

## ANNABEL MORRIS BUCHANAN: FOLK SONG COLLECTOR

Lyn Wolz

**A**mateur folk song collectors have been responsible for gathering and preserving much of America's folk song heritage. Folk music scholarship today would be limited to studying a meager body of songs without the work of collectors such as Vance Randolph and Helen Hartness Flanders who devoted large amounts of time and energy to the splendid avocation of knocking on the doors of strangers and asking them to share their songs.

One of these people, to whom folklorists are indebted for her tireless dedication to collecting folk music, is Annabel Morris Buchanan. Folk music scholars may be familiar with her name from her only published book *Folk Hymns of America*, or the articles she wrote for the *Southern Folklore Quarterly* and other journals. Others may know that she deposited her large collection of folk songs in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1978. Even among folklorists, however, her name is not well known. Her special talents helped her to gather over 1,000 versions of folk songs primarily from southwestern Virginia during the period from 1930 to 1950. Buchanan's work, both as a folklorist and a writer/composer employing folk themes, deserves wider recognition.

Who is this woman who gathered such a substantial number of folk songs in her lifetime? Born in Groesbeck, Texas, in 1888, Buchanan showed signs of musical talent at a very early age, composing tunes and playing the piano to accompany her father's singing in church when she was only seven years old. There was a fine southern singing tradition on both sides of her family which focused especially on folk hymns. Her father and grandfather were Cumberland Presbyterian ministers, and religious piety ran deep in all the Buchanan family branches in Tennessee, Alabama, Virginia, South Carolina, and Texas. In 1960, she wrote an article called "Recollections of Groesbeck" for the newspaper in her hometown:

My earliest childhood impressions were all bound up with the music and singing of my parents . . . songs and tunes which, heard in the impressionable years of childhood, have profoundly influenced my life. And of these, none are more vivid in my mind than the old hymns with their ancient modes and tunes, many of them learned through family

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Lyn Wolz, Assistant Librarian, Public Services, earned a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Missouri, and an M.A. in Folklore from the University of North Carolina. A longer version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in San Antonio, Texas, October 24, 1981. Ms. Wolz attended the meeting as a result of a grant from the College's fund for professional development.

tradition, others from yellowed shape-note hymnals, the long-ways books from which I first learned to read music. <sup>1</sup>

In fact, her favorite place to play as a child was in a "house" made of these long-ways hymnals, built under the stairs of her father's newspaper office. These early influences had important consequences for both her collecting and her scholarship, as the book, *Folk Hymns of America*, demonstrates.

Although her family moved to Maury County, Tennessee, in 1901, Annabel returned to Texas in 1903 at the age of fifteen to attend the Landon Conservatory in Dallas. She graduated three years later with highest honors in piano, violin, theory, and composition. Between 1906 and 1912, she taught at colleges in Oklahoma and Virginia. It was in Virginia that Annabel met John Preston Buchanan, a lawyer who later became a state senator and author. They were married in 1912, and moved to Marion, Va. Here they raised four children in a house called "Roseacre". Throughout her life Buchanan was active in the National Federation of Music Clubs (NFMC), an organization designed to promote an interest in classical music among American youth. She participated also in many political and charitable enterprises, as well as writing, composing, performing and gardening.

While in many ways outwardly conforming to the stereotype of southern womanhood, Buchanan was never one to let herself be confined to a mold. Her talent and ambition led her to accomplish many things often thought of as outside the usual woman's sphere of activity during her era. Her original musical compositions, which she considered to be her most important and lasting work, include 132 songs, many of which were sung by famous concert singers during the 1920s and 1930s. She also arranged approximately 110 secular folk songs and 120 folk hymns which were published and used by church and college choirs. Three longer works which in her own eyes qualified her as a serious composer included a choral ballad called *The Legend of Hungry Mother*, a work for women's chorus called *Rex Christus*, and a suite for chorus and symphony orchestra called *When the Moon Goes Down*.

Buchanan's literary output included short stories set in rural areas dealing with folk traditions and beliefs, <sup>2</sup> as well as romance novels, children's books, and articles on gardening. Her non-fiction writings on folklore ranged in length from numerous newspaper and magazine articles about the White Top Folk Festival to three book-length manuscripts. Unfortunately, none of these three manuscripts — *The Bough Was Given to Me*, *Mountain Magic*, or her four-volume magnum opus *White Top Folk Trails* — was ever published. However, she did publish several articles on folklore, including two articles on folk song for the *International Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians* (1939 ed.); <sup>3</sup> two articles in the *Southern Folklore Quarterly*

— one in 1937, titled "The Function of a Folk Festival;" and another in 1940, called "A Neutral Mode in Anglo-American Folk Music"; <sup>4</sup> "Adventures in Virginia Folkways" a series of eight articles in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in 1936; <sup>5</sup> "The Creation and Fall of Man: A Kentucky Ballad Carol" which appeared in the *Kentucky Folklore Record* in 1955, <sup>6</sup> as well as many book reviews and other miscellaneous articles. As one can tell from this partial list of her accomplishments, Annabel Morris Buchanan made many contributions to scholarly endeavors. But whatever fame was attached nationally to the name came from her association with the White Top Folk Festival in the 1930s.

The White Top Folk Festival grew out of a conversation that occurred between Buchanan and one of her husband's cousins, John Blakemore, who was the majority owner of the White Top Company which owned White Top Mountain in Grayson County, Virginia. He was looking for opportunities to use the land and had been approached by some of the local people who wanted to hold a fiddle contest there. He mentioned it to Buchanan, who in a flash of inspiration asked if they could make it a folk festival modeled on the ones held in Canada. Modest plans resulted in the first annual White Top Mountain Interstate Folk Festival in August of 1931, attended by about 5,000 people. Buchanan was the Director of the festival, dealing with publicity and judging, while Blakemore was the Business Manager and took care of finances and physical arrangements. Many people thought that the festival would become a permanent fixture on the mountain, especially after the 1933 festival was attended by Eleanor Roosevelt and 22,000 other people. But in 1937 the organizers decided not to hold it because of the death of Buchanan's husband, as well as the threat of polio epidemics. Though Buchanan kept her official title as Director of the festival, she had no active part in it thereafter. The festival attracted smaller crowds in 1938 and 1939, and a storm washed out the roads to the top of the mountain cancelling the 1940 festival. It was never held again.

Nationwide publicity about the White Top Folk Festival in newspapers and magazines helped to make Buchanan a well-known public figure. It also allowed her to meet many composers, musicians, critics, writers and folklorists. The name White Top came to symbolize Buchanan to the general public, to other folklorists, and even to herself. She often spoke of her "White Top work", referring to all of her many activities in the sphere of folklore. It was also the name she gave to what she considered to be her most important manuscript, "White Top Folk Trails". The first two chapters of the work contain her definition of folk music and her theories about its importance. The rest of the manuscript consists of the songs she collected and notes of her research on them, and also includes special sections on folk hymns and on dances and dance tunes.

Although it is plain that Buchanan was a personality to be

reckoned with in more than one area, her main interest to folklorists lies in her folk song collection and her talent as a field worker. Her folk music collecting experiences began in 1930. That was the year she met John Powell, a concert pianist and composer from Richmond, Virginia, who was intensely involved in the "National" music movement which is often identified with such figures as Bela Bartok and Ralph Vaughn Williams. Powell encouraged Buchanan to read Cecil Sharp's books, to collect folk music in Virginia in order to prove that America did have a "native" or national music, and to use folk themes and modes in her compositions. She was inspired by Powell and by elite culture's search for internationalism through nationalism in the form of folklore. Buchanan justified all of her folklore work in both collection and presentation in terms of elite cultural pursuits.

Whatever her justification, Buchanan soon found great joy in collecting, especially during field trips through the mountains. As she wrote to Anne Gilchrist, English folklorist, in 1936:

I am enchanted at the opportunity this summer and fall to run around some in the mountains, having lacked a car before, and having grown fond of the joys of "hitch-hiking". I have had a MARVELOUS time gypsying around and vagabonding through the summer, in three states, maybe sleeping in some mt. cabin or in the car . . . It was such a splendid adventure, I shall never forget it. And we collected splendid material. Having been initiated into that most delightful of fraternities, that of the folk music collector, I am desirous of imparting to others some of the joy and adventure therein.<sup>7</sup>

This enthusiasm for folk songs and for people was one factor in her ability to ferret out songs. Richard Chase once marveled at her remarkable rapport with people. He tells an anecdote about one collecting trip they took together. They had stopped on the road so he could change a flat tire. By the time he was finished, she had already noted down three tunes from people passing by.<sup>8</sup> While this tale may be apocryphal, it does indicate that other collectors admired her field work talents. Samuel P. Bayard wrote to Buchanan in 1946 to say that "I have always regarded you as the only *real* collector in southwest Virginia".<sup>9</sup> And Harold Thompson wrote that her collection was "undoubtedly one of the most important in America".<sup>10</sup>

Buchanan's approach to finding informants was usually informal. She began collecting in the 1930s by contacting people in her own town of Marion and surrounding Smyth County. Later she branched out on field trips, usually with other people — Richard Chase, Berkeley Williams, Ernest Meade, or her daughter — but sometimes alone. The papers in the Buchanan Collection at the University of North Carolina provide fascinating insights into her collecting style. Once, she scribbled on small sheets of scratch paper in the dark while on a moving bus to note down a singing game from a fellow passenger. Another time, while walking down the street in an

unfamiliar town, she did not hesitate to approach an old man who had "a certain look about him" to ask if he had a copy of the *Southern Harmony*; and he did! While hitch-hiking in the Cumberlands of Kentucky on a collecting trip in 1935, she soon had the driver of a truck singing "Cumberland Gap". During the 1950s, while she was spending a summer in the Huckleberry Mountain Artist's Colony in North Carolina, Buchanan collected some spirituals from black convicts on a road crew. At the other end of the social spectrum, she collected children's songs and singing games from officials of the NFMC.

Buchanan herself describes the situations in which she collected folk music in her manuscript *Mountain Magic*:

I have recorded folk songs on a bitter cold winter's day while leaning against a horse's stall in a stable on a mountain top. I have balanced on slippery rocks in the middle of a rushing mountain stream to catch with pencil and paper the notes of an aged singer's still more ancient song. I have crept on hands and knees up a North Carolina mountain, note pad and pencil in my pocket, have climbed over or straight through barbed wire fences. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Surely, a less adventurous and dedicated person could not have garnered the songs that Buchanan did. Perhaps her enthusiasm and unabashed friendliness accounted for her popularity with informants and for the amount of material she collected from them.

Buchanan also used other methods to supplement her collection. She took down many songs from her own memory of her family's traditions, while others she plucked from old "ballet" books, i.e., scrapbooks containing hand-written word sheets or newspaper clippings of the words to songs the singer wanted to learn. Another of Buchanan's sources for folk songs was correspondence. Sometimes she even went so far as to seem to badger people into sending her songs, as this excerpt from a letter to a Mrs. Walker in Bastian, Virginia, illustrates:

I would appreciate it ever so much if you will make a try at writing down the tune. Even if you have never done anything of the kind, I believe that if you sit at the piano, you can do it. First determine whether it sounds major or minor, and get your key note, and you will not find it so difficult.<sup>12</sup>

An even more unorthodox incident occurred in 1939 which would have been one of the most unusual forms of folk song collecting ever used — had it worked out as planned. A woman from Kentucky wrote to Buchanan with a scheme for enabling the collector to record the words and tune of a folk song. The original singer was going to teach the song to a radio personality in West Virginia who would then sing it on the air so that Buchanan could take it down from the radio broadcast. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, the scheme did not work. Despite such unusual methods, Buchanan built a substantial

collection of versions of traditional songs.

Buchanan's folk song collection, like that of all other collectors, has limitations as to its coverage of the complete folk song repertory of any one geographical region or group of people. She was affected by the same factors that influenced every collector — time and money available to support field work, the sex of the collector and the informant, the personal prejudices of the collector, and pure chance. Buchanan's primary limiting factor was her lack of money. She once explained to Bayard that no one had ever financed any of her field work or research or writing, which was a hardship for her, especially after her husband died in 1937.

Other limiting factors included the cultural and religious prejudices of her informants. Buchanan was familiar with the experiences of other collectors who attempted to gather "love songs", or the old ballads, only to find that a certain singer used to know a number of such songs but gave up singing them years ago when he got religion. Another problem that many female collectors encountered was the feeling among men in traditional cultures that it just was not right to sing some songs in front of a woman. Though Buchanan never referred specifically to this problem, it is hard to imagine that there wasn't some self-censoring going on in the minds of some of her informants, such as one old roustabout once said to Mary Wheeler, "I don't know no songs fittin' fo' a nice lady to write down".<sup>13</sup> Buchanan's socio-economic status, as well as her sex, kept her from discovering and recording all of the many types of songs she felt she should "catch" for posterity.

In spite of these limitations, Buchanan's natural application of various collecting techniques in an energetic and determined fashion, resulted in a collection of over 1,000 versions of songs, tales, games, dances, beliefs, proverbs, cures, spells, and charms. The songs are the major genre represented in the collection and include a total of about 430 versions of 204 titles of ballads alone. Of these, 163 are versions of Child titles — those gems of status for the early American collectors. Other types of songs include children's songs, singing games and play-party games, words to dance tunes, lyric songs, and humorous songs. The largest percentage of these songs are from southwest Virginia, with a substantial number coming from the rest of Virginia and the mountainous regions of North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky. There are also some songs from West Virginia and Maine, with a smattering from other states. Buchanan's collection of songs, along with her correspondence and published and unpublished writings, constitutes a valuable resource for the study of Appalachian folk music.

Buchanan states her beliefs and goals, her reasons for collecting and studying folk music, in an effective, though romantic, way:

Every tragedy, every crime or dramatic event, every impulse good or evil seems to find its way into song. And these songs are arising every day, not

only from our mountains but from our prairies, our mines, our city streets, even from our penitentiaries. But it takes generations to make a song truly representative of a people. Folk song is valuable not because it is old, but because in order to have endured for centuries, there must be something about it that touches the heartstrings of a race — the universal chord in human nature. After several generations of passing through oral tradition banal or tawdry texts and tunes will either drop out of existence, or will be shaped into something more truly representative of the people. Our task now is to help in making these native resources available for use. We want our collection for reference and study by our music and folklore students, composers, writers, scholars and historians.<sup>14</sup>

Thanks to this determined and very talented woman — Annabel Morris Buchanan — part of America's valuable heritage of folk song has been saved for just such purposes.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Annabel Morris Buchanan, *Folk Hymns of America* (New York: J. Fischer & Sons, 1938), foreword.

<sup>2</sup>Four of her short stories using folklore were published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in the 1930s. A previously unpublished story, "Rise, King Jesus," has been readied for publication by David Whisnant.

<sup>3</sup>"American Folk Hymnody," *International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1939), 596-601; "American Folk Music," 654-676.

<sup>4</sup>"Function of a Folk Festival," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* I (March, 1937), 29-34; "Neutral Mode in Anglo-American Folk Music," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* IV (June, 1940), 77-92.

<sup>5</sup>"Adventures in Virginia Folkways," *Richmond* (Va.) *Times-Dispatch*, every Sunday section from May 24th to July 12th, 1936.

<sup>6</sup>"Creation and Fall of Man," *Kentucky Folklore Record* I (Oct.-Dec., 1955), 91-99.

<sup>7</sup>Letter, Annabel Morris Buchanan to Anne G. Gilchrist, Sept. 4, 1936, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection, Annabel Morris Buchanan Collection, 4020, Series A.

<sup>8</sup>Conversation with Richard Chase, Spring 1980, Ferrum College.

<sup>9</sup>Letter, Samuel, P. Bayard to Annabel Morris Buchanan, Feb. 9, 1946, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection.

<sup>10</sup>Letter, Annabel Morris Buchanan to Macmillan Co., 1948, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>11</sup>Notes for "Mountain Magic" manuscript, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection, Annabel Morris Buchanan Collection.

<sup>12</sup>Letter, Annabel Morris Buchanan to Mrs. J. N. Walker, Bastian, VA, April 11, 1939, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>13</sup>Mary Wheeler, *Steamboat Days* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969; reprint of Louisiana State University Press ed, 1944), p. 67.

<sup>14</sup>Address for Chamber of Commerce luncheon, San Jose, CA, 1954; "The Archive of American Folk Music," unpublished article, 1960.

# **THE FERRUM REVIEW**

**Published annually in cooperation with the Professional Development Committee of Ferrum College through the generous support of the Jessie Ball duPont Religious, Charitable, and Educational Fund.**

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**Number 5  
Fall 1982**