

Delta Sources and Resources

Mary Wheeler and the African American Folk Songs of the Roustabouts The Mary Wheeler Collection of the McCracken County (Kentucky) Public Library Online Resource by Nathan Lynn

The McCracken County Public Library in Paducah, Kentucky, has recently brought new life to an old collection of photographs and inland water songs. In 2013 the library, located in the western portion of the state, launched a digital site which can be accessed at digitalcollections.mclib.net. The site contains over 2,000 photographs and documents pertaining to Paducah and its surrounding lands. Of particular note for researchers is the Mary Wheeler Collection, a one of a kind collection of songs and photographs pertaining to the African American roustabouts and chambermaids who worked upon packet boats from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries.

Paducah lies in the area of western Kentucky known as the Jackson Purchase, an often forgotten section of the Commonwealth. While most Americans are aware of the towering mountains of eastern Kentucky and the rolling bluegrass of the central portion of the state, the western river lands are often overlooked. This small paradise extends from the hills of the Pennyryle region and Land Between the Rivers into the vast river bottoms of what could be described as the North Delta. With the help of the Tennessee, Cumberland, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers, a rare and important collection of American music developed within this region of the country.

The Mary Wheeler Collection is a primary source collection of documents and photographs collected by the late musicologist, Mary Wheeler. Most noteworthy to the collection are the songs and photographs that she collected from the former roustabouts and chambermaids



Mary Wheeler
Photograph Courtesy of
McCracken County, Kentucky, Public Library

living in the Jackson Purchase area of western Kentucky during the 1930s. These black men and women who had worked upon the packet boats of the mid-19th to early 20th centuries provided Mary with songs of religion, labor, love, murder, history and exploration. Traveling from the North Delta to New Orleans and back, as well as up the Ohio, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers to the eastern mountains and back, these individuals developed a collection of songs that show glimpses of the blues and mountain music and, like the rivers they came from, provide a confluence of numerous American musical styles.

While Hollywood has often provided us with scenes of Southern Belles, Dixieland jazz,

and floating castles on the water, the actual lives that these men and women led have more than often been missed. Work as a roustabout or chambermaid often meant long periods of time away from home and family. It was a life filled with hard labor from loading and unloading freight as well as cleaning and cooking through the heat of summer and the cold of winter. The lifestyle was often dangerous and many leaned on their faith and spirituality. Regardless of the struggle, they often turned to singing. Lyrics were carried from town to town and boat to boat. And thus, a whole world of song slowly grew into what Mary Wheeler would catalog as Roustabout Songs.

Ms. Wheeler herself was born and raised in Paducah, Kentucky. She studied music and sang in numerous settings including in New York, Chicago, and DC. She worked as a nurse with the American Red Cross in Toul, France during WWI, taught at the Hindman Settlement School in Eastern Kentucky and eventually began working on her master's thesis focusing on the roustabout songs of the Ohio River Valley. Back in Paducah she began interviewing the former roustabouts living in the Jackson Purchase. While interviewing these individuals, Mary would write down the lyrics to the songs and remember the melodies long enough to return to her home and write out the notation with the help of her piano. Mary took along Walter Beasley Jr. to take photographs during many of these trips. After finishing her thesis, she published two books, *Roustabout Songs of the Ohio River Valley* and *Steamboatin' Days*.

Following her death, Mary's niece, Bertha Wenzel, donated the majority of her aunt's work to the McCracken County Public Library. Housed within the Local and Family History Department's closed archives, the collection is one of the last untouched resources for American music and one of the largest collections of inland waterways songs. Within these African American folks songs we find stories that help document not only the lives of those hard working men and women who labored upon the rivers, but also provide a glimpse into the history and

culture of the lands that surround the Mississippi, Tennessee, Cumberland, and Ohio rivers.

In 2013 the McCracken County Public Library began an initiative to make this one of a kind collection available to the world through the power of digitization. Since then we have not only made numerous documents and songs available online, but also the photographs that Ms. Wheeler and Walter Beasley took of the former roustabouts and chambermaids. While we have not made all of the collection available, the digital collection provides access to a large portion of it and also draws awareness to the collection as a whole. For scholars and researchers of early twentieth century black history, the photographs themselves are an amazing study. Thankfully, Ms. Wheeler left notes on many of the photographs, and with the help of her thesis and books, the department has been able to not only provide photographs of these men and women, but also a bit of genealogical information about them as well.

Within this collection we find delta blues, gospel, mountain songs, country songs, labor songs, and chanteys. They tell stories of hard work, love, murder, religion, boats and more. The collection also contains numerous "soundings," which were used as a way to relay the depth at any point in the river. While these songs help to draw attention to a group of people's culture that was nearly lost, they also tell the story of western Kentucky's confluence of delta and mountain music. This collection of African American folk songs is truly one of kind yet carries the qualities of American music. Wherever the rivers flow music will follow, and while we may no longer find the roustabouts singing their songs as the boats leave the shore, we are thankful that we have the opportunity to relive these songs.

For more information please visit <http://digitalcollections.mclib.net/> or contact the McCracken County Public Library at www.mclib.net or (270) 442-2510 Ext: 134.

