on this massive project's background and key figures, illuminate the lives and times of diverse yet representative performers, and offer historically significant, aesthetically compelling audiovisual recordings from the Upper Midwest that weave what has been another America into the Nation's sonic fabric.

Jim Leary was born and raised in Rice Lake, a farming and logging town in northern Wisconsin. His field and archival research since the 1970s regarding the cultural traditions of the Upper Midwest's diverse peoples have resulted in numerous media productions, museum exhibitions, and publications. The Birgit Baldwin Professor of Scandinavian Studies and a professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin, Leary is co-editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*, and a co-founder and the current director of the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures (<http://csumc.wisc.edu>).

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*

