

FOLK MUSIC OF THE UNITED STATES

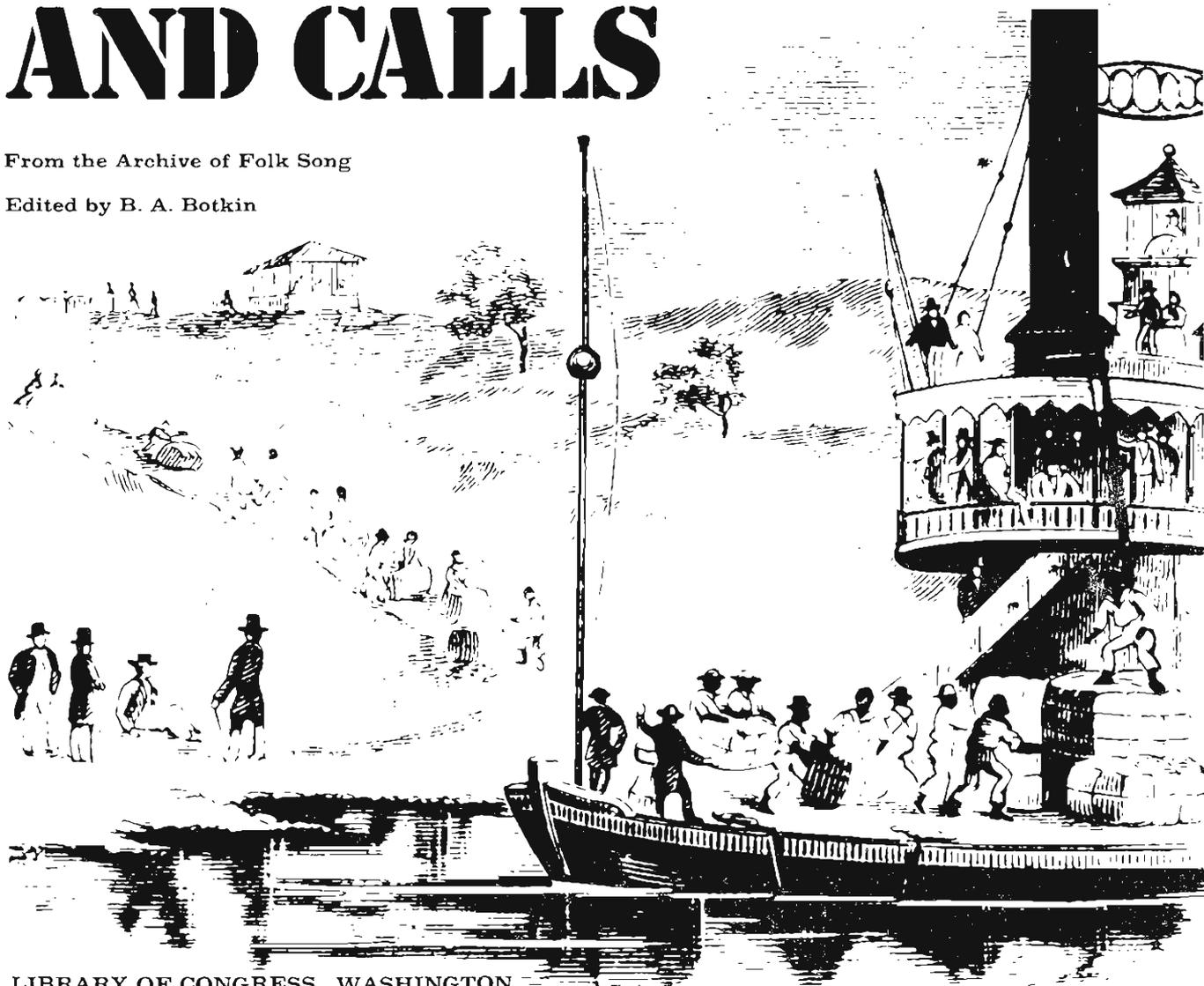
Music Division

Recording Laboratory AFS L8

NEGRO WORK SONGS AND CALLS

From the Archive of Folk Song

Edited by B. A. Botkin



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A1—UNLOADING RAILS

A2—TAMPING TIES

Called by Henry Truvillion at Wiergate, Tex., 1940. Recorded by John A. and Ruby T. Lomax.

Henry Truvillion (now Rev. Henry Truvillion, pastor of a small country church near Newton, Texas) grew up on a farm in Mississippi and has at various times been railroad section hand, boss of a construction gang on southern railways, driver of a "two-horse wheeler" on Mississippi River levee-building jobs, and roustabout on Mississippi River steamboats. For nearly twenty years he was head tracklayer for the Wiergate Lumber Company, where, according to John A. Lomax, "track-laying goes on the year round. Railways must be built to drag the big logs out of the woods miles from the mills."

The problems presented by recording railroad construction songs and calls on the job are such that most attempts are unsuccessful. In spite of a certain loss of authenticity that results from "staging" the work, the present record has considerable documentary value—for its language and declamation style as much as for what is said. Only excerpts from Mr. Truvillion's rapid-fire monolog for unloading steel rails are given below.

For a track-lining holler ("Sis Joe") by Henry Truvillion, see *Our Singing Country*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, Ruth Crawford Seeger, music editor (New York, 1941), pp. 262-64.

A number of steel-laying, tie-shuffling, and tie-tamping chants are given in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York, 1934), pp. 10-20.

UNLOADING RAILS

. . . All right now, listen to me right good.
Walk up until you're almost to the car.
Inside men, step back.
Outside, pull up good and strong.
Head high!
Throw it away!
That's all right!
I heard it ring.
Come on back and get another one now. . . .

Walk to the car, steady yourself.
Head high!
Throw it away!
That's just right.
Go back and get another one.
You got the wrong one that time. . . .

Walk humble and don't you stumble,
And don't you hurt nobody.
Walk to the car and steady yourself.
Stand a minute.
Head high!
Good-bye, rail!
Good iron!
I heard it ring-nnng. . . .
Go back and get another one. . . .

All right, steady.
Stand a minute.
Get your wind a minute.
Head high!
Good-bye, old rail!
That's all right, son.
Go back and get another one. . . .

Walk humble and don't you stumble.
Don't let me hurt nobody.
This is the safety first company.
Steady!
Head high!
Good-bye!
That's all right!
I heard it ring!
Now let's go back and get another one. . . .

TAMPING TIES

Tamp 'em up solid,
All the livelong day.
Tamp 'em up solid,
Then they'll hold that midnight mail.
The captain don't like me.
Won't allow me no show.
Well, work don't hurt me,
Don't care where in the world I go.
Work don't hurt me,
Like the early rise.
Well, work don't hurt me,
But that's the thing that hurts my pride,
That hurts my pride,
That hurts my pride,
That hurts my pride.

A3—HEAVING THE LEAD LINE

Called by Sam Hazel at Greenville, Miss., 1939.

A4—MISSISSIPPI SOUNDING CALL 1

A5—MISSISSIPPI SOUNDING CALL 2

Called by Joe Shores at Greenville, Miss., 1939. Recorded by Herbert Halpert.

This record will be interesting to all readers of Mark Twain, especially of his *Life on the Mississippi*.

On February 2, 1863, according to George D. Lyman, in *The Saga of the Comstock Lode* (New York, 1941), p. 213, Samuel L. Clemens, then a reporter on the *Territorial Enterprise*, of Washoe, Nevada, dropped his undistinguished pen-name, "Josh," and first signed himself "Mark Twain." This was originally the "nom de plume of one Capt. Isaiah Sellers, who used to write river news over it for the New Orleans Picayune" (according to a letter of Twain's dated June 24, 1874). "Mark twain" is the sounding call for two fathoms, or 12 feet—"just enough draft for the boat to get over." In his chant Sam Hazel, eighty-six years old, calls the sounding calls the "old way," as he heard them while roustabouting on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Joe Shores, fifty-two years old, uses "newer" calls. At the time of this recording, he was pilot on the night run of the *A. C. Jaynes*, a ferryboat plying between Greenville, Mississippi, and Arkansas City, Arkansas.

The soundings are called by the leadsman to a deckhand (the word passer) on the hurricane deck, who relays them to the pilot. "Quarter less twain" means two fathoms less a quarter, or 10.5 feet. Similarly, "quarter less four" is 22.5 feet, and "quarter less five" is 28.5 feet. "Half twain" is 2.5 fathoms or 15 feet.

HEAVING THE LEAD LINE

Now we're stuck there—?—
For the lead line drapped off right now.
Well, old deck hand, when you git on top
I'm gonna hear that line—?—
Let the old boat draw.
Lord, I'm throwin' lead line on the la'board
side.
Quarter less twain,

Don't you change your mind.
Heave it in the water just-a one more time.
Eight feet and a half, Mr. Pilot, will you
change your mind.
Run him on a slow bell,
Run him on a slow bell.
Quarter less twain on the sta'board side.
Mr. Pilot, will you change your mind.
Drap it on over on the left-hand side.
Tell me there's a buoy, a buoy right on the
bar.
The light is twisted, and you can see just
how.
Pull a little over to the la'board side.
Lawd, Lawd.
Quarter less twain,
Quarter less twain,
Quarter less twain,
Quarter less twain,
Lawd, Lawd, now send me quarter less
twain.
Throw the lead line a little higher out.
I've gone low down, so mark twain,
Mark twain.
Come ahead, Mr. Pilot, a little bit strong.
I've done got over, and I believe we're
gonna
Throw the lead line over——
No bottom here.

MISSISSIPPI SOUNDING CALLS

1. No bottom,
Mark four,
Quarter less four,
Quarter less five,
Half twain,
Quarter twain.
2. Quarter less four,
Half twain,
Quarter twain,
Mark twain,
Quarter less twain,
Nine and a half feet,
Nine feet,
Eight and a half feet.

A6—ARWHOOLIE (CORNFIELD HOLLER)

Sung by Thomas J. Marshall at Edwards, Miss., 1939.

A7/ —QUITTIN' TIME SONGS 1 and 2

A8 {
Sung by Samuel Brooks at Edwards, Miss.,
1939.

A9—MEALTIME CALL

Called by Thomas J. Marshall at Edwards,
Miss., 1939. Recorded by Herbert Halpert.

At the time of this recording Thomas J. Marshall and Samuel Brooks were students at the Southern Christian Institute, Mount Beulah College, Edwards. They were brought up together in Edwards and often worked together on the same job. According to Mr. Marshall, the "original name" of the cornfield holler is "arwhoolie" or "hoolie." Of the "Quitting Time Song," Mr. Brooks says: "They sing it late in the evening. About the time they quit, they generally feel good and they like to sing this kind of thing. . . . They usually sing it on a plantation . . . if one man starts, well, across maybe another field close by, why, they sing that same tune back to him. . . . Then maybe another man may answer him another tune." "Mealtime Call" originated among the students at the institute, where meals were served "on the bell" by Miss Wright, the dining hall matron.

For a discussion of "call" and "response" in field calls, see *Negro Folk Rhymes* by Thomas W. Talley (New York, 1922), pp. 264 ff.

ARWHOOLIE

Oh, etc.
I won't be here long.
Oh, etc.
Oh, dark gonna catch me here,
Dark gonna catch me here.
Oh, etc.

QUITTIN' TIME SONG 1

Ooooh, the sun going down,
And I won't be here long,
Ooooh, the sun going down,
And I won't be here long.
Ooooh, then I be going home.
Ooooh, I can't let this dark cloud catch me
here.
Ooooooh, I can't stay here long,
Oooooooooooh, I be at home.

QUITTIN' TIME SONG 2

Oh, etc.

MEALTIME CALL

Oh, Miss Wright,
Why don't you ring that bell?
Oh, Miss Wright,
Why don't you ring that bell?
I can tell
The way those greens smell.

A10—POSSUM WAS AN EVIL THING

A11—COME ON, BOYS, AND LET'S GO TO HUNTIN'

Sung by Henry Truvillion at Burkeville,
Tex., 1940. Recorded by John A. and
Ruby T. Lomax.

In order to appreciate these children's songs, one must visualize the setting in the cotton fields, where children have been picking cotton and are thinking of a feast of fat possum baked with sweet potatoes. "Along toward sundown," says Henry Truvillion, "we'd all leave and go on home, and you can hear sometimes twenty-five boys and twenty-five girls all going home through the woods and across the fields, and they're all singing the same song back at one another."

POSSUM WAS AN EVIL THING

Possum was an evil thing,
He rambles in the dark.
He didn't know what the trouble was,
Until he hear old Rover bark.
Ooooh, baby, who*-oh-hoo!
Ooooh, baby, who-oo-hoo-hoo!
That's my baby, who-oh-oo-oo-oh!
Ooooh, baby, who-oh-hoo!
Old Aunt Dinah, who-oo-oo-oo!
Old Aunt Dinah, who-ho-oo-oo-ho!
Ooooh, baby, who-oh-hoo!
Ooooh, baby, who-oo-hoo-hoo!
That's me a-talkin', who-ho-hoo-hoo-oh!
Who-ho-hoo-hoo-oh—who-ho-hoo-hoo-oh!
Ooh, Dinah, who-oh-ee!
Old Aunt Dinah, who-oo-hoo-hoo!
Old Aunt Dinah, who-oh-oo-hoo-oh!

* Pronounced "whoa."

Ooooh, baby, who-oh-ho!
 Possum was an evil thing,
 He rambles in the dark.
 He didn't know what the trouble was,
 Until he hear old Rover bark.
 Ooooh, Rover, who-oh-oo!
 Who-oh, Rover, who-oo-hoo-hoo!
 That's me a-talkin', who-oh-hoo-hoo-oh!

COME ON, BOYS, AND LET'S GO TO HUNTIN'

1. Come on, girls, and let's go to huntin', [2]
 Dog in the woods, and he done treed sump'n. [2]
 [Repeat.]
2. Yo'dog bark, he don't see nothin', [2]
 When my dog bark, he done treed sump'n.
 Come on, boys, let's go to huntin'.
 Dog in the woods, and he done treed sump'n.
3. The woods is wet, the roads is muddy.
 I'm so drunk till I can't stand steady.
 Come on, boys, let's go to huntin',
 Dog in the woods, and he done treed sump'n.
 Come on, boys, let's go to huntin', [2]
 Dog in the woods, and he done treed sump'n.
4. Possum up a gum stump, coon in the holler.
 Rabbit give a backtrack and stole a half a dollar.
 Come on, boys, let's go to huntin'.
 Dog in the woods, and he done treed sump'n.
 Come on, boys, let's go to huntin', [2]
 Dog in the woods, and he done treed sump'n.
5. Possum up a gum stump, coon in the holler,
 Rabbit give a backtrack and stole a half a dollar. [2]
 Come on, boys, let's go to huntin', [2]
 Dog in the woods, and he done treed sump'n. [3]

A12—OLD RATTLER

Sung by Mose (Clear Rock) Platt and James (Iron Head) Baker at Central State Farm, Sugar Land, Tex., 1934. Recorded by John A. and Alan Lomax.

Mose (Clear Rock) Platt—the “Old Rock” and “Big Foot Rock” of the song—sings of a dog named Rattler, famed in Negro folk song as (in Clear Rock's own words) “de fastes' an' de smellin'es' bleedhoun' in de South.” Clear Rock himself has an almost legendary reputation for being fleet footed. Once, in running away from a “ghost,” he told John A. Lomax, his “eyes was stickin' out an' shinin' like the spy-light on a locomobile. I was goin' so fas' when I crossed the T. P. tracks in Fort Worth that my shirt tail catch afire and made me run faster. That's what I call runnin' yourself lost. Before I could protect myself I had run clear outa Texas over into Oklahoma.”

For another version, see *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York, 1934), pp. 66-67.

CHORUS

Here, Rattler,
 Here, Rattler, here,
 Here, here, Rattler,
 Here, Rattler, here.

1. Oh, b'lieve to my soul there's a nigger gone,
 Here, Rattler, here.
 Oh, b'lieve to my soul there's a nigger gone,
 Here, Rattler, here.
2. Oh, he went right through the corn.
 I heard old horn blow.
3. Go and get the dog man.
 Go and get the dog man.
4. Run that nigger to the riverside.
 Run that nigger to the riverside.
5. Go and call old Rattler.
 Call old Rattler.
6. Old Rattler come a-yelpin'.
 Go and call old Rattler.
7. Old Rattler come a-yelpin'.
 Old Rattler come a-yelpin'.
8. Oh, put that nigger right up that tree.
 Old Rock couldn't get to three.
9. Oh, he set so long with the sympathy.
 Oh, run that nigger right lost his mind.

10. Go and call old Rattler.
Go and call old Rattler.
11. Oh, he run that nigger till he went stone
blind.
Oh, cross the river to the long leaf pine.
12. Oh, he run so far he didn't leave no sign.
Oh, got a baby here, got a baby there.
13. Oh, believe to my soul it's the Worldy Fair.
Oh, they didn't 'low no black folks there.
14. Oh, trip this time, I'll trip no mo'.
Oh, goin' to the North where you can't go.
15. Goin' ring the sergeant.
Goin' ring the sergeant.
16. Old Rattler's good, old Rattler's bad.
Believe to my soul it's another one gone.
17. Oh, if you can hold it up you can hold
right on,
Run that nigger right through that corn.
18. Oh, Big Foot Rock is surely gone!
Oh, Big Foot Rock is surely gone!

B1—GO DOWN, OLD HANNAH

Sung by James (Iron Head) Baker, Will Crosby, R. D. Allen, and Mose (Clear Rock) Platt at Central State Farm, Sugar Land, Tex., 1933. Recorded by John A. and Alan Lomax.

This is one of the best known of the slow-drag work songs sung by Negro prisoners in South Texas. James (Iron Head) Baker says that he first sang it in 1908, on long hot summer days when, about three o'clock in the afternoon, the sun (Old Hannah) seemed to stop and "just hang" in the sky.

For another version, sung to a similar tune, see *Our Singing Country*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, Ruth Crawford Seeger, music editor (New York, 1941), pp. 356-58.

1. Go down, old Hannah,
Won't you rise no more?
Go down, old Hannah,
Won't you rise no more?

2. Lawd, if you rise,
Bring Judgment on.
Lawd, if you rise,
Bring Judgment on.
3. Oh, did you hear
What the captain said?
Oh, did you hear
What the captain said?
4. That if you work
He'll treat you well,
And if you don't
He'll give you hell.
5. Oh, go down, old Hannah,
Won't you rise no more?
Won't you go down, old Hannah,
Won't you rise no more?
6. Oh, long-time man,
Hold up your head.
Well, you may get a pardon
And you may drop dead.
7. Lawdy, nobody feels sorry
For the life-time man.
Nobody feels sorry
For the life-time man.

B2—HAMMER, RING

Sung by Jesse Bradley and group at State Penitentiary, Huntsville, Tex., 1934. Recorded by John A. and Alan Lomax.

The most dynamic of Negro work rhythms are to be found in the hammer songs. Of "Hammer, Ring," John A. Lomax has written: "The men who drove the spikes that fastened the long steel rails to the wooden ties sang the most thrilling tune of all—the hammer song, song of the ten-pound hammer with its two heads scarcely more than a couple of inches in diameter, that was swung free from the shoulder in a complete circle about the head . . . that song with its own individual vibrant and stirring tune."

The Bible story of Noah and the ark, which is also the theme of spirituals, is here used to dramatize the work, with echoes of ballad and game-song usage.

For another version see *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York, 1934), pp. 61-62.

CHORUS

Won't you ring, old hammer?
Hammer, ring.
Won't you ring, old hammer?
Hammer, ring.

1. Broke the handle on my hammer,
Hammer, ring.
Broke the handle on my hammer,
Hammer, ring.
2. Got to hammerin' in the Bible.
3. Gonta talk about Norah.
4. Well, God told Norah.
5. You is a-goin' in the timber.
6. You argue some Bible.
7. Well, Norah got worried.
8. What you want with the timber?
9. Won't you build me a ark, sir?
10. Well, Norah asked God, sir.
11. How high do you want it?
12. Build it forty-two cubits.
13. Every cubit have a window.
14. Well, it started in to rainin'.
15. Old Norah got worried.
16. He called in his children.
17. Well, Norah told God, sir.
18. This is a very fine hammer.
19. Got the same old hammer.
20. Got to hammerin' in the timber. . . .

B3—I WONDER WHAT'S THE MATTER

Sung by "Lightning" and group at Darrington State Farm, Sandy Point, Tex., 1934.
Recorded by John A. and Alan Lomax.

This slow-drag prison song is an unusual example of certain qualities of declamation associated with Negro sermons and religious services. Most striking, perhaps, is the use of rhythmic interjections which resemble the exclamations and interpolations in Negro sermons. In its blending of solo and group voices and its handling of pause and repetition in the call and response passages, it is more akin to a religious chant than a work song.

LEADER

I wonder what's the matter.

CHORUS

Oh——o, Lawd!

LEADER AND CHORUS

Well, I wonder what's the matter
With my long lime here.
Awright.

LEADER

Boys, I woke up early this mornin'.

CHORUS

Hey, Lawd!

LEADER AND CHORUS

Boys, I woke up early this mornin'.
Awright, awright.

LEADER AND CHORUS

'Bout the break of day,
The break of day.
Hear it, hear it.

LEADER

Well, the big bell sho was tonin'.

CHORUS

Oh——o, Lawd.

LEADER AND CHORUS

Well, the big bell sho was tonin'.
Sho was. Good Lawd.

LEADER AND CHORUS

Just a while fo' day.
Judge right.
Oh, yah!
Everybody talk.

LEADER

Well, the bully turn over in the bed
a-grumblin'.

CHORUS

Oh——o, Lawd.

LEADER AND CHORUS

over in the bed a-grumblin'.
'Bout that night so short.
Oh, Lawd.
Don' hurt nobody.
Night so short.

LEADER

Well, it look like it been one hour.

CHORUS

Oh——o, Lawd.

LEADER AND CHORUS

Well, it look like it been one hour.
Oh, Lawd.

LEADER AND CHORUS

Pardner, since I lay down.
Oh, Lawd, since I lay down. . . .

**B4—ROLL 'IM ON DOWN [Bahaman
Launching Song]**

Sung by David Pryor and group of Andros
Island men at Nassau, Bahamas, 1935.
Recorded by Alan Lomax and Mary E.
Barnicle.

David Pryor comes of a family of singers. "My mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, and all their children sang all the time." A native of Nassau, he used to follow sponge fishing (until recently one of the principal industries of the island) as a Bowman, who "sights the sponges with his glass and hooks them." The launching described in this song is a community affair, which takes place in October or November, after the hurricane season, when the sailboats are hauled down the beach again.

"Roll 'Im on Down" is the type of work song whose words describe the action and whose rhythm suggests the movement of the work. It is also a good example of the process of fitting new words to an old tune ("Blow the Man Down") which is just suited to them. Moreover, its words are such as might have been composed by a group.

For two other Bahaman launching songs (versions of the shanties, "Round the Bay of Mexico" and "Bowline"), sung by David Pryor and Henry Lundy, see album L5 in this series.

1. So pull 'im along,
Well, we pull 'im along,
Hey, ay, pull 'im along.
Now we pull 'im along from this old ship-
yard,
Give me some time to roll 'im along.
2. Now we jerk 'im along,
Well, we jerk 'im along,
Hey, ay, jerk 'im along.
Come and give me some time for to jerk
'im along,
Give me some time to roll 'im along.
3. Well, we kick 'im along,
Well, we kick 'im along,
Hey, ay, kick 'im along.
Now we kick 'im along from this old Cap-
tain's ground,
Give me some time to kick 'im along.

4. Well, we roll 'im along,
Well, we pull 'im along,
Hey, ay, pull 'im along.
Well, we pull 'im along from this old ship-
yard,
Give me some time to pull 'im along.
5. Well, we slide 'im along,
Well, we push 'im along,
Hey, ay, push 'im along.
Oh, come and give me a little bit of time
for to push 'im along,
Give me some time to push 'im along.
6. Oh, come roll 'im along,
Well, we slide 'im along,
Hey, ay, slide 'im along.
Well, we slide 'im along down to the old
seaside.
Give me some time to slide 'im along.
7. Oh, as we roll 'im along,
Then we'll roll 'im along,
Hey, ay, roll 'im along.
Give me some time for to slide 'im along,
Give me some time to slide 'im along.
8. Well, we jerk 'im along,
Well, we kick 'im along,
Hey, ay, slide 'im along.
Give me a little time for to kick 'im along,
Give me some time to pull 'im along.
9. Well, we roll 'im along,
And we pull 'im along,
Hey, ay, pull 'im along.
Give me some time for to pull 'im along,
Give me some time to push 'im along.
10. Oh, well, we roll 'im along,
Well, we swing 'im along,
Hey, ay, swing 'im along.
Well, we swing 'im along down to the old
seaside,
Give me some time to push 'im along.

B5—THE ROCK ISLAND LINE

Sung by Kelley Pace, Charlie Porter, L. T.
Edwards, Willie Hubbard, Luther Wil-
liams, Napoleon Cooper, Albert Pate, and
Willie Lee Jones at Cumins State Farm,
Gould, Ark., 1934. Recorded by John A.
Lomax.

B6—TRACK-LINING SONG

Sung by Allen Prothero at State Penitentiary, Nashville, Tenn., 1933. Recorded by John A. and Alan Lomax.

As a song about a railroad, "The Rock Island Line" (sung both as a spiritual and as a field song) is presented here for contrast with a railroad work song like "Track-Lining Song." In the one the train is a symbol of speed and escape, with a tall tale twist that makes it arrive forty-one minutes before it started. In the other the men sing about their troubles on the job and their pleasures off it, with one biblical allusion.

Allen Prothero, himself a railroad worker, died of tuberculosis in the Nashville penitentiary just before receiving his parole. Only a portion of his "Track-Lining Song" is reproduced here because of defects in the original record.

For another version, by Henry Truvillion, see *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York, 1934), pp. 14-17.

THE ROCK ISLAND LINE

CHORUS

I says the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.

I says the Rock Island Line is the road to ride.

I says the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.

If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'.

Buy your ticket at the station on the Rock Island Line.

1. Well, Jesus died to save me in all of my sin. Well-a, glory to God, we goin' to meet Him again.

2. Well, the train left Memphis at half pas' nine.

Well, it made it back to Little Rock at eight forty-nine.

3. Well, Jesus died to save me in all of my sin. Well-a, glory to God, we goin' to meet Him again.

TRACK-LINING SONG

1. Hey, boys, joint ahead.
I'm gonna tell you something now.
Oh, all I want—my navy beans,
A big fat woman and a wheeler team.
Hi, hi, won't you line 'em?
Hi, hi, won't you line 'em?
Ho, ho, won't you line 'em?
See Eloise go lining track.
2. If I could, I surely would
Stand on the rock where Moses stood.
Oh, boys, in the morning,
Hi, hi, a'ternoon,
Hi, boys, in the evening,
I'd be standing there all the time.
3. Oh, boys, want to tell you something now.
Oh, way down yonder in the harvest field,
Angels working at the chariot wheel.
Oh, boys, won't you line 'em,
Oh, boys, won't you line 'em,
Oh, boys, won't you line 'em,
See Eloise go lining track.
4. Oh, if I'd known my cap'n was blind,
Wouldn't went to work till the clock struck nine.
Ho, boys, he can see.
Hi, hi, he ain't blind.
Hi, hi, got a Waterbury.
Hi, hi, he can tell time. . . .



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