

# The John and Ruby Lomax Southern States Recording Trip (1939)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Matthew Barton



*Henry Truvillion and John Lomax*



*Frank Goodwyn*

Between March 31 and June 14, 1939, as they passed through ten southern states, John Avery Lomax (1867-1948) and his wife Ruby Terrill Lomax (1886-1961) recorded approximately 25 hours of folk music from more than 300 performers on 267 12" lacquer coated discs for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. In 1999, an in-depth online presentation entitled "Southern Mosaic" gave the public access to nearly all of these recordings, as well as scans and transcribed, searchable text of the Lomaxes' field notes and correspondence; all available here: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/john-and-ruby-lomax/about-this-collection/>. In 2002, the National Recording Preservation Board added all of the recordings from the field trip to the National Recorded Registry.

Recording in the field was not a simple matter in those days. Their disc cutter weighed more than a hundred pounds, the power supplies in the rural areas they frequented were unreliable, and most performers had never sung for a microphone in their lives. Nevertheless, the Lomaxes captured a wide range of traditional musical styles in English and Spanish, including ballads, blues, children's songs, cowboy songs, fiddle tunes, field hollers, lullabies, play-party songs, religious dramas, spirituals, and work songs, as well as interviews with the performers.

Although the field recording activities that the Lomaxes and others undertook for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress brought such great folk artists as Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Muddy Waters and many others to public prominence, these trips were not undertaken as a kind of rural star search, but out of the growing awareness that the United States and the many varieties of the American Experience had fostered unique folk songs and folklore that had not been sufficiently documented or studied. On this trip, as on most others, few of the performers recorded were professionals, or even semi-professionals, rather, they were people

who sang and played songs and tunes and told stories that were intricately intertwined with their lives, communities, work, religion and history. For the Lomaxes, these were the real folk of folk music.

By this time, John Lomax was 72 years old. He had been a recognized authority in the field of folk song since publishing “Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads” in 1910, but his interest began in the 1870s when he was first immersed in the culture of the people who worked and rode the land around his boyhood home along the Bosque River in Texas. The book was well received, and Lomax continued to write and lecture on folk songs and folklore, but earned his living mainly as a college English teacher and administrator, and later as a banker in Texas.

Early in the Great Depression, Lomax lost both his banking position and his first wife, Shirley, who died in 1932. His love and knowledge of folk song proved to be his most valuable financial and emotional asset at this point, helping to lift his spirits and gain him some income on the lecture circuit, and in 1933, a contract with the publisher MacMillan to compile a book of folk songs that would include previously unknown songs that he and his 18 year-old son, Alan, would collect themselves. In 1934, he married Ruby Terrill, a teacher and dean of women at the University of Texas at Austin, and was named honorary consultant and curator of the Archive of American Folk Song. These were the days of the “dollar-a-year men,” individuals representing various disciplines, specializations and businesses who consulted for the government, and Lomax only received reimbursement for expenses and token payments for his efforts. Nevertheless, he was able to parlay his efforts into further publications, speaking engagements and other ventures. Together and apart, he and Alan made numerous field trips for the Library, and in 1937, Alan became “Assistant in Charge of the Archive of Folk Song” at the Library of Congress, a paid position from which he was able to direct the Library’s growing field recording efforts.

The Archive was part of the Library’s Music Division, and Lomax reported to its chief, Harold Spivacke. Spivacke proved to be an enthusiastic advocate of field recording, and 1939 would be its peak year at the Library, with extensive field work undertaken, from New England to California, by a varied group of men and women including Herbert Halpert, Sidney Robertson Cowell, Helen Hartness Flanders, Stetson Kennedy, and others.

But John and Ruby were nearly left out of it. John was sidelined by illness in the fall of 1938 and as Nolan Porterfield noted in his biography “The Last Cavalier”:

[I]nactivity always depressed him, and for weeks he was in poor spirits complaining to Spivacke that he felt neglected by the Library of Congress and telling [his other son] Johnny morosely that he was thinking of following Ambrose Bierce’s example of going to Mexico and disappearing. His only purpose in life, he said, was never to become a burden to his children. He told Alan that he was realizing he had only a few years to live<sup>i</sup> and, lamenting his failures, touchingly urged his son “to achieve in some such way as I have dreamed for myself.” He had started too late, he said, pointing out that he was twenty-eight before he ever got to a college worthy of the name. He had also been held back by his brother’s debt and the care of his mother and sister[.]<sup>ii</sup>

When healthy, Lomax never tired of field recording, and the thought of an ambitious new field trip during this difficult time gave him some solace. Once he had recovered, he was determined to hit the road again with “Miss Terrill” as he unfailingly addressed his second wife and invaluable collaborator. Before becoming a teacher and the dean of women at the University of Texas, she had earned an MA in classical languages from Columbia University, majoring in Latin and minoring in Greek. Along with a love of classical literature, she shared with her husband the conviction that the common folk of America, even the unlettered, expressed a unique and epic spirit in their songs and stories that should be preserved, cultivated and promoted.

But their 1939 field trip almost didn't happen. Having already committed the Library's recording equipment to other field recordists, Spivacke could offer little encouragement to the Lomaxes. But in January, a disc recorder stolen from Alan Lomax while he was working in Michigan months earlier resurfaced in Detroit and was returned. John and Ruby began planning their trip in earnest, and would set out from their home in Port Aransas, Texas, on March 31<sup>st</sup>.

The Lomaxes spent nearly eight weeks in Texas, recording some 350 performances, including more than 100 in Spanish. They spoke little of the language, but John had been recording Spanish songs in Texas since the earliest field trips, hearing in them echoes of the uniquely American lives that he had also found in the songs of English speaking. Of one, he later wrote, “We have shaken hands with a Mexican share-cropper who carried in his head the text, tunes, and stage directions for a Miracle play requiring four hours and twenty actors to perform.”<sup>iii</sup> This was Gonzalo Lopez whom they had heard of from nuns at Our Lady of the Lake College in San Antonio. The play was called *Morir en la cruz con Cristo, o Dimas, el buen ladrón* (“Dying on the Cross with Christ,” or “Dimas, the Good Thief.”)

In her fieldnotes, Ruby Terill Lomax described the play's history:

The presenting of this play, *Morir en la Cruz Con Cristo, Odima el Buen Ladron*, is traditional with the Lopez family beginning with their elders in Mexico. It occurred to some one of the family, Lorenza Lopez, some fifty years ago that the drama would be more effective if the lyrical parts were sung. As Sister M. Dolores has set down in her introduction, Lorenza Lopez approached an old school teacher in Coahuila, Lorenzo Flores, then a recluse, who, after praying over the matter for several days, set the verses to tunes which he taught the Lopez family. These tunes have been handed down from generation to generation of the Lopez family without written music. The discs which John A. Lomax has deposited in the Archive of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress are their first permanent form.<sup>iv</sup>

The entire play would have filled more than 20 of their recording discs, so the Lomaxes concentrated on collecting the song highlights. They tried first in Houston on April 9<sup>th</sup>, Easter Sunday, but failing batteries curtailed the session. Two weeks later they visited the Lopez home in nearby Sugar Land, and were rewarded with several strong performances by the family. (Songs from both sessions can be hear here: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/john-and-ruby-lomax/?fa=original-format:sound+recording%7Clanguage:spanish>)

Miss Manuela Longoria, a school principal in Brownsville, Texas, arranged a recording session for them with her Spanish speaking students, and sang several songs herself, including songs reflecting the Mexican American experience of the Civil War, learned from her father, who served in the Confederate army, though her grandfather fought for the Union. Some Anglo singers also sang in Spanish, like Frank Goodwyn, a retired cowboy and sheriff who recorded “El Corrido de Kansas,” a song about events on the Chisholm Trail in 1867.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000135/>

Throughout their 1939 fieldwork, the Lomaxes held recordings sessions with some of the most exceptional singers that they had encountered on earlier trips. John Lomax had first recorded Henry Truvillion of Weirgate, Texas, in 1933 and 1934 with his son Alan, and found his repertoire to be both vast and unique. In his report on the 1939 trip, wrote that:

From a Negro, Henry Truvillion, who lives in the Sabine River swamps between Texas and Louisiana, a former river roustabout, section hand and migratory worker, now the leader of a work gang that alternately lays down and tears up a railroad for timber cutters, we secured a store of valuable work songs. These are the chanted directions that Truvillion, as leader of the gang, intones, guiding the men with his rhythmic efforts, and at the same time entertaining them with the play of his fancy as constantly rephrases the words of his changes. Among his songs we at last found and recorded a descriptive ballad of the loading of a Mississippi River steamboat.” (“Steamboat”:

<https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000683/>).

In Texas, they recorded at the first of several prisons they would visit on this trip. By this time, John Lomax was familiar to many prisoners and also prison staff, having recorded at several state prisons since the first field trips of 1933 and 1934, some of them several times. It began as a way of seeking out singers less influenced by pop styles available on radio and records, and the discovery that a work song tradition still thrived among many laboring black prisoners encouraged return visits. In addition, prisons usually had reliable power supplies, and wardens were generally accommodating of a government representative, when local authorities in the free world often were not. Some were even proud of their incarcerated singers. The Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville hosted a weekly 30-minute radio program entitled “Behind These Walls” featuring performances by imprisoned black and white performers. The Lomaxes recorded strong performances by Hattie Ellis, a female black blues singer who was accompanied by Jack Ramsay, a white prisoner on guitar. They also recorded harmonica player Ace Johnson and singer guitarist Smith Casey, whose song “Shorty George” is the most enduring song recorded from this field trip. It was released on a collection of Library of Congress field recordings called “Afro-American Blues and Game Songs.” Better known today as “He Was a Friend of Mine,” it has been recorded by many artists, including Rolf Cahn, Dave Van Ronk, Bob Dylan, and the Byrds. Smith Casey’s version can be heard here:

<https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000044/>

After their lengthy sojourn in Texas, the Lomaxes would spend no more than a week in any other state on their itinerary, but made the most of their time. During their four days in and around Merryville, Louisiana, they recorded spiritual and children’s songs in schools, churches, private homes, and offices. Three days. They next spent three busy days in Arkansas, including a

session at Cummins State Farm in that ended memorably: “The kerosene lamps were burning low and we were packing up to go when a big fellow, one of the quartet who sung a line hymn, offered to sing ‘John Henry’ hesitatingly: ‘I don’t reckon you’d want “John Henry,” would you? I guess you already got that.’” Mr. Lomax asked for a sample of his version.<sup>vi</sup>

Within three lines, Lomax knew that prisoner Arthur Bell’s version was unique, and recorded it before they left. His verses would later appear, with credit, in the Lomax songbook “Our Singing Country.”

The trip to Mississippi was similarly brief. One highlight was a recording of a prisoner known as Washington “Barrel House” White. His full name was Booker T. Washington White, and he had recorded under the name Washington White and “Bukka” White, the spelling of his name used on the label for his 1937 release of “Shake ‘Em on Down.” White disliked the corruption of his name, but was unfortunately saddled with it for the rest of his life, which included a successful comeback in the 1960s. (Listen to “Sic ‘em Dogs On” here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000365/>, and “Po’ Boy” here <https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000366/>)

Several times during the field trip, the Lomaxes visited artists and collaborators who had already made considerable contributions to their efforts, but who were far from exhausting their repertoires. Henry Truvillion had made recordings for John and Alan Lomax in 1933 and 1934, but he still had many more. Of the 1939 sessions, John Lomax wrote:

...Henry Truvillion, who lives in the Sabine River swamps between Texas and Louisiana, a former river roustabout, section hand and migratory worker, now the leader of a work gang that alternately lays down and tears up a railroad for timber cutters,...we secured a store of valuable work songs. These are the chanted directions that Truvillion, as leader of the gang, intones, guiding the men with his rhythmic efforts, and at the same time entertaining them with the play of his fancy as constantly rephrases the words of his changes. Among his songs we at last found and recorded a descriptive ballad of the loading of a Mississippi River steamboat. (“Steamboat:” <https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000683/>) (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/john-and-ruby-lomax/?fa=contributor:truvillion,+henry>).

There would be a further session with Henry Truvillion in October of 1940.

Many of the artists who recorded for the Library of Congress only came to the attention of field recorders through the efforts of individuals such as Ruby Pickens Tartt (1880-1974), a Livingston, Alabama, painter whose love of the local African-American folklore became the basis of her 1934 book “Stars Fell on Alabama,” which in turn led to the administrator’s job for the Federal Writers Project in Sumner County. She thrived in this role, and made lasting contributions, including interviews with former slaves, some of which can be heard here: <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam015.html>.

The Lomaxes encountered Tartt through her work with the Writers Project, and first worked with her in 1937. In 1939, they spent five days in Sumner County, recording of 115 tracks (110 included online), including examples of children's songs, hollers, play-party songs, religious oratory, and spirituals, many of them recorded on the porch of her home. Tartt’s friends had

exceptionally large and varied repertoires, and they would return in 1940. Alan Lomax would record Vera Ward Hall at length in 1948 and, again, in 1959.

In June, after five days in Florida, the Lomaxes carried on to South Carolina. Their recording plans were greatly hampered by a polio epidemic sweeping the state that would last well into the summer, though they managed a few sessions here and there. In Murrells Inlet, a center of Gullah culture, they again worked with Genevieve W. Chandler (1890-1980), another contact in the Writers Project, to build on the collection of songs they began with her help in 1937. They would return in 1940 for further recordings.

The remainder of the field trip proved anti-climactic. In Toccoa Falls, Georgia, on June 11, they attended the Georgia-Carolina Singing Festival, but only recorded a few songs from male and female quartets. In Galax, Virginia, their plan to record the Bog Trotters Band were frustrated by the illness of the group's leader W.P. "Doc" Davis. The Lomaxes delivered their most recent field recordings to the Library in person on June 14, 1939, after 6,502 miles of driving through ten states. On the strength of what they had achieved, they would get to make two further wide-ranging trips with comparable results in 1940 and 1942. These later field trips are beyond the scope of this essay, but in many instances, the Lomaxes picked up where they left off in certain areas or with certain artists. The United States' entry into World War II greatly limited field recording work at the Library of Congress for the duration of the war. The war also hastened the process of modernization which was already marginalizing much of what the Lomaxes and others sought to preserve at the Library of Congress.

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### *Further Reading*

<https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9908/lomax.html>

Biography of John Lomax: <https://www.loc.gov/item/n79148914/john-avery-lomax-1867-1948/>

Biography of Ruby Terrill Lomax: <https://www.loc.gov/item/no94003748/ruby-terrell-lomax-1886-1961/>

Biography of Ruby Pickens Tartt: <https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2019/01/alabama-folklorist-ruby-pickens-tartt/>

Interactive map: [https://labs.loc.gov/experiments/southern-mosaic/?loc\\_lr=blogsig](https://labs.loc.gov/experiments/southern-mosaic/?loc_lr=blogsig)

"Building a Southern Mosaic" Aditya Jain, creator of the interactive map:  
<https://blogs.loc.gov/the-signal/2018/05/building-a-southern-mosaic/>

Corridos of the Texas Border Collected by John and Ruby Lomax, blogpost by Stephanie Hall:

<https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2015/09/corridos-of-the-border/>

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<sup>i</sup> He would die on January 26, 1948 at the age of eighty.

<sup>ii</sup> Nolan Porterfield, *The Last Cavalier*. University of Illinois Press, 2001

<sup>iii</sup> *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs and Ballads*. Collected and compiled by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax. 1941.

<sup>iv</sup> Lomax, Ruby Terrill. 1939 Southern Recording Trip Fieldnotes: Section 3: Houston and Sugar Land, Texas; April 9 and 23.

<sup>v</sup> Lomax, John. 1939 Southern Recording Trip Report (accessible here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000887/>)

<sup>vi</sup> Lomax, Ruby Terrill. 1939 Southern Recording Trip Fieldnotes: Section 14: Cummins State Farm, near Varner Arkansas; May 20-21.