

Folklife Today

December 2018: Christmas Songs from the American Folklife Center

Steve Winick: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm Steve Winick, the editor in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the creator of the Folklife Today blog, and I'm here with John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the Center.

John Fenn: Hello. You've probably noticed that the holiday season is here. You hear Christmas tunes *everywhere* this time of year – on the radio, in the mall, in your family's home. I thought we could look into some more unusual traditional Christmas songs.

Steve Winick: So we had our staff here at the American Folklife Center pick their favorite songs to talk about today.

John Fenn: That said, would you like to start us off?

Steve Winick: I'd love to.

John Fenn: What song do you have to share with us?

Steve Winick: I'm a big fan of "The Cherry Tree Carol." It's one you can hear sung by a lot of people, from Joan Baez to Annie Lennox. It tells a story derived from one of the apocryphal gospels, which came into English in the middle ages, both in this ballad and in Christmas mystery plays.

John Fenn: Wow! So this is medieval caroling. How did you first hear it?

Steve Winick: Well, I was a medievalist a long time ago, and I came across the song back then when I studied the N-Town plays, a set of medieval mystery plays that tell the same story. And I loved it so much in graduate school that I wrote a term paper about the apocryphal gospels and their influence on folksongs for my professor Don Yoder, who was also a major collection donor to the Library of Congress. And you can read more about Dr. Yoder on the blog too!

John Fenn: So what's the song about?

Steve Winick: It joins Joseph and Mary on their journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. So they're crossing the desert, and of course Mary's obviously

pregnant. And Joseph is aware that he isn't the father. So when they get to a Cherry Tree and she asks him to pick her some cherries, he gets annoyed.

John Fenn: Uh oh.

Steve Winick: Let's hear a clip and you'll see what I mean. We'll hear the beginning of Aunt Molly Jackson's version, sung in Kentucky in 1937. Of course, Jackson was known as a labor singer, songwriter and organizer, but she also recorded a great number of traditional folk songs for Alan Lomax and others. So here she is:

Aunt Molly Jackson [sings]

Joseph was an old man, an old man was he
When he married Mary in the land of Galilee

As Mary and Joseph walked through the orchard green
Where cherries and berries was nice to be seen,

Mary spoke to Joseph with a blush and a smile,
"Gather cherries for me Joseph for I am with child."

"Gather cherries for me Joseph," to Joseph Mary said,
"For I may injure my baby if I reach o'er my head."

Joseph said to Mary, "Why do you ask me?
Let the father of your baby gather cherries for thee!"

John Fenn: OK, Joseph's not a happy camper there.

Steve Winick: No he's not! And I also love the detail that she might injure her baby by reaching over her head—there's some women's wisdom in there.

John Fenn: Traditional folk knowledge. So what happens next?

Steve Winick: So here's where the supernatural or magical aspect comes in. The baby speaks up from the womb and commands the tree to bow down so his mother can pick the fruit. Let's hear this second part of the ballad sung by Burl Ives. Burl was a friend of Alan Lomax's. He came into the archive starting in the 1930s, and also participated in a lot of radio shows with Alan. He donated his guitar to us in the 1980s and we have it in the reading room, so you're all welcome to come see it and even play it at the Library of Congress. Here's Burl singing the second part of the song.

Burl Ives [sings]: Then up spoke the child Jesus before he was born:
"Bow low down, low down, cherry tree, bow down to the ground.
Bow low down, low down, cherry tree, bow down to the ground."

Then the cherry tree it bowed down, it was low on the ground
And Mary gathered cherries while Joseph stood around
And Mary gathered cherries while Joseph stood around.

Steve Winick: so there is that beautiful imagery of the cherry trees bowing down for Mary.

John Fenn: and I love that line "while Joseph stood around!"

Steve Winick: I know...that's great!

John Fenn: So, does Joseph ever learn his lesson?

Steve Winick: Well, kind of. He asks forgiveness...in most versions of God rather than Mary, and then he chats with the baby Jesus a little too.

John Fenn: Let's hear that part.

Steve Winick: Sure thing. For this part, I selected the version of Jilson Setters, whose real name was James William Day. He was fiddler and singer who was a recording artist in the 1920s, one of the first generation of what were called "hillbilly musicians," what we'd now call old-time musicians. The folklorist Jean Thomas kind of managed him, and came up with a whole fictionalized persona loosely based on his real life. But with the pseudonym Jilson Setters. In the later 1930s Alan Lomax recorded him for the Library of Congress, playing and singing his version of the Cherry Tree Carol.

Jilson Setters [sings with fiddle]:

Then Joseph took Mary all on his right knee
"What have I done, God, Have mercy on me."

Then Joseph took Mary all on his left knee
"Oh tell me, little baby when thy birthday will be."

"The Sixth of January my birthday will be
The stars and the elements will tremble with glee."

John Fenn: So he asks the baby when it will be born, and he says “the sixth of January.” Not December 25th?

Steve Winick: So that’s a great point. There are a couple of explanations for why Jesus gives the sixth of January as his birthday.

John Fenn: The one I’ve heard has to do with the shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. If Jesus was born on December 25th of the Julian calendar, that date would move to January 5 for the 18th century, and then to January 6 for all of the 19th century.

Steve Winick: And that is a popular theory. But it’s also true that January 6 was celebrated as Christmas in some parts of the Christian world before December 25th ever was. So the idea that Jesus was born on January 6 doesn’t necessarily come from the calendar shift. In any case, the date was referred to in Appalachia and elsewhere as “Old Christmas,” and it also coincides with Epiphany, which is also the day the three kings or magi are believed to have visited Jesus.

John Fenn: So “Cherry Tree Carol” is an “Old Christmas” song?

Steve Winick: Exactly. And AS a song associated with the 6th of January, and also with folk drama through the N-Town plays, it has a lot in common with some of the songs Stephanie Hall wrote about on the blog. She’s agreed to talk to us about those traditions. Hi, Stephanie.

Stephanie Hall: Hi, John and Steve. Thanks for having me.

John Fenn: So, Stephanie, which other tradition did you write about?

Stephanie Hall: On the blog I wrote about some of the earliest Christmas songs to make it to the United States, which also come from folk plays.

John Fenn: Interesting. So how did they get here?

Stephanie Hall: Well, these are songs in the Juan B. Rael Collection, and were recorded in 1940, in New Mexico and Colorado. The songs are in Spanish, and can be traced back to plays that were performed in medieval Spain. And in these plays, the characters sang their parts. Spanish colonists were in the new world earlier than English colonists, and it’s likely they had some of these old songs with them.

John Fenn: And Steve said that some of these are associated with January 6?

Stephanie Hall: Yes, in many Spanish-American traditions, January 6 is celebrated as the date on which the three kings visit the baby Jesus. And there was a play about that, which was performed on Epiphany. Juan Rael knew about that, and he was looking for this play, but he couldn't find it, and he determined that it hadn't been performed in New Mexico or Colorado for thirty years. And finally, on his last day of recording, which was sometime after August 11, 1940, he came across a 70-year-old singer, Samuel Martinez Y Lavadí, who remembered the play and could still sing some fragments of its songs.

John Fenn: Great, let's hear some fragments from Los Reyes Magos.

A la vemos a Jesus
Con musica y alegría
Que son los altos misterios
De Jesus, José y Maria
De Jesus, José y Maria

Steve Winick: So as you mentioned, that wasn't the best preserved play in that tradition. Was there another one that remained popular into the 1940s?

Stephanie Hall: Yes, one called *El Segundo Coloquio de los Pastores*. It's the source of several songs in the Juan B. Rael collection. The play is about the shepherds who followed a star to find baby Jesus in the manger.

Steve Winick: And which of the songs did you choose for the blog.

Stephanie Hall: I chose "Hermanos Pastores," or "Brother Shepherds," because it sets the scene for the play.

John Fenn: Great, let's give that a listen.

Hermanos pastores, hermanos queridos,
Vamos transitando por estos caminos.
Vamos transitando por estos caminos
Caminen alegres, vamos caminando,
al pie de esos montes vamos hospedando.
al pie de esos montes vamos hospedando. (repeat)

Camina, Gilita, ya vendrás cansada,
Y al pie de esos montes, haremos majada
Y al pie de esos montes, haremos majada

Steve Winick: That was “Hermanos Pastores,” or “Brother Shepherds,” sung by Adolfo Chavez and Julian Lobato in Antonito, Colorado in 1940. You can hear the entire Juan Real collection at loc.gov. Thanks, Stephanie!

Stephanie Hall: Thanks for having me!

John. I see that our next guest here is Nancy Groce. Nancy, what song did you want to talk about?

Nancy Groce: I brought along “There were three pigs went out to dig” from the great Kentucky singer Jean Ritchie.

Steve Winick: I love anything Jean sang, but what was particularly interesting about this song?

Nancy Groce: I think that even though it’s almost a stereotypical rural folksong, it kind of challenges some of the stereotypes about Mountain folks.

John Fenn: How so?

Nancy Groce: well, the song has never been collected in America except from Jean, and it was never collected in Britain either, except by Marianne Mason. Mason was a remarkable woman, who was the first woman to be appointed to a senior post in the British civil service—she was an inspector in charge of government foster-parent programs. Mason collected songs and nursery-rhymes, mostly from her own family, and printed them in an 1877 book called “Nursery Rhymes and County Songs.” She was friends with the important folklorist Lucy Broadwood, who in turn reprinted this song in some of her books, which became standard folksong books in the early 20th century.

John Fenn: OK, let’s hear Jean sing it.

Jean Ritchie [sings]:

There was a pig went out to dig, on Cris-i-mas day, on Cris-i-mas day

There was a pig went out to dig, on Cris-i-mas day in the morning.

There was crow went out to sow, on Cris-i-mas day, on Cris-i-mas day

There was crow went out to sow, on Cris-i-mas day in the morning.

There was a sparrow went out to harrow, on Cris-i-mas day, on Cris-i-mas day

There was a sparrow went out to harrow, on Cris-i-mas day in the morning.
There was a sheep went out to reap, on Cris-i-mas day, on Cris-i-mas day
There was a sheep went out to reap, on Cris-i-mas day in the morning.

Steve Winick: So it was collected in England by Marianne Mason, and in America, it seems only to have been known by Jean Ritchie's family. So connect those dots for us, Nancy.

Nancy Groce: Well, in her book, Marianne Mason specifically says that there were no set verses to this song except the first verse. After that, she wrote: "rhymes are invented according to the pleasure of the singer."

John Fenn: So...it was improvised.

Nancy. Well, yes. But all the verses Jean sings are in Mason's book, which doesn't sound like improvisation to me. It's also true that Mason and Broadwood spelled Christmas with a second "I" instead of the t, so it probably sounded like "crisimas," and that might indicate that it was pronounced that way in Lancashire where Mason heard it. And of course, that's exactly how Jean also pronounces it.

John Fenn: So it's sounding like Jean learned it from the book?

Nancy Groce: Maybe. Or else, she learned it from a family member who learned it from the book. You know, there are stereotypes of mountain people as isolated and illiterate, but in fact many were literate and often had access to books. So when they were visited by folklorists who wanted to hear folksongs, sometimes they obliged by learning songs from folksong books.

Steve Winick: Yes, we know Aunt Molly Jackson, whom we heard earlier, did just that sometimes. And of course Jilson Setters was heavily managed by Jean Thomas.

Nancy Groce: exactly. So it was probably brought from England to Kentucky in a book and learned by Jean's family...but I also happen to think it's a really cute song.

John Fenn: Indeed! Thanks for bringing us that one, Nancy!

Nancy Groce: My pleasure.

Steve Winick: So now we've come to you, John. What did you pick?

John Fenn: I picked an awesome Christmas spiritual called “Children Go Where I Send Thee.” Let’s hear a version by the Silver Star Singers, which was recorded at the Fort Valley Folk Festival in Georgia in 1943:

Silver Star Singers [sing]:

Children go where I send you
Where will I send you?
I will send you one by one because
One was the little bitty baby
Born in Bethlehem

Children go where I send you
Where will I send you?
I will send you two by two because
Two was the Paul and the Silas
One was the little bitty baby
Born in Bethlehem

Children go where I send you
Where will I send you?
I will send you three by three because
Three was the Hebrew children
Two was the Paul and the Silas
One was the little bitty baby
Born in Bethlehem

Children go where I send you
Where will I send you?
I will send you four by four because
Four was the four came knockin' at the door
Three was the Hebrew children
Two was the Paul and the Silas....

Steve Winick: So what can you tell us about it?

John Fenn: Well, it’s an African American version of a traditional song that’s been around since the 17th century, which makes a counting-song out of items in the Bible. There are different versions, and some of them count down to

one little bitty baby, born in Bethlehem. Versions like that are often sung as a Christmas carol. And it's a cumulative song, so at the end of a lot of the verses you count down to one. Some go up to Ten Commandments, and some even to Twelve Apostles.

Steve Winick: so as a counting song, it's a good way to teach kids to count, and also to teach them about the bible.

John Fenn: yes, and we have at least one version sung by kids. This is the Davies Hill School Chorus, also from Georgia, in 1943...and we'll just hear the last verse so you hear how they count down.

Davies Hill School Chorus [sings]:

Go where I send you
Where will you send me?
I will send you twelve and twelve
What is your twelve and twelve?
Twelve was the twelve apostles and
Ten was the ten that never got in and
Eight was the eight that stood at the gate and
Six was the six that never got fixed and
Four was the four that stood at the door and
Two was the Gospel Preacher
Take a look at old Paul and Silas and
One was the holy baby
Was born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Steve Winick: Wow, they went two by two...I guess it's a really long song otherwise.

John Fenn: Yeah, it can be really long. Bessie Jones of the Sea Island Singers had a great version where she sped up and also shortened it as she went on, so let's hear the first verse where she took her time and really sang a lot about Jesus.

Bessie Jones [sings]:

Children go where I send thee
How shall I send thee Lord?
I'm gonna send you one by one

One is just a little baby
Born by the virginal Mary
Rocked him in the cradle
What you gonna call that baby?
I'm gonna call him Jesus
He was born, born, Lord
He was born in Bethlehem

John Fenn: And now let's hear the last verse, where she sang really fast and cut out most of those lines about the baby!

Bessie Jones [sings]:

Children go where I send thee
How shall I send thee Lord?
I'm gonna send you ten by ten
Ten is the ten commandments
Nine is the nine come drinking of the wine
Eight is the eight that waited at the gate
Seven is the seven that didn't get to heaven
Six was the six that didn't get fixed
Five was the gospel writers
Four was the Four that stood at the door
Three is the Hebrew children
Two is the Paul and
One just a little bitty baby
Was born, born, Lord
He was born in Bethlehem

John Fenn: I just love that song, and like a lot of spirituals it's popular in both black and white communities, so you can find recordings by Johnny Cash or Kenny Rogers!

Steve Winick: That's always fun, and I have another little fun secret about that song.

John Fenn: what's that?

Steve Winick: it also exists in French, especially in Canada, and Alan Lomax recorded a French Canadian version in Michigan in 1938. He even caught some silent footage of it being sung, and we've synced it up to the recording. In French, it's often called "Dis-Mois Pourquoi Un" which means "Tell me what one is for." Want to hear it?

John Fenn: of course!

Steve Winick: OK, here's the last two verses. For most of the song, Exilia Bellaire asks the question and then Moise, her husband, sings out the long response. But on the last verse they sing the whole list together.

Exilia and Moise Bellaire [Sing]:

Dis moi pourquoi onze
Dis moi pourquoi onze
Onze milles vierges
Dix commandements
Neuf chœurs des anges
Huit beatitudes
Sept sacrements
Six urnes rendues placées aux noces de Cana
Cinq livres de Moïse
Quatre évangélistes
Les Trois Hebreus
Deux Testaments
Il n y a qu un seul Dieu
Il n y a qu un seul Dieu

Dis moi pourquoi douze
Dis moi pourquoi douze
Les douze apôtres
Onze milles vierges
Dix commandements
Neuf chœurs des anges
Huit beatitudes
Sept sacrements
Six urnes rendues placées aux noces de Cana
Cinq livres de Moïse

Quatre évangélistes
Les Trois Hebreus
Deux Testaments
Il n y a qu un seul Dieu
Il n y a qu un seul Dieu

John Fenn: That was a mouthful, and it was a little fast. Do you know what they said?

Steve Winick: Luckily, I helped translate that for James Leary's Book *Folksongs of Another America*, so I listened to it a lot. The list goes like this: Twelve Apostles, eleven thousand virgins (who I'll explain were the companions of St. Ursula in a prominent Catholic legend), ten commandments, nine choirs of angels, eight beatitudes, seven sacraments, six urns arrived at the marriage at Cana (those are the urns of water that Jesus turned into wine), five books of Moses, four evangelists, three Hebrews (meaning the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), two testaments, and there is but one single God.

John Fenn: Well, we have one single guest we still want to talk to, and that's Jennifer Cutting, a folklife Specialist at AFC. Most of these songs have been pretty religious, but she's brought one that's about the more social aspects of the holiday: eating, drinking, and being merry.

Jennifer Cutting: That's right, 'cause I am all about eating, drinking, and being merry.

John Fenn: so what song did you bring us?

Jennifer Cutting: Well, it's a song that's generally known as "The Wassail Song," but since there are several very different songs called that, I call it "The Gloucestershire Wassail," since it was collected in Gloucestershire as well as other places.

Steve Winick: And why did you select this song?

Jennifer Cutting: Well, it's special to me because a number of versions were collected by James Madison Carpenter in his collection, which I've been curating for many years here at the American Folklife Center.

John Fenn: so you say it's a "Wassail" song, and that there are others. What does that mean, exactly?

Jennifer Cutting: Well, wassail is from an old Anglo-Saxon toast, meaning "Be hale" or "Be well." So as an activity, wah-SAIL-ing or wass'l-ing, means drinking to people's health, or sometimes the health of other things like crops or trees. And this particular song drinks to the health of some farm animals and also people around the farm where it's sung. Carpenter collected this song mostly in manuscripts, which you can see on the blog. But we don't have a good recording of it in the Carpenter collection. Which brings us to another reason why Steve and I both love this song.

John Fenn: what's that?

Steve Winick: it's because we sing it every year as part of our mummers' play. Staff members of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress have performed a mummers' play, which is our adaptation of a traditional English folk drama, each year since 2009. Jennifer adapted the earliest play from items in the Carpenter collection, including this song.

Jennifer Cutting: so, in the week leading up to the holiday, Steve and I and several other staff members precess around the Library of Congress singing this song!

Steve Winick: 2018, believe it or not, will be the tenth annual AFC mummers' play, and the tenth time we have roved the halls of the Library of Congress singing our Wassail song.

John Fenn: So you have a recording of the AFC mummers?

Jennifer Cutting: We sure do.

Steve Winick: Then we'd better say our thank yous. To those we listened to today: Aunt Molly Jackson, Burl Ives, Jilson Setters, Jean Ritchie, Samuel Martinez Y Lavadí, Adolfo Chavez, Julian Lobato, The Silver Star Singers, The Davies Hill School Chorus, Bessie Jones, Exilia and Moise Bellaire, and the AFC Mummings.

John Fenn: Also, big thanks to Stephanie Hall, Nancy Groce, and Jennifer Cutting for sharing songs, Trelani Duncan and Mackenzie Kwok on the writing team, and of course, our engineer, Jon Gold.

Steve Winick: And of course, thanks to YOU, the listener!

John Fenn: Have a happy holiday season! Here are the AFC Mummers with their Wassail!

Mummers:

**Wassail, wassail all over the town
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee**

Now here's to the bullock and to his right eye
May God send our master a good Christmas pie
A good Christmas pie that may we all see
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee

**Wassail, wassail all over the town
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee**

Now here's to the milk cow and to her broad horn
May God send our master a good crop of corn
A good crop of corn that we may all see
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee

**Wassail, wassail all over the town
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee**

And here's to the calf and to her right ear
Pray God send our master a happy New Year
A happy New Year that we may all see
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee

**Wassail, wassail all over the town
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee**

Now here's to the lass in the lily white smock
Who tripped to the door and slipped back the lock
Who tripped to the door and pulled back the pin
For to let all us jolly wassailers in.

**Wassail, wassail all over the town
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee**

**Wassail, wassail all over the town
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee**