Folklife Today
February 2020: Winter Songs, Part 2

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.


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

Stephen Winick: Hi Folks! As you may recall, we’ve embarked on an epic look at songs of winter over two episodes. We’ve asked some of our colleagues on the American Folklife Center staff to bring us their favorite songs about ice and snow. This is part two, so if you haven’t heard it yet, you can find part 1 at loc.gov/podcasts. It’s season 2, episode 3, or episode 15 if you prefer!

John Fenn: And that makes this Season 2, episode 4, or episode 16. And our first guide on this winter excursion is going to be Stephanie Hall, who is another of our Folklife Today bloggers and a folklorist here at the American Folklife Center. Stephanie did a blog post on winter songs in Sidney Robertson Cowell’s California folk music project collection, which was mostly recorded in 1939 as part of the WPA projects in California. What have you brought us, Stephanie?

Stephanie Hall: Well, I should say that the Cowell collection is very diverse and contains recordings in many languages. But most of the Winter songs I found that weren’t in English were either Christmas songs or songs of other religious holidays like Three Kings Day or St. Nicholas’s day. And since we covered that kind of song last December and we wanted secular songs this year, they’re both in English.

Stephen Winick: All right. What should we hear first?

Stephanie Hall: How about we hear Bogue Ford singing “Footprints in the Snow.”

John Fenn: Oh, that’s kind of a classic. Why don’t we hear it first and then talk about it.
Stephanie. Good idea!

Some lovers like the summer time when they stroll about
And courting in the meadows can be found without a doubt
But give to me the winter time, for the girl I love the best
Was captured while the snow was on the ground.

I traced her little footprints in the snow.
I traced her little footprints in the snow
I bless that happy day when Lily lost her way
I traced her little footprints in the snow.

I went to see this girl of mine one winter afternoon
That she had gone out walking, they informed me very soon
They said she’d strolled away, to where, they could not say
So I started out to find her in the snow

I traced her little footprints in the snow
I traced her little footprints in the snow
I bless that happy day when Lily lost her way
I traced her little footprints in the snow

I asked this little girl of mine, as we were walking home
And she promised that she never from me would ever roam
I live a happy life with the girl I made my wife
I won her when the snow was on the ground

I traced her little footprints in the snow
I traced her little footprints in the snow
I bless that happy day when Lily lost her way
I traced her little footprints in the snow

Stephen Winick: Again, that was Bogue Ford with “Footprints in the Snow.”
So, I know this song from Bill Monroe, who recorded it first in 1945, and I
also know that on his records, Monroe claimed authorship of the song
under the pseudonym Rupert Jones. But I’m guessing the song is actually
much older.

Stephanie Hall: that’s right. The first sound recording of the song seems to
be from 1931, a commercial recording by Ernest Branch and the West
Virginia Ramblers. But sheet music versions go back to about 1877, and
indicate that it was written by an English songwriter named Harry Wright.
The sheet music also claims that it was “Sung with great success” by a music-hall singer named “Jolly Little Lewis.” That sounds like fun! There are also older advertisements for Lewis’s performances, which make it clear that the song, as written by Wright and performed by Lewis, had existed on the music-hall circuit for a couple of years before the sheet music came out, so 1875 is probably about when it was written. The original title was “Footmarks in the Snow.” The older versions have some verses which Bogue Ford doesn’t sing. These make the plot a little clearer: the narrator goes looking for his sweetheart, and finds she has walked out on a snowy day and lost her way. By tracking her footprints, he’s able to find her and lead her back home. She’s so grateful for being rescued that she accepts his marriage proposal, and they live happily ever after.

John Fenn: But if she’s leaving visible footprints the whole way, couldn’t she just have followed her own footprints back home?

Stephanie Hall: yes, that’s the ironic thing. It’s kind of sexist, and reads like a male fantasy of rescuing the damsel in distress. But it was a nineteenth century idea of romance.

Stephen Winick: So given that Bogue Ford’s recording is 8 years after the commercial recording, I guess we’d have to ask if Ford seems to have been influenced by Ernest Branch.

Stephanie Hall: No, Bogue Ford’s version is much more like the sheet music and other English printed texts than like the commercial old-time records. So it seems likely the song came over from England in the oral tradition and both Ford and Branch got it from some other traditional singer.

John Fenn: Wow, thanks, Stephanie! It’s always great to get the background for a Bluegrass and old-time standard. What else did you bring?

Stephanie Hall: Well, how about we hear an ice-skating song?

Stephen Winick: An ice-skating song? Is that a whole genre?

Stephanie Hall: it turns out that it was. It’s surprising how many ice-skating songs you find from the 19th century if you go looking. There are several examples of sheet music on the Library of Congress website, and in the Cowell collection from California, there are two different ice skating songs, both sung by the same singer.
John Fenn: And who was this ice-skating singer?

Stephanie Hall: He was a man named George Vinton Graham. And he’s kind of famous in the Cowell collection because he owned a guitar but didn’t know how to play it. Cowell said that he tuned his guitar like a violin, but I think she was being kind. He felt he had to be strumming in order to sing, so he just strummed randomly, hitting dissonant chords. Because he knew a great many old songs that Cowell wanted to record in order to get the words and melodies, she tolerated his guitar strumming. So, his singing does sound strange, but there’s really gold in Cowell’s recordings of him.

Stephen Winick: Okay, let’s hear the skating song by George Vinton Graham.

George Vinton Graham: All right? Now this is the ice...this is the skating song. I was a little bit...the other one was a little bit different.

Over the ice in moonlit sheen  
Skates so clearly ringing  
Speed we on with merry hearts  
While the girls are singing  

Eyes shine bright through winter's night  
Icicles adorning  
Like a young bride in her robes  
On the wedding morning  

Over the ice in moonlit sheen  
Skates so clearly ringing  
Speed we on with merry hearts  
While the girls are singing  

John Fenn: Again, that was George Vinton Graham with his skating song. So, do we know anything about the song itself?

Stephanie Hall: The words were published anonymously as a poem in a magazine called “Onward” in 1870. We don’t know where the tune came from. “Onward” only lasted a couple of years, but in the same issue there was an article called “Yule Folk-Lore” so it might be fun to read the whole thing!

Stephen Winick: That’s great, Stephanie! Thanks so much!
Stephanie: You’re welcome! Thanks for having me!

Stephen Winick: You can find links to “Onward” magazine in the blog, as well as a link to the Cowell collection. Now, there’s another song that Stephanie wrote about in that blog post that’s been a favorite of mine for years, so it’s my second pick. In the Cowell collection, Warde Ford sings it, but it’s not a great recording, technically speaking...it skips a lot! But two other versions from our archive have been released to the public, one by Isaac Garfield Greer on one of our own Library of Congress LPs in the 1950s, and one by Charles Ingenthron on a CD compilation from our Vance Randolph collection. So we’ll play you parts of several versions.

John Fenn: So what’s the song?

Stephen Winick: It’s a song called “Young Charlotte” or “Fair Charlotte.” It’s a cautionary story about a young woman who wants to look fashionable and so refuses to wear bulky blankets on a sleigh ride to a fancy ball, and ends up getting a bit chilly on the way. So let’s hear the first part of the song as sung by Warde Ford.

Warde Forde: The song “Fair Charlotte.”

Fair Charlotte lived on a mountain side in a wild and lonely spot
Not another dwelling for three miles round except her father’s cot
And yet on many a rainy night young swains would gather there
For her Father kept a social abode and she was very fair

All in the village some fifteen miles there was a ball one night
And though the air was very cold young hearts were warm and light
Her eager looks and trembling hands when a well known voice she heard
As driving up to the cottage door Charles Leslie did appear

John Fenn: OK, so that part of the ballad sets the scene: Charlotte lives in an isolated house, but luckily, she and her family are popular with the neighbors, and a suitor named Charles shows up in a sleigh to take her to a ball.

Stephen Winick: Right! Let’s hear another segment of the ballad as sung by Charles Ingenthron. He pronounces the young woman’s name as Charlottie! Here are some of his verses:

Charles Ingenthron:
O daughter o daughter the mother said, those blankets round you fold
It is a dreadful night abroad, you'll catch your death of cold
O nay, o nay!" the daughter said, and she laughed like a gyptian queen
For me to be wrapped up in blankets like this, I never could be seen.

Her bonnet and her shawl were on, they stepped into the sleigh
And over the mountain side they went and o'er the hills away
There’s music in the chimes of the bells as o'er the hills they go
What a creaking noise the runners do make as they leave the frozen snow
The rain and the hail were falling fast as it gathered on her shawl
Young Charlottie said in cold solemn words “I am extremely cold.”

John Fenn: so this part has her mother telling her to wrap up, and she says
“no way, Mom, I’d never be seen all wrapped up in a blanket!” Like no other
parent has ever experienced that, right? And then she starts getting
“extremely cold” on the journey.

Stephen Winick: Yeah, and that’s where you get the sense it might not end
well! So let’s find out! Here’s the conclusion of the ballad as sung by I.G.
Greer.

I.G. Greer:
He cracked his whip, he urged his steed much faster than before
Saying it’s five more dreary miles to go and o'er the ice and snow
“How fast,” said Charles, “the frosty ice keeps gathering on my brow!”
And Charlottie said in a very feeble voice, "I'm growing warmer now."

He drove up to the ballroom door, stepped out and reached his hand
He asked her once, he asked her twice, he asked her three times o'er.
Why sit you there like a monument that has no power to move?
He took her hand in his, oh God, and it was deathly cold.
He twined his arms about her neck, the bitter tears did flow
As his thoughts turned back to place where she said, “I’m growing warmer
now."

John Fenn: Um, that’s a powerful ending. So she freezes to death on the
way to a party.

Stephen Winick: Yes. And one thing that’s interesting is that the writer had
a sense of the physiology of freezing to death, because people who are
freezing often do reach a point where they think they’re getting warmer, but
it’s just the body shutting down the extremities to keep the core warm—in other words, you’re beginning to die. And her boyfriend, seemingly, also knew this, because when he finds her dead, his mind goes back to her saying “I’m growing warmer now.” He realizes then that he should have caught on, but now it’s too late.

John Fenn: And we’ve presented the ballad in segments from different versions here, but you can hear all the versions in full over at the blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

Stephen Winick: Now, it’s not that common for ballads to be in the news, but just a few weeks ago as we record this, the Washington Post ran an article on “Young Charlotte.”

John Fenn: Really? What was the focus?

Stephen Winick: interestingly, when toy makers first started to market ceramic dolls for kids to play with in the bathtub, they mostly made them with a simple white glaze. So they kind of looked like frozen children. And at that time, the ballad of “Young Charlotte” was very popular. So the dolls came to be nicknamed “Frozen Charlotte” and “Frozen Charlie,” because those are the names of the young people in the song!

John Fenn: Wow! So what do know about these dolls?

Stephen Winick: Well, some of these dolls had arms that stuck out, but others had arms down at their sides, and attached all the way along. As solid pieces of ceramic, these dolls were nearly indestructible, and a lot of them are still around. So the Washington Post piece was on how to identify antique and vintage Charlotte dolls, and they gave the ballad’s history as background.

John Fenn: well, what’s the history of the song?

Stephen Winick: Well, in 1840, the New York Observer published an article about a young woman who froze to death on a sleigh ride to a New Year’s Eve ball. It’s not clear if it ever really happened, or if it was kind of an urban legend—because as we know legends like that do get printed as news all the time. But anyway, inspired by that article, in 1843, a poet named Seba Smith wrote a poem called “A Corpse Going to a Ball,” and published it in another newspaper in the state of Maine, called The Rover. The ballad is
basically that poem, set to music—and no one knows when or by whom the music was added.

John Fenn: I guess there’s always mysteries connected to these great old songs.

Stephen Winick: There certainly are—which gives researchers like us lot to look forward to! For now, we have one last guest with us, and that’s Jennifer Cutting, a folklife specialist here at the American Folklife Center. Hi Jennifer!

Jennifer Cutting: Hello!

John Fenn: Jennifer, I understand you have a couple of songs for us as well.

Jennifer Cutting: I do! When I’m not working as a member of the programming team at the American Folklife Center, I’m actually the leader of an electric folk band called The Ocean Orchestra, or in our smaller configuration the Ocean Celtic Quartet.

Stephen Winick: and full disclosure: I am a member of her band. So basically everyone here is my boss! So, the songs that Jennifer brought are connected to your band work, is that right, Jennifer?

Jennifer Cutting: Yes, they are. The first song I brought is a children’s song that Alan Lomax recorded in Scotland in the 1950s. It’s called “The Wind Blows High.” And the reason it spoke to me is that it shares several verses with an Irish kids’ song called “I’ll Tell My Ma,” which we used to perform with Ocean, especially on St. Patrick’s Day. But also, it’s about a snowy day—so it’s perfect for this winter podcast. I brought along two versions. The first is sung by just one girl, Peggy MacGillivray. The second version is sung by a whole group of children, and it shows how the song was used, which was to choose someone to be “it” in the next singing game. And in this case, Alan Hartley is chosen as “it,” and then we hear the kids play the next game too with Alan singled out.

John Fenn: Great, let’s hear both recordings.

Peggie MacGillivray:

The wind, the wind, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky
Margaret Thompson says she’ll die
For the want of the Golden City

She is handsome, she is pretty
She is the girl of the golden city
She is handsome one two three
Come and tell me who shall be

Unidentified Children:

The wind, the wind, the wind blows high
The snow comes falling from the sky
Cissy Halliway says she’ll die
For the want of the Golden City

She is handsome, she is pretty
She is the girl of the golden city
She is handsome one two three
Come and tell me who shall be

One, two, three...Alan Hartley
A is his first name, his first name, his first name
A is his first name, E-I-O sir
H is his second name, his second name, his second name
H is his second name, E-I-O sir
Alan Hartley is his name, is his name, is his name
Alan Hartley is his name, E-I-O sir
Now’s the time to hide your face, hide your face, hide your face
Now’s the time to hide your face, E-I-O sir
Now’s the time to show your face, show your face, show your face
Now’s the time to show your face, E-I-O sir
Now’s the time to choose the one, choose the one, choose the one
Now’s the time to choose the one, E-I-O sir

Stephen Winick: Once again, that was “The wind blows high,” with the line “The snow comes falling from the sky” making it perfect for our Winter Songs episode of the Folklife Today podcast.

John Fenn: And we’re here in the studio with Jennifer Cutting, a staff member at the American Folklife Center, who I believe has one last song for
us. And this is kind of unusual, because it’s not an archival recording but a recording of your group, right Jennifer?

Jennifer Cutting: Technically, it’s a recording of my former group, The New St. George, which we made back in the 1990s for a compilation album of songs about winter for a charity called Hungry for Music. But I also released it on the album Song of Solstice by my current group, Ocean Orchestra, so you could say the song is by both groups!

John Fenn: And how is this song connected to the American Folklife Center archive?

Jennifer Cutting: Well, I got the call from Jeff Campbell, the founder of Hungry for Music, asking me to arrange a winter song for this Holiday music compilation CD. So I knew I was on the lookout for a song. And I just happened that week to be assisting a researcher in the American Folklife Center Archive, and all of a sudden, the book I was holding for that researcher, it was Frank Kidson’s *Traditional Tunes* from 1891, it fell open to the song “Time to Remember the Poor.” And I remember sight-reading it, in my mind, hearing it, and I remember thinking that the tune Kidson collected was just inappropriately cheerful for the very solemn text, but still somehow I knew this song was “the one.” So I tried to make the music match the text a little better; I slowed down the tempo, I changed the meter, I eliminated the tune’s more chromatic character. And I looked at several different versions of the lyrics too, to compile my own version.

Stephen Winick: and are there archival recordings of “Time to Remember the Poor” at the Center too?

Jennifer Cutting: Well, I remember hearing at least one, which was a cylinder recorded in England by Percy Grainger. And I think I used some of those lyrics as well.

John Fenn: Can you tell us how you arranged the song, Jennifer?

Jennifer Cutting: Yeah, I had fun with it. I got really weird with it. I wanted a very eerie, dystopian sound canvas to complement the foreboding lyrics. And to evoke that kind of dark drama in the themes and the era of the broadside, I came up with a kind of fusion of Gothic and Victorian feelings which I combined with 60s psychedelia in the guitar solo. And this is before I knew what Steampunk was, but now Steampunk is how I think of it. And
I’m really glad that I persuaded the Grammy-winning acoustic fingerstyle guitarist Al Petteway, who played with my band The New St. George for a while, to pick up the electric guitar for this recording. So it’s very rare to hear Al Petteway on electric guitar in the recording studio. So he’s the guitarist, and the singer is the great Lisa Moscatiello, and the band also features the late Juan Dudley on drums, and my trusty bass player Rico Petruccelli, who is still in my current band today.

Stephen Winick: And on this track Jennifer herself plays the keyboards as well as some really eerie choral samples. So we’re going to let Jennifer’s song play us out, but first we should thank some people. All the singers, musicians, and collectors that we heard—we’ve said their names already as we played their great songs, and we’re grateful to the work they’ve done. And our guests, Thea Austen, Jennifer Cutting, and Stephanie Hall. And thanks to you, John!

John Fenn: well, thanks to you too, Steve! And thanks to Jon Gold our engineer, to Mike Turpin and Jay Kinloch for help in the studio, and to colleagues throughout the Library who help us deploy this podcast once it’s produced.

Stephen Winick: So now we can hear a band that you could accurately call either The New St. George or The Ocean Orchestra, playing “Time to Remember the Poor,” as arranged by our own Jennifer Cutting. That will bring to a conclusion the second part of our epic two-part look at winter songs. See you next time!

Lisa Moscatiello:

Cold winter is come, with its cold chilling breath
And the leaves are all gone from the trees
All nature seems touched by the finger of death
And the streams are beginning to freeze
When the young wanton lads o'er the river slide
When flowers attends us no more
In plenty you are sitting by a warm fireside
That's the time to remember the poor

When the cold feathery snow from the North does descend
It blankets the prospects around
The keen cutting wind from the North will attend
And cover it over the ground
When the bright twinkling stars they proclaim the cold night
And the rivers are froze on the shore
When the hills and the dales are all mantled with white
That's the time to remember the poor

When the poor harmless hare he escapes from the wood
His footprints indenting the snow
When the lips and the fingers are tinted with blood
And sportsmen a hunting do go
When poor Robin Redbreast approaches your cot
When icicles hang from the door
When the smoke it does billow, reviving and hot
That's the time to remember the poor.

Soon the time will be here when our savior on Earth
The ends of the Earth shall rejoice
And angels and men Hallelujah shall sing
Then the rich shall lie down with the poor
Then the rich must remember the poor

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