I may be right, I may be wrong
You're gonna miss me when I'm gone

Oh, the Rock Island Line's a mighty good road.
The Rock Island Line's the road to ride.
The Rock Island Line's a mighty good road.
If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'
Get your ticket at the station on the Rock Island Line

The cat's in the cupboard but he don't see me

Oh, the Rock Island Line's a mighty good road.
The Rock Island Line's the road to ride.
The Rock Island Line's a mighty good road.
If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'
Get your ticket at the station on the Rock Island Line

Well, Jesus died to save our sins
Glory to God, we goin' to see Him again.

Oh, the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
The Rock Island Line is the road to ride.
The Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'
Get your ticket at the station on the Rock Island Line

Yeah, the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
The Rock Island Line is the road to ride.
The Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'
Get your ticket at the station on the Rock Island Line
If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'
Get your ticket at the station on the Rock Island Line

If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'
Get your ticket at the station on the Rock Island Line
YEAH!

John Fenn: 02:40 That was the English singer-songwriter Billy Bragg singing us into the Folklife today podcast. I'm John Fenn and I'm here with my colleague Stephen Winick.

Steve Winick: Hello from the beautiful Thomas Jefferson building.

John Fenn: We're both folklorists at the American Folklife Center here at the Library of Congress. I'm the head of research and programs and Steve is the Center's writer and editor as well as the creator of our blog "Folklife Today." Today we want to discuss occupational folklore and focus on the very interesting Occupational Folklife Project now underway at the Library.

Steve Winick: 03:07 Occupational folklore or folklife is the study of work and workers, and it takes many forms: stories about how people learn their jobs; special language or jargon needed within a particular trade; the unique skills and knowledge needed to do different jobs; stories, songs, and legends related to specific professions; and firsthand descriptions of people's workdays and job related experiences. The Song Billy Bragg just sang is an occupational folk song written by employees of the Rock Island railroad and collected by John and Alan Lomax in Arkansas in the 1930s it demonstrates that occupational folklore and folklife has always been an important part of our archive.

John Fenn: 03:44 That's an important point, Steve. Work songs and other occupational folklore were a major focus for many of our early collectors, but recently we've increased our focus on occupational folklife. Eight years ago, American Folklife Center launched the Occupational Folklife Project and set up the Archie Green fellowships to support fieldwork documenting contemporary workers throughout the United States talking about their jobs.

Steve Winick: 04:05 So we're going to talk to Nancy Groce, who directs that project, and several other staff members later in this episode. But first, hearing the words Archie Green Fellowships, the question might occur to you, who is this Archie Green? Archie Green was a
folklorist whose two greatest legacies within the discipline are his focus on the folklore of work, not only occupational folklore, but also the folklore of organized labor and the founding of the American Folklife Center.

John Fenn: 04:30 Yes. So let's talk about his primary legacy. Steve, didn't you tell me that the person from the Library of Congress staff who knew Archie best is David Taylor? My predecessor as the American Folklife Center's head of research and programs?

Steve Winick: 04:42 That is correct. Unfortunately, David wasn't able to join us in the studio, although he still works here at the library of Congress. They just keep them too busy up there. But we do have a clip of David explaining his relationship with Archie and the source of some of our audio of Archie himself. So here's David recorded back in 2009.

David Taylor: 04:59 Once you met Archie, you never forgot him. I've known Archie since 1972 he was the second folklorist I met in my life when I was an undergraduate, the University of Maine. He came to lecture there and to talk about his research, uh, interviewing workers of various kinds around the country. And he really turned beyond to that and that had a big influence on my later work as a folklorist. Yeah, he is a towering figure in our field and much beloved. Certainly I had an opportunity to go out in and interview him at his home in the Castro district of San Francisco back in 2003 and spent the better part of two days interviewing Archie about his life.

John Fenn: 05:42 So the first of David's clips about Archie is how he became a shipwright as a means to get involved in the organized labor movement in the 1940s.

Archie Green: 05:52 We all knew about the Labor Movement. And some became professionals, NLRB, Social Security, labor lawyers, labor editors, but those of us that had a more romantic vision of work—we wanted to be real workers, and we'd go up in the union movement after we proved ourselves in the trades. So, the idea of craftsmanship and union leadership were fused. That is, it was if, if you were a union leader without coming up through the craft you were a phony; you were imposed upon the workers. But if you came up from the ranks, if they elected their own leader that was legitimate. It was a combination of John Lewis, who was a great orator, and bushy-browed and lion-maned. He'd come out of the mines and he studied Shakespeare, on the one hand, and Paul Bunyan, the mythical figure, on the other. That workers were big and strong and always striding into the future. We didn't have any specific
trades in mind, but it became a regional thing. In Kentucky, it would have been coal mining. In Pittsburgh, it would’ve been steel. In Detroit, it would have been autos. In San Francisco it was Maritime. So roughly my goal was to be a maritime worker.

John Fenn: 07:39 And Archie did become a shipwright and a union leader. But then he went back to the university. First he got a master’s degree in library science and then he got a PhD in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania. One of the things that Archie devoted himself to as a scholar was the occupational song. The way that songs reflected the lives of workers. He wrote his doctoral dissertation about the traditions of coal miners with particular attention to songs about mining. It was published as a seminal book, *Only a Miner*.

Steve Winick: And he chose that title based on one of my favorite songs here in the archives. So let's hear a version by blind Jim Howard from Kentucky.

Blind Jim Howard: 08:13 He's only a miner been killed in the ground, He's only a miner, and one more is gone; Killed by an accident, there's no one can tell His mining's all over, poor miner, farewell.

He leaves his dear wife, and little ones, too To earn them a living as all miners do. While he was working for those whom he loved He met a sad fate from a boulder above.

He's only a miner been killed in the ground, He's only a miner, and one more is gone; Killed by an accident, there's no one can tell His mining's all over, poor miner, farewell.

The miner is gone, we'll see him no more God be with the miner, where ever he goes God pity the miners, protect them as well And shield them from danger while down in the ground.

He’s only a miner been killed in the ground, He's only a miner, and one more is gone; Killed by an accident, there's no one can tell His mining's all over, poor miner, farewell.

I thought of that last verse, and I just sang it on out!

John Fenn: 10:24 Archie was also important to the founding of the American Folklife Center. What can you tell me about that, Steve?
Steve Winick: Well, Archie believed so strongly that the nation should formally acknowledge the importance of traditional heritage, and also preserve and present it, that from 1969 to 1976 he put his academic career on hold, moved to Washington DC and lobbied congress for the passage of the American Folklife Preservation Act. This act was passed unanimously by Congress and signed by President Ford in 1976 and thus established the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. It was a remarkable effort and it’s amazing that it was done by Archie, almost single handedly. Here’s what he told David about it.

Archie Green: We really lobbied out of Frank Thompson’s office. You know, I’d go to his office, put down my bags and he’d give me leads. But in that process of learning to lobby, you know, they, there’s a network of friendly aides and they would look, we had a natural constituency, all the liberal congressmen, Frank Thompson, Bella Abzug, Peter Rodino, they were Andrew Young. They were for us because they were liberal, if, if they were ethnic, like Peter Rodino remembered as grandmother, you know, the thing he remembered, she wore an amulet called the Malocchio, the evil eye, you know, to ward off the evil eye. And I walked in, some of these only took a minute. I’d walk into his office and he said, I know all about folklore. And he told me about as when I was a little boy and look up at my mother’s Malocchio and you know, I’d be frightened and scared, so then put me on the bill. But others took more time. Anyhow, we’d get co-sponsors in the House. The tradition then was 25 on a bill. And we got Appalachian conservatives by Appalachian music. I was able to get Herman Talmadge, and Sam Ervin, I even had Strom Thurmond. You know, I ranged from McGovern to Thurmond.

John Fenn: Again, that was Archie Green talking about lobbying Congress for the American Folklife preservation act. And out of his efforts, the American Folklife Center emerged in 1976. So Steve, how did you come to know the story of how Archie lobbied Congress?

Steve Winick: That’s a really good question because that story of Archie lobbying congress to create the American Folklife Center is actually part of the occupational folklore of workers here at AFC. We all learn the story soon after we get hired here and then we hear it over and over during our years here. We have physical artifacts related to the story, including a desk plaque that says "citizens committee for an American Folklife Center," which Archie used to have on his desk at whatever office he was lobbying out of. And we have different versions of the story to some people emphasize his ability to find a folklore topic close to the heart of any given representative or senator based on
their district or religion or ethnicity or personal tastes, which was an important part of his strategy. Jennifer cuttings version emphasizes that Archie apparently saved money by eating nothing but peanut butter for seven years because he was so poor when he was on the hill.

John Fenn: I've also heard that the story of Archie is still told by members of Congress.

Steve Winick: Yes, there are still some longtime members who remember Archie as a lobbyist, and even among those who didn't know him then, many have heard the tale from senior members. In fact, the most impressive time I heard the story was from a member of Congress. Soon after Archie died in 2009 we were privileged to have Archie's representative in Congress come address us about his importance, and we captured that moment on video. In addition to being his representative. She was also a friend of Archie's. And she happened at that time to be Speaker of the House. And remarkably, she is now Speaker of the House again. So let's hear Nancy Pelosi tell us a little bit about Archie Green.

Nancy Pelosi: Archie Green, I'm so proud of him as a San Franciscan. He represented the best of our city of San Francisco, and indeed of the nation. He was a scholar and a worker,--you know all of this, but I want the record to show that the Speaker of the House does too—a teacher of folklore and a student of culture, a man committed to his family, passionate about our shared history, unwavering in his dedication to social justice. He was a great patriot, serving our country in the Civilian Conservation Corps and in the United States Navy, as a union worker, and as an activist, and an advocate. A great American. With deep pride in our nation’s heritage, Archie worked tirelessly to create the national center to preserve American folklife. He lobbied every Senator and Representative—relentless was a word that was so inadequate to describe him—why folk traditions in their states and districts mattered, and why ordinary citizens who carried them on deserved our recognition. In 1976 his efforts paid off, 33 years ago. Because of Archie’s advocacy, the American Folklife Preservation Act became law and the dream of an American Folklife Center became a reality at the Library of Congress. In our hometown of San Francisco, Archie worked diligently to highlight the contributions of working people. He helped preserve structures along the waterfront, to forever remind us of the central role shipwrights and longshoremen played in our city’s history. On the national stage, he founded the nonprofit fund for labor culture and history, to boost understanding of laborlore; to bring trade unionists, scholars,
and artists together; to shine a bright light on the indispensable role played by working people in forging our national identity in so many ways. In his honor, we will remain steadfast in our commitment to Archie’s cause. We will continue to honor the folklore of America’s labor force. We will keep alive the sounds, songs, and stories of our nation’s working men and women. Archie Green was a legend in his own time, and a legend for all time, and for his work, the Library of Congress awarded him the Living Legend award in 2007, capping off a lifetime of achievement. The landscape of our American national heritage was forever changed by Archie Green’s work.

John Fenn: 16:58 Wow. It is pretty impressive to hear the Speaker of the House talk so passionately about a folklorist. And that's just one of the reasons we honor his legacy through the Archie Green fellowships. Through these fellowships, we have collected almost 900 oral history interviews with American workers, and more continue to arrive every few months. All of them will be preserved in the American Folklife Center’s archive, but through the Library’s public-facing website, we’ll also be able to post these interviews online and share this exciting research collection widely. Eventually, all the Occupational Folklife Project interviews will be available online, but right now, we wanted to let people know about the project in general and celebrate the posting of the first hundred or so interviews on a few specific occupations. So let’s talk with some AFC staff members who are involved in this project. First up, we welcome our AFC colleague, Folklife Specialist, Nancy Groce.

Steve Winick: Hi Nancy.

Nancy Groce: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Steve Winick: 17:50 Before we start, let us know how you've been working in folklife and what kinds of occupational Folklife research you've done. Well, I've been at the American Folklife Center for about 10 years, but I was interested in occupational Folklife a long time before that I initially I was interested in musical instrument makers and then I got very interested in interviewing workers in urban areas, especially in my hometown of New York City. So I did interview projects with backstage Broadway workers and with traders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and the Mercantile Exchange with subway drivers and taxi drivers and the people who put up the water towers around the city. And just a whole variety of things.

Steve Winick: Oh, that's really cool. As a New Yorker myself, I appreciate all of those occupations. That's terrific.
John Fenn: So it makes sense. Nancy, you've been so central to the design and management of our Archie Green fellowships and the Occupational Folklife Project. Can you give us a little more background on this project and how it came to be?

Nancy Groce: Oh sure. So the Occupational Folklife Project, or OFP as we like to call it, began in 2010 as a multi-year project by the American Folklife Center to document the culture of contemporary American workers during what was then an era of economic and social transition. The idea was inspired, as you've pointed out, by Archie Green's work and also by the New Deal WPA projects during the 1930s, especially the American life histories which were collected by fieldworkers across the country employed by the federal writer's project. And more than 2,900 of these interviews are now housed at the library of Congress.

Steve Winick: Incidentally, Archie was a WPA worker himself in the Civilian Conservation Corps. So that was another connection he had to this great labor history.

Nancy Groce: Yeah. Right. And the Occupational Folklife Project was also partially inspired by a great oral history collection done by the colorful Chicago-based writer, researcher and radio host Studs Terkel whose book Working was a bestseller in the early 1970s like the WPA life histories Terkel set out to document the voices of everyday Americans doing a wide variety of jobs. And in the process he found that almost everybody he interviewed had something interesting and insightful to say about their jobs.

John Fenn: And on top of that, the American Folklife Center archive already has a lot of occupational folklore interviews, right?

Nancy Groce: Yeah, absolutely. Among our more than 3,200 collections, there are a lot that either feature occupational folklore or include a lot of information on occupational folklife, but like a lot of things in scholarly research, topics go in and out of fashion. So there was a lot of interest in occupational folklore studies in the 1930s and then again in the 1970s but not much has been done in recent years. So we thought maybe this was an interesting time to revisit the topic. Oh and one more thing. As you mentioned at the beginning of the episode, many folklorists like Archie Green for example, discovered occupational folklore through their interest in work songs. So we had lots of material in the archives from occupations that also had strong and distinctive song traditions. For example, cowboys and miners or lumberjacks and sailors. Traditionally these were also all heavily male professions. What we didn't have was interviews with heavily female occupations like, for example, teachers or nurses.
or home health care workers. So we thought this new occupational folklife initiative would be a good way to enrich and balance our archive with more inclusive reflections of contemporary working Americans.

Steve Winick: Wow, great idea. So how's it going?

Nancy Groce: You know, it's going great. To date, with the help of dozens of research teams across the country, we've added almost 900 occupational Folklife interviews to our archive. And since all the fieldwork being done is being submitted electronically, we've designed a very helpful and rather neat online intake system to help us ingest—now there's a real archive word, ingest—and keep track of the ethnographic information when it comes in, and then make it available or as hardcore archivists say, serve it to researchers online and in our reading room.

Steve Winick: Yeah, I think our motto should be "Ingest and Serve."

John Fenn: Ha. That's a good one, Steve. But let's discuss specifics. What do people talk about and what trades in occupations are being documented?

Nancy Groce: Right now, interviews are usually about an hour long and we've recorded either audio or video formats. Um, people talk about their current jobs and how they came to be in that job. They talk about how they learn their jobs, on the job challenges and rewards, and what they like or dislike about their jobs, the history of their trades, their coworkers and mentors and their larger occupational communities, the future of their trades and whether their children would be likely to go into their trades. Each interview has a slightly different shape because each person in each profession is a bit different, but there are usually a lot of fascinating content in each of these interviews. And I think listeners can't help but come away thinking about how many interesting dedicated workers there are out there.

John Fenn: Well, Nancy, there are numerous collections within the larger Occupational Folklife Project, right?

Nancy Groce: Yes. At this point there are more than 45 individual sub-collections focusing on specific trades or occupations within the Occupational Folklife Project. Each sub-collection has been compiled by an individual fieldworker or a team of researchers collecting interviews on behalf of the American Folklife Center. Each collection includes oral history interviews with a worker or a group of workers, as well as interview transcripts,
photographs, and other materials, like permission forms and sometimes scans of older, historic photographs or older printed materials or things like business announcements or menus or logos.

John Fenn: 23:37 So as of now, June, 2019 which collections are available online?

Nancy Groce: 23:41 Right now, we've posted seven collections of the 45 that have been accomplished so far and these include a wonderful collection on hairdressers and beauty shop workers by New York based researcher Candacy Taylor; stories about back of track workers at thoroughbred racetracks along the East Coast by folklorist Ellen McHale, interviews with Nevada gold miners collected by folklorists Meg Glaser and Charlie Seeman; oral histories of circus workers in Oklahoma, gathered by Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn; documentation of ironworkers from Illinois and Wisconsin, collected by Jim Leary and Bucky Halker; and some great video interviews with home health care workers in Eugene, Oregon, collected by Bob Bussel and his team of fieldworkers. We also have many terrific interviews with workers doing various maritime related jobs at the port of Houston. This was an initial project that we put online. Um, and can I tell you a little bit about it?

Steve Winick: Sure. Go for it.

Nancy Groce: 24:40 This is a wonderful collection. It features 54 in-depth interviews recorded in 2011 and 2012 by a team of Texas-based folklorists and fieldworkers led by folklorist Pat Jasper, who is director of folklife and civic engagement at the Houston Arts Alliance. Dr. Jasper coordinated a team of more than a dozen researchers who documented the work experience of river pilots, marine firefighters, longshoremen, tugboat operators, port engineers, union organizers, employees of port-related businesses, and many, many other workers who keep one of America's busiest ports humming.

Steve Winick: So how does the AFC organize and support all of these interviews?

Nancy Groce: Most of the fieldwork projects that feed the Occupational Folklife Project are supported through our Archie Green fellowship program. Since 2010 more than 45 Archie Green fellowships have been awarded to individual fieldworkers, scholars, and research teams at nonprofit organizations and universities to underwrite work-related oral history and collecting projects across the United States.
Individuals and teams apply for these annual competitive grants and the ones selected by our review panel then work closely with the staff here at the American Folklife Center to collect, process, and submit interviews that meet agreed upon standards and protocols. And I should add that some individuals and organizations are also participating in this Occupational Folklife Project without the grants.

John Fenn: Now, if you're interested in learning about more of the grants, you can find information about the Archie Green fellowships on the American Folklife Center website at loc.gov/folklife. But Nancy, can you tell us a bit more about the Port of Houston collection?

Nancy Groce: Well, it was one of the first projects we funded through the Archie Green fellowships and it was the first collection that was made available on our website. And I love it because it contains so many great interviews with fascinating people doing jobs I didn’t even know existed.

John Fenn: I've learned a lot about looking at that question too. Do you have any particular favorite interview moments from the Port of Houston collection?

Nancy Groce: Well, I love the interview that Pat Jasper did with Gilda Ramirez, who was the vice president for small business development at the port of Houston's Port Authority in 2012. Gilda grew up in a family of port workers that extended back several generations and she offers wonderful memories about how the port related occupations of her family members shaped and molded her childhood experiences.

John Fenn: Great. Let's hear it.

Pat Jasper: 27:14 I wonder if you have any memory of neighbors in the Magnolia Park area who worked for the port and could recall maybe some of their activities, like you have family members.

Gilda Ramirez: 27:28 Well, I do remember that one of my brothers worked for Caterpillar, and again, they worked near the Port Authority and a lot of those pieces of equipment came across the docks. And I remember as a child the smell of oil. And thinking... And I associated that with money, because they worked and then on Friday, they would come back and they would have a lot of money. They always had a roll of cash on Friday; so I always associated that smell with a job and money. And I think I can
associate that smell with several of our neighbors—and I guess it was black oil.

And then I remember my mother and other people—this is really funny—making lunch for them and the big lunch pails they would carry and they always had really good smelling food. So it’s funny to associate the smells with the work, and again, the hustle and bustle and the movement of the Port Authority. So they always had the big lunch pails and I remember the neighbors all walking in the morning and getting on a truck and then coming back in the evening, and the wives waiting outside for their spouses and those kinds of things.

So it’s a great story and I think this neighborhood has flourished and people have been able to move on. I think a lot of second and third generation have been able to send their children to college. And we often laugh because my father worked on the docks. And I get to look out my window and see the docks. So all of his hard labor and fruits of labor have definitely paid off. But I think it’s very important to not forget that you got here on the backs of someone else—and it’s just good to always remember that. And to do what you can for others. If you talk to people from the Magnolia Park that many, many people, I would, I would venture to say every single person that grew up in Magnolia is somehow tied to the port authority.

Steve Winick: Again, that was Gilda Ramirez from the working the port of Houston collection.

John Fenn: And what happened after the interview was over?

Nancy Groce: 29:58 The interviewers make sure that the people that they’re interviewing know that they are being recorded for our archive and that an unedited copy of their interview will also be made available publicly on the library of Congress’s website. Like all modern folklorists and oral historians, at the end of the interview, um, the fieldworker asked the interviewee to sign a release form giving the American Folklife Center permission to post the interview and share it with researchers. And by the way, the interviewee has the right not to sign it if they prefer. In such case, the interview cannot be accessioned into our archive and it would be erased. Right now we have seven collections online and pretty soon these will be joined by interviews with Park Rangers in Kentucky and small business owners in Baton Rouge, tobacco growers in Connecticut, funeral home workers in the Carolinas, electricians in New York and many more. And the fieldworkers are the ones that do the essential work of finding great people to interview and convincing them to help
us enrich the American Folklife Centers archive by sharing their
history thoughts and reflections, and the stories are just great.

John Fenn: 31:07 Well Nancy, thanks for all of your work on this project and
thanks for taking the time to talk with us and give us an
overview during the podcast.

Nancy Groce: Oh, my pleasure.

Steve Winick: Over the past eight years, scores of folklorist and other
ethnographers have been involved with the Occupational
Folklife Project and we thought it would be fun to talk to
someone who actually went out and collected for the project.
Fortunately, our director here at the American Folklife Center,
Dr. Betsy Peterson, conducted some excellent interviews for the
working the port of Houston project before joining our staff in
2011 so I've asked Betsy to stop by.

John Fenn: Hi Betsy and thanks for coming onto the podcast with us.

Betsy Peterson: Hey John and Steve, it's great to be here.

Steve Winick: So what was your involvement in the Port of Houston project?

Betsy Peterson: The head of the project, folklorist Pat Jasper, hired me to do
some interviews. The port of Houston project was interesting
because it looked at the full range of occupations involved with
the port from longshoremen to union officials to stevedores,
crane operators, coastguard, channel pilots, and tugboat
operators. I had to leave the project early, unfortunately, to
start my work here at the Folklife Center. But I loved doing all of
the interviews.

John Fenn: 32:14 So earlier we had Nancy on the episode and we asked if she had
a favorite interview moment from the collection. Now it's your
turn.

Betsy Peterson: 32:21 Well, the interview with Tom Lightsey stands out to me
because, mainly, of his job. The position of a channel or a river
pilot is utterly unique. They are the kings or queens of any port.
Their training is rigorous. The job is high pressured and
dangerous. And in the history of the Houston port and ship
channel, which is over a hundred years old, there are just over
200 pilots. They are members of a very exclusive club. Um, in
this interview, Mr. Lightsey talks about the pilot's
responsibilities and authority and the importance of safety.
When a cargo ship is about to enter the ship channel, which
extends roughly 50 miles from Galveston to Houston, the pilot gets a call and meets the ship. When he comes on board, the ship's captain must relinquish all control and authority to the channel pilot who guides the ship safely into port. The pilot knows every nook and cranny and inch of the channel. And the Houston ship channel is especially known for being narrow. In this excerpt Mr. Lightsey starts off saying that you can't just stop a cargo ship in mid motion in the channel.

STEVE WINICK: All right, let's hear it.

Tom Lightsey: And you can’t stop that ship. So you have to be very, very cautious; and safety is the pilot’s primary concern – Safety! Safety! Safety! That’s what we get paid for. Because one collision can be chaotic.

Pat Jasper: Why can't you stop that ship?

Tom Lightsey: Well, The channel is only 400 feet wide. It’s man-made; it’s got bluff banks; and it depends on your speed and everything, so that’s the reason, the deeper it is, the slower you have to go because the ship will not get close to the bank. Because you have bank suction, bank cushion, and the closer you get to that bluff bank the more the water is going down inside the hull pushing it back out, and pushing it back out and towards the center of the channel.

And when two ships are meeting – the media has always called it Texas Chicken – the Bay might be 5 miles across, but that channel is only 400 feet. And the pilots know what they can do. And you have to hold on when you’re meeting head-to-head till you’re about half-a-mile apart. And man their first time here, these captains climb the wall because they think a collision is imminent—but it’s not! We pilots have done this so much that we wait till we know; just move 3 or 4 degrees over and we pass—and if you get over too soon, the bank is going to force you back into the center of the channel. So you have to do that. But it makes all the people on the ship, if they haven’t been here before, real nervous. Houston was—it’s very dangerous.

And we’ve had bad collisions--I’ve had them—before we had the good communications like we have now. And we’ve had one pilot who was burned to death in a collision. And so that’s the reason we preach safety. And the pilots have made so much progress along that line. The channel is now over 525 feet wide. But as I said, safety is the primary concern and we live and breathe safety.
Steve Winick: 36:10 Again, that was Tom Lightsey, a channel pilot in the port of Houston. Thanks for bringing along that interview, Betsy.

Betsy Peterson: My pleasure. And thanks for having me on.

Steve Winick: Next up, let’s welcome Nicole Saylor who is the head of the archive here at the American Folklife Center. She leads a team of archivists, folklorists, and ethnomusicologists, to acquire, preserve and provide access to afcs, one of a kind collection. Nikki, welcome.

Nicki Saylor: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Steve Winick: Can you briefly share your role or responsibilities in the Occupational Folklife Project?

Nicki Saylor: Well, sure. Um, as you mentioned, I lead the archives staff and we’re tasked with acquiring these collections and making them accessible. You know, we’re also interested in building a national online, uh, oral history collecting workflow. And so the Occupational Folklife Project has been a really fun test bed for that kind of work. Um, so we have an online submission platform for the fieldworkers.

37:02 And so I helped get that launched. I help keep that maintained. Um, we work hard to shorten the distance between, uh, the fieldwork itself and online access and we’ve certainly learned that that's a huge challenge for us. But we know that, you know, to meet the demands of the archives that we need to work on scaling access to are born digital fieldwork. And so we keep at it.

Steve Winick: Great. Thanks.

John Fenn: Were there any particular challenges, Nicki, that stand out with regards to this project? Especially considering that there are so many different fieldworkers involved across multiple sub collections?

Nicki Saylor: Right. So if you can imagine that at the world's biggest library when you get books, you get them often from a publisher in a real standardized way, um, that are relatively easy to manage. Um, in this case we have teams of distributed field workers and they’re submitting all this multi-format stuff, audio, video, sound recordings, field notes, um, you know, that they created off their own cameras and their own styles.
Um, and so to try to bring any kind of uniform, and he did this to try to, you know, make it a manageable thing to acquire and to, and to make accessible is no small feat. The spirit of the project is to rely on a fieldworker information and make things, you know, accessible in short order. Um, sometimes that can run counter to impulses we have as archivists and librarians to have pristine metadata to smooth, you know, processes. So it's, it's fun to challenge those assumptions about how this work gets done.

Steve Winick: So, um, how is it determined which interviews are made available online access first, uh, how is that prioritized? Is it first come first serve or is there some other principle involved?

Nicki Saylor: Of course, you know, we want to give good geographic coverage and occupational coverage to give the public a sense of the breadth and depth of the collection.

So for instance, the next round of collections that are going online are some of the most contemporary ones. So we don't necessarily follow a pattern chronologically.

Steve Winick: Great. Makes Sense. So if there were any particular sound clips that you wanted to share with, uh, with people listening to this podcast, what would you choose?

Nicki Saylor: Well, I chose this clip from an interview with Terry James Thibodeaux conducted by folklorist Pat Jasper in 2011. Um, Terry is a port engineer with Martin Marine, uh, in the port of Houston and the Houston shipping channel. Uh, the whole collection is fantastic, includes more than 50 interviews, uh, with boat pilots, longshoremen, tugboat operators, and so on. Um, this stuff was made into an exhibit and beautiful book. Even an opera performance came out of, was inspired by the fieldwork in this project. So it's, it's an amazing collection. Um, and I chose the clip for a couple of reasons. So as somebody who spent most of my life in the Midwest landlocked, I don't know a thing about this culture. And so all of the information in the collection is pretty new to me. Um, and yet there's something really universal about how he talks about learning a job, which often involves so much more than just learning how to do the actual work.

John Fenn: Yeah. Great. Let's listen to it.

Pat Jasper: What I would describe as an apprenticeship.
So could you describe kind of that learning experience? How you, how you use that time to

well yeah. Instead of going to school or something for it, it was just right to work, you know, when you just helped the person who you was working with and he taught you everything he knew. And it takes a lot, a lot of years learn what they know because they’re pretty, pretty intelligent guys pretty smart guys. They have a lot of years underneath their belts. Well you learn how to uh, to try to troubleshoot problems. Um, you learn how to work with the guys, the people on the boats, uh, to get along with them, make everything work as a whole, as a whole unit.

And what were some of the major tasks you had to learn? I mean, I’m assuming that there’s a lot of mechanical.

Oh, you learn everything from the, um, uh, I'll call it from a toilet to broken hearts because you fixed every single thing on the boat, whatever broke. Most...mainly it’s your engines. We worked on the engines a lot back then, but you still have steering, you still have gearboxes you have...and then if they run over something and mess up the propellors, you find out what shipyard to bring it to. Um, pick the boat up and then there was a timeframe involved too. You gotta hurry up and as fast as you can make all the repairs normally as cheap as you can get as fast and cheap and try to get them back into working.

Again, that was Terry James Thibodeaux on the Folklife Today podcast.

Don’t you just love that line? You learn everything from a toilet to a broken heart. His job, like so many of our jobs, just comes down to fixing problems and then trying to take care of one another along the way.

Yeah. That's great.

Now, Nicki, I know that not all of the collections are yet available online, but how can listeners otherwise access the, the bulk of this material?

So for the dozens of collections that aren’t online, you can come to the American Folklife Center reading room at the Library of Congress.
John Fenn: Excellent. Well thanks for sharing and thanks for coming on the podcast today.

Steve Winick: Yeah, thank you so much.

Nicki Saylor: Thanks a lot. Thanks for having me.

Steve Winick: So earlier on, Nancy referred to our system for acquiring, ingesting and preserving these materials, which are then made accessible through the library of Congress website. Now we've asked Kelly Revak and Melissa Lindberg to explain the work that goes into acquiring, preserving, and making these collections available online. And in the process they'll give us a glimpse into the occupational folklife of archivists at the library of Congress because Kelly is an archivist here at the American Folklife Center and Melissa was an archivist here, but has since moved to the prints and photographs division of the Library of Congress. So both of them have worked on this collection. Welcome Melissa and Kelly.

Melissa Lindberg & Kelly Revak: Thank you.

Steve Winick: So Melissa, could you start out by talking about how the interviews are associated with the Occupational Folklife Project are sent to the library and tracked? I believe the stage is loosely referred to as intake.

Melissa Lindberg: That's right. Um, intake or acquisition of materials associated with each OFP project involves a lot of moving parts, but ultimately entails receiving all content and metadata from all of the OFP interview is associated with a given collection. All of the OFP content is what we call born digital. So it comes to the library as files in a variety of formats, including audio files containing the interview itself or video files. Um, digital photographs taken during the interview in many cases and textual materials like transcripts or logs and the release forms that interviewees signed to provide the library of Congress permission to share the interview materials with researchers and the public and to put them online. This can be one of the most potentially unwieldy aspects of the process. Fieldworkers deliver the files associated with a particular interview via file transfer software. And we need to make sure that those files are in the right format and match the associated metadata.

Steve Winick: Well, we often have occasion to speak of the magic of metadata on this podcast. So what in this context is the metadata?
Melissa Lindberg: 44:18 So metadata is the information about the files that we receive, including both descriptions of the interviews, like the where, what, who and when, and technical specifications related to the files. Fieldworkers themselves are tasked with entering most of the descriptive metadata and some of the technical metadata such as file name extensions like Jpg for an image file or a Wav for an audio file or mov for moving image files. They use a user-friendly online form that feeds into a specially designed database. These forms do some important things from an archival point of view, like automatically assigning each interview a unique number so that we can keep track of it.

Steve Winick: 44:54 So what do you do once the files are transferred and the Metadata is entered?

Melissa Lindberg: 44:58 Well, we have to review the Metadata to make sure that it meets our specifications. For example, we require that all sound files be submitted in wav format. Um, and then we need to compare content, so the actual files and Metadata to make sure that they match and that the files are formatted correctly. If there's an issue with the files, we have to get in touch with the field workers to get on the same page and then have them reformat or resubmit the information that they provided if need be.

Steve Winick: That sounds pretty complex.

Melissa Lindberg: It is. Lapses in communication with fieldworkers can cause headaches down the road when you're trying to locate a stray file or associated metadata that was made years previously. So we've taken steps to make sure that we follow up early and often. Once we're sure we have all the content in the form of text, audio and image files, we use the library system for copying content to the library of servers to ensure the ingest and long-term preservation of those materials.

Steve Winick: 45:48 Great. So Kelly, what's the next step that needs to take place to get these interviews up online?

Kelly Revak: 45:53 So maybe I'm just an archive nerd, but I think this next part is pretty cool.

Steve Winick: 45:57 Well, you're definitely not just an archive nerd. Kelly is also a great folklorist by the way.

Kelly Revak: 46:02 So at this point we have all the files safely preserved and all this great descriptive metadata provided by the fieldworkers in our
specially designed database. For the files to go online, we need to create a library of Congress catalog record for each interview. To be accessible and searchable by the public, the data from these catalog records, we'll eventually get paired with the digital files in our online presentation space. The fieldworker database, or maybe I should call it a metadatabase, was designed with this in mind. So we are sure that we're gathering all the pieces of information that we will eventually need to make those catalog records.

Steve Winick: 46:34 So it sounds like it should be pretty easy to make the fieldworker metadata into catalog records eventually.

Kelly Revak: 46:40 Well it sure wasn't. At least at first. The two systems are totally separate and don't talk to one another. The first collection I cataloged for this project, the port of Houston, I did by manually cutting and pasting from one system to the other. Reformatting the data and restructuring as needed. This drove me a little crazy because the data is already digital and I thought there had to be a better way. So I ended up learning enough programming to write a transformation script to take the fieldworkers data from the metadatabase and restructuring and rearranging it in batch to generate the catalog records. Now I can do in just a few minutes what it took months to do by hand.

Steve Winick: 47:16 Wow. That is so cool. You are an archive superhero

Kelly Revak: 47:18 Thanks Steve. So now that we have the full process in mind and the end goals for the data, Nancy and I can work with the fieldworkers to ensure the metadata they're creating is going to move smoothly through this whole process.

Steve Winick: 47:30 Great. And does anything else need to happen before they go online?

Kelly Revak: 47:34 There's still some more behind the scenes finagling. Um, mostly moving around and manipulating the files. Specifically, we make derivatives of all the files, which are generally have a smaller size and more easy to view or play in an online environment. If there are images or video, we also make thumbnails, so the interface looks nice. The full-size originals are still available for download though.

Steve Winick: 47:55 Wow, that's a lot of work. We are so glad to have such a great staff of dedicated archivists here, like Kelly and Melissa. Do you have a favorite moment from the interviews that you've processed?
Kelly Revak: Yeah, so I'm gonna mix it up. Well, almost all the interviews have either audio or video components, many also include photographs as well. I know we're on a podcast here so you can't see them, but I'd love to tell you about my favorite series of images, which is in the Big Top Show Goes On collection of interviews with circus workers in Oklahoma. The images are scans of what look like Polaroids from 1972 that are still held by the interviewee B.K. Silverlake. In this series of three snapshots we see Mel Ray Silverlake, a young boy with Norma Jean, the elephant at the Fisher Brothers Circus. In the first image, the elephant, Norma Jean is lying down on her side and Mel Ray is sitting on the side of her head enjoying a bag of popcorn. In the second image, Mel Ray is sharing some popcorn with Norma Jean who's reaching up with her trunk. The final image is an action shot, and in my mind, at least what it looks like has happened is the elephant set up suddenly in the boy's slide off. He's standing in front of the elephant looking upset and pointing while the elephant dumps the entire bag of popcorn into her mouth. Norma Jean just has this expression of mischief that cracks me up.

Steve Winick: Yeah, those are great photos and that kind of allows us to show the range of different interviews we have in this collection too, because those photos come from Juliana Nykolaiszyn and Tanya Finchum documenting circus workers in Oklahoma. Here's a bit of an interview with Barbara Miller Byrd, which also concerns elephants.

Barbara Miller Byrd: By that time they had one elephant and my mother and father lived in the truck, uh, in the, uh, front one part of that truck with the elephant and the elephant lived in the back part. Then they bought the farm across the street from where we're sitting today. It was an established farm and they'd bought the acreage. And, um, my, uh, grandfather moved into the little house on the, on the property, and, uh, the elephant got a barn. And so my mother always jokes, said that the elephant had a house before she did. And, uh, they just have always loved elephants, especially my father. Uh, and so he, uh, he's always been associated with the elephants, uh, all of his life. He loved to work with them and train them. When I was a baby, my mother tells stories about how they would go on the off season and they would take their elephants.

So they made a Tarzan movie in Hollywood one time, uh, which is always hysterical because I think Tarzan was in Africa and these were Asian elephants, but you know, no one paid any attention. And, uh, they, they performed with elephants since before I was born. And when they passed away, they actually
left their estate directly to the elephants. And they had already
given a property to the elephants, to the Endangered Ark
Foundation, 120 acres. And, um, so we used their estate to
erect the buildings that house the elephants and the exercise
pens. And, uh, and we have some left in a fund for perpetual
care of the elephants. They, it was very important to them that
they felt they were part of our family and that they stay
together. Um, and we care for them till they pass on.

Steve Winick: 51:07 Again, that was a clip of Barbara Miller Byrd from the
Occupational Folklife Project here on the Folklife Today podcast.
You can hear the rest of the circus interviews and see the
pictures Kelly mentioned by following links from our blog at
blogs.loc.gov/folklife where there's a great article about that
collection. Um, Melissa, did anything stand out for you from the
Occupational Folklife Project?

Melissa Lindberg: 51:30 Yeah, and I'd like to highlight a collection that I really enjoyed
working on because of its different approach. Um, although it's
not online yet. Most of the Occupational Folklife Project
interviews are conducted by folklorists or people who are
otherwise professionally trained to do this kind of work. And
they do a really good job, but at least one of the other
collections, the Domestic Workers United collection, um,
focuses on domestic workers in New York City. Um, and it takes
a different approach where the interviewee and the interviewer
are both domestic workers, Brooklyn Arts Council coordinator,
the project trained to the interviewers and recorded the
interviews. These worker to worker interviews are really special
because the interlocutors' shared experience. Really bring
something extra to the interviews, I think.

Steve Winick: 52:10 That sounds great and we really look forward to that one going
online as well. So Melissa and Kelly, thank you so much for
joining us.

Melissa Lindberg & Kelly Revak: Thank you.

John Fenn: Well Steve, it's been great hearing about the contemporary
folklife collecting that our Archie Green fellowships have
supported over the past eight years.

Steve Winick: Yes. And we're really looking forward to seeing more and more
of the Occupational Folklife Project collection go online as time
goes on because we think it will really be a resource that
everyone can use. But before we sign off, we began with an
Englishman singing an occupational song from Arkansas and I
thought it might make sense to allow our listeners to hear the
source recording from the archive. So Billy Bragg was here in 2017 talking about his book and again in 2018 to interview me for one of his media projects and both the book and the other project involved skiffle, which is a genre of music that emerged in the 1950s and was one of the main ingredients in British invasion rock.

53:03 The breakaway hit of skiffle was Lonnie Donegan's recording of "Rock Island Line." Donegan had heard it from Huddie Ledbetter or Lead Belly and Lead Belly had heard it as an assistant on the field trip where he and John Lomax had recorded it. So this is that field recording. I should say that folklorists make a distinction between "work songs," which are sung during physical labor to coordinate movements and relieve the tedium, and "occupational songs," which are songs about work. This one was an occupational song. It was a booster song written by a club made up of railway workers and they intended to sing the virtues of their railroad line, the great Rock Island Line.

John Fenn: 53:39 Well, let's play that after we give credit where credit is due. We'd like to thank David Taylor, Nancy Groce, Betsy Peterson, Nicki Saylor, Kelly Revak and Melissa Lindbergh for coming into the studio to talk with us.

Steve Winick: 53:50 We'd also like to thank Pat Jasper for her work on the port of Houston Project, Juliana Nykolaiszyn and Tanya Finchum for the Big Top project, and Archie Green, Gilda Ramirez, Terry James Thibodeaux, Tom Lightsey and Barbara Miller Byrd for allowing ethnographers to interview them. We want to thank Billy Bragg, Blind Jim Howard, and Kelly Pace for singing their songs and of course Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi for saying such nice things about Archie, and her staff for clearing us to use that audio.

John Fenn: 54:19 We should also thank all the AFC staff who have worked on processing and archiving the Occupational Folklife Project materials as they've come into our archive over the years. It takes a solid team to process the hundreds of interviews and thousands of digital files involved. Without the work of our audio engineer John Gold and our intern Gabriel Cowan, this podcast wouldn't have happened. And we're also indebted to Mike Turpin and the music division for use of the studio here in the Jefferson building, as well as all the colleagues throughout the library who helped deploy the podcast once we finish an episode.
Now to conclude and to finish our song, as the old singers said, let's hear the field recording of Kelly Pace and a group of other men singing "Rock Island Line."

I say the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
I say the Rock Island Line is the road to ride.
I say the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
If you want to ride, you gotta ride it like you're flyin'.
Buy your tickets at the station on the Rock Island Line.

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

I say the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
I say the Rock Island Line is the road to ride.
I say 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.

Well, the train left Memphis at half pas' nine.
Well, it made it back to Little Rock at eight forty-nine.

I say the Rock Island Line is a mighty good road.
I say the Rock Island Line is the road to ride.
I say 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.

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

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

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