"This is a Traditional Song; We Can't Let You Stay Happy Long"[1]: Gender, Social Politics, and Identity in 19th Century American Murder Ballads

by Natalie Rose Ivy

A thesis accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Folklore

and Public Culture

Thesis Committee:

Leah Lowthorp, Chair

Whitney Phillips, Member

University of Oregon

Spring 2025

[1] Bob Waltz, "Remembering the Old Songs: Omie Wise," *Inside Bluegrass*, August 2000.

THESIS ABSTRACT

Natalie Rose Ivy

Master of Science in Folklore and Public Culture

Title: "This is a Traditional Song; We Can't Let You Stay Happy Long.": Gender, Social Politics, and Identity in 19th Century American Murder Ballads

Murder ballads are songs that tell the story of a murder. In American balladry, these songs are most associated with the Appalachian region and musical practices, an evolution of the Anglo ballad tradition. While most of these ballads concern fictional events and people, a small subset are about real crimes and historical actors. I am proposing the term "true crime murder ballad" to isolate this subset of ballads as a meaningful subgenre. This study utilizes archival research, folkloristics, media studies, literature analysis, and history to understand these ballads, their historical actors, and their legacies within their contexts. Through three case studies, I seek to examine why these true crime murder ballads emerged in the United States, how they function socioculturally within the societies that originated them, and how these functions changed when the ballads were taken out of their original contexts. I also explore the ways in which these true crime murder ballads were used as news media, both within the societies where the murders took place and by outsiders to perpetuate the "othering" of Appalachians and the Appalachian diaspora through negative stereotypes regarding class, race, and gender.

Keywords: Murder Ballads, Ballad, True Crime, True Crime Murder Ballads, Appalachia, Appalachian Diaspora, Ideological Recharacterization, Folklorification, 19th Century, American Balladry

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to sincerely thank my support system through this process. Thank you to my family. To my mother, who has answered every panicked phone call; to my father and Lynn, who have read every draft; to Sean Patrick and Annabel, who have kept me laughing; to Dave, Anne-Marie, and Lauren whose faith in me has never wavered. I would also like to thank my cohort — Alix, Linnea, and Kieran — for going on this incredible journey with me, and my friends Kayte and Lena. You have become as dear to me as family. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Leah Lowthorp, and my committee member, Dr. Whitney Phillips. I would also like to thank Dr. Martha Bayless for her guidance and mentorship through my first year of this program, and the University of Oregon's Center for the Study of Women in Society for their generous grant funding. Finally, thank you to Dr. Ellen Wurtzel, who guided me through my first thesis. Without you, my love of history would have gone unnurtured.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

I: INTRODUCTION

William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll
With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger At
a Baltimore hotel, society gath'rin'
And the cops were called in, and his weapon took from him
As they rode him in custody down to the station
And booked William Zanzinger for first-degree murder[2]

In October of 1963, Bob Dylan recorded a song about the murder of Hattie Carroll. The crime was still fresh in cultural memory, having been committed in February of that same year. Carroll, a 51-year-old black woman and life-long resident of Baltimore, MD, was attacked by William Zantzinger, a wealthy young white man from an influential tobacco family, as she served him at a bar.[3] After assaulting several other black staff members — including waitress Ethel Hill, whom Zantzinger repeatedly hit across the hips and buttocks — he turned his ire on Hattie, hurling racist slurs as he demanded a drink.[4] Zantzinger, already drunk and rowdy, hit her with his cane when he determined she was taking too long.[5] The strike he left between her neck and shoulder led to a brain hemorrhage, killing Carroll eight hours later. She was a mother, a church deacon, and a member of the local choir.

When Zantzinger stood trial for Hattie Carroll's murder eighteen weeks later, in August of 1963, it was not in front of a trial of his peers, but rather a panel of three judges.[66] His case

[2] Bob Dylan, *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, vinyl recording, *The Times They Are A-Changing* (New York, NY: Tom Wilson, 1963).
[3] "The Spinseters' Ball," *Time*, February 22, 1963. Note: Dyland chose to remove the "t" from Zantzinger's last name, calling him Zanzinger instead.
[4] Ian Nagasaki, "To Show That All's Equal: The Devoted Life and Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," *Folklife Magazine*, February 9, 2023.
[5] Peter Carlson, "A Regular Old Southern Maryland Boy," *Washington Post*, August 4, 1991.
[6] Carlson

was heard four counties and more than fifty miles away from where the crime took place. His charge

was reduced to manslaughter, and he served just six months in county jail. *Time Magazine* noted that "[t]he judges considerately deferred the start of the jail sentence until September 15, to give Zantzinger time to harvest his tobacco crop."[7]

The day Zantzinger's sentence was handed down happened to be August 28, 1963, the same day a young Bob Dylan attended Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington.[8] As King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, rallying Americans to advocate for civil rights, just miles away Zantzinger was returning home to organize the harvest of his profitable tobacco crop. The death of Hattie Carroll was not only reflective of the racial lines drawn in Maryland, but across the entire country. Further, Zantzinger's words and actions were steeped in sexism and misogyny. Dylan put a pen to paper, and less than two months later, he was recording *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, a murder ballad of the mid-20th century. Though the Maryland court system had failed Hattie and her family, Dylan's song has remained in the cultural consciousness and ensured that William Zantzinger was never able to forget what he had done. He retained his wealth, his power, and after six months in jail, his freedom. However, his name is forever remembered in connection to Hattie Carroll.

Murder ballads are songs that tell the story of a murder. Generally, murder ballads depict conflicts between heterosexual romantic partners that end in murder, with the male partner generally the murderer. Clearly, this was not the case for Hattie Carroll and William Zantzinger. However, the dynamics of power, race, and gender that permeate the case are common themes

[7] Time

[8] Ian Frazier, "Legacy of a Lonesome Death," Mother Jones, 2004, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/05/legacy-lonesome-death-bob-dylan-hattie-carroll/.

across murder ballads. Many of these ballads are fictional, telling stories of imagined conflicts or alluding to general themes and events that can be transferred to a wide variety of times and places. However, there are a number of murder ballads that are tied to real events and real people, such as that of Hattie Carroll and William Zantzinger. The majority of murder ballads concerning real events emerged in the United States during the 19th century, particularly in the Appalachian region or in American trans-Appalachian diasporic communities. These ballads generally deal with social taboos, gender and racial expectations, and concepts of justice, vengeance, and legacy.

In this thesis, I propose the term "true crime murder ballad" to describe this distinct type of murder ballad based upon true crime events. Within this framework, I examine three 19th century American murder ballads that focus on genuine murders that evidence both temporal and regional variation, spanning the early to late 19th century from Appalachia to the Midwest. In so doing, I argue that these 19th century American murder ballads composed about true crime emerged primarily out of communities that were viewed as cultural "others" or separate from Victorian American society. Though Victorianism is most commonly associated with England, the Victorian era also influenced the United States due to the influence of the British Empire. Victorianism is characterized by industrialization, modernization, urbanization, and a significant focus on morality and strict codes of gendered conduct.

I suggest that these true crime-based songs served both as early forms of news media and as social messaging. Speaking to both male and female audiences, these narratives served a didactic purpose in advising listeners on how to avoid similar situations. They likewise acted as a way for communities to practice restorative justice when their own justice systems failed them. Because of the inherent "otherness" of the people featured in these ballads, I argue that, though

based on real people, they are subject to an "ideological recharacterization" when the ballads circulate outside of the contexts that produced them. This leads to these figures effectively becoming stock figures within the framework of familiar narratives that later audiences could project their needs or desires onto. I use the term stock figure here to mean characters based on quickly recognizable stereotypes that exist as a way to quickly establish character traits with an audience.[9] This resulted in multiple song variants whose analysis reveals the shifting ideologies regarding gender, justice, and race in the American communities that adopted these narratives across the 19th century. I will engage with this analysis with the ballads of *Omie Wise*, *Tom Dooley*, and *Frankie and Johnny*, all of which are about real historical actors and which emerged in the 19th century American communities that experienced the murders.

Terminology

I propose the term "true crime murder ballad" to refer to a murder ballad written about a real crime that adheres to the events and actions of real people that can be verified through historical record. "True crime" refers to the nonfiction genre of media that deals with subjects of crime and criminals, with roots dating back to 17th century England, though its more modern iterations are more associated with the United States. As the name suggests, the crimes featured in media reports are anchored in some level of truth, though this truth is sometimes sacrificed for the sake of a "better" story. The true crime genre seeks to investigate the history and context leading up to a crime, the impact upon individuals involved, and often the consequences (or lack thereof) faced by the perpetrator.

[9] Shawn O'Bryhim, "Stock Characters and Stereotypes," essay, in *A Companion to Plautus* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 189–203, 189-190.

Within this context, I choose to adhere to a slightly more rigid definition of true crime, wherein the ballad serving as the earliest known variant from which ballad variants originate, is concerned with presenting information factually—or at least what the creators believed to be factual—rather than changing elements for dramatic effect or entertainment value. However, it is important to note that source texts are not always in the form of a ballad. Many of the earliest known variants of many ballads, usually the ones that followed the events of a murder most factually, have been lost and thus are unavailable for direct reference. The *existence* of these older variants are important, though, and shapes our understanding of how communities interpreted events.

With this in mind, I propose the following criteria for classification as a true crime murder ballad: 1) the ballads originate either shortly after the crime was committed or during the legal proceedings following the murder; 2) the crimes must be recognizable as connected to a historical murder; 3) the ballads must be written by a member of the community in which the murder occurred; and 4) the ballads must be represented in local media and/or legal proceedings. All four criterion must be met to fulfill the requirements of being what I term a "true crime ballad." Given these criteria, Dylan's *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, though following the true crime murder ballad tradition closely, does not technically qualify; Dylan was not part of Carroll's community in Baltimore and he wrote his song several months after the crime and trial proceedings concluded. Bob Dylan did not experience any of the events or impacts of the murder firsthand, and therefore cannot reflect the ideology of the community around Hattie Carroll.

However, I would like to emphasize the necessity of this third criteria within the context of the true crime ballad tradition. Being written by the immediate community of the historical actors involved makes the messaging and themes far more personal and impactful. When hearing

a true crime murder ballad about someone you have never met or shared life experience with, you have a far different reaction than hearing a true crime murder ballad about someone from your own community. In requiring a true crime murder ballad to be originally generated by a community member who has experienced the immediate effects and aftermath of the murder, I am ensuring that the ballad is reflective of the social values and reactions that genuinely occurred among historical actors. Further, through looking at the ways in which these events were then altered or reshaped to fit social expectations and narratives for *other* communities, we can examine the themes and messages these outsider communities valued most. Dylan's distance from Carroll and her community displays the way true crime murder ballads have served as inspiration for other murder balladry while the author remains a removed outsider to the actual event. The use of a true crime to further the social messaging of a ballad is common, and can be seen in the ideological recharacterization of true crime murder ballads across time.

The ideological recharacterization of the historical actors of both perpetrators and victims presented in the narratives, clearly delineating those written about in true crime murder ballads, establish the actual figures and their communities as an "other." I propose the term "ideological recharacterization" to explain the way the figures of real people were reduced to "characters" within their ballads as these narratives circulated to new spaces and communities.[10] Originally reflective of real figures, with their wider circulation these characters transformed over time into recognizable archetypes that serve to further the ideologies of communities adopting the ballad. By reducing historical actors to stock figures while retaining the moral weight of being

[10] Note: While variation and multiple existence are foundations of folklore, I propose ideological recharacterization as an extension of this concept. I am using this term to specifically isolate the ways in which outside communities take narratives regarding historical actors and events that occurred and change their actions, traits, physicality, and identity to further social ideologies that were not inherent to the historical action.

associated with a genuine murder, I argue that further social messaging was thereby implemented that was not present in the original narrative.

Finally, I propose the term "folklorification" to refer to the effect of a living person whose likeness or caricature becomes embedded in popular culture, specifically during their lifetime. Essentially, the folklorification of an individual creates both a "real" and "folkloric" version of the same person that exist paradoxically at the same time. The real person, then, is subject to the sociocultural interpretations of their "folklorified" self. In the case of Hattie Carroll, this can be seen in the reception of William Zantzinger after Dylan's song rose to popularity. An obituary for William Zantzinger in *The Independent* noted that the song "[conferred] a villainous notoriety on Zantzinger until his dying day."[11] Not only was Zantzinger directly impacted by folklorification, this impact ensured his legacy is intrinsically tied to the murder he committed. Dylan's song acts here as a form of cultural catharsis, ensuring restorative justice was enacted and that appropriate punishment was passed, even when the court system failed.

Criteria, Selection of Songs, and Chapter Outlines

My study investigates three of the most notable true crime murder ballads of 19th century America. My primary goals are to examine 1) how true crime murder ballads emerge from populations that have been "othered" in the American popular consciousness, 2) how these songs communicate social taboos and expectations regarding gender and race, and 3) how narratives

[11] Rupert Cornwell, "Obituaries: William Zantzinger: Subject of Bob Dylan Ballad ," *The Independent*, January 12, 2009.

were adapted by new populations to serve differing social functions. In so doing, I present in-depth case studies of three true crime ballads: *Omie Wise* (1807), *Tom Dooley* (1866), and *Frankie and Johnny* (1899). I selected the ballads for this thesis based upon the following criteria:

- All songs should be based on real historical actors involved in real crimes that could be authenticated through historical records and research (archival data, newspaper reports, trial records, etc.)
- All songs should originate in the Eastern United States, representing both Southern Appalachia and the trans-Appalachian diaspora of the Ozarks, regions that have intertwined histories and developments in music.
- All songs should focus on violence and/or transgressions against women, though women are not always the victims.
- Each song should come from a different era of the 19th century to ensure the longevity of the true crime murder ballad tradition across the era.
- All songs should continue to be recorded in the 21st century, thereby maintaining their cultural relevance today.

These criteria ensure that each case study can be reasonably put into conversation with one another. As each song originated from the same cultural base of Scots-Irish ballad traditions and focuses on themes of gender and power, the differences that appear in each song can be compared. Further, the fact that each ballad is about real historical actors and a real death ensures that when examining the sociocultural impacts of the true crime murder ballads, there is a

common basis of criminality. Finally, as each song has continued to be sung and adapted into the present day, this study can follow the evolutionary arc of both oral and written tradition.

Chapter 1 focuses on the ballad *Omie Wise*, from Randleman, North Carolina, which emerged in 1807 shortly after the end of the American Federalist Era. The narrative follows a young pregnant woman murdered by her lover after he promises her marriage. In this chapter, I examine the importance of this ballad as the first American true crime murder ballad.[12] I establish that ballads are a form of social messaging, with *Omie Wise* conveying the potential dangers for young women who are of courting age. Further, I argue that *Omie Wise* establishes the murder ballad as a form of localized news media. I also examine how *Omie Wise* serves as a mode of restorative justice through both the legacy the murder ballad establishes and the ballad variants that punish the murderer in ways that did not occur in real life. Finally, I use this chapter to establish that Appalachia was viewed as a cultural "other" that departed from Victorian ideals, particularly those of gender and social taboos, and evidences [illegible] becomes a necessary function for the survival of murder ballad narratives outside of their original contexts.

Chapter 2 is a case study of the ballad of *Tom Dooley* from Wilkes County, North Carolina. The murder that inspired the ballad took place in 1866, immediately after the end of the American Civil War (1861-1865). This chapter investigates the role of sensationalist journalism, both within the state of North Carolina and on a national scale, in the furthering of Appalachian stereotypes in the American consciousness. In this chapter, I explore how this ballad reinforces the importance of ideological recharacterization of historical actors, particularly regarding the

[12] Note: That is, a ballad composed in the United States by American balladeers and regarding an American true crime. These ballads were further not based on an imported ballad from the British tradition. *Omie Wise* establishes the foundation of American murder balladry from which all subsequent 19th century American true crime murder ballads build on.

women involved in the narrative. I utilize the example of the ballad of *Tom Dooley* to explore the complicated gender dynamics present in communal interpretation of events, and how the perceptions of male and female blame impact attempts at restorative justice.

Chapter 3 focuses on *Frankie and Johnny*, a song emerging from St. Louis, Missouri in 1899 and the turn of the century. This ballad follows the narrative of a black prostitute killing her lover/pimp when she catches him with another woman. I utilize *Frankie and Johnny* to investigate songs and narratives of the trans-Appalachian diaspora, particularly in black communities. In this chapter, I focus on the perpetuation of black communities as a cultural "other" in the United States through racial assumptions and stereotypes emerging in the ideological recharacterization of ballad figures. I further explore how ideological recharacterization can perpetuate folklorification via the life trajectory of the ballad's main character Frankie Baker, and the consequences of this effect.

Theory and Methodology

The methods I have used for this project include archival research, historical analysis, and literary analysis. I have taken a contextualist approach to this research and sought to examine the murders presented in these ballads within the full scope of their historical milieu, which required on-site archival research at the North Carolina State archives in Raleigh, NC. There I accessed primary source documents including court minutes, court summons, and trial records from the murder trials that informed *Omie Wise* and *Tom Dooley.* This allowed me to compare legal historical documentation against the way the same narratives were conveyed through ballads. While I was unable to find the court documents regarding *Frankie and Johnny*, I was able to locate interviews with involved parties in the years after the crime. The relative context of

the 19th century, as well as the Appalachian and trans-Appalachian space, shape the ways in which gender, race, and crime were perceived both by those inside and outside of the communities that experienced these murders, and thus this context must in turn shape the study. I have also used primary sources such as personal accounts, oral histories and interviews, contemporary publications, and newspaper accounts. I have likewise engaged with a wealth of secondary sources including journal articles, monographs, and multiple song covers.

In terms of theory, my research engages feminist theory, critical regionalism, and reception theory. Firstly, my research is guided by intersectional feminist theory, as most notably explored by scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Because this topic deals so heavily with female agency, victimization, and action, I examine how gendered expectation and gender performance have been superimposed on the songs' subjects and what these conceptions of gender and sexuality say about the societies that produced them. Further, I engage with the concept of intersectionality to understand the ways in which gender oppression is compounded specifically by class for all three ballads, and by race in regard to Frankie Baker of *Frankie and Johnny.*

Secondly, I explore critical regionalism theory by examining how specifics of place, localized culture, and localized narratives are integrated into the media produced by a community. Though this is normally applied to architecture and structures, there are clear applications to regions such as Appalachia, as explored by folklorist Mary Hufford.[13] Hufford explains, "... regionalism is a symbolic operation of the media—through advertisements, political campaigns, and the news. Such operations sustain "Appalachia" as a bourgeois social

[13] Mary Hufford, "Interrupting the Monologue: Folklore, Ethnography, and Critical Regionalism," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 62–78.

imaginary... viewed from vigorously defended perspectives on the region from outside, or above."[14] In creating the image of Appalachia, outsiders are in charge of how the region is interpreted and understood, even when the image produced is reductive and inaccurate. This both limits the ways in which Appalachia can connect with the outside world—thus compounding the stereotype of isolation and "otherness"—and limits the ways in which outsiders can understand how Appalachian culture has been influential.

Hufford's work illuminates how media portrayals of Appalachia and the perpetuation of Appalachian stereotypes is inherently political and seeks to disenfranchise the region by flattening it into a negatively portrayed cultural monolith. In reality, Appalachia in the 19th century was culturally, demographically, and musically unique, and the contributions of Appalachia from this period continue to influence American music today. The multiracial and multidimensional facets of the specific Appalachian identity must be interrogated in conjunction with the music and folklore that was produced there.

My research also engages audience reception theory. Audience reception theory examines how messages are incorporated into media and how these messages are interpreted by audiences, even if these audiences are not actively aware of their own engagement. Sociologist Stuart Hall developed the "encoding/decoding" model of communication which proposes that: 1) The same event can be encoded in many different ways; 2) The encoded message can be decoded or interpreted in more than one way; and 3) Understanding the encoded message can be a difficult and problematic process, even if there is an "obvious" reading of the message.[15] I use

[14] Hufford, 63.
[15] Stuart Hall, "Council of Europe Colloquy on 'Training In The Critical Reading Of Televisual Language,'" in *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Universirty of Leicester: Centre for contemporary cultural studies, 1973) and David Morley, Audience Research, January 31, 2009,

audience reception theory to unpack the different ways that audiences have interpreted true crime murder ballads as well as the different messages and social values that are encoded in different variants of the same narrative.

Finally, I am approaching this study through the scholarly framework pioneered by Chicano ballad scholar Américo Paredes. Though Paredes's work is largely neglected in modern discussions of folkloristics, his work sought to reorient the discipline away from the "classical" European definitions of folklore. Instead, Parades looked to the American borderlands to expand the traditional scope of how non-Europeans produced and transmitted folklore and folk practices, including balladry. Though my study is centered in the Appalachian and trans-Appalachian regions of the United States, I still seek to follow Paredes's work by pursuing these ballads as meaningfully distinct from the British ballad tradition, and examining balladry in terms of race, ethnicity, and geography. In this study, I endeavor to expand on traditional notions of how Appalachian geography and cultural influence are understood. I also contribute to the folkloristic study of ballads and the study of Victorian American history, which has been largely neglected in Appalachian spaces.

Historical Context: Balladry, American Murder, and the "True Crime" Genre

In American tradition, ballads are most closely associated with the Appalachian region. Scottish, Irish, and English settlers brought their musical traditions, instruments, and motifs, most notably fiddling and later, African-influenced banjos, to the mountains where they began to settle.

https://web.archive.org/web/20090131045249/http://museum.tv/archives/etv/A/htmlA/audiencerese/audiencerese.htm.

Appalachian State University has described ballads as "[t]he most studied, and arguably respected, musical tradition in the Appalachian region…"[16]

Ballads have been notoriously hard to categorize and define.[17] Folklorist David Atkinson proposes the following definition for the ballad:

> ...ballads are multiform song-stories with a focus on dramatic narrative, typically beginning *in medias res* and arranged episodically in scenes, the action moving in a fashion described as 'leaping and lingering'. Their descriptive diction is generally impersonal and frequently formulaic, drawing on a pool of so-called 'commonplaces' which are sometimes compounded by 'incremental repetition' to impart a narrative impetus. They take as their themes love and death, tragedy and comedy, romance and conflict—the familiar material of song, but often presented through a kind of heightened realism, perhaps even a magical realism, so that their situations and personnel are rarely quite those of the ordinary folk with whom ballad singing is conventionally associated.[18]

People have likely been singing songs that tell narratives for as long as there have been people to sing. As literary scholar Meredith McGill explains, "[the ballad's] very commonness—appearing in all literary periods, cutting across distinctions between high and low culture—keeps us from seeing how they have functioned within the genre system and how they have been used to define the boundaries of literariness itself."[19] The oral tradition of setting stories to song has existed for centuries, but the ballad as it is understood and studied now emerged in the late Medieval period.[20] Ballad scholar MacEdward Leach proposed that ballads have three definite characteristics: "(1) The ballad tells a story; (2) it tells its story in song, in simple melody; (3) it

---

[16] AppState, "Ballad Traditions of Appalachia," App State Digital Scholarship and Initiatives , accessed May 17, 2025, https://dsi.appstate.edu/projects/mountain-music/topics/dooley/balladtraditions.

[17] Meredith L. McGill, "What Is a Ballad? Reading for Genre, Format, and Medium," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 71, no. 2 (September 1, 2016): 156–75, https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2016.71.2.156, 156.

[18] David Atkinson, "The Ballad and Its Paradoxes," *Folklore* 124, no. 2 (July 17, 2013): 123–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.2013.779837, 123.

[19] ibid

[20] John E. Housman, *British Popular Ballads* (Miami, FL: Royale House, 1975), 13. Note: The oldest extant evidence of a ballad in English comes from the 13th century, called *Judas* and classified by Francis Child as Ballad 23.

is *folk* story-song since it has the unmistakable qualities of treatment, of style, and of subject matter that only comes of folk culture."[21]

The first ballads sung in the United States were British ballads, sometimes adapted to fit within new American contexts. However, as people began to settle into their new lives, entirely new ballads began to emerge. Many of these songs have been lost to time, given that ballads are traditionally transmitted orally.[22] Further, materials to record and reprint ballads were largely unavailable to immigrants, and literacy levels were lower among rural populations like those in Appalachia.[23] However, some English ballads and their Americanized variants have survived through oral tradition, continuously sung and spread across generations, until they were 'officially' recorded by early 20th century ballad collectors.

European ballads, and the American ballads that followed them, often reflected narratives that were familiar to the lower classes.[2424] As Leach described, "Such stories have an appeal to the folk over the generations, for in basic form they occur over and over in real life. Always there are sensational deeds of violence, jealous lovers, family and tribal feuds, men against society. These situations are timeless."[25] One of the most popular forms of ballads was murder ballads, exciting songs that told tales of crime and punishment, love affairs and betrayal, justice and vengeance.

---

[21] MacEdward Leach, *The Ballad Book* (New York, NY: A.S. Barnes, 1975), 1.
[22] AppState, "Ballad Traditions of Appalachia."
[23] Samuel Sidwell Randall, *History of the Common School System of the State of New York, from Its Origin in 1795, to the Present Time : Including the Various City and Other Special Organizations, and the Religious Controversies of 1821, 1832, and 1840* (New York, NY: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor & Co., 1871), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=miun.aen6278.0001.001&seq=5&q1=In%20populous%20cities, 18.
[24] Housman, 13.
[25] Leach, 2.

These murder ballads were not unique to America. In fact, European murder ballads have been traced back to the Middle Ages. (insert footnote here about medieval murder ballads) However, the elements of *true crime* murder ballads did not begin to emerge until the 16th century. I argue that the broadside ballad is the earliest iteration of what would become a true crime murder ballad. According to the University of Santa Barbara's English Broadside Ballad Archive, "[b]roadside ballads are ballads that were printed on one side of a sheet of paper, sung and sold in the streets of London, or carried to towns throughout England by traveling salespeople... Though many of these ballads do address traditional topics... they also often speak about current events, religious issues, wonders and "monstrous" happenings (such as the births of deformed children), and other timely topics."[26] Broadside ballads were unique in the way that they did not rely exclusively on oral transmission, and did not expect cultural longevity. The broadside ballad developed in response to the printing press, and focused on topical and contemporary subjects.[27] Broadside ballads, also called a broadsheet ballads, were distributed, as the name suggests, on a large single sheet of paper designed to be discarded after reading.[28] These broadsides were wildly popular in England, and later in Scotland and Ireland. Manufactured cheaply and quickly, broadsides were commonly sold on street corners, in markets and pubs, and other public meeting places.

Because of their inexpensive and ephemeral nature, broadsides could be distributed to and shared among the lower classes, helping spread news, political ideology, and stories. Ballads written on broadsides were often sung as they were sold, and were purposefully set to familiar

[26] Eric Nebeker, "The Heyday of the Broadside Ballad," UCSB English Broadside Ballad Archive, 2007, https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/heyday-of-the-broadside-ballad.
[27] Bruno Nettl, "Broadside Ballad | Traditional, Folklore & Balladry | Britannica," Brittanica, May 5, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/art/broadside-ballad.
[28] Leach, 1.

tunes that captured the attention of the listener.[29] This meant that broadside balladeers were not required to come up with new tunes when writing their topical pieces, which sped up the process of both writing and retaining information.

Some of the most popular subjects for these ballads were crime and murder.[30] The more sensational the story, the more likely a broadside was to sell. Just as traditional stories of romance and murder were popular in orally transmitted balladry, similar themes proved successful in broadside ballads. While murder had long been a theme within the ballad corpus, writing ballads about *real* crimes and criminals became popular largely through the broadside tradition. Many broadsides were sold at public executions. These ballads were often moralistic and sometimes took on the perspective of a condemned criminal, repenting and urging the audience not to make the same mistakes.[31] Oral ballads were also interested in the sensational and grim. Ballads that focused singularly on the details of a murder, and often the catalyst and aftermath of the crime, became known as murder ballads. When the traditions of oral balladry and broadside ballads intersected, the fascination with *true* crimes and consequences was paired with the longevity of the oral ballad.

I position the broadside ballad as the closest predecessor to the true crime murder ballad due to its emphasis on recounting the facts of a crime to the public, usually embellished to be as sensational as possible. Further, these songs encouraged lessons of morality and the carriage of justice, reminding the public that criminality had consequences. Broadsides were briefly popular

[29] Peter Gammond, *The Oxford Companion to Popular Music* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 82.
[30] ibid.
[31] Olive W. Burt, "The Minstrelsy of Murder," *Western Folklore* 17, no. 4 (October 1958): 263–72, https://doi.org/10.2307/1496190, 263.

in America, largely during the colonial era.[32] Murder ballads, too, were popular, both as adaptations of already-known British songs and as new compositions. In the words of journalist and editor Patricia Donovan, "Bloody murder has been a quintessentially American preoccupation since John Newcomen sailed in on the Mayflower and was whacked by a fellow colonist. What followed in America from the 17th century to the present, says cultural analyst and author David F. Schmid, is a form of 'entertainment by murder,' a ghastly enthrallment that conflates some of Americans' favorite preoccupations: consumerism, titillation by celebrity gossip and violence."[33] This fascination with murder and violence has manifested in many ways over the centuries, and balladry was one of the most prominent.

However, as the United States began to settle into an independent identity, immigrants began to move further westward, away from population centers that could support broadside balladeers. In spaces like Appalachia, the broadside ballad was no longer a practical means of spreading information, and as such, new forms of news media and balladry had to evolve. Further, the Appalachian region was becoming its own region that was fundamentally separate from the rest of the fledgling nation. As previously mentioned, Appalachia was largely settled by the Scots-Irish, who began displacing indigenous peoples in the mid-18th century.[34] Other 'undesirable' European immigrants followed, such as French Huguenots.[35] Many of these Irish and Scottish immigrants were fleeing religious and social persecution or economic hardships in the British Isles. These settlers further became "othered" as they intermarried with indigenous

[32] Carleton Sprague Smith, "Broadsides and Their Music in Colonial America," essay, in *Music in Colonial Massachusetts*, vol. 53 (Boston, MA: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1980), 157–367.
[33] Patricia Donovan, "America's Fascination with Murder," University at Buffalo - The State University of New York, September 6, 2007, https://www.buffalo.edu/ubreporter/archive/vol39/vol39n2/articles/SchmidMurder.html. Note: John Newcomen was murdered by a fellow Mayflower colonist in 1630.
[34] Note: Scots-Irish here is interchangeable with Scotch-Irish and Ulster Irish.
[35] Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg, *Our Appalachia: An Oral History* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 13.

Americans and, later, free or escaped black Americans.[36] As early as 1728, negative images of Appalachia were being published, painting inhabitants as poor, lazy, and backward.[37] This meant that, from the first white settlers of the area, Appalachia was marked as a region inhabited by marginalized and ”othered” populations.

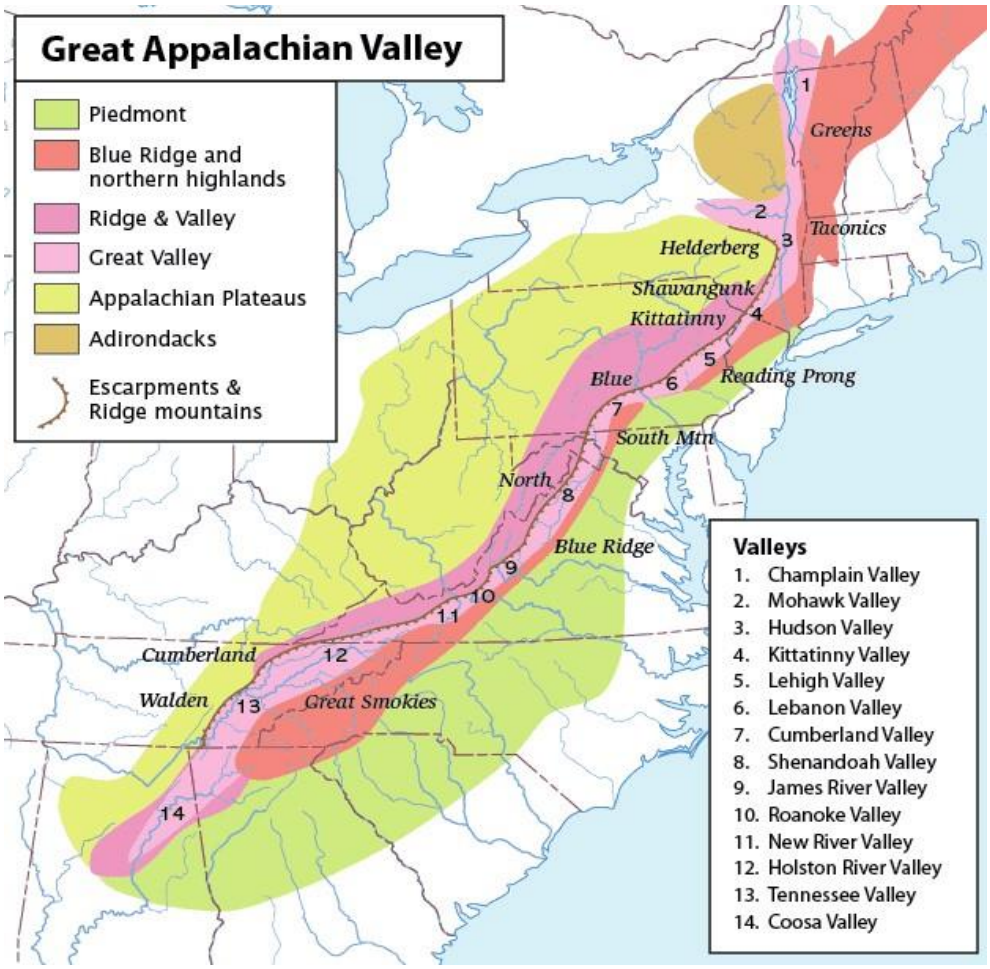

Fig 1.1: Great Appalachian Valley.[38]

[36] Mary K Anglin, “Erasures of the Past: Culture, Power, and Heterogeneity in Appalachia,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, WHITENESS AND RACIALIZATION IN APPALACHIA , 10, no. 1/2 (Spring 2004): 73–84, 77. [37] Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 26.

[37] Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 26.

[38] *Great Appalachian Valley*, May 10, 2010, map, *Wikipedia*, May 10, 2010, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Appalachian_Valley#/media/File:Greatvalley-map.png.

Though Appalachia as we know it today was not formally defined until the 20th century, the region was marked as "other" far before. This separation was present from the foundation of the American colonial empire. Appalachia was considered a wild and untamed frontier that was a separate entity from the colonies, acting as a barrier between British and French settlements.[39] Those who settled in Appalachia largely did so for the inexpensive land rights and freedom from religious and social persecutions, establishing the inhabitants as inherently poor and alienated from the eastern parts of the developing nation.[40]

This "otherness" continued post-Revolution. The mountains of Appalachia were harder to work and sparsely populated compared to the lowlands. These inhabitants were both physically and ideologically separate from the government that represented them. A schism was formed between those who lived in the mountains and those who did not. Stereotypes of the region were quick to form and spread, transforming the cultural perception of Appalachia from a collection of varied and independent cultures into a singular monolith.[41] Though Appalachia spans thirteen states and over 190 counties, the image of the "Appalachian" was condensed into the figure of an impoverished, simple-minded, sometimes violent, and always backward mountain-dweller.[42] As Appalachian historian Ron Eller explained:

> Appalachia may likely have replaced the benighted South as the nation's most maligned region.... Always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness once associated with the South as a

[39] Gregory H. Nobles, "Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 17501800," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 1989): 641–70, https://doi.org/10.2307/1922778, 643.
[40] James Graham Leyburn, "Part III: Scotch-Irish in America," essay, in *The Scotch-Irish : A Social History* (Chaple Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 174–332, 222.
[41] Carissa Massey, "Appalachian Stereotypes: Cultural History, Gender, and Sexual Rhetoric," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 13, no. 1/2 (2007): 124–36, 125.
[42] Katie Beth Brooks, "A Historiographic Account of Stereotypes, Ideology, and Education in an Appalachian Region," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 30, no. 2 (2024): 165–80, https://doi.org/10.5406/23288612.30.2.04, 166.

> whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the 'other America' quite so persistently as Appalachia.[43]

A strange, almost paradoxical, result of this stereotyping has resulted in the pervasive cultural view that Appalachia is a place of nostalgia, where the old, quaint ways of the past survive into the modern day. This association was largely due to the fact that Appalachia was isolated, and thus, non-Appalachians assumed all inhabitants were insulated from the influence and evolution of the outside world. This manifested most dangerously in the belief that Appalachia was the last "racially pure" part of America, composed only of people who were 100% white. As historian LaVinia Jennings explains, "Anglo elites understood true "Americanness" as linked to whiteness and British ancestry."[44] This, of course, was not an accurate depiction of Appalachia, and was used as a form of harmful propaganda. In reality, Appalachia was home to indigenous tribes, free and formerly enslaved black Americans, and non-English settlers such as Italians, Poles, and Hungarians.[45] Appalachia had a nearly 10% black population, even as Appalachian communities had proportionally far fewer enslaved peoples.[46] As Jennings explains,

> In their efforts to pinpoint Appalachia as a resource for national whiteness yet distinguish Appalachian Americans from sophisticated, elite, white readers, commentators like William Goodell Frost utilized racialized language that associated mountain residents with the barbarian tier of civilization according to cultural evolutionism. As "barbarians," Appalachian residents were considered just one step above "savages," who were generally understood as nonwhites.[47]

---

[43] Ronald D Eller, "Introduction," introduction, in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), ix–xi, ix.
[44] LaVinia Delois Jennings, *At Home and Abroad: Historicizing Twentieth-Century Whiteness in Literature and Performance* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 93.
[45] AV's Intern Team, "Whitewashing Reality: Diversity in Appalachia," Appalachian Voices, June 21, 2024, https://appvoices.org/2014/02/07/whitewashing-reality-diversity-in-appalachia-2/.
[46] Athena Webb, "African Americans in Appalachia-- Featured Essay," Oxford African American Studies Center, accessed May 17, 2025, https://oxfordaasc.com/page/2527.
[47] Jennings, 95.

This purgatory of race left white Appalachians as both lesser than their non-Appalachian counterparts and as figures to be envied for their connection to "pure" white culture. This purposeful whitewashing and simultaneous suppression of Appalachian autonomy and culture was, and continues to be, a symptom of American paternalism.

This romanticized view of Appalachia was integral to the effort to collect and record what many scholars consider "traditional" ballads, or ballads that were spread through oral tradition and tell stories in a poetic form, often focusing on love.[48] In the early 20th century, outsiders "discovered" Appalachia and its song traditions, drawn to the region by its perceived racial purity and preservation of "marginal survivals" of British folk culture. In the late 19th century, English ballad collectors like Harvard professor and folklorist Francis James Child, who gave his name to the influential Child Ballad collection, had already done a great deal of work collecting traditional Scots-Irish and English ballads. Child's collection of ballads— consisting of both traditional Scottish and English ballads and their Americanized variants—was published in five volumes from 1882 to 1898, titled *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads.*[49] Appalachia was seen as a venue for forgotten or undiscovered vestigial British folk traditions, including lost ballads, due to the perceived backwardness of Appalachian society.[50] However, these early collectors, such as Cecil Sharp, had preconceived notions of the types of songs they wanted to find, specifically variants on the ballads Child had already recorded.[51] As such, many songs that have become foundational to American culture and musical tradition were neglected or ignored

[48] https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/ballad#traditional-ballads
[49] Francis James Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge, The Cambridge Edition of the Poets (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), v.
[50] Dianne Meredith, "Migration and Adaptation of Popular Balladry in the US Appalachian Region," *Scottish Geographical Journal* 117, no. 3 (January 2001): 169–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/00369220118737120, 169.
[51] Brian Peters, "Myths of 'Merrie Olde England'? Cecil Sharp's Collecting Practice in the Southern Appalachians," *Folk Music Journal* 11, no. 3 (2018): 6–46, 7.

by early collectors.[52] This left more popular songs about less "civilized" subjects, such as murder ballads, love songs, and occupational songs, unaccounted for in academic and institutionalized spaces. Ironically, these ballads are the ones that most authentically encapsulate

Appalachian culture and experience. However, this neglect also allowed for oral transmission to continue among residents, which promoted further spread and variants of songs.

Trans-Appalachian Migration, St. Louis. and the Boundaries of Appalachia

This study has pushed me to interrogate my understanding of what it means to "be" Appalachian, and who exactly falls under the Appalachian umbrella. While Appalachia is a geographical region, it is also a cultural region, and as such, its boundaries are often a subject of scholarly debate. The Appalachian Regional Commission, a federal-state partnership founded in 1965, has changed the boundaries of what it considers Appalachia several times since its inception.[53] The flexibility of the geographical boundaries of Appalachia is mirrored in its cultural boundaries, and Appalachian culture has spread as its inhabitants have migrated further Westward, particularly to a region known as trans-Appalachia, which spans west of the Appalachian mountain range to the Mississippi watershed.[54] St. Louis, Missouri, which is at the far end of the trans-Appalachian region on the border of the Ozark Mountains, has been culturally shaped by Appalachian culture, music, and practices.

---

[52] Peters, 17. Note: These excluded songs included "religious music, popular music, instrumental music, and recently composed ballads and songs" as well as black spirituals. Ibid.

[53] Appalachia Then and Now: Examining Changes to the Appalachian Region Since 1965 § (2015). [54] Kristofer Ray, "Interpreting Native Trans-Appalachia, 1670-1770," *XVII-XVIII: Société d'Etudes AngloAméricaines Des XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* 78 (2021), https://doi.org/10.4000/1718.8090.

[54] Kristofer Ray, "Interpreting Native Trans-Appalachia, 1670-1770," *XVII-XVIII: Société d'Etudes Anglo-Américaines Des XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* 78 (2021), https://doi.org/10.4000/1718.8090.

Fig. 1.2: Map of trans-Appalachia as approximated by trans-Appalachian scholar Dr. Max Fraser, University of Miami, 2024.[55]

[55] Max Fraser, *Map of Transappalachia*, February 23, 2024, map, *Daily Yonder*, February 23, 2024, https://dailyyonder.com/qa-what-was-the-hillbilly-highway/2024/02/23/.

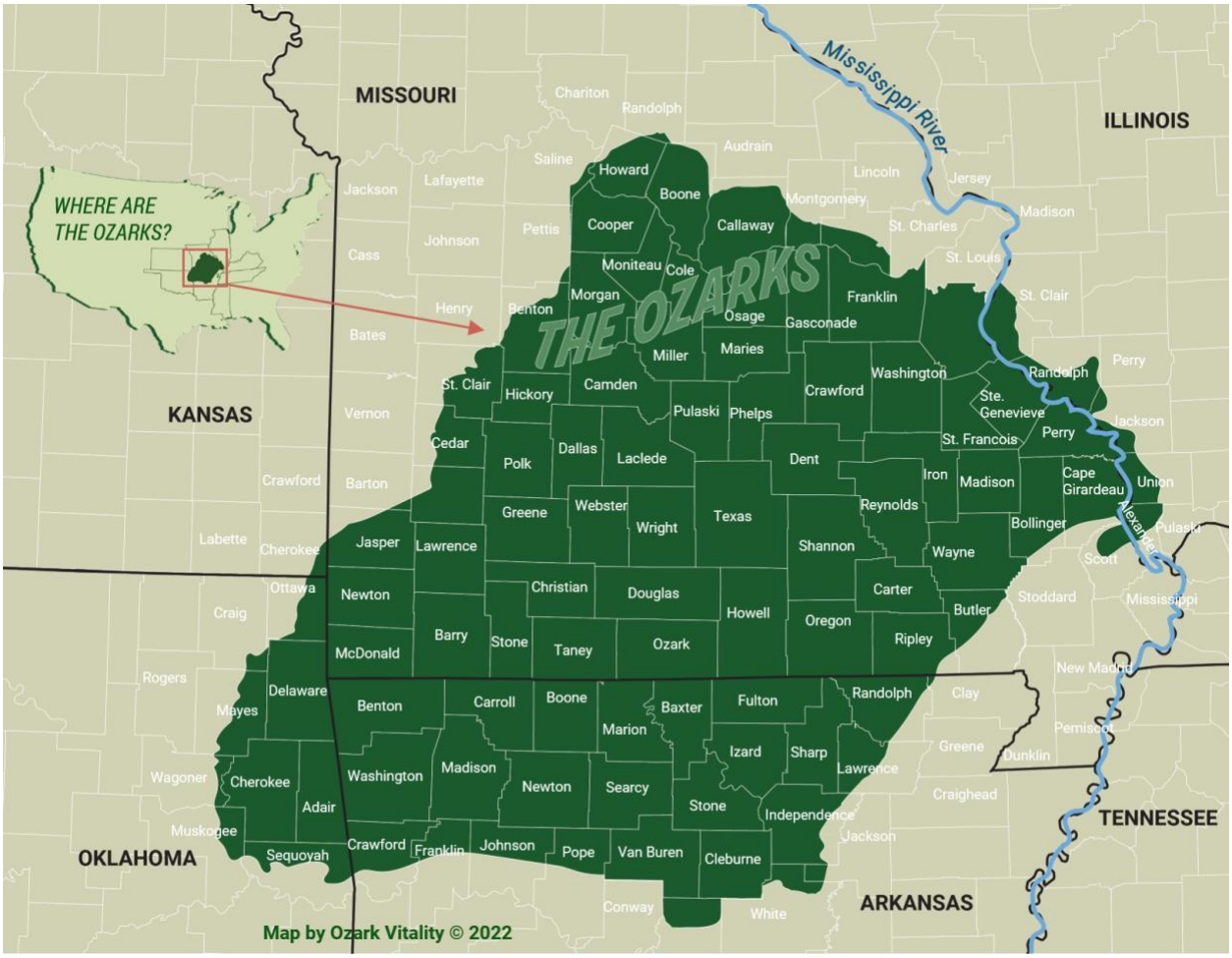

Fig. 1.3: Map of the Ozarks[56]

Murder ballads established themselves as a popular form in St. Louis, particularly among its black communities. I argue that this can be considered an extension of Appalachian culture as part of a larger trans-Appalachian region. This comes from both the original settlement patterns of the Ozarks and the migration of Appalachians, specifically black Appalachians, to the St. Louis area. As mentioned above, the boundaries of Appalachia have always been contested, and while Missouri and St. Louis are certainly not geographically or within the Appalachian

[56] *Where Are the Ozarks?*, 2024, map, *Ozark Vitality*, 2024, https://www.ozarkvitality.com/region.

Ecoregion, the cultural boundaries are even more flexible.[57] Further, if we consider the geographic and topographical similarities between the Ozarks and the Appalachian regions, as well as the demographics of settlers who colonized the land, the parallels are very clear.

Appalachia has been referred to as the "Ozark's mother region" for good reason.[58] Geographer John Florin outlines that "[t]he Appalachian Uplands, stretching from New York to Alabama, and the area of the Ozark-Ouachita mountains are separated by some 400 kilometers of land. They are actually two parts of a single physiographic province that have a strong topographic similarity and an unusually close association between topography and human settlement."[59] Further, though the Ozarks were settled much later than Appalachia, they were also largely populated by white Scots-Irish migrants.[60] These settlers were largely Southern Appalachians migrating westward. This led to traditions such as balladry moving into the cultural framework of the Ozarks as well. Prior to Reconstruction (1863-1877), white settlercolonists brought enslaved Africans to their communities, who in turn brought African and African American musical and cultural traditions.[61]

---

[57] Stewart Scales, Emily Satterwhite, and Abigail August, "Mapping Appalachia's Boundaries: Historiographic Overview and Digital Collection," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 24, no. 1 (April 1, 2018): 89–100, https://doi.org/10.5406/jappastud.24.1.0089, 89.

[58] Brooks Blevins, "Wretched and Innocent: Two Mountain Regions in the National Consciousness," *Journal of Appalachian Study* 7, no. 2 (2001): 257–71, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41446485, 258.

[59] Stephen S Birdsall and John William Florin, "Appalachia and the Ozark," essay, in *An Outline of American Geography : Regional Landscapes of the United States* (Washington, DC: Department of State. Bureau of International Information Programs, 1998).

[60] Donald L Stevens, *A Homeland and a Hinterland: Historic Resource Study Ozark National Scenic Riverways* (Omaha, NE: National Parks Service Midwest Region, 1991), 21. Note: The Ozark were colonized by white settlers starting in the early 19th century.

[61] Note: the earliest black inhabitants of the Ozarks were Haitians enslaved by the French in the 1720s. For further reading, see Brooks Blevins, *A History of the Ozarks, Volume 2: The Conflicted Ozarks (*Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 17. Slavery was practiced on a smaller scale in the Ozarks and Appalachia as there were no

Free Black Ozarkers also settled in the region of their own volition. Prior to the Civil War, small black-only settlements emerged in the mountains.[62] During Reconstruction, many Southern and Southern Appalachian black Americans migrated to the Ozarks while travelling westward. This migration intensified as Reconstruction failed, notably through the Exoduster Movement. The Exodusters were black Americans fleeing Southern states, specifically seeking to go to Kansas, the name coming from the great "exodus."[63] St. Louis, also known as the Gateway to the West, was a key stop on this journey. The Mississippi River connected the West to the South, and St. Louis had been constructed with the river as its veins.[64] While most of these Exodusters continued on their way to Kansas, some remained in St. Louis. Though the white population of St. Louis attempted to dissuade Exodusters and other black migrants from passing through the city, the local black community came together to aid these emigrants in their journey.[65] A small portion of these people chose to remain with the community they had found—including black churches, schools, and mutual aid—and continued their lives in St. Louis.

It's no coincidence that the negative stereotypes of Appalachians, Ozarkers, the ScotsIrish, and black Americans have a great deal of overlap. Scholar Meredith McCarroll examines this intersection of Appalachian stereotyping through the lens of film, but her exploration is applicable here as well. McCarroll writes that she is "interested in the stakes of... images of Appalachian figures that are almost exclusively phenotypically white, while relying on

---

resources to support plantation systems. However, this did not mean enslavement was not occurring, contrary to popular myth.

[62] Billy D. Higgins, "The Origins and Fate of the Marion County Free Black Community," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 427–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/40027828, 427.

[63] See: Bryan M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2021).

[64] Jack, 123.

[65] Glen Schwendemann, "St. Louis and the 'Exodusters' of 1879," *The Journal of Negro History* 46, no. 1 (January 1961): 32–46, https://doi.org/10.2307/2716077, 34-5.

tropes long used to depict nonwhites."[66] McCarroll emphasizes that white Appalachians exist as a "safe" stereotype. This is because the caricature of Appalachians as backward, uneducated, and poor is dependent on a monolithic understanding of the region. Because those stereotyped still benefit from white privilege, those perpetuating the stereotypes face little to no resistance against the harmful imagery.[67] White supremacy is, after all, dependent on the "invisibility" of whiteness, or the acceptance of whiteness as the norm. Hence, when white Appalachians represent a homogenous "other," they inhabit space that essentially positions them as socially non-white. This is compounded by the myth that Appalachia is exclusively white.

McCarroll notes that "[t]he isolation of the hills leads to a depravity – often sexual in nature. Without the presence of a civilizing force, monstrous mountaineers are given reign to hone their self-serving cruelty."[68] This is mirrored by the most pervasive stereotypes of African Americans—hypersexual, violent, and animalistic.[69] This can also be seen in the anti-Irish sentiment of the era, which often depicted the Irish as beastly.[70] Recall that the Scots-Irish were the primary white settlers of Appalachia.[71] The implication was clear—Appalachians and black Americans were less evolved and less human than the rest of white America. Due to these

---

[66] Meredith McCarroll, *Unwhite: Appalachia, Race, and Film* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2018), 5.
[67] ibid.
[68] McCarroll, 22.
[69] J. Stanley Lemons, "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920," *American Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 102–16, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712263, 105.
[70] Kevin Kenny, "Irish Immigrant Stereotypes and American Racism ," Picturing US History, accessed May 17, 2025, https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/irish-immigrant-stereotypes-and-american-racism/.
[71] Note: Historian Art McDonald notes that in the mid-19th century, "Irish and Africans Americans had lots in common and lots of contact during this period; they lived side by side and shared work spaces. In the early years of immigration the poor Irish and blacks were thrown together, very much part of the same class competing for the same jobs. In the census of 1850, the term mulatto appears for the first time due primarily to inter-marriage between Irish and African Americans. The Irish were often referred to as 'N---- turned inside out and N---- as smoked Irish.'" Art McDonald, "How the Irish Became White," University of Pittsburgh, accessed June 4, 2025, https://sites.pitt.edu/~hirtle/uujec/white.html.

overlaps in culture, perception, topography, and socioeconomic conditions, I argue that the black ballads that emerged in St. Louis at the end of the 19th century can and should be considered in conversation with Appalachian murder ballads.

Contributions

As previously mentioned, Francis James Child was a pioneer of English-language ballad collecting and classifying. His collection of 305 ballads, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, is most commonly referred to as "The Child Ballads," and contain all variants of each song that Child could find, as well as annotations regarding song origins and subjects. In the decades since Child, the study of balladry has become increasingly diversified. In American ballad studies, the 'authenticity' of white culture or connection to British tradition is no longer a priority. Modern scholarship seeks to understand the ballad in all of its complexity, which has resulted in the recording and analysis of songs that were previously deemed unimportant or of little value by traditional collectors such as Cecil Sharp.

A large shift in the world of ballad scholarship came in the mid-20th century, when collectors and researchers began moving away from the ballad as a textual object and began to consider it within the context of performance and the identity of the performer. This movement corresponded with the "performance turn" in folkloristics, wherein folklorists began to consider folklore within the context of its performance rather that as solitary or static. Roger D. Abrahams' *A Singer and Her Songs: Almeda Riddle Book of Ballads,* Eleanor R. Long-Wilgus's

Ballad Singers, Ballad Makers, and Ballad Etiology, and Porter and Nicolaisen's *Ballad Explanations, Ballad Reality, and the Singer's Epistemics* all showcase this shift in attention in the American post-World War II era.[72] This intersected with the American folk music revival (c.1930-1970), which saw the transformation of American popular music and musical identity.[73] During the folk music revival, the ballad recognized as a quintessential folk tradition that artists were seeking to preserve. However, unlike early ballad collectors, this preservation was not a project undertaken by the traditional elite but instead spearheaded by artists who felt they were representative of the common man and who viewed their work as a countercultural preservation of their own forms of cultural expression.

This was concurrent with work by scholars such as Américo Paredes, who was working to expand the academic confines of the ballad, particularly regarding race, ethnicity, and geography. Paredes was a true pioneer in folklore, pushing for the recognition of Chicano studies and the importance of ballads outside of the Anglo tradition, particularly through conversation with the corrido tradition (see Paredes's *With His Pistol in His Hand,* 1958). As folklorist Charles L. Briggs elegantly puts it, "Paredes anticipated shifts in ethnographic representation and in the politics of culture, he pointed to a different way of thinking about how diverse actors, including both folklorists and laypersons, produce knowledge about folklore."[74] Paredes's work encouraged ballad scholarship to move away from focusing only on the United Kingdom and Appalachia and into the American borderlands and the voices of non-white, marginalized groups.

---

[72] Note: Published in 1970, 1973, and 1986 respectively.
[73] Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States," *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (August 1996): 501–43, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00160675), 501.
[74] Charles L. Briggs, "What We Should Have Learned from Américo Paredes: The Politics of Communicability and the Making of Folkloristics," *Journal of American Folklore* 125, no. 495 (Winter 2012): 91–110, 92.

In more recent decades, ballad scholarship has expanded to focus on the reconciliation between classical scholarship in the vein of Child Ballads and the evolving landscape of popular balladry.[75] Further, ballad scholarship has mirrored the interest of other areas of folkloristics, such as gender, race, sexuality, and identity. Scholars such as Dianne Dugaw, author of *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry: 1650-1850*, have explored gender and sexuality in ballads, with Dugaw specializing in the study of narratives about women cross-dressing as men.[76] Historians like Cecil Brown and John Garst have furthered the study of black balladry and the importance of narrative in community-making.

Murder ballads in particular have become a popular subject in folkloristics since the 1990s. The historiography on murder ballads largely treats fictional and true crime murder ballads the same way. Often, true crime murder ballads are discussed and anthologized alongside fictional murder ballads, with only a small notation indicating that some songs were based on historical crimes such as in Steven L. Jones' 2023 book *Murder Ballads Old and New: A Dark and Bloody Record*. When murder ballads about real events are isolated, such as in Richard Pollenberg's *Hear My Sad Story* and Richard Underwood's *Crimesong*, the facts of the historical murder are presented, but without any additional analysis.[77] This is not to suggest that my study is the first to deal with ballads I would categorize as true crime murder ballads but mine is the first to establish these types of ballads as a meaningful category. Eleanor R. Long-Wilgus collected dozens of variants of *Omie Wise* for her 2003 book *Naomi Wise: Creation, ReCreation,*

[75] Note: For futher reading, see Sigrid Rieuwerts' *"The Genuine Ballads of the People": F. J. Child and the Ballad Cause, Journal of Folklore Research* 31, no. 1/3 (1994): 1–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814508.
[76] Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
[77] Note: Published in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

and Continuity in an American Ballad Tradition. However, Long-Wilgus' focus remains in examining ballad variants and their discrepancies rather than using *Omie Wise* as a case study.

Perhaps the earliest monograph about what I would classify as a true crime murder ballad is Anne B. Cohen's *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl!* published in 1973. This is what I would consider to be the most foundational work regarding true crime murder ballads, as Cohen's microhistory explores the murdered-girl stereotype in media and the ways this trope was adopted by media coverage of the Bryan murder case. The exploration of media in this thesis was further guided by Gretchen Soderlund's *Sex Trafficking, Scandal, and the Transformation of Journalism, 1885-1917* and Daniel A. Cohen's *The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850.*[78]

In this thesis, I seek to fill in the historiographical gaps regarding where and why certain communities, namely Appalachia and the Ozarks, produced true crime murder ballads in the 19th century. Through archival texts, court records and other legal documentation, ballad variants, contemporary newspaper reports, 19th century literature, and personal accounts, I have constructed an in-depth contextual analysis of these ballads. There has been no study thus far examining the reason true crime murder ballads emerge almost exclusively in Appalachia and trans-Appalachia, or the cultural expectations and traditions that best fostered the production and spread of these narratives. To my knowledge, there has also been no study on trans-Appalachian and Ozark ballad traditions as an extension of Appalachian influence and culture, the shifting representation from white narratives into black narratives as true crime murder ballads moved west, and the overlapping stereotypes of Appalachian poor whites and trans-Appalachian black communities in media representation surrounding true crime. Further, I examine the impact of

[78] Note: Published in 2013 and 1997, respectively.

taking stories of real historical actors and changing them to appeal to outside audiences. Previous literature, such as Cohen's *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl!* has addressed the role of media in spreading the narratives of true crime murder ballads, but this thesis aims to expand on this, and pushes to understand the impact of using historical actors and their experiences as a way to perpetuate ideology that was not inherent to the original crime.

As legal scholar Richard Underwood notes, "Rather than concern themselves with the courtly love, treachery, and bravery of the austere [British ballads], these American [murder] ballads wallowed in the depths of depravity arising from the darkness of the human spirit. And they always let you know the caliber of the gun."[79]

Fig. 1.4: Approximate locations of each murder on a US map. Green indicates regions of Appalachia and the Ozarks. A: Omie Wise, Randolph County, NC. B: Laua Foster, Wilkes County, NC. C: Allen Britt, St. Louis, MO.[80]

[79] Richard H. Underwood and Ronald Pen, *Crimesong: True Crime Stories from Southern Murder Ballads* (Lexington, KY: Shadeland House Modern Press, LLC, 2020), 1.

[80] Image adapted by Nat Ivy.

II: OMIE WISE

"Oh, listen to my story,
I'll tell you no lies
How John Lewis did murder
Poor little Omie Wise"[81]

Fig. 2.1: Randleman, NC on a map[82]

Randolph County, North Carolina. April 1807. Naomi Wise was found dead; her body buoyed in Deep River just miles from her home in Randleman, north of present-day New Salem, NC. Within hours her lover, Jonathan Lewis, would be arrested. However, he never stood trial for her murder, escaping from prison and fleeing to Kentucky. The crime left a deep scar on the community. The tragic events soon become a song, and that song will take on a life of its own. The ballad of Naomi Wise quickly outgrew the small North Carolina town that saw her death. In fact, her murder is considered the basis for America's first-ever fully *American* murder ballad.

When examining true crime murder ballads, *Omie Wise* feels like a natural starting point. Bob Waltz, editor of *Inside Bluegrass* and long-time co-administrator of the Traditional Ballad Index, calls *Omie Wise* "the granddaddy" of American murder ballads.[83] This is because *Omie Wise* is the oldest extant murder ballad that we have record of written in America about America and not based on a previous British ballad. Because of this, this true crime murder ballad sets the

[81] Doc Watson, *Little Omie Wise*, CD, *Doc Watson* (New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964).
[82] *Location of Randleman, North Carolina*, n.d., map, *Wikipedia*, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randleman,_North_Carolina.
[83] Bob Waltz, "Remembering the Old Songs: Omie Wise," *Inside Bluegrass*, August 2000.

tone and a precedent for all ballads that came after it. Not only in the form and circumstances of the murder (though drowning and illegitimate pregnancy are common themes), but in the way the song was interpreted and adopted by the community of Randleman, and later, the wider American public. Omie Wise sets many standards, including the need for restorative justice, the ideological recharacterization of true crime murder ballad figures when they are removed from their original contexts, and the purposeful "othering" of the communities that experienced the crime. The narrative, as canonized by the numerous ballads about the case, goes something like this:

Naomi Wise, a beautiful young orphan, met a handsome scoundrel named Johnathan Lewis and fell in love. Despite their different social standings, and the rumors that John Lewis was bad news, the two became lovers. Naomi, besotted, agreed to intercourse out of wedlock and soon fell pregnant. Fearing social alienation and abandonment, she wanted to get married. John Lewis assured her that they would be wed, and whisked Naomi away on horseback. However, instead of going to the county magistrate to officiate their marriage, he stopped at the Deep River ford, where he brutally strangled Naomi. There, he pushed her body into the river, trusting that she would drown, and rode away.

She did drown. Her body was carried downriver, where it was found less than two days later. John Lewis was immediately a suspect and taken to jail but refused to confess. Some ballads end here, but others follow Lewis further. Shortly after imprisonment, he escaped from jail and fled Randolph County. Eventually, he was brought back in handcuffs for trial. However, he was never convicted and walked away a free man. Some variants of local folklore say he confessed to Naomi's murder on his deathbed. Some say his guilt is what kills him in 1817, just ten years after the murder. Everyone agrees Naomi never got her justice.

The brutality of the murder, and the ensuing lack of justice, cemented Naomi's story in cultural memory. The true crime murder ballad written about her served as a form of news and as a warning for young lovers. The numerous variations that have emerged from this core ballad act as cultural catharsis when justice is retroactively enacted, as a way to "other" the Appalachian landscape, and as a canvas on which to project shifting and evolving sociocultural ideologies. In the two hundred and eighteen years since her murder, Naomi's story has been told and retold, shaped and reformed. Though core elements remain the same, the ballads of *Omie Wise* (also known under the names of Omi, Omy, Oma, Ommie, and Nomie) are really the stories of many women. This is not because many different "Omies" really existed, but because the ballad variants depict different expectations and social values that appeal to audiences in different times and places. The ideological recharacterization of Naomi and the other historical actors present in the ballad allow the same narrative, and the moral weight of a real murder, to be applied to different contexts. This dichotomy between "Omies" can be seen in the two general narrative paths taken by ballads.

The first, and more popular, narrative path was perpetuated by Braxton Craven, an American educator and Randolph County native. His version of Naomi's story is the oldest in published print, and contains the first written iteration of ballad text, though the ballad itself was already twenty years old by the time Craven was born. His account, *Life of Naomi Wise: true story of a beautiful girl, enacted in Randolph County, N. C., about the year 1800*, was published first in 1851, and then several times over in various North Carolina newspaper runs, spreading his account of the tale into new parts of the state.[84]

[84] Braxton Craven, *Life of Naomi Wise: True Story of a Beautiful Girl, Enacted in Randolph County, N.C., about the Year 1800* (King, NC: Newsum Book Co., 1851). Note: Craven wrote under the pen name "Charlie Vernon"

In Craven's interpretation, Naomi Wise is presented as the ideal Victorian woman. This Naomi is nineteen, fresh-faced and beautiful, known for her innocence and naivety. She falls in love with Jonathan Lewis, who Craven calls "a hyena, skulking about the pathway of life..." Lewis courts Naomi, but has no intention of marrying her.[85] In fact, Lewis already has his eyes set on a woman of greater social standing, the sister of his employer, Hettie Elliott. Naomi, however, is blinded by her love and is willing to give Lewis anything he wants. When she is discovered missing, her community comes together to find her, and later, comes together to grieve for her. She is a maiden, a martyr, a Madonna.

This version is heavily saturated with the Victorian ideology that guided America through most of the 19th century. Though Naomi was murdered in 1807, thirty years before Victoria would take the throne in 1837, Craven's narrative presents the story as if it were beholden to the social values of Victorian America in 1851. Craven, though born and raised in Randolph County, was already a Methodist preacher and college president by the time his account was published and had been exposed to Victorian ideology and perceptions of women's value and roles. In Victorian society, women were expected to abide by the four pillars of "True Womanhood"; piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[86]

However, Craven neglected to remember that Appalachia in 1807 was not the same landscape as broader America in the 1850s. Instead, Appalachia chafed against the rest of the nation's shift towards "modernity" and industrialization. Communities in Appalachia were less

[85] Craven, 11.
[86] Catherine J Lavender, "Notes on The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood, Prepared for Students in HST 386: Women in the City, Department of History, The College of Staten Island/CUNY," CUNY, 1998, https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/truewoman.pdf.

influenced by the imported Victorian ideals due to their isolation and the necessity of female physical labor, and therefore had different standards for female behavior. However, Craven's wider public was certainly familiar with and more sympathetic to a Victorianized image of Naomi. As such, this image of Naomi had a stronger cultural hold outside of Appalachia, and has been perpetuated both through Craven and the idealized ballads. This interpretation of the story can be seen in many successive versions of the ballad, such as that of iconic folk singer Doc Watson and balladeer and National Endowment of the Arts Heritage Fellow Doug Wallin. There are some aspects of Craven's story that have historical backing. Naomi was indeed an orphan and employed as a servant by the Adams family. The Lewis family was well known in the area for their proclivity to violence.[87] Further, the class dynamics present between Naomi and Jonathan presented a power imbalance. No matter how much Naomi may have been infatuated with Jonathan Lewis, she was still of a lower class, and as gender historian Victoria Bynum says, more "a sexual proving ground" than a potential spouse.[88]

The second narrative path comes from a very different source. In 1952, a commonplace book was donated to UCLA's Special Collections containing *A true account of Nayomy Wise* by a school-aged girl named Mary Woody.[89] Woody, born in 1801, was living in Randolph County during the 1813 trial of Johnathan Lewis for his escape from jail.[90] In this handwritten account, she recorded a lengthy poem describing the Lewis and Wise courtship, ensuing pregnancy, and

[87] Hal E. Pugh and Eleanor Minnock-Pugh, *Naomi "Omie" Wise: Her Life, Death, and Legend* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2022), 24-5.
[88] Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 109.
[89] Note: a commonplace book was a notebook or journal used to compile information and knowledge, most of which was thought to be "common" or general knowledge. They were often utilized by schoolchildren in the 19th century to practice their spelling and penmanship.
[90] Note: Recall that Lewis never stood trial for Naomi's murder and was instead in court for his escape only.

dramatic aftermath. Woody's writing is possibly the only contemporary account from a layperson in Randolph County recording their knowledge of the crime. Though embellished, her writing is thought to be reflective of general events, and as a commonplace book, was likely reflective of the general information that Randolph County residents had access to.

In Woody's account, Naomi Wise was older, perhaps in her mid to late twenties. By 1807, she already had two children by two different fathers, one of whom being the local hatter, Benjamin Sanders. Instead of marrying, she was a single mother who perused financial aid from the fathers. Lewis, a young man "too fond of carnality," was Naomi's third conquest.[91] He was displeased by the pregnancy, and tried to bribe Naomi to not name him as the father. When that failed, he threatened her with murder. Neither swayed her. According to Woody, Naomi was "not fearful" of Lewis, something she divulged to her mistress, Mary Adams.[92] Lewis lured Naomi to Deep River where he killed her, hoping to avoid the consequences of fathering a bastard child. Mary Adams, who feared for Naomi's safety, was the one to head the search party. When Naomi's body was found, her community buried her as a wayward woman rather than an innocent young girl.

This version is supported historically by Randolph County's bastardy bonds. Naomi's two children, Nancy (born 1789) and Henry Wise (born 1803), were both registered by the state as bastards. Bastardy bonds were legal agreements that placed the burden of financial responsibility on the putative father of an illegitimate child rather than the state if a mother was unable to support her children. Wise had previously charged the fathers of Nancy and Henry with "begetting a child on her body" and these men had posted public bonds that promised they would

[91] Woody
[92] Woody

not leave their children's care in the hands of the state.[93] These bond records place many details of the Craven account into question, particularly Naomi's age. If she were 19 as Craven and many other sources claim, she would have given birth to her daughter Nancy at 10 years old. While not technically impossible, it seems certainly improbable. As historians Eleanor Minnock-Pugh and Hal Pugh point out, "the average age of menarche in 1780 was 17 and by 1877 was near 15."[94]

The question of her age is further complicated by her line of work. Though little is concretely known about Naomi's earliest years, what is known is she had been orphaned and taken in by William and Mary Adams of Randolph County, North Carolina.[95] As a ward of the Adams family, Naomi worked as essentially an indentured servant. Orphan indenturement was a common occurrence in late 18th century America, effectively binding an orphaned child to a family as their servant in exchange for room and board.[96] This was not an adoption and not a recognized apprenticeship, but rather a largely transactional way to keep children in their communities when no family was able to care for them. In exchange, a family was provided with free household or workplace labor without needing to provide education. At the time of her death, Naomi was working for the Adams family. However, there is evidence that Naomi had worked for several families in the Randleman area prior.[97] Many orphans who were indentured were set free from their contracts between 16 and 18 at this time, allowing them to seek employment elsewhere. This indicates that Naomi likely aged out of her indenturement, worked

---

[93] Randoph County Bastardy Bonds, NC State Archives, as cited in L McKay Whatley, "Naomi Wise," Notes on the History of Randolph County, NC, August 23, 2009, https://randolphhistory.wordpress.com/2009/06/03/naomi-wise/.
[94] Minnock-Pugh and Pugh, 18.
[95] Note: Within this chapter, the historical figure of Naomi Wise will be referred to as "Naomi" and her fictionalized counterpart will be referred to as only "Omie" to minimize confusion.
[96] Tim Hacsi, "From Indenture to Family Foster Care: A Brief History of Child Placing," *Child Welfare*, Special Issue: Lessons from the Past: A History of Child Welfare, 74, no. 1 (1995): 162–80, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351315920-9, 164.
[97] Minnock-Pugh and Pugh, 18.

in other households, and then chose to work again for Adams family. due to their good treatment of her. At the time of her death, her daughter had also been indentured out, and so perhaps she also had a desire to stay in the same community as her children.[98] There is no extant record of Naomi's birth, making it impossible to definitively identify her age. Her official gravestone, located in Providence Cemetery, Randolph County, NC reports her year of birth to be 1789. However, this same grave states she died in 1808, which can be proven conclusively false through court record.

The truth of what "really" happened to Naomi Wise likely falls somewhere between the Craven and Woody accounts. What is definitive is that Naomi Wise and Jonathan Lewis were involved in a physical relationship that was known to their community. When Naomi's body was discovered, Lewis was almost immediately arrested and taken to jail as the primary suspect due to his known involvement with her. He was kept under heavy and constant guard, but still managed to escape his cell at the Randolph County jail before his trial. Several men, including the Sheriff, were indicted for aiding his escape due to the suspicious conditions of his disappearance. Lewis then fled to Indiana, where he lived in hiding until 1811 when he was recaptured by authorities and returned to North Carolina. He remained incarcerated until November of 1813 when he stood trial in Randolph County for escaping prison. However, he was never tried for the murder of Naomi Wise. After serving a 30-day sentence and paying a fine of ten pounds (or approximately $1,500 in today's money), Lewis left North Carolina a free man and headed for Kentucky where he lived the rest of his life in obscurity.

[98] Minnock-Pugh and Pugh, 26. and The American Philosophical Society, "The Lives of 18th Century Apprenticed and Indentured Children," American Philosophical Society, 2024, https://www.amphilsoc.org/museum/exhibitions/children-archives/lives-18th-century-apprenticed-and-indenturedchildren.

Craven and Woody's narrative tracts expose different ways *Omie Wise* serves audiences. Though their narratives diverge, both serve as warnings. Craven warns young women not to divert from the Victorian norm. Sex out of wedlock, he preaches, will lead to death. Both Craven and Woody warn of the social and economic consequences for men who father bastards. Further, Craven's ideological recharacterization of Naomi partook in a precedent for using the subjects of true crime murder ballads as stock figures for portraying cultural narratives. The Victorianization of Naomi through Craven compounded the "otherness" of Woody's more historical account. Not only did he expose the ways in which Appalachian North Carolina differed from the social norms of more "civilized" parts of the country but also perpetuated the removal of Appalachian characteristics from the overall narrative.

There are, of course, some elements that remain the same across all tellings of the ballad, and one of these contents is Jonathan Lewis's use of excessive cruelty in murdering Naomi. As C. Kirk Hutson outlines, few historical sources detail violence against women in the 19th century American South.[99] However, Hutson emphasizes that this is not for a lack of occurrences. Rather, southern women have been less likely to speak out about their abuse for fear of retribution, due in part to the way Southern society condoned violence against women more than other areas of the United States.[100] Legal scholar Richard Brown proposes that the south saw such an influx of violence due to the cultural need to preserve one's honor.[101] The South's "culture of honor" has been of interest to scholars for many years, wherein even small disputes were seen as an insult to

[99] C. Kirk Hutson, "'Whackety Whack, Don't Talk Back': The Glorification of Violence Against Females and the Subjugation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Southern Folk Music," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 3 (September 1996): 114–42, https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0492, 114.
[100] Hutson, 114.
[101] Richard M Brown, "Southern Violence-Regional Problem or National Nemesis?: Legal Attitudes Toward Southern Homicide in Historical Perspective," *Vanderbilt Law Review*, Symposia: The Legal History of the South, 32, no. 1 (January 1979): 225–50, 225.

an individual's personal or familial honor and reputation.[102] This culture of honor was most prominent among white men due to their social positioning as patriarchs and heads of households—in other words, their reputations and positions were most at-risk if tarnished or questioned.[103]

Many theories have been proposed as to why a culture of honor developed in the South, but the truth likely lies in a combination of factors. Due to the South's sparse population compared to the rest of the nation, the settling of disputes was largely dealt with interpersonally. Official law enforcement was often unavailable, geographically inaccessible, or corrupt, leading to personal definitions of restorative justice.[104] Additionally, the social culture demanded that men, in order to assert and maintain their masculinity, needed to present as dominant and reactionary.[105] Law and lawfulness was not measured by state or territory laws, but rather by the laws of the Constitution and the laws of the Bible.[106] Therefore, even a violent man could still be considered a good and honorable man within the constraints of honor culture, as long as he stayed within the social boundaries set by his community.

This is not to suggest that there were no regulations or repercussions to violence committed by a man against those in his household. It was the responsibility of a man to maintain order, and while that could be done through violence, they risked communal ostracization and retribution.[107] Men who killed their dependents—those who lived and worked

---

[102] Richard E. Nisbett et al., "Insult, Anger, and Aggression: An 'Experimental Ethnography' of the Culture of Honor," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 5 (November 27, 1995): 945–60, 945.
[103] Nisbett et. al, 946.
[104] Nisbett et. al, 946.
[105] Brown, 229.
[106] ibid
[107] Edward E Baptist, "My Mind Is to Drown You and Leave You Behind," essay, in *Over the Threshold Intimate Violence in Early America*, ed. Christine Daniels and Michael V Kennedy, 1st ed. (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 1999), 94–110, 95.

within their households and depended on them socially and economically—were likely to face consequences if those dependents were white. These punishments could range from public humiliation to lynching.[108] However, even as men were reminded that their violence had social confines, they still sang songs like the ballad of *Omie Wise*. Where real violence may have been condemned, stories were certainly condoned. The Southern imagination was captivated by tales of murder, and regardless of the particularities of the case, ballads spread the stories of what people *believed* to have happened.

The ballad fills many of the gaps left in this story, and paints much more vivid pictures than the archival court documents ever could. However, what is added not only fleshes out the narrative, but exposes the social expectations and desires of the communities that sang and perpetuated the ballad. The two Naomi's presented in the main versions of the ballad are at the opposite ends of the same spectrum of early 19th century womanhood—the ideal woman and the ideal *fallen* woman. Though the first interpretation of a Naomi who was young and beautiful and naive, is more popular in the general ballad corpus, both iterations appear in different capacities and both have cultural sway. As the subject of a murder ballad, the objective truths of Naomi's life and tragic death have fallen to the wayside, making room instead for sensational storytelling, didactic messaging, and the fancies of fiction.

As the central female figure, Naomi's character and characterization is trapped between the two extremes. Her illegitimate pregnancy has damned her twice, resulting in both her tragic, untimely death, and her negative representation. As an unwed pregnant woman in the early

[108] Ibid. Note: This humiliation could take the form of charivari. Charivari (also called shivaree) was a folk custom that required a community to stage a mock parade, including songs, to shame the offending community member as a form of penance. For further reading, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 370.

nineteenth century, the only possibilities for her depiction are as a pure, naive, and recently deflowered tragic lover or as an impure temptress already sullied by her previous relationships and thus unworthy of social sympathy. In the former, Naomi is the "perfect victim," the kind of woman whose fate inspires others to be cautious of those they give their hearts to. In the latter, she is the "deserving victim," who was killed because she crossed too many sociocultural boundaries. Either way, Naomi crossed a sociocultural boundary through premarital sex, regardless of if she intended to marry Johnathan Lewis. As per ballad formulation, she thus doomed herself to die.

The ideological recharacterization of Naomi's character is reflected through the change in her name. She is no longer Naomi Wise, a real person who could experience the full range of human emotions and actions, she is *Omie*, the victim who either deserved her fate or didn't. In many variations, specifically ones that portray her as a "perfect victim," she becomes *poor little* Omie Wise. Not only is her name shortened, but the diminutive additions also completely restructure her identity around the attributed adjectives. Becoming *poor little* Omie Wise strips her of her agency. She can no longer be anything but poor and little, no matter what occurs within the narrative. She is a figure to be pitied and, to an extent, infantilized. Her "littleness" and associated naivety and besmirched purity paint the picture of a very young Omie, who, despite exhibiting culturally rewarded virtues—is still the one 'at fault' for her own death. The ballad communicates that a "good" woman must remain pure and naive while also combating any sexual advances from interested suitors. To stay alive, a woman cannot put her trust in any man, even in a patriarchal society that emphasizes protecting women and their "virtue".

But why does this matter? Naomi's story, though tragic, is not particularly unique. The American ballad tradition is populated by dozens of accounts of fictional, and a few nonfiction

murders, of unwed pregnant women. There is even a subgenre of ballad to classify these songs, the "murdered sweetheart" ballad.[109] The motif is defined by scholar Caitlin Kirchner as narratives that perpetrate "certain tropes (or stereotypes) that work together to strip the female victim of control over her situation... stock elements that appear in the following composite list: the innocence of the victim, the luring away and subsequent isolation of the victim by her killer, the victim pleading for her life (often on her knees), an outdoor setting, a romantic relationship between the victim and the assailant, the suggestion that the crime was the result of sexual transgression, the victim's abandoned body that is vividly described, and the killer's punishment or regret for the deed."[110] However, Omie Wise holds such cultural sway because it was the first murder ballad written in America, by Americans, without working from a prewritten British or Scots-Irish ballad. Further, the ballad, as a true crime ballad, is reflective of a distinct cultural ripple within Randolph County. Her death was significant enough that it not only went to trial, but became a vehicle for teaching other young women in her community how to avoid her fate. The murder was significant enough that it shifted from a tragedy to a cultural touchstone—inspiring both a resurgence of tradition and the creation of something new.

To understand why this change occurred, we must recontextualize Omie back into Naomi. When considering the responses to Naomi's murder, several different conditions must be accounted for. Historically, the crime comes at a very transitory period in American history, and

[109] Delia Dattilo, "Some Patterns of the 'Murdered Sweetheart Ballads' in Oral Tradition, Early Recordings, and Popular Culture.," *Studia Ethnologica Pragensia*, no. 1 (2023): 24–40, https://www.ceeol.com/search/articledetail?id=1203967, 24.

[110] Caitlin Kirchner, "If I Had a Shotgun: Musical Protest against Misogyny in Murder Ballads," *Oshkosh Scholar*, December 2017, 6–16, https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/79141/11460%20OshScholar18%20Kirchner.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, 8.

public reactions were shaped in part by this unfamiliar and unprecedented moment in time. To construct the historical perspective, Naomi Wise was murdered during the second term of Thomas Jefferson's presidency. At this time, North Carolina had been a state for less than twenty years. According to some records, Naomi was born the same year North Carolina became a US state and Washington first took office. This is to say that the murder of Naomi Wise was not only committed on the soil of a fledgling nation, but the fall out was also handled by a very new judicial system. Prior to 1783, every colony's judicial system was determined internally, and varied greatly from place to place.[111] When the United States became united, it was a long transitional period to establish unified national laws and regulations.

The first American murder case with a recorded transcript was brought to trial in 1800. This case, known colloquially as the Manhattan Well Murder and more officially as The People vs. Levi Weeks, likely had a large amount of influence on the way subsequent murder cases were perceived and conceptualized. In 1799, carpenter Levi Weeks was accused of murdering the girl he was courting, Gulielma "Elma" Sands.[112] In an eerie parallel to Naomi's own murder, Weeks was alleged to have beaten and strangled Elma Sands before throwing her into Manhattan Well in Manhattan, NY.[113] Sands' family reported that she had been intending to marry Weeks the night of her disappearance. Though the coroner's inquest determined Sands was not pregnant at the time of her death, many news sources speculated that an illegitimate child was the reason she was attacked.[114]

---

[111] Richard Keyser, "Chapter 1.0. Early Colonial Law and Courts: Introduction," American Legal History to the 1860s, 2020, https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/ls261/chapter/chapter-two/.

[112] Scott Slawinski, "A Tale of Two Murders: The Manhattan Well Case as Source Material for Charles Brockden Brown's 'The Trials of Arden,'" *Early American Literature* 44, no. 2 (2009): 365–98, https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.0.0063, 366.

[113] Note: More specifically, 129 Spring Street, Manhattan, New York.

[114] Slawinski, 367.

The case garnered a great deal of public attention, not only because Weeks was defended by the legal powerhouse team of future Vice President Aaron Burr, former Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, and future Supreme Court Justice Henry Brockholst Livingston, but because it was an American murder, committed on American soil. News of the case was picked up by local papers and quickly sensationalized.[115] A beautiful young woman found dead, her lover accused of the murder, and the public split on his guilt. As author and legal historian Liva Baker wrote, "Miss Sands, of little local significance in life, became in death the talk of the town."[116]

In the end, Weeks was acquitted of the murder after only five minutes of jury deliberation. However, the impact of the case had made its mark on American history, signaling the beginning of the United States' public fascination with crime and criminality. The Weeks case proved that, as long as there was a shadow of a doubt in terms of legal evidence, potential murderers could walk free from the courthouse. It also proved that the public was less willing to forget or forgive, as Levi Weeks discovered when he was driven out of New York by his fellow citizens in the wake of the murder. If justice was not found in the legal system, it could still be enacted in the public sphere.

One must also consider the geographic, demographic, and cultural conditions of the location of the murder of Naomi Wise—Randolph County, NC in 1807. By the early 19th century, Appalachia and the Southern states were sparsely populated and largely disconnected from other parts of the nation.[117] Further, Southern Appalachia was its own distinct region, constructed from both Southern and Appalachian culture. Therefore, the identity of North

---

[115] Liva Baker, "The Defense of Levi Weeks," *American Bar Association Journal* 63, no. 6 (1977): 818–24, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20744436, 819.
[116] Baker, 819.
[117] Note: North Carolina is both a Southern and Appalachian state.

Carolina as a state must be understood within the context of both sectionalism and regionalism. Sectionalism, as defined by historian Susan Deily-Swearingen is "the idea that individual communities of people, sharing a set of cultural, economic and geographic realities, create individuated sections and loyalties within a larger polity."[118] While sectionalism is most associated within the context of the American Civil War—specifically the divide between Northern and Southern states—the divisions of distinct communities has been present in the United States since its founding.[119] However, due to the connotation of sectionalism and its ties to the Antebellum South in scholarship, the term regionalism was developed to explore the formation of a region's distinct cultural identity that does not subvert or reject wider national interest.[120]

Understanding Southern Appalachia as a distinct cultural region illuminates how societal mechanics functioned, specifically those surrounding gendered and intimate partner violence, social acceptability, and the functions of justice. Within the region, communities were small, insular, and tended to construct and abide by their own rules and codes. Law and order were less a codified rulebook and more an amorphous set of social bindings that differed from community to community. Because of this, judgement and justice were settled largely outside of the

---

[118] Susan Deily-Swearingen, "Sectionalism," Essential Civil War Curriculum , September 2020, https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/assets/files/pdf/ECWC%20TOPIC%20Sectionalism%20Essay.pdf, 1.

[119] Deily-Swearingen, 2. Note: Historian Frederick Turner Jackson likens the American 'sections' to the different nations of Europe.

[120] Richard B Drake, "Southern Appalachia and the South: A Region Within a Section," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 3 (1991): 18–27, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4144559719 Note: the coiner of regionalism, Howard Odum, further defined regionalism as ": 1) "sectionalism emphasizes political boundaries and state boundaries" while "regionalism connotes component . . . parts of the larger national picture;" 2) "sectionalism may be likened unto cultural inbreeding in which only home stocks are advocated . . . whereas regionalism is line breeding, in which regional cultures contributed the base but not the whole;" 3) "regionalism by its very nature . . . implies more of the designed and planned society," whereas "sectionalism would abound in conflict" among interests; and 4) as a southerner he noted that "one of the most critical aspects of sectionalism is. . . .its counter- point in potential. . . .as inevitable coercive federalism." (As quoted in Drake, 21)

courtroom, and what might be considered illegal or unjust in other parts of the country was accepted or ignored.

Finally, conditions of what kind of media was already popular must be considered. There are many reasons why the gruesome story of a young woman drowned by her lover might have caught the attention of ballad writers and Southern audiences alike. Death and dying were a popular fascination in 19th century America. In particular, the dead *female* body was an object of interest and romanticization. Brenna Mulhall argues that this is because "representations of dead female bodies exemplify the feminine ideal: passive, visionless, and voiceless."[121] Daniel A. Cohen's influential essay *The Beautiful Female Murder Victim* asserts that *Omie Wise* is the oldest extant evidence of what he calls a "courtship murder" ballad—that is, ballads about "the murder of young unmarried women by young unmarried men."[122] As such, it's also the first courtship ballad based on a crime that can be traced in historical record. This is not to suggest that British, Scottish, and Irish ballads concerning similar subject matter were not popular during this period. There is plentiful evidence that ballads were transmitted orally across the Atlantic, and many were centered around stories of love and betrayal, with the murdered woman as a particular subject of interest. Cohen asserts that in early post-colonial America, isolated settlements of Scots-Irish immigrants such as Appalachian frontier communities were especially partial to gruesome narratives and balladry.[123]

---

[121] Brenna Mulhall, "The Romanticization of the Dead Female Body in Victorian and Contemporary Culture," *Aisthesis: The Interdisciplinary Honors Journal* 8, no. 2 (November 2, 2017): 1–8, https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/aisthesis/article/view/46, 1

[122] D. A. Cohen, "The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 2 (December 1, 1997): 277–306, https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/31.2.277, 284.

[123] D.A. Cohen, 280.

This may be attributed in part to the harsh conditions experienced by these immigrants. Their lives were hard, not only due to the physical demands of living in Appalachia, but also because of their relative isolation. Not only were many Appalachians geographically distant from other parts of the country, but they were also relegated to settling in the mountains because they were considered undesirable. Many Scots-Irish settlers traced their ancestry back to disenfranchised subjects of James I's England.[124] King James I (r. 1603-1625) attempted to legitimize his Protestant rule by seizing land in Ulster (Northern Ireland) and rendering the Catholic inhabitants essentially serfs on their own land.[125] The Church of England was put in power, and required all citizens to pay tithes, even when they were denied rights.

In the 1690s, when famine drove many Scottish immigrants south, Church of England became the religious minority in Ulster, but remained politically in power. In a bid for religious freedom and a restoration of their rights, many Scots-Irish immigrated to the American colonies, where they would later become a strong fighting force in the American Revolution. However, in the post-war world, many found they "had come to these shores in rebellion against the very kind of society which they found already entrenched on the eastern shore."[126] Anti-Irish and Anti-Catholic sentiment was already present in America, and the largely undeveloped Appalachian Mountains provided space for relative religious and cultural freedom for white settlers.[127]

---

[124] Emily Webb, "In the Mountains: The Scots-Irish Heritage in Appalachia," Lee McRae College, March 17, 2022, https://www.lmc.edu/about/news-center/articles/2022/in-the-mountains-the-scots-irish-heritage-in-appalachia.htm. Note: James I was also James VI of Scotland. Under his rule, the Scottish and English crowns were united, much to the dismay of both sides. The years presented here as his reign (1603-1625) only denotes the time he was king of both England and Scotland, hence why he is referred to as 'James I' exclusively.

[125] ibid

[126] Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 10.

[127] Kenny. Note: This is, of course, an oversimplification of history that ignores much of the BIPOC presence in Appalachia. For further information, refer back to the Introduction.

Cohen explains that both the ballad tradition of courtship murders and the actual social practice were well documented in Great Britian in the late 18th and early 19th century.[128] He suggests that courtship itself was undergoing a transformation due to changing social contexts in both Britian and America, wherein communities were moving away from strict Protestant views of morality. This resulted in "increasingly aggressive pursuit of both economic self-interest and sexual self-fulfillment, in conjunction with weakening familial and communal controls" in young men and resulted in courtships that were more physical affairs.[129] Women, on the other hand, were subject to the "resurgent cultural norm requiring marriage as a precondition for sexual intercourse and romantic fulfillment."[130] This double standard reflected the tensions between assertions and expressions of masculinity and the rigid boundaries of feminine honor and social responsibility.

Many ballads were written regarding this friction between gender roles. Imported ballads from Great Britian, such as *The Wexford Girl* from Ireland, which in turn was adapted from an earlier English ballad called *The Bloody Miller*, tells an eerily familiar narrative.[131] A male narrator tells the story of how he, a miller, courted a girl in Wexford. Though she had a "rolling eye," she agreed to marry the miller.[132] One day, he calls on her to go for a walk under the pretense of discussing their marriage. Instead, the miller beats her with a stake, and when she falls unconscious, he drags her by her hair to a river and throws her in so that she will drown. The narrative of *Omie Wise*, though based on a real crime, parallels much of the *Wexford Girl*.

---

[128] D.A. Cohen, 287.
[129] D.A. Cohen, 289.
[130] D.A. Cohen, 292.
[131] Note: This same ballad was co-opted and renamed *The Knoxville Girl* in some parts of America to reflect the American landscape. In this version, the narrator is no longer a miller, but the rest of the narrative remains largely the same.
[132] John W. Green, CD, *Wexford Girl* (Saint James, Beaver Island, MI: Alan Lomax, 1938), https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1939007_afs02282a/.

It's no wonder, then, that the crime would feel culturally resonant enough to put to song. *Omie Wise* presents itself as an archetypical example of what an American murder ballad "should" look like. Eleanor Wilgus-Long notes, "the story of the murder of Naomi Wise by Jonathan Lewis, nurtured by the pre-existence of textual models from which to borrow relevant features and the fundamental idea of what a 'murdered girl' tale should consist of, was ready to be shaped into a traditional ballad."[133] Not only did Naomi's story follow pre-established ballad tradition, the themes present in her murder were also particularly topical for the time and likely ushered in an additional wave of public interest.

Drowning was a popular motif in art and literature regarding young lovers. Psychologist Abigayle Anne Claggett asserts that "drowning in particular was an object of much public interest—it was seen as a very gendered way to die, as women were statistically far more likely to drown as a result of a variety of social conditions, primarily fashion and beliefs in women's physical inferiority."[134] Women, particularly white women, were less likely to be able to swim than men or black women.[135] In keeping with Appalachian social codes, women and girls were intended to stay in the sphere of the home, where swimming was seen as unnecessary and an expression of immodesty.

However, this is not to suggest Southern Appalachian women didn't interact with water. In fact, open bodies of water were much more prominent in everyday life in the 19th century. All water used in the home had to be either hand pumped from a well or taken from a body of water, and many activities that are done in the modern home– such as laundry and bathing– often took

[133] Long-Wilgus, 17.
[134] Abigayle Anne Claggett, "'The Death of a Beautiful Woman': Women's Suicide by Drowning in 19th Century American Literature," *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (Summer 2020): 1239–48, https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.54.60, 1239.
[135] T Kevin Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 1, 2006): 1327–55, https://doi.org/10.2307/4485894, 1334.

place outside.[136] Historian Suzannah Lipscomb explored the dangers of open water in her documentary series *Hidden Killers*. Though she focuses on Tudor England (1485-1603), her experiments regarding the female body in open bodies of water provide some insightful data, applicable to early 19th century American life. First, women's clothing was often made of heavy wool. While wool was prized for its insulation and antimicrobial properties, the material is highly absorbent and quickly becomes incredibly heavy.[137] Secondly, Lipscomb outlines how the body's first reflex when exposed to the cold, especially cold water, is to involuntarily gasp. When fully submerged, this allows water to flood the lungs and causes the larynx to spasm, leading to drowning, even in shallow areas. Water takes heat away from the body 25 times faster than air of the same temperature, meaning that even in warm or mild weather, being submerged can be deadly.[138]

Lewis drowning Naomi also has symbolic significance when brought into the ballad form. While drowning may have simply been the most convenient method of killing his lover, the transformation of crime into ballad attaches literary symbolism and motifs to the events. Water is considered a purifying agent, particularly within the religious contexts of Southern Appalachia. To drown Naomi was to symbolically link her to baptism and to cleanse her of sin. In the rite of baptism, many Christian sects believe that the sinner is drowned, and the cleansed soul is removed from the water.[139] Naomi's sin was premarital sex and her resulting pregnancy. In this way, Jonathan Lewis asserts religious authority and righteousness in his actions and positions himself as a savior of Naomi's soul, despite being the one to end her life.

---

[136] Absolute History and Suzanna Lipscomb, "The Deadly Secrets Of The Tudor Home | Hidden Killers," YouTube, February 27, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD0McTYto3I&t=744s.
[137] Absolute History.
[138] ibid
[139] Note: This is associated with Romas 6 and Paul the Apostle. See: Philip Meyer, "What Does Such Baptizing with Water Indicate? (Romans 6)," Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, March 21, 2021, https://www.ielcth.org/what-does-such-baptizing-with-water-indicate-romans-6/.

The ballad positions Lewis in a seemingly contradictory collection of roles—lover, killer, savior, villain. However, all these facets reinforce the patriarchal and gendered social expectations of early 19th century Appalachia. Men were the ultimate power of authority, and wielded that power in the household, in religious spaces, in the socioeconomic sphere, in romantic and sexual relationships, and even in the realm of deciding life and death. This, coupled with Southern Appalachia's honor culture, paints a vivid picture of the power dynamics and social responsibilities present between men and women. In his monograph exploring the intersections of folk song and American history, historian Robert V. Wells outlines,

> [t]he central message of these ballads [murder ballads based on real crimes] is that young men will lead young women astray if given half a chance, and they will frequently commit murder to cover up their crimes. Courtship as the time of these ballads brought not only pleasure and love but hidden dangers as well...This song, and the many others that followed, warn young women not to trust young men, who might well get them pregnant and then kill them.[140]

Naomi, too, presents a more complicated figure than she first appears in ballad text. Christian women, both in Appalachian and non-Appalachian communities, were expected to act as cultural foils to men. The female body was representative of purity, modesty, maternity, restraint, and domesticity. Where men's lives were predominately characterized by their work in the wild, hunting and fishing, women were tasked with maintaining the homestead, bearing and raising children, planting and tending to crops, and providing the necessary education for younger generations.[141] As a woman was, at least for part of her life, indentured to a wealthier family and who had already borne two children out of wedlock, Naomi had no husband or land of her own to lay claim to. She was thus rebelling against the intended mold of womanhood. By

[140] Robert V. Wells, *Life Flows on in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 21-2.
[141] Wyatt-Brown, 234.

wrapping her story in the coat of a ballad, the narrative of *Omie Wise* ideologically recharacterizes the real Naomi, putting her back into her assigned social role.

In terms of female victims like Naomi Wise, this ideological recharacterization most often manifests as reducing women into innocent, flawless ingénues in the ballad space. This recharacterization of Naomi files down all of her "flawed" parts, until only *poor little Omie* remains, the paragon of a pure and perfect victim. This kind of mythmaking indicates what a community desires to distill from a story. Because of the popularity of the innocent maiden narrative over the more nuanced historical truth, the meaning that has been derived from Naomi Wise lays in this version of her mythology. What the people of Randolph County found important was not necessarily what was important to Braxton Craven, who was heavily influenced by the Victorian ideals of America outside of Appalachia. However, Craven's Victorian audience, composed of literate non-Appalachians, were compelled by his telling of events, and once Craven's work was put into print, the narrative was solidified.

However, some things—perhaps the most important things—remain. What the people of Randolph County found so tragic, what Craven wrote to his audiences, what ballad singers have repeated for over two hundred years, has been about a girl murdered by a man who was supposed to love her. This narrative fit the prescriptive familiarity of previously written ballads and previously held trials mentioned above, and reinforced core social ideology and messaging at the time.

There is one element of fiction that seems to cling to the ballad of *Omie Wise* that cannot be separated, even when proved definitively false by the historical record. In nearly every iteration of Naomi's story—Craven's narrative, Woody's commonplace book, the famous 20th century recordings by singers like Doc Watson and Doug Wallin—is an addition of justice. The

real Jonathan Lewis was never convicted for the murder of Naomi Wise. By the time he stood trial, he was only convicted of escaping prison with no mention as to why he was placed there. However, the ballad has never let Jonathan Lewis escape his actions. In Craven's account, Lewis is convicted by a jury of murder. Young Mary Woody wrote much the same, describing a courtroom scene in which Lewis was found guilty. Doug Wallin, the folk singer who Smithsonian Folkways recruited in 2002 for his rendition of Omie Wise, recounts a story where Lewis is arrested and immediately expresses his guilt. Lewis dramatically laments "[y]ou can shoot me, you can hang me, for I am the man/I drowned little little Omie in Yonders ol' mill dam/My name is John Louis, my name I'll never deny/I drowned little Omie, I'll never reach the sky."[142] Even today, local folklore insists that, while Lewis may have escaped judicial punishment, he was tormented by Naomi's death for the rest of his life, confessing his sins on his deathbed.

Deathbed confessions are not only a form of closure but are a manifestation of a lifetime of guilt. In many sects of Christianity, confession of sin is required for the dying party to properly pass into the afterlife. While we cannot know the exact denomination of Jonathan Lewis, we can assume he was at least nominally Christian.[143] It would make sense, then, that he would confess to a sin as egregious as murder only on his deathbed. The addition of this deathbed confession to the narrative not only situated Lewis as definitively guilty, but would also ensure that he had been followed by the intense guilt of his crime for the rest of his life. Even if

[142] Doug and Jack Wallin, *Omie Wise*, CD, *Family Songs and Stories from the North Carolina Mountains* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1995), https://folkways.si.edu/doug-wallin/omie-wise/american-folk-old-timeprose/track/smithsonian.

[143] Note: The Second Great Awakening was in full swing in 1817, and North Carolina had seen a huge surge in Christian revival in 1801-1802. See: Ellen Fitzgibbons Causey and Michael R Pelt, "Revivals," NCpedia, 2006, https://www.ncpedia.org/revivals.

he escaped punishment from the legal system and even escaped communal ostracization by fleeing the state, he could never escape himself and his own guilty conscience.

Perhaps this is a final parting gift to Naomi Wise. She was failed in life, both by Lewis and by the court, but the public who remember her will never forgive Jonathan Lewis for her murder. Lewis's legacy is irrevocably tied to his crime. He is remembered not as a man, but as a monster. This need for justice reveals that all iterations of Naomi — good or bad, pure or promiscuous — deserve retribution. Her community ensured this justice through circulating her memory and used her story to keep other women from facing the same fate. The wider Victorian public ensured this justice through the ideological recharacterization of Lewis, casting him in the role of the vile, murderous lover. Modern balladeers ensure this justice by refusing to let Naomi's story fall into obscurity. Though she is killed over and over again in song, Naomi Wise is given the justice that might finally let her rest.

III: TOM DOOLEY

Hang your head Tom Dooley
Hang your head and cry
You killed little Laurie Foster
Poor boy you're bound to die[144]

Fig. 3.1: Wilkes County's location in NC[145]

It's very possible that a young Laura Foster knew the tragic ballad of *Omie Wise*. Born approximately 100 miles from Randleman, and 35 years after Naomi's death, Laura Foster was raised in the foothills of Wilkes County, North Carolina. In her isolated, tight-knit community, the warnings of *Omie Wise* could have been sung to her and her numerous female cousins, warning them of the threats that lurk in the company of a man. She may have felt pity for Omie, or sympathy, or sorrow. We can never know, of course, but regardless, she was likely taught the same general messaging that *Omie Wise* supported: be careful who you trust. Act as a lady. Remember that safety is never promised. None of this saved Laura Foster.

In the summer of 1868, the body of Laura Foster was found six miles from her home in Elkville, Wilkes County, North Carolina. Laura, the daughter of a local tenant farmer, was

---

[144] Frank Proffitt, *Tom Dooley*, CD, *Frank Proffitt of Reese, North Carolina* (Folk-Legacy Records, 1962.), https://folkways.si.edu/frank-proffitt/frank-proffitt-of-reese-north-carolina. Note: This version was first recorded by Frank and Ann Warner, Beech Mountain, N.C. in 1938.

[145] Wikimedia Commons, *Map of North Carolina Highlighting Wilkes County*, February 12, 2006, map, *Wikimedia Commons*, February 12, 2006, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_North_Carolina_highlighting_Wilkes_County.svg.

discovered in a shallow, poorly dug grave. Her legs, drawn up to her chest, concealed the cause of her untimely death. She'd been brutally stabbed, a gash 1 inch across and 6 inches deep carved into her chest.[146] By the time she was found, 22-year-old Laura had been missing for over three months.

Tom Dooley is perhaps the most well-known song to participate in the true crime murder ballad tradition for a 21st century audience. Many people, both inside and outside of North Carolina, know the name of Tom Dooley." It's been recorded dozens of times by artists across the genre spectrum, including Bing Crosby and the Grateful Dead. The song plays in the opening scene of the cult classic horror *Friday the 13th* and inspired a 1959 Hollywood film starring Michael Landon. *Tom Dooley* is still taught in school curriculum about the Civil War and North Carolina folklore.[147] Far fewer people know the name Laura Foster. Unlike Omie of *Omie Wise*, Laura is not the central figure in the song that recounts her murder. In many renditions of the ballad recounting her death, Laura isn't even given a name. Instead, the focus is on her murderer Tom Dula (pronounced "Dooley") and the tragedy of his impending hanging.[148]

Tom Dooley follows many of the same story beats of *Omie Wise*, making the narrative both familiar to audiences—and therefore more likely to be remembered in oral tradition—and culturally flexible. While the events of *Tom Dooley* occurred in Wilkes County, North Carolina, the same shape of the story could happen anywhere. Following the traditional mold of the "murdered sweetheart" ballad, *Tom Dooley* is a tale of two lovers. Tom, the strapping young murderer, lured his lover to a secluded spot under the pretense of marriage and murdered her.

---

[146] Wilkes Criminal Action Papers. 1866. Box 254.31.1. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.
[147] Asheville History Museum, "Hang down Your Head, Tom Dooley Folklore Lesson," Asheville History Museum, accessed May 30, 2025, https://www.ashevillehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Tom-Dula-TeacherMaterials-PDF.pdf.
[148] Note: Think how The Grand Old Opra is pronounced "Aw-pree"

However, unlike *Omie Wise*, the murder that inspired *Tom Dooley* quickly captured the imagination of audiences outside of Appalachia. Due to the rising trend of journalists reporting on events and crimes outside of their local vicinities, as well as the increasing popularity of sensationalist coverage of crimes, the murder of Laura Foster became nationally publicized.

The ballad of *Tom Dooley* spread as well. The first songs about Tom began to emerge while he was still in custody, awaiting trial. Many renditions of the song are notable for their ending, wherein Tom Dooley himself (as in, the character of Tom Dooley rather than the historical Tom Dula) expresses his deep regret over the crime. Those that don't take on Dooley's voice reiterate that he will soon be hanged, emphasizing the use of the ballad as a warning to both male and female listeners. This attention to Dooley's fate also stresses the audience's need for a sense of justice and revenge, even within the world of the ballad. The wide reach of *Tom Dooley*, and the enduring interest in the murder of Laura Foster, contributed to the stereotyping of Appalachia as backward and violent. Further, the variants that emerged as the ballad spread into the larger American consciousness display the same ideological recharacterization of historical actors to suit Victorian sensibilities, particularly when dealing with the figure of Laura Foster.

Arguably, the most prevalent version of the ballad was recorded in 1958 by the Kingston Trio. Their version presents a very bare bones story: Tom Dooley killed a woman on a mountain, tried to flee to Tennessee, was caught by a mysterious man only referred to as "Grayson," and was sentenced to hang. The Doc Watson version adds a little more substance, playing out as a conversation between Tom and his accusers. Tom's victim is named "Laurie Foster" and Watson sings of the murder in more detail: "You took her on the hillside for to make her your wife/You took her on the hillside and there, you took her life/You dug the grave four feet long and you dug

it three feet deep/You rolled the cold clay over her and tromped it with your feet."[149] Watson alleged that his version was accurate to the real crime, and that his own grandmother attended to one of the involved parties, Ann Melton, on her deathbed.[150]

The basics of the story never change: Tom Dooley killed a woman, was found guilty, and was sentenced to die. And somehow, this story has become one of the most famous murder ballads ever recorded. Something about Tom Dooley has captivated the public imagination for nearly 160 years, and fascinatingly, that something does not seem overly concerned with his victim. This thesis, however, is concerned with the life and death of Laura "Laurie" Foster, why she has been neglected in her own narrative, and how the ballad about her murder humanizes the murderer over the victim.

The story of Laura Foster and Tom Dula, like all interpersonal tragedies, is far more complicated than the ballad lets on. In Wilkes County, Tom Dula is still a household name. Every July, the play *Tom Dooley: A Wilkes County Legend* runs at The Forest's Edge Amphitheater. Family histories often intersect with the Dula and Foster families, and many descendants still live in the area. The story of Tom Dula and Laura Foster has remained active and alive, the subject of much debate among community members and speculating historians alike. Spectacularly, the trials following the discovery of Laura Foster's body are largely still extant and accessible. Witness testimonies, affidavits, and physical evidence still exist in the North Carolina state archives. However, while the court may have found Dula guilty and sentenced him to death, local legend and speculation is less sure of his criminality.

[149] Doc Watson, *Tom Dooley*, CD, *Doc Watson* (New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964).
[150] *Three Days with Doc*, *YouTube*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5mZlriOogU.

In general, the Dula case takes on three main narratives. One: Tom Dula kills Laura Foster alone. Two: Laura's cousin, Ann Melton, kills Laura. Tom, Ann's not-so-secret lover, takes the blame.[151] Three: Tom and Ann work together to kill Laura, but when they are caught, Tom denies Ann's involvement to save her from hanging.[152] To understand the dimensions of each narrative, what these interpretations mean for those who uphold them, and the ways the story is memorialized in ballad form, a general history must be established. The "historically accurate" series of events played out as follows:

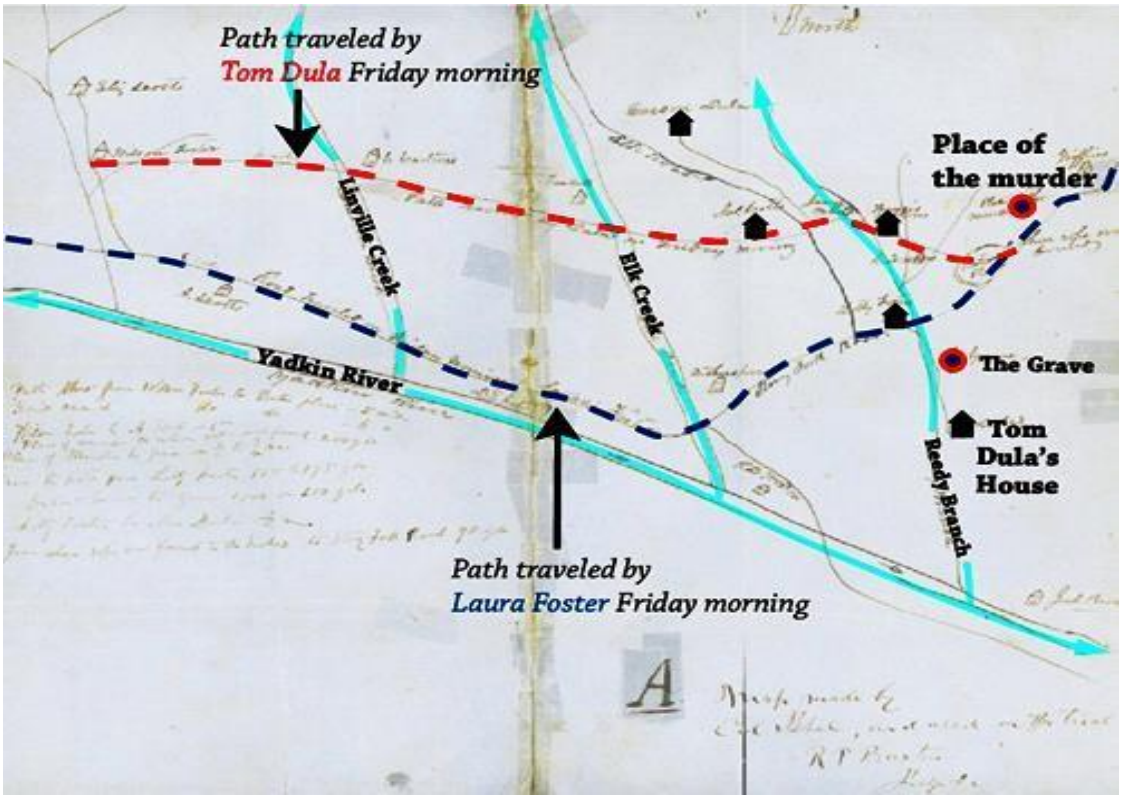

Fig. Paths walked by Tom Dula and Ann Melton, drawn over the original map drawn by Col. Isabel in the trial of Tom Dula. State Archives of North Carolina.[153]

[151] Note: As seen in John Foster West's monograph, see: John Foster West, *Lift up Your Head, Tom Dooley: The True Story of the Appalachian Murder That Inspired One of America's Most Popular Ballads*(Asheboro, NC: Down Home Press, 1993).

[152] Paul Slade, *Unprepared to Die: America's Greatest Murder Ballads and the True Stories That Inspired Them* (London, UK: Soundcheck Books, 2015).

[153] Thorton W Mitchell and State Library of North Carolina Government & Heritage Library, *Paths Walked by Tom Dula and Ann Melton*, map, *NCpedia*(State of North Carolina, 1986), https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/dulathomas-c-tom-dooley.

The crime took place, ironically, in a community colloquially known as the Happy Valley. Tom Dula, the grandson of some of Wilkes County's first settlers, was an incorrigible ladies' man. In his youth, he was romantically connected to Ann Melton (née Foster), a neighbor girl one year his senior. When Tom and his two older brothers left North Carolina to serve in the Confederate Army, Ann Melton married a local cobbler, James Melton. When Tom returned, the only surviving Dula boy, he started courting Laura Foster, Ann's cousin, with the intention of marrying her. However, he and Ann continued to be bedfellows. When Pauline Foster, another cousin of Ann and Laura, came to town to stay with Ann, he began to bed her, too. As discussed in Chapter 1, many Southern and Southern Appalachian communities were incredibly insulated. This was certainly the case for Elkville, North Carolina in 1866. Almost all parties involved in the death of Laura Foster and the ensuing trial were related, either by blood or by marriage, and had their lives intertwined by family, business, or other association.[154] However, Pauline was keeping a secret. She had travelled to Happy Valley for a very specific purpose– the aid of the local doctor, another distant relation and the only medical professional in the area. She had come down with "the pox" and was seeking treatment. In other words, Pauline was infected with syphilis. Due to her sexual activity, the disease began to infect her bedfellows. Pauline's syphilis spread to Tom, who then gave it to both Ann and Laura. All parties began to experience uncomfortable symptoms. One night, Tom visited Laura at her home and told her to meet him in the woods, where they would leave and get married. Tom returned to town. Laura didn't.

[154] Note: Dr. John Edward Fletcher's monograph on Dula explains the full extent of genealogical overlap among the Dulas, the Fosters, and the Meltons, but this thesis will only outline the most important intersections. For further reading, see: John Edward Fletcher, *The True Story of Tom Dooley: From Western North Carolina Mystery to Folk Legend*, ed. Edith Marie Ferguson Carter (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015).

Tom was immediately a suspect. He fled to Tennessee, where his employer (the infamous Grayson from the Kingston Trio's song) discovered his identity and aided in his capture. When he returned to Wilkes County, he, Ann, and Pauline were all arrested for their possible involvement in Laura's murder. Pauline offered a startling confession in exchange for her freedom. She could take authorities to Laura's body. Pauline testified that Ann Melton had taken her to the gravesite shortly after Tom Dula's arrest, intent on seeing if the body had been disturbed. Tom and Ann were arrested and arraigned for the murder of Laura Foster. In his trial, Tom testified that he alone had killed Laura, dooming himself to the hangman's knot but ensuring Ann Melton's freedom.[155] On May 1, 1868, Tom Dula died. His story did not.

The proposed accounts of what happened in the murky time between Laura's last confirmed sighting and the day her body was discovered reveals a great deal about the sociocultural values and beliefs of different storytellers and communities. In the "court approved" account, Tom acted alone. There are many potential reasons he committed his crime, though Tom himself gave no definitive answer. Many speculate that he blamed Laura for infecting him with syphilis, though most historians now agree that Pauline was the catalyst for the disease, as she was the first to show symptoms, first to seek treatment, and an outsider of the Happy Valley community. This was the version of events that the prosecution put forward during Tom's trial, and the most likely "why". Allegedly, Tom had mentioned to a neighbor in May of 1866 that he intended to "put through" whoever had given him syphilis. "Putting through" was a colloquialism for stabbing, and the neighbor attempted to talk him down from his anger.[156]

[155] "The Death Penalty," *The New York Herald*, May 2, 1868.
[156] Slade.

Syphilis—also known as the pox or the pock in Antebellum North Carolina— was not unknown or even particularly uncommon in 19th century America. The Civil War helped spread diseases, and syphilis was no exception. Venereal diseases were uncomfortable and unfortunate, but well-documented. The Union Army's physicians reported 73,382 cases of syphilis in soldiers during the Civil War, and those who survived brought the disease with them wherever they went.[157] Briefly, the Mayo Clinic describes syphilis as "an infection caused by bacteria. Most often, it spreads through sexual contact. The disease starts as a sore that's often painless and typically appears on the genitals, rectum or mouth. Syphilis spreads from person to person through direct contact with these sores."[158]

After infection, patients may develop a rash, sores around the mouth, hair loss, swollen lymph nodes, and flu-like symptoms.[159] These are likely the sensations Tom, Ann, Laura, and Pauline were experiencing. The infected sought treatment in the form of "blue stone, blue mass, and caustic."[160] Blue mass refers to a mercury-based treatment, while blue stone may refer to copper sulfate, and caustic to hydroxides. None of these treatments were particularly effective, and one can imagine the mounting fear, discomfort, and frustration as time passed. If left untreated, syphilis can spread to the spinal cord, the brain, the eyes, or other body parts.[161] It's likely that Tom Dula had seen what syphilis could do to a body. His anger, then, becomes more tangible.

---

[157] Joseph K Barnes et al., *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion (1861-65) (Volume 1, Part 3)* , vol. 1, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Surgeon-General's Office, 1888), https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-14121350R-mvset, 891.
[158] Mayo Clinic, "Syphilis," Mayo Clinic, September 10, 2024, https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseasesconditions/syphilis/symptoms-causes/syc-20351756.
[159] ibid.
[160] Foster-West, 80.
[161] Mayo Clinic.

This semi-"canonized" series of events plays deeply into the stereotypes and cultural narratives about poor Southern whites of the time and became popular fodder for reporters who picked up the story. John Edward Fletcher describes the Dula trial as "the nation's first nationally publicized crime of passion..." spurred on in part by the sordid news coverage and in part by the creation and dissemination of the ballad.[162] Tom Dula, Ann Melton, and Laura Foster all became physical representations of who poor white Southerners were. The prosecution focused heavily on the sexual activities of both Dula and Foster. They used this sexual promiscuity to underline Tom's anger at contracting a venereal disease.

Legal historian Lawerence Friedman outlines how lawyers are required to present cohesive and sympathetic stories to sway juries.[163] Often, each side is presented with a fragmented, biased set of events. These narratives can often contradict and conflict with the opposing side, and each lawyer must work to prove their story is the more accurate. Friedman explains that, through these composited and reconstructed stories, lawyers "expose, in an open and dramatic way, common stereotypes, attitudes, and norms of the period. The lawyers must appeal to ideas, images, and concepts that (they hope) will sway the jury."[164]

In doing so, these narratives emphasize cultural values and perceptions, even without necessarily meaning to. In the Dula trial, this meant presenting Dula as an angry man who had contracted a disease from a sexual partner, and in the fashion of a poor, promiscuous southern white man, killed the bedfellow he suspected of giving it to him. This image of Tom as a rough and violent man was influenced by the generally negative stereotypes of Antebellum

[162] Fletcher, 11.
[163] Lawrence M Friedman, "Front Page: Notes on the Nature and Significance of Headline Trials," *St. Louis University Law Journal* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 1243–84, https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1394&context=lj, 1269.
[164] ibid.

Appalachian communities. The *New York Herald*, which picked up the story of the trial and provided a distinctly Northern view of the proceedings, reported that:

> The community in the vicinity of this tragedy is divided into two entirely separate and distinct classes. The one occupying the fertile lands adjacent to the Yadkin River and its tributaries, is educated and intelligent, and the other, living on the spurs and ridges of the mountains, is ignorant, poor and depraved. A state of immorality unexampled in the history of any country exists among these people, and such a general system of freelovism prevails that it is "a wise child that knows its father." This is the Bates' Place, where the body was discovered by blood marks, and where some ten or twelve families are living in the manner described.[165]

This account of Happy Valley is rife with both general stereotypes and useful information about the case. The reader learns that the promiscuity as seen in Tom, Ann, Laura, and Pauline was expected by the 'immoral' residents of the poorer parts of the county.

The Antebellum South was a deeply hierarchical society, divided both racially and socioeconomically. Within white society, plantation owners held the most power. Next in the hierarchy came yeoman farmers or "small landowners," who often enslaved a much smaller number of people. Below yeoman farmers were the class known as "poor whites" who consisted of non-slaveholders who often did not have land of their own.[166] Historian Harry Watson explains that, "In theory, whites' elevated position in a slave society rested on their innate racial characteristics, not on acquired traits like education, virtue, or religious conversion..." meaning that though all white men were socially positioned above enslaved individuals, they were still seen as socioeconomically inferior to the rich and educated.[167] Tom Dula was somewhere between the yeoman class and the poor whites, though he was quickly given the stereotyped role

[165] New York Herald, "The Death Penalty."
[166] CUNY, "U.S. History, Cotton Is King: The Antebellum South, 1800–1860, Wealth and Culture in the South: Slavery and the White Class Structure," CUNY OpenEd, 2007, https://opened.cuny.edu/courseware/lesson/370/student/?section=2.
[167] Harry L. Watson, "The Man with the Dirty Black Beard: Race, Class, and Schools in the Antebellum South," *Journal of the Early Republic* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.2012.0014, 3.

of poor white by the press. The Dula family owned their own land, but it was largely rocky and untenable. Tom, the last surviving son of the Dula family, was uninterested in tending to the land, meaning that his family gained no income from their parcel.

Reverend Joseph Caldwell, the first president of the University of North Carolina, travelled around North Carolina in the mid-1830s, recording his observations of the state in essay form. In one such essay, he described the yeoman farmer and his family. Watson summarizes Caldwell's interpretation of the yeoman as "[l]acking the capacity for system, self-denial, and improvement, Caldwell's family of illiterates were almost animals: The traveling farmer was hairy, smelly, and filthy, his wife a slattern, their offspring feral and vicious."[168] Caldwell was a New Jersey-born transplant to North Carolina, and his perceptions of the yeoman class betrays a more general sentiment about poor Southerners. Tom fit easily into this general mold, allowing the prosecution to paint him as low-class, unambitious, and promiscuous. A man of such moral standing was far more likely to be guilty of a crime like murder than other identities Tom held, such as a war veteran or a well-liked community member.

The prosecution then also had to present Laura as sexually promiscuous to indicate how Tom suspected her of infecting him. This is corroborated by newspaper reports of Laura. Described in the *New York Daily Herald* as "a beautiful but frail girl," Laura Foster was certainly known to be a local beauty.[169] However, this beauty got her into trouble. Author John Foster West maintains that Laura's frailty "had nothing to do with fragile health. It had to do with moral

[168] Watson, 2.

[169] New York Daily Herald, "The Death Penalty."

stamina."[170] Laura Foster was known as a girl with "round heels"—meaning that she spent more time in bed than on her feet, or more bluntly, that she was known to sleep around.[171]

According to gender historian Victoria Bynum, there were three general categories of "unruly" or "atypical" women in the antebellum North Carolina—those who were "good" women but who publicly complained about their mistreatment at the hands of their male family members and spouses, those who partook in "forbidden social and sexual behaviors," and those who "implicitly or explicitly defied the authority of the Confederate State during the Civil War."[172] Laura Foster, from what historical data supplies, can be very squarely placed in the second category.

There was no mistaking her as a virginal maiden like some interpretations of Naomi Wise. Instead, Laura was well-known for being sexually active and therefore unruly. However, this did not mean that she deserved to die. Despite her perceived flaws, the community and the law saw Laura's death as an act of unforgivable violence. This is due, in part, to the ways isolated communities such as the Yadkin River Valley operated differently from their more urban counterparts. Victorian standards of sexual purity had not yet fully taken hold in the region, largely because of the isolation of Appalachian communities.

Gender historian Caroll Smith-Rosenberg emphasizes that "Victorian purity was the creation of a self-defined group of male sexual reformers who advocated a variety of reforms, all involving a fusion of bodily and social control."[173] This reform, however, required communities

[170] West, vii.
[171] West, vii.
[172] Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1.
[173] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Jacksonian America," *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1978): S212–47, https://doi.org/10.1086/649241, S213.

to self-regulate, especially in rural spaces such as Appalachia where societies were often few and far between, with little influence from the more ”modern” parts of the country. Therefore, a community like Happy Valley would be both less likely to be exposed to these expectations of purity, and have no surrounding societies to encourage them to conform. Any application of Victorian ideals would have to be generated from within the community itself, and in the case of Laura Foster, her sexual promiscuity did not seem to be something that would fully ostracize her. She may have been shamed for her sexual choices, but ultimately, she was still part of the community.

Smith-Rosenberg furthers that ”pornography, venereal disease rates, prostitution, and widespread abortion point to a society actively engaged in the pursuit of real and of fantasied sexual pleasures, both within and without conjugal confines.”[174] This means that, while the Victorian *ideal* of sexuality was one of purity and sex within marriage, it was an accepted fact of life that these ideals were not always met. Marriage, or lack thereof, was not indicative of impurity within Appalachian communities. Even if couples lived together, had children together, and grew old together, it did not necessarily mean they were legally married. Marriage, as John C. Campbell outlined in his ethnography of Southern Appalachia, was not as rigid a concept. Campbell explains that “[t]here are not a few men and women in the Highlands living as husband and wife who have never been married by any legal form.”[175] This in turn meant that sex outside of marriage, especially between two people such as Laura and Tom who were intending to be married, did not represent the same kind of social taboo that it would in other communities.

---

[174] Smith-Rosenberg, S212.

[175] John C Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, *Russell Sage* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921), https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/Campbell_Southern%20Highlander%20Homeland_0.pdf, 132-3.

Campbell reasons that this was due to "the lack of privacy in the home, early acquaintance with the sex relation, and a promiscuous hospitality."[176] Murder, however, was a wrong that did not depend on imported Victorian ideology.

Further, some theories contend that, much like Naomi Wise, Laura had fallen pregnant while still unmarried. Tom, unready or unwilling to be a father, had taken matters into his own hands. There is no extant evidence to prove that Laura was actually pregnant at the time of her death, but the theory remains popular, likely because it falls neatly into preexisting notions of both gendered violence and murder ballads. Even if Laura may have been a subject of gossip for her relationship with Tom and their (alleged) pregnancy out of wedlock, she would not have been viewed as a social pariah, and further, Tom would have no grounds to commit murder to preserve his social reputation. Instead, Laura's reputation as a functional member of the Happy Valley community would have compounded the severity of his crime.

The perceptions of Laura and her alleged pregnancy as the case spread through news media also damaged Tom's reputation. Victoria Bynum explains that in wider Antebellum society, "[m]otherhood, the noblest calling of southern white women, became the most appalling symbol of degradation when it occurred outside marriage."[177] This is the lens through which outsiders would view the details of the crime. In some reports, Laura's association with sexuality was minimized. Her ideological recharacterization, much like Naomi Wise, was concerned with presenting her as a perfect victim, which meant this version of Laura Foster had to uphold the highest standards of morality. However, this alleged pregnancy was a juicy piece of hearsay, and the *New York Herald* reported that "it was also believed that the murdered woman was *enceinte*

[176] Campbell, 132.
[177] Bynum, 2.

[pregnant],” thus solidifying the rumor in the historical record.[178] It’s possible the Herald included this detail to catch the attention of their Northern audience, as the motif of the “murdered girl” was wildly popular with audiences in New York. In instances where Laura’s sexuality was acknowledged, such as in the *Herald*, adding in the element of pregnancy shifted her posthumous public image. Despite her alleged failings in purity, she was fulfilling a woman’s supposed greatest purpose. As a future mother, she was more sympathetic, and her death became inherently tragic.

Reporting and sensationalism were evolving in popular papers, and the murder of Laura Foster presented a compelling story. Daniel Cohen proposes that the murder of Helen Jewett, a New York City prostitute, was the catalyst for this shift in media reporting. The *New York Herald* was a central figure in the Jewett murder as well, following the progress of the case closely, and reporting sordid and descriptive details. This coverage, and its immense popularity, led to the rise of the “penny press,” or what we would now refer to as tabloids.[179] At the center of these reports was a fascination with death, murder, and what Cohen describes was “the beautiful female murder victim” trope.

To briefly describe the case, in April of 1836, Helen Jewett was brutally murdered. One of her regular clients, Richard Robinson, was tried for the assault but was sensationally acquitted. Cohen presents several reasons stretching back to the eighteenth century for the immense interest in the murder,

> . . . such as a breakdown of both formal and informal systems of censorship by the early eighteenth century, particularly in New England; a gradual weakening of inhibitions regarding the publication of profane works on the part of American printers, due in some cases to their lessening dependence on the patronage of clergymen; a proliferation of both urban and small-town printers during the post-Revolutionary period,

[178] New York Herald, ”The Death Penalty.” Note: *Enceinte* meaning “pregnant” or “with child” in French.
[179] D.A. Cohen, 277.

> leading to a dramatic increase in the overall output of American presses…; and a gradual rise in literacy rates and in the prevalence of casual reading as a leisure activity among those groups in the American population (e.g. women and young people) most likely to purchase and read such publications…[180]

More nebulously, Cohen also offers "that small upsurge of sexual or courtship-related homicides to much broader shifts in popular sexual behavior reflected in changing rates of premarital pregnancy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—patterns long noted by social historians and historical demographers of both Europe and North America, and often attributed by them to a posited breakdown of "traditional" rural courtship practices and the development of more "modern" attitudes and behaviors."[181] In short, the "modernization" of society, accompanied by urbanization and industrialization, created a bubbling pot of new societal fears, and the "beautiful female murder victim" was a tangible representation of these concerns and their repercussions.

Cohen defines the key components of the "beautiful female murder victim" motif as "a (1) beautiful (2) female is (3) murdered… generally (4) young, (5) unmarried, and is most often murdered by, or at the instigation of, a (6) young (7) unmarried (8) man (9) in the context of some sort of romantic relationship or sexual counter."[182] Laura Foster very clearly fits into this mold as a twenty-two year-old woman killed by her suitor. She was easily identified as a sympathetic victim, even with her socially transgressive actions. Therefore, Tom Dula made a compelling villain. The exciting trimmings of the case, such as the love triangle and venereal disease, just made the story more captivating.

[180] D.A. Cohen, 283.
[181] D.A. Cohen, 277.
[182] ibid.

The love triangle, or perhaps rectangle if one is to include Pauline, led to the final proposed series of events: that Ann Melton was involved in the murder, and Tom was an accessory. This is perhaps the most dramatic theory, as it elevates the murder from a tragedy between two lovers into an interfamilial betrayal and a case of false justice. This is perhaps the version of the story that is most widely believed in the Wilkes County area today. As the narrative has been passed through generations, the assertion that Ann was the true guilty party seems to be taken more as fact than folklore.[183]

It's no wonder that Ann is a figure of interest. Her inclusion in the tragedy of Tom Dula and Laura Foster evolves the narrative from one that had been seen before (in cases such as that of Naomi Wise) to a much more dramatic and compelling love triangle that sounds straight out of a dark romance novel. The media of the time were fascinated with Ann, and dedicated much of their coverage on the trial to her, even though she was charged as an accomplice.[184] Her involvement in the murder, and her subsequent trial and acquittal, expose the social and cultural tensions surrounding expectations of femininity and womanhood. In Chapter 1, I established the binary of what made a woman "good" or "bad" in 19th century American society. Ann Melton's trial and portrayal in the American press challenge the boundary between these notions.

On a baseline, Ann is not the "ideal" 19th century woman. She is an adulterer, disloyal to her husband and family, who fails to prioritize filial piety, is outwardly sexual, and, according to some, a murderer. However, as Laura Foster has already been established as an 'imperfect' victim, the analysis of Ann must be examined in relation to how she fulfills the social roles that

[183] Note: Given extant historical evidence, there is very little 'real' proof that Ann was involved in the death of Laura Foster.

[184] Henry L Myrover and James Henry Myrover, "Notes and Items of Travel in Western North Carolina," *The Fayetteville News*, November 20, 1866.

Laura fails to. As a wife and a mother, Ann was a more established member of the Happy Valley community. A modern audience would perhaps see these factors as even more damning against her character—she was willing to betray her family and expose her husband to venereal disease for her own benefit. However, her status as wife and mother may have worked in her favor to sway public and jury opinion. In fulfilling the expected female social roles, Ann became of more "value" than an unmarried, childless woman like Laura.

Further, Ann's defense benefitted from the cultural perception of women as the weaker and more fragile sex that permeated contemporary social knowledge. While some press, such as the *The Fayetteville News*, supported the theory that Ann was guilty of aiding in Laura's death, many publications and audiences subscribed to the notion that women were incapable of committing acts such as murder.[185] As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg explain, "[t]he Victorian woman's ideal social characteristics—nurturance, intuitive, morality, domesticity, passivity, and affection-were all assumed to have a deeply rooted biological basis."[186] Further, the female body was seen as medically inferior to that of a male body, resulting in a woman being physically unable to kill.[187]

This can be seen most famously in the acquittal of Lizzie Borden, accused of murdering her father and stepmother with a hatchet.[188] Modern historians continuously argue over whether or not Lizzie was guilty, but popular culture has determined her a killer.[189] Circumstantial and

---

[185] Myrover.

[186] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Journal of American History* 60, no. 2 (September 1973): 332–56, https://doi.org/10.2307/2936779, 334.

[187] Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 334

[188] Note: Though the popular rhyme associated with the case goes 'Lizzie Borden took an axe/gave her mother forty whacks/when she saw what she had done/gave her father forty-one."

[189] Ann Schofield, "Lizzie Borden Took an Axe: History, Feminism and American Culture," *American Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 91–103, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40642497?seq=1, 92.

physical evidence pointed to Lizzie as the killer, and she had ample motive to commit the crime. However, an all- male jury found her innocent in 1892. Her feminine body and mind were deemed incapable of conceiving and carrying out such brutal murders. This is not to imply that it was impossible for women to be convicted of crimes in this period, but to suggest that a female criminal had to fit into specific social conventions.[190] Women who killed were, in a way, worse than men because it required a far more dramatic deviation from their socially prescribed role.[191] Lizzie simply did not look the part of a murderer. For one, the crime was committed with a hatchet, meaning that physical strength was required to kill and foresight was required to dispose of physical evidence. Women who killed were associated with poisoning above all else due to the 'clean' nature of the death.[192] Edmund Lester Pearson, a pioneer of the 'true crime' literary genre and a contemporary accountant of the Borden trial, wrote "to suggest that a woman of good family, of blameless life and hitherto unimpeachable character, could possibly commit two such murders, is to suggest something so rare as to be almost unknown to criminology.... There is something about the act of battering in the skulls of an elderly man and woman which suggests the male butcher, not the more subtle though equally malicious methods of the murderess."[193]

[190] Note: Mary Suratt, implicated in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, had been hanged in July of 1865. Her death stirred great controversy among the American public.
[191] Alice Bonzom, "A Crash-Course in Femininity? Female Criminals in the Victorian and Edwardian Era," Collège de France, October 23, 2017, https://booksandideas.net/A-Crash-Course-in-Femininity.html.
[192] Alison Morton, "The Female Crime: Gender, Class and Female Criminality in Victorian Representations of Poisoning," Midlands Historical Review, June 23, 2021, https://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/the-femalecrime-gender-class-and-female-criminality-in-victorian-representations-of-poisoning/.
[193] Edmund Lester Pearson, "The Borden Case," in Studies in Murder (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1924), 32-120, 32. As quoted in Cara W Robertson, "Representing 'Miss Lizzie': Cultural Convictions in the Trial of Lizzie Borden," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 8, no. 2 (January 1996): 351–416, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/72833285.pdf, 375.

Her physical appearance was of great interest to the press, and many articles reported on her feminine features. *The Boston Herald* took pains to describe her as she sat on trial.

> A wealth of black hair is revealed under the hat which, arranged on top of her head, is trained about her forehead in short curls, parted in the centre and thrown over to the sides. Her dark, lustrous eyes, ordinarily flashing, were dimmed, and her pale face was evidence of the physical suffering she was undergoing and had experienced. To sum up, Miss Lizzie Borden, without a word from herself in her own defence, is a strong argument in her own favor.[194]

Her womanhood served as its own defense on the stand. Female murderers were often associated with insanity or hysteria, neither of which manifested in Lizzie's physical appearance.

Lizzie was also portrayed as a genteel and religious woman by those who knew her personally, and this bled into how she was reported on by the press. As the Boston Journal reported, "[i]f character counts for anything, it should be reckoned as a moral improbability that a woman of refinement and gentle training, of professed religious faith and hitherto blameless life, should have conceived and executed so bloody a butchery as the killing of her father and stepmother with an axe."[195] This was one of the many ways Lizzie was able to benefit from the stereotypes surrounding her identity– she was upper class, a spinster, and a Sunday school teacher. Her class was an immediate defense against her criminality, as was her position within her church. Her spinsterhood positioned her as an 'imperfect' woman, as she had no husband or children and was 32 at the time of the murder. However, her social position recontextualized her as harmless and morally upright, choosing to live as a devoted and Godly daughter rather than marry.

---

[194] The Boston Herald, "Her Personal Charms Might Attract," *The Boston Herald*, August 6, 1893, https://www.famous-trials.com/lizzieborden/1429-news3.

[195] Boston Journal, 10 August 1892, reprinted in Robertson's *Representing "Miss Lizzie": Cultural Convictions in the Trial of Lizzie Borden*, 391.

When considering this within the context of Ann Melton, the idea of a woman committing a physical act of violence, such as stabbing Laura Foster in the chest and then dragging her body into a shallow grave, was unlikely at best and inconceivable at worst to the public. Much like Lizzie Borden, Ann's physicality was tied to her potential guilt, and if there was one thing contemporary news coverage agreed on, it was that Ann was strikingly beautiful. Frank C. Brown, a folklore collector and folksongs, collected several variants of Tom Dooley, and in doing so, interviewed several individuals who claimed to have witnessed the case. Brown noted that,

> A very old man who still lives in Wilkesboro and who attended the trial, assured me, a few weeks ago, [Ann Melton] was 'the purtiest woman I ever looked in the face of. She'd a-been hung too but her neck was jist too purty to stretch hemp. She was guilty. I knowed hit. Ever'body knowed hit, and Tom Dula could-a proved hit, but he loved her, I reckin. Anyhow, he shore died fur her... Ef they'd a-been ary womern on the jury, she'd a got first degree. Men couldn't look at that womern and keep their heads.'[196]

Indeed, the male-dominant audience of jurors and lawyers ruled Ann Melton to be innocent when she was put on trial shortly after Dula. Further, her reputation was bolstered by her marriage to her husband, James Melton. Though she was certainly guilty of committing adultery, she was bound by kinship ties to Melton, who was known in their community as an honest and upstanding man.[197] As the community's cobbler and carpenter, he was well-established in his trade and provided a valuable service to his community. And, even if his wife was unfaithful, James appeared to be deeply devoted to Ann.[198]

---

[196] Frank Clyde Brown, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore; the Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society* , ed. Norman Ivey White, Henry M. Belden, and Arthur Palmer Hudson, vol. 2, 7 vols. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), 706.
[197] Fletcher, 77, 84.
[198] Fletcher, 160.

According to trial testimony, the affair between Ann and Tom was somewhat of an open secret, perhaps not even hidden from James Melton.[199] Because she was a woman, it was possible Ann was seen as the less 'guilty' party in the affair. Dula was doing the active pursuing, Ann was simply the object being pursued. She was just one of many women Tom was sleeping with, positioning him as the most implicated in the adultery. While this undermined her agency, it provided moral and legal cover for her actions.

The folklore surrounding Ann Melton didn't stop with the death of Tom Dula. After his hanging, the official historical record stops. Ann Melton, to the newspaper audiences of the North, disappeared into obscurity. However, locals of the Yadkin River Valley still maintain that Ann confessed to the murder of Laura Foster on her deathbed. Allegedly, Ann became very ill just a few years after the end of the trial and died in 1874. Local folklore say that her death was caused by late-stage syphilis, a final moment of revenge for Laura Foster.[200] Doc Watson, the Southern Appalachian folk singer who recorded many murder ballads in the 1960s, alleged his great grandmother Betsy Triplett Watson was a relative of Ann and was with her when she confessed "[i]f I knew I would never get well again, there is something I would tell you about Tom's hanging."[201] That "something" was clearly suspected to be a confession to the crime. In the line notes of Doc Watson's 1964 self-titled album, musician Ralph Rinzler wrote that Ann told Betsy Watson that she could see the flames of hell from her sickbed.[202] Like Jonathan Lewis,

[199] Note: It's mentioned that Tom was often a houseguest of the Meltons and was known to sleep in bed with Ann rather than James.
[200] Slade, 129.
[201] Ralph Rinzler, "Tom Dooley" liner notes for Doc Watson, *Doc Watson* (New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964).
[202] ibid.

the image of Ann suffering from the guilt of her crimes brought a sense of justice to the community who felt she was never punished for her crimes.

Despite Laura Foster being the victim, all popular songs about her death focus on Tom Dula. This is a dramatic departure from a ballad like Omie Wise, where Omie is the central narrative figure. Even when Naomi's ballad makes her death seem like things that just "happened" to her, rather than things that occurred out of her own actions and agency, she is still the sympathetic character in the narrative. The audience is aligned with Omie, and the ballad makes it clear that John Lewis is a villain. This is thematically very important, both within the song and regionally, because it acts as a form of restorative justice. The case of Laura Foster and the ensuing ballads depart from this tradition in two major ways: First, Tom Dooley is, unsurprisingly, a song about Tom Dula. Second, Tom Dula was hanged for his crimes. This thesis proposes that these departures are heavily interconnected, and that the presentation of Tom Dooley as a "lesser" villain, who has sympathetic traits and the primary role in the narrative, is a response to his hanging. Because he was hanged, the "justice" doled out by a ballad must then be shared between murderer and victim.

The first accounts of the Dula crime bare very little resemblance to any familiar ballad rendition one might hear today. Col. Thomas C. Land, a Confederate veteran and local poet, wrote *The Death of Laura Foster* in either 1867 or 1868.[203] In his long-form poem, Land splits the narrative into three sections, The Murder, The Search, and The Resurrection and Inquest. The narrative casts Laura in a familiar shape, a naive but beautiful young woman eager to marry her lover. In The Murder, Land outlines Laura's ill-fated last ride to the Bates' place, her waiting for

[203] Note: According to local history and genealogy, Col. Land's brother was the carpenter who built Tom Dula's coffin, and his second cousin was one of the men who helped with Dula's capture. This second cousin, James Isbell, was a member of the Isbell family, who were also related to the Dulas by marriage.

Tom, and his betrayal of her along with a "vile [g]uest" (thought to be a reference to Ann Melton). The Search follows Laura's father and community as they look for Laura. The Resurrection and Inquest depicts the coroner and the jury looking at Laura and determining the guilt of Dula and his "vile [g]uest", recounting that "some ruthless fiend had struck the blow/ Which laid poor luckless Laura low."[204] However, Land leaves his audience on a hopeful note, assuring his reader that after burial Laura would ascend to heaven, "then robed in white we trust she'd rise/To meet her Saviour in the skies."[205]

Land's poem exposes a lot about the perception of the murder and Laura herself during Dula's imprisonment and execution. Thomas Land was a member of the Happy Valley community, and his poetry is perhaps the most accurate account of how Laura's neighbor and friends felt about her death. Much of the Yadkin River Valley was illiterate and could not write their own accounts and feelings surrounding the murder. Extant evidence is largely legal documents and heavily biased newspaper reports, neither of which displayed local sentiment about the tragedy. Land's portrayal of Laura presents her as a well-known and respected community member with a family that loved and valued her. Land's work also seems to support the theory that, even in 1868, locals were suspicious of Ann Melton and her involvement in Laura's death.

However, Land was not the only one writing about the Dula case. Folklorist Frank Brown's collection of North Carolina Folklore, which he compiled between 1912 and 1943, houses some of the earliest evidence of a sung ballad about the crime. One of Brown's interlocutors, a Caldwell County woman named Maude Sutton, recounted that her version of the

[204] Land.
[205] Land.

song “was very popular in the hills of Wilkes, Alexander and Caldwell Counties in 1867," and that, at the time of Brown’s collection, "Many mountain ballad singers still sing it."[206] This would indicate that ballads about Tom Dula were being spread and sung before he had even been sentenced. Sutton’s version bears remarkable resemblance to modern versions of the ballad, even including the famous refrain “Hang down your head Tom Dula/Hang down your head and cry/You killed poor Laura Foster/And now you're bound to die.”[207]

Sutton’s record of the ballad names Dula as the killer and Laura as the victim, both by name. This iteration makes no mention of Ann Melton, providing a counter to Land’s mention of a “vile [g]uest”. These direct references to actors in the murder, however, get lost in some later iterations of the ballad. Returning to the Kingston Trio’s 1958 recording of Tom Dooley, the lyrics could be about a totally different crime than Land’s poem. Very little detail is provided in the Trio’s version of the song, and the verses of the song are presented in the voice of Tom himself while the chorus seems to be sung back at him from an outside perspective. “I met her on the mountain/There I took her life/I met her on the mountain/ Stabbed her with my knife,” the Trio’s fictionalized Tom sings.[208] “Hang down your head, Tom Dooley/Hang down your head and cry/Hang down your head, Tom Dooley/Poor boy, you're bound to die” the familiar refrain sings back at him.[209]

This choice to give a voice to Tom dramatically alters the narrative. No longer is Tom Dooley a distant villain who the audience can condemn. He is a man confessing directly to the listener. While he doesn’t plead for his life, or try to assuage his guilt, the ballad still forces the

[206] Brown, 711.
[207] Brown, 712.
[208] The Kingston Trio, *Tom Dooley*, CD, *The Kingston Trio* (Hollywood, CA: Capitol Records, 1958).
[209] ibid.

listener to conceptualize Tom as a real man who is going to hang. Another of Brown's recorded ballads supplied by Sutton, which she called "Tom Dula's Lament", also presented events from Tom's point of view.[210] This song departs dramatically from the ballad most commonly known as Tom Dooley, so it will not be referred to as a variant, but rather an addition to the canon. In Dula's Lament, Tom does seem to express guilt and remorse, singing "Poor Laura loved me well/She was both fond and true/How deep her love for me/I never really knew… I've lived my life of sin/I've had a bit of fun/Come, Ann, kiss me goodby/My race is nearly run."[211]

There is no evidence that the Kingston Trio ever heard Tom Dula's Lament. However, this shows us a strong desire from storytellers to reframe the narrative and to change the perceptions of Tom. Perhaps this is due, in part, to the wider social messaging of ballads, in which women were always the ones most responsible for their own deaths. Further, Tom Dula's legacy was recharacterized as the ballad gained popularity spread across the country. Because of Dula's time in the Confederate Army, many retrospectives have romanticized his service and bravery in war. In the late 1950s, Dula was adopted by some formerly seceded areas as a war hero deserving of dignity, regardless of his involvement in murder.[212] This mirrors the previously-established concept of Southern masculinity, excusing the violent behavior of white men exerting power over women. Further, the Trio's recording is credited with ushering in the folk revival of the 1960's, spreading the narrative of Tom Dooley.[213]

---

[210] Brown, 713.

[211] Brown, 713.

[212] "Tom Dula's Honeysuckle Covered Grave May Be Restored in North Carolina," *The Florence Morning News*, December 4, 1958.

[213] The Grammy Museum, "The Kingston Trio and the Folk Revival," Grammy Museum, May 26, 2016, https://grammymuseum.org/exhibit/the-kingston-trio-and-the-folk-revival/ and Martin Chilton, "How the Kingston Trio Revived Folk Music and Got America Singing," uDiscover Music, June 1, 2024, https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/kingston-trio-folk-music/.

The romanticization of Tom's acceptance of punishment serves to show us that the context of murder was enough to sway local opinion on the level of guilt that should be attributed to the criminal. If Tom truly did take the blame to spare Ann Melton, he becomes representative of a morally upright, if lovestruck, young man who is unwilling to sentence a woman to death. His shouldering of the blame then becomes an act of martyrdom to save Ann's life and showcasing his strong principals against putting women to death—a popular point of debate at the time. Further, this narrative allows for the demonization of Ann Melton and allows the audiences to enjoy the notion that she suffered far more in life and waiting for her eternal punishment than Dula did at the hands of the law.

IV: FRANKIE AND JOHNNY

Frankie and Johnny were lovers
O Lordy, how they could love
They swore to be true to each other
Just as true as the stars above
He was her man but he done her wrong[214]

Frankie and Johnny is, arguably, the most well-known murder ballad ever written. In fact, according to ballad collector Frank Shay in 1928, the song was already "sung by altogether too many persons."[215] American musicologist Sigmund Spaeth noted that "everyone who knows anything at all about 'Frankie and Johnnie' is likely to have a version of his or her own…"[216] A 1935 article in The Oregonian proclaimed "[w]here Americans gather, 'Frankie and Johnnie' comes out sooner or later."[217] In 1962, doctoral student Bruce Redfern Buckley of Indiana State University identified two hundred and ninety-one different variants.[218] Due to how well-known the ballad has become, it comes as no surprise that there are debates about the origin of the song, and discourse surrounding the "real" Frankie and Johnny.[219] However, most historians and ballad scholars generally agree that the "real" story surrounds the murder of Allen Britt by Frankie Baker in St. Louis, MO, October of 1899.

This chapter will examine *Frankie and Johnny* as a song emerging from the black Appalachian diaspora and the ways in which the ballad reinforces the perpetuation of black

---

[214] Doc Watson, *Frankie and Johnny*, vinyl recording, *Doc Watson* (New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964).
[215] John Held and Frank Shay, *My Pious Friends and Drunken Companions ; and, More Pious Friends and Drunken Companions: Songs and Ballads of Conviviality* (New York, NY: Dover, 1961), 65.
[216] Spaeth, as quoted in Bruce Redfern Buckley, "Frankie and Her Men: A Study of the Interrelationships of Popular and Folk Traditions" (thesis, 1962).
[217] Webster A Jones, "Heroine of 'Frankie and Johnnie' Files Bond in $100,000 Suit," *The Oregonian*, May 25, 1935.
[218] Bruce Redfern Buckley, "Frankie and Her Men: A Study of the Interrelationships of Popular and Folk Traditions" (thesis, 1962).
[219] Note: An in-depth collection of potential 'origin' stories can be found in Ch 2 of Buckley's *Frankie and Her Men.*

communities as an American "other." I will investigate how ideological characterization is applied to racial caricatures when regarding black historical actors, as well the previously established use in regard to class and gender. This chapter will also look at the repercussions of folklorification, and how this folklorification acts as a new avenue for restorative justice.

In the most ubiquitous version of the ballad, Frankie and Johnny (Allen) are lovers. Frankie is characterized by her love and loyalty for Johnny, as well as being generous with her money. One night, Frankie goes out and discovers Johnny has been seeing another woman, called either Nellie Bly or Alice Pryor.[220] Frankie catches Johnny and his lover in bed together, and shoots Johnny for his infidelity, often with a 44 pistol. The greatest departures of the story come in Frankie's reaction post-crime. In some versions, she's arrested and executed for the murder, in others she is simply left in prison, and in a few, she repents publicly at Johnny's funeral or begs his mother for forgiveness.[221]

Frankie and Johnny diverges from *Omie Wise* and *Tom Dooley* in several ways. The most immediately evident is that, in this narrative, Frankie is the murderer and not the victim. In a genre plagued by femicide, a murder ballad focused on a woman as the killer is striking. Further, the ballad's plot does not tread the familiar ground of a young woman being lured away into the woods with a promise of marriage. Instead, the murder is clearly not a premeditated act, is committed in front of a witness, and there is no mistaking the identity and guilt of the killer. When placed within the context of the Baker-Britt murder, Allen (Johnny) was able to escape the apartment where Frankie shot him before collapsing on the steps of his parents' home, just

[220] Note: There is no relation with this name to the journalist, and instead comes from a minstrel show character. See: Stephen C Foster, "Nelly Bly. the Popular Negro Song. Box 068, Item 018," The Lester S Levy Sheet Music Collection, accessed May 18, 2025, https://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/collection/068/018.
[221] Note: For an in-depth look at 291 ballad variants, see Buckley's *Frankie and Her Men*.

blocks away. The murder, beginning as a private affair spurred by a love triangle, immediately became a public spectacle.

However, perhaps the most striking element of the Baker-Britt case is Frankie and Albert were both black. Though the ballad has been adapted into films, a ballet, several stage plays, numerous cartoons, and remarkably a puppet show, Frankie and Johnny are almost never portrayed as black.[222] Historically, the instances that have acknowledged their race have been unapologetically racist, such as vaudeville shows performed in blackface. The legacy of *Frankie and Johnny* then splits into two diverging cultural narratives, one influenced and altered by whiteness and the other retaining its historic roots. However, to fully understand the sociopolitical implications of this split, as well as the impacts of the ballad on Frankie Baker as a female killer, the historical context and facts must first be established.

Frances "Frankie" Baker and Albert "Allen" Britt lived together at 212 Targee Street, St. Louis Missouri. Targee Street was part of St. Louis's Chestnut Valley, a segregated black district of the city known for its talented ragtime performers.[223] Albert "Allen" Britt was a seventeenyear-old ragtime piano player, locally known for his skill. He also worked as a pimp for his lover, Frankie. Frankie was a prostitute, known for making good money and well-liked by her neighbors. She was in her twenties in 1899, reported to be between 22 and 24 at the time of the murder.[224] Richard Clay, a neighbor of Frankie and Allen, described her as "a beautiful, light brown girl, who liked to make money and spend it. She dressed very richly, sat for company in

[222] Note: For a fascinating exploration of *Frankie and Johnny* adaptations, see Stacy I. Morgan's *Frankie and Johnny: Race, Gender, and the Work of African American Folklore in 1930s America.*
[223] Morris Levitt, Roger Furman, and Ernest Smith, "Wed, 05.16.1900 The Rosebud Bar, (Ragtime Venue) Opens," African American Registry, accessed May 18, 2025, https://aaregistry.org/story/the-rosebud-bar-the-spot-forragtime/.
[224] Note: Her death certificate listed her year of birth as 1876.

magenta lady's cloth, diamonds as big as hen's eggs in her ears."[225] Clay also asserted that Frankie truly loved Allen. However, because he was so young, Allen wasn't ready to be as serious as Frankie wanted, and he spent the time Frankie was entertaining Johns to go "out playing around."[226]

Clay, who allegedly kept vigil by Allen in the hospital before he passed, gave actor and playwright John Huston a personal account of the night of the crime. He reported that Frankie had found Allen in bed with another prostitute, Alice Pryor, at the Phoenix Hotel (no longer standing). She and Allen got into a loud and very public argument in the street outside. Eventually, Frankie left, and when Allen returned to their Targee Street apartment early the next morning, they resumed their fight. Clay alleges that Allen threatened to leave Frankie, and Frankie tried to leave the apartment, presumably to find Alice Pryor. Allen threatened Frankie that he would kill her if she left, which is when Frankie shot him.

Later in life, Frankie would give her own recollection of events. In 1935, she told journalist Dudley McClure that her fighting with Allen was not a rare occurrence.[227] In fact, she claimed that Allen had beaten her quite badly. When she appeared before a judge for Allen's murder, Frankie recalled, she still had an "eye festering and sore" from Allen's abuse.[228] Frankie reported that she knew Allen was out at a party with Alice Pryor, but had gone to bed, because she was feeling ill. She woke around 3 AM when Allen returned home and threw a lamp at her. She alleged that he then began yelling and approached her with a knife, which is when she shot

---

[225] John Huston, *Frankie and Johnny* (New York, NY: B. Blom, 1968), 109.
[226] Huston, 109.
[227] Cecil Brown, "We Did Them Wrong: The Ballad of Frankie and Albert," essay, in *The Rose & The Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 123–45, 138.
[228] *The Real Story of Frankie & Johnny*, Dudley L. McClure, as quoted in Richard Polenberg, "Frankie and Johnny (1899)," *Hear My Sad Story : The True Tales That Inspired "Stagolee," "John Henry," and Other Traditional American Folk Songs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 45–55, 41.

him with the .38 she kept under her pillow. She maintained she shot him only once. Allen then fled to 32 Targee Street where his parents lived before collapsing on the stairs.

According to Richard Clay, Allen's mother found him on the stairs and began to wail "Frankie's shot Allen!" He was then taken to the hospital, where he identified Frankie as the perpetrator. She was taken into custody, and Allen died four days later. Frankie stood trial less than a month after the shooting, appearing in front of a judge on Friday, November 13, 1899. Her roommate, Pansy Marvin, had been present the night of the shooting and testified on Frankie's behalf. She corroborated that Allen had gone at Frankie with a knife, and that it was only after he attacked her that she shot.[229] The coroner's jury returned a verdict of justifiable homicide, ruling the shooting an act of self-defense. Frankie would later say "I ain't superstitious no more. I went to trial on Friday the 13th, and the bad luck omens didn't go against me. Why, the judge even gave me back my gun."[230]

According to folklore, a song about the shooting was being sung on Targee Street before Allen had even died. Historian and folklorist Cecil Brown alleges that a ballad had been written by the very next evening.[231] Local musician Bill Dooley is credited as the first to capitalize on the crime in song. A well-known balladeer and performer, Dooley called his song *Frankie Killed Allen* and began to perform it on street corners.[232] The song was a hit, and quickly spread from the Chestnut Valley into the rest of St. Louis and beyond.

A brief, but important note: Some musicologists and folklorists have tried to prove that

[229] Richard Kurres and Charles J Oswald, "It's Frankie and Albert Instead of Frankie and Johnny," *The Lakeland Ledger*, May 29, 1975.
[230] Brown, "We Did Them Wrong," 138.
[231] Brown, "We Did Them Wrong," 126.
[232] Note: He also sold the lyrics on a sheet for ten cents.

Frankie and Johnny is an older song than the 1899 Baker case.[233] The most popular of these 'alternate' origin stories is that of Frankie Silver, a rural woman who murdered her husband in 1833 and was hanged. This can be quickly dismantled through a number of Frankie and Johnny's attributes. First, Frankie Silver killed her husband with an axe. Further, historian Stacey Morgan explains "the 'Frankie and Johnny' ballad tradition thus is grounded in African American history and expressive culture; more specifically, many variants of the song (including some of the earliest) explicitly feature a milieu of pimps, prostitutes, and saloons. Consequently, I have suggested that at first glance the ballad's contents hardly seem the typical stuff of polite society, mainstream popular culture, or high art."[234] African American balladry will be discussed in more detail later, but it's important to note that as Morgan suggests, many aspects of Frankie and Johnny are rooted in black American culture and urban culture, things that would have not been found in a narrative about a white woman in a rural area.

Morgan does not suggest that Frankie and Johnny was created in a vacuum, but instead asserts that "whatever elements Bill Dooley might have drawn from preexisting murder ballads, a composition whose details were at least loosely inspired by Frankie Baker's murder of Allen Britt was the root source of the song that captured the national imagination as it proliferated rapidly over the course of the first half of the twentieth century."[235] Many of the claims that there is another source for Frankie and Johnny stems from the impulse of ballad collectors to claim all popular American balladry under the umbrella of white culture. Further, the fact that Frankie and Johnny only appears in print after the turn of the 20th century makes it highly unlikely that there

[233] Stacy I. Morgan, *Frankie and Johnny: Race, Gender, and the Work of African American Folklore in 1930s America* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 24.
[234] Morgan, 30.
[235] Ibid.

was any popular or influential ballad of the same name and tone present before the Baker-Britt case.

As the song picked up traction, Allen Britt's parents used their local influence to change the song from *Frankie and Allen* to *Frankie and Johnny* in a bid to separate their son from the story.[236] In a 1939 report on the song and murder, the Oregonian would explain "...relatives of the deceased Mr. Britt were persons of money and influence who were able to get the name changed before the song had really gotten its hold on society."[237] Frankie Baker had no such luck. She was irrevocably tied to what would become one of the most popular murder ballads of all time, bridging the gap between Appalachian balladry traditions and the emerging genre of the blues.

Though Missouri is not part of Appalachia, the regions have deeply intertwined cultural histories.[238] As Missouri-born journalist Jeannette Cooperman said, "St. Louis might be Midwestern, but its history is Southern."[239] The majority of Missouri is dominated by the Ozark Mountains, and as such, the state has been shaped by similar geographical limitations, such as strong place-based identities. Further, Missouri's vernacular culture has been influenced by Appalachia since the earliest non-indigenous settlements. Many of the Ozarks' earliest settlers were Southern Appalachians moving west, and with them came their traditions, beliefs, and

[236] Oswald and Kurres.
[237] "Frankie and Johnny WERE Sweethearts, but, Frankie Says It Was the Famous Song That Done Her Wrong," *The Oregonian*, December 17, 1939, 65.
[238] Rex R Campbell, Mary Campbell, and Colleen Hughes, *A Revolution in the Heartland: Changes in Rural Culture, Family and Communities, 1900–2000*(Columbia, MO: Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri, 2004), 18.
[239] Jeannette Cooperman, "The Story of Segregation in St. Louis," St. Louis Magazine, October 17, 2014, https://www.stlmag.com/news/the-color-line-race-in-st.-louis/.

culture.[240] St. Louis sits at the Northern border of the Ozarks, and has thus been influenced by both Northern and Appalachian culture. During the end of the Reconstruction period, many black Americans left the South and migrated North and West.[241] St. Louis acted as a kind of gateway city to the West. Some black migrants chose to settle in St. Louis by choice. However, many were forcibly stranded in the city because white steamboat owners refused to take them on the Missouri River.[242]

By 1899, St. Louis had a small but active black population. Making up just over six percent of the population, black residents of St. Louis were largely insulated in their communities, as seen in "Chestnut Valley" where Frankie and Albert lived.[243] However, proportionally, this was a very large black population for a city of the time. In 1900, St. Louis was home to over 35,000 black residents. Baltimore, MD was the only large city that had a higher black population at this time. Further, in 1890, St. Louis was America's fourth largest city in terms of population, making the percentage of black residents especially concerning to white residents.[244] Still, St. Louis was a heavily segregated city with a long history of benefitting from institutional chattel slavery. The only places where black and white people intermingled were the red-light districts of the city, where white men often visited to take advantage of black prostitutes. The racial divides present in the city are integral to Frankie Baker's story in several

[240] Campbell, 44.
[241] Kathleen E Shea et al., "Part I: The African-American Experience," St. Louis Missouri, 1995, https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/preservation-plan/part-i-africanamerican-experience.cfm.
[242] Ulysses S Grant National Historic Site, "Black Life in St. Louis during Reconstruction (U.S. National Park Service)," National Parks Service, accessed May 18, 2025, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/black-life-in-st-louisduring-reconstruction.htm.
[243] Cooperman.
[244] Polenberg, 18.

ways, most predominantly because of the close-knit ties of her community and her social position as a black woman killing a black man in a white-dominated city.

When Frankie Baker was born, the era of American Reconstruction was just ending (1865-1877). While Reconstruction had been touted as a time of progress and racial integration in the wake of the Civil War, many of the attempts to address the political, social, and economic impacts of chattel slavery were abandoned as time went on. Subsequently, America saw a resurgence of white supremacy, the implementation of Jim Crow laws, and a reinforced sense of separation between black and white communities. Because the black community of St. Louis had to be largely insular, Frankie and Allen's story takes on the features of a murder committed in a small settlement such as the Yadkin Valley or Randleman rather than a large metropolis like St. Louis. Black communities were not prioritized by institutional law enforcement. In fact, there was not a single black police officer in St. Louis in 1899.[245] Thus, many interpersonal disputes in the Chestnut Valley were handled within the community, much like the isolated Appalachian communities examined previously. Here, the familiar communal values and expectations of a smaller society can be applied to the case and its fallout. This includes the idea of restorative justice.

What did this mean for Frankie? In terms of immediate social repercussions, historical record shows that Frankie was given back her gun and sent on her way after the trial. However, Bill Dooley's song proved to be a popular one. She was exonerated in a court of law, but not the court of public opinion. Presumably, this caused Frankie trouble in her line of work. As a sex worker, being known for killing her lover and pimp would make attracting business more

[245] Eugene J. Watts, "Black and Blue: Afro-American Police Officers in Twentieth-Century St. Louis," *Journal of Urban History* 7, no. 2 (February 1981): 131–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/009614428100700201, 131.

difficult. If one is to take the story that Allen's parents were the reason his name was changed to "Johnny" in song, their influence in their community would be apparent. In a city like St. Louis, there was nowhere for Frankie to hide. Newspaper reports were no help. Whereas a friend described Frankie as "a nice Christian woman," the papers touted her as "an ebony-hued cakewalker" that alleged she killed Allen with a knife.[246]

Frankie and Allen's race was always at the forefront of media reports on the crime. The first report of the murder was headlined "Negro Shot By Woman" in the St. Louis Globe Democrat. Undoubtedly, Frankie and Allen being black shaped the way they were seen by the American public at large. The 1890s was the decade American states passed Jim Crow laws into effect.[247] Segregation being ratified into law created a legal division between black and white Americans as well as a metaphorical division. As professor Michael O'Mally writes, "[s]egregation was an attempt to remind people that they are different, that despite what they might have in common they are not the same kinds of creatures."[248] Minstrel shows were also still popular with white audiences during this period; wherein white actors dressed in blackface and acted in stereotypically "black" ways.[249] These caricatures, based in racist pseudoscience and stereotypes, pushed the narrative that black Americans were lazy, stupid, and violent—unable to be equals to white people. Blackface minstrelsy became so popular that Jim Crow laws were

[246] "Negro Shot by Woman," *St. Louis Republic*, October 16, 1899. Note: a cakewalker was someone who participated in cakewalks, a group dance that evolved from enslaved Americans mimicking the formality of their white enslavers in a comedic style. In the 1890s, cakewalks had been appropriated by minstrel shows, and calling Frankie a cake-walker was a derogatory remark.
[247] Michael O'Malley, "Jim Crow and the 1890s," Jim Crow Museum, 1999, https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/links/misclink/1980s.htm.
[248] Ibid.
[249] J. Stanley Lemons, "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920," *American Quarterly* 29, no.1 (1977): 102–16, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712263, 102.

named after a popular caricature.[250] Even as new forms of entertainment came into fashion, such as vaudeville acts, they retained the same themes and characterizations of minstrel.[251]

This meant that race, and the connotations of race, were constantly at the forefront of white American's minds. When presented with sensational news of a violent crime, it was easy to reconcile the events with the harmful stereotypes they consumed. Frankie and Allen weren't sympathetic, real people involved in a tragedy. Instead, they were reinforcing preconceived stereotypes of black Americans. Black women suffered from the associations of being both women and black, meaning that their social perceptions were heavily influenced by the negative connotations of both. As scholar Mahassen Mgadmi outlines, "[t]he bipolar conceptualization of Black and White womanhood assigned Black women all the negative traits of disgrace whereas White women were attributed all the idealized aspects of "True Womanhood," such as piety, deference, domesticity, passionlessness, chastity, cleanness and fragility. Conversely, Black women were conceived and pictured as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly and dirty."[252] Frankie, as a woman who was both a prostitute and a killer, no matter how good her reason for killing was, reinforced the negative stereotypes already present in the American cultural sphere. Therefore, newspaper accounts and the general public saw no moral issue in "othering" her for her perceived transgressions, even as she was exonerated in the eyes of the law.

However, Frankie's "punishment" wasn't relegated to being haunted by her past. She was also being followed by increasingly sensational variants of the ballad bearing her name.

---

[250] Ibid.
[251] Lemons, 104.
[252] Mahassen Mgadmi, "Black Women's Identity: Stereotypes, Respectability and Passionlessness (1890-1930)," *Revue LISA / LISA e-Journal* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 40–55, https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.806, 40.

Technically, the first printed version of *Frankie and Johnny* was published by Hughie Cannon in 1904. This version preserved Bill Dooley's original melody and the refrain "he done her wrong," but chose to create his own narrative around it. However, the first published sheet music of *Frankie and Johnny* that follows the historical narrative (and presumably the narrative in Dooley's own ballad) was by brothers Frank and Bert Leighton in 1908.[253] By 1912, the most recognizable version of the ballad had solidified. The same year, ragtime musician and vaudeville actor Gene Greene recorded the track for the first time, ensuring *Frankie and Johnny* would be a song that would never die.

The St. Louis public was already hungry for murder ballads by the time Frankie shot Allen. The city was a hotspot for blues music, which Cecil Brown explains "developed as a form of resistance to the conditions prevailing in districts such as Deep Morgan and Chestnut Valley."[254] Brown describes blues in the 1890s as "a kind of folk or oral literature" that developed as an evolution of black expression.[255] Blues music emerged as a way to cope with the mental and physical trauma of everyday life in an oppressive system, and became a way for black musicians to make a small profit. Though the American murder ballad tradition is most commonly associated with Appalachia, it intersects with many other forms of American music. Where the murder ballads previously discussed in this thesis come from the Anglo-American balladry tradition, as time passed, an increasing number of other influences have intersected with

[253] Note: Musicologist Bruce Redfern Buckley alleges that ragtime composer Les Copeland published a version in 1908 as well, which Copeland claimed was taken from Frankie Baker herself. This seems quite doubtful, given her aversion to the song. I have been unable to find the ballad text Buckley references.
[254] Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003),110.
[255] Brown, *Stagolee,* 111.

these ballads. This includes black ballads, emerging as African and African American musical traditions came into contact with Anglo-American songs.

According to Cecil Brown, "ballads were rare during slavery" due to the fact that enslaved peoples had no opportunity to make their own choices and shape their own stories.[256] The ballads that did emerge focused on rebels who railed against their enslavers rather than everyday people and their experiences. In the wake of Emancipation, formerly enslaved musicians began to shift narratives to be about black folk heroes and "bad" black men– men who did not submit to white structures of power.[257] These songs were seen as low class and associated with crime, prostitution, and vice. Folklorist Malcolm Laws proposed that black ballads diverged from white ballads in several ways. Brown, referencing Laws, writes:

> Laws also noted that all the black ballads dealt 'with crime, usually with murder and its consequences.' And unlike white ballads, which frequently expressed horror when recounting a crime, the black ballads usually described violent events 'briefly and rather casually,' dwelling instead on the ensuing 'trials, hangings, and funerals' at 'some length.'... A black audience, Laws noted, would also sympathize because 'they can understand how, provoked beyond endurance, a man or woman may be driven to kill, and they know, sometimes from personal experience, the devastating effects of long years in prison.' Laws described the singer of Negro ballads as a 'dramatist first, moralist second'[258]

This divide can be seen when comparing a ballad like Omie Wise to one like Frankie and Johnny. In Frankie and Johnny, the crime is almost overshadowed by the events leading up to the shooting, and then follows Frankie to her day in court (and occasionally, to the electric chair), whereas Omie Wise is much more concise in its depictions of the crime and John Lewis's consequences.

---

[256] Brown, *Stagolee,* 113.
[257] Brown, *Stagolee,* 114.
[258] Brown, *Stagolee*, 111-112.

However, there are clearly some elements of murder ballads that do not fit within the parameters Laws and Brown propose. Most glaringly, the *point* of a murder ballad is to tell the story of crime, murder, and its consequences. These songs would lose their social functionality if consequences were not addressed, and the ballad would not be a murder ballad at all without a murder to convey. It must also be addressed that sympathy for the murderer is also a function of the Anglo-American murder ballad, as seen in many iterations of *Tom Dooley*. The murder ballads considered in this thesis illustrate that consequences are perhaps the most integral part of a song's use as a didactic tool. Still, Brown and Laws draw attention to the fact that ballads produced by black musicians are a syncretism between the Anglo-American ballad and African musical tradition. The songs produced in St. Louis in the 1890s were driven more by recounting the incidents of crime rather than punishing the murderers, and often even elevated the murderer to a higher moral status than the victim, as seen in the ballads *Duncan and Brady* and *Stack-o-Lee*.

In 1890, a barroom fight between a policeman and a bartender resulted in both a murder and a ballad. *Duncan and Brady* tells the story of an Irish policeman, known for their brutality to St. Louis's black population, being shot by a black bartender. The real events are a little less clear. Harry Duncan, who was tried and executed for the crime, maintained his innocence and claimed it was the bar's owner, Charles Starkes, who shot Brady.[259] Regardless, the story took off and was memorialized as a ballad, and Harry Duncan was immortalized as a figure of rebellion. Author Richard Polenberg asserts that, at his funeral, "more people paid their respects to Harry Duncan than to any other black person in the city's history."[260]

[259] Polenberg, 20. Note: The day before he was hanged, Duncan wrote "It's politics that forces me to the gallows."
[260] Polenberg, 26.

On Christmas night of 1895, less than three years before Frankie Baker would shoot Allen Britt, Lee "Stack Lee" Shelton shot Billy Lyons at the Bill Curtis Saloon of St. Louis.[261] The murder would soon become ballad fodder, with balladeer Charlie Lee performing a song called *Stack-a-Lee* in 1897.[262] The case, though between two men, has a number of similarities to *Frankie and Johnny*. Shelton was a pimp in St. Louis's red-light district. Immediately, this places Shelton and Lyons within the same proximity and context that Frankie and Albert lived. It's very likely that Frankie and Allen knew the story of *Stack-o-Lee*, and perhaps even knew the lyrics to the ballad. The story goes that, after drinking and getting into a fight, allegedly over politics and Billy Lyons taking Shelton's hat, Lyons came at Shelton with a knife, and Shelton responded by shooting him once.[263] Shelton went home to bed, and Lyons died that Christmas night, a single gunshot through his liver.

However, Shelton was not acquitted for his crime. Though his lawyer argued selfdefense, he was sentenced to twenty-five years in penitentiary for the crime.[264] While Shelton was imprisoned, his ballad spread. To many black audiences, Stack Lee became something of a folk hero. As a pimp and a political activist, Shelton was well-known in his community. As the song spread out from St. Louis, the story of Stack-o-Lee became popular among disenfranchised sharecroppers, black migrants heading West, and exploited prisoners.[265] Cecil Brown notes that "Stagolee became a trope for the resentment felt by people marginalized by the dominant white

---

[261] Polenberg, 28.
[262] "'Stack-a-Lee' and Early Ragtime," *The Leavenworth Herald*, August 21, 1897. Note: The Leavenworth Herald was a black newspaper, located in Leavenworth, Kansas. The ballad is also called Stagger Lee, Staggo-Lee, and other variations.
[263] Polenberg, 28. Note: Lyons is credited with saying "You cock-eyed son of a bitch, I am going to make you kill me" before he was shot. This line has been immortalized in many versions of *Stack-o-Lee*.
[264] Polenberg, 31.
[265] Cecil Brown, "Godfather of Gangsta," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2003.

society."[266] In some variants, Billy Lyons transformed into a policeman who Stack, standing as a vessel for the singer and the audience, can then shoot down.[267] White audiences occasionally tried to appropriate Stack Lee into a white outlaw, both as an attempt to transform him into a white folk hero and to dispossess black audiences of a figure of rebellion. However, this whitewashing was largely unsuccessful, and Stack-o-Lee remained a black figure for black audiences.

The same can not be said for Frankie Baker. Within the context of black singers and songwriters, she was not elevated as a folk hero for her killing of Allen Britt, even though she fell into the familiar pattern of protecting herself from a violent man with more power than her. Instead, Frankie was cast in the light of a jilted and jealous lover, a far less noble fate than that of Stack Lee Shelton and Henry Duncan. The ballad that bore her name followed her for the rest of her life. After leaving St. Louis, Frankie spent time in Omaha, Kansas City, Denver, and San Francisco before settling in Portland, Oregon in 1915.[268] The ballad was always there, waiting for her, evolving to become more scandalous and salacious as time went on. Doc Watson recorded a version and claimed it was the first song he'd ever learned to play. In his rendition, Frankie begs Johnny's mother for forgiveness after killing her son and languishing alone in jail.[269] In Jimmie Rodger's 1929 version, Frankie was sentenced to the electric chair. Both of these versions end with the final verse ringing out, "This story has no moral, this story has no end/This story just goes to show that there ain't no good in men."[270] The fictional Frankie was cast as a jealous lover, doomed to death or penance, and much more in line with the fates of the

[266] Brown, *Stagolee,* 120.
[267] Brown, *Stagolee*, 152.
[268] Huston, 104.
[269] Watson, *Frankie and Johnny.*
[270] Jimmie Rodgers, *Frankie and Johnny*, vinyl recording (Dallas, TX: Victor Talking Machine Company, 1929).

men in white murder ballads than the stories of her own community. Perhaps in the cruelest twist in the real Frankie's fate, however, was her whitewashing at the hands of Hollywood and the American entertainment industry.

In 1930, the film *Her Man* debuted, starring white actress Helen Twelvetrees as Frankie. In the movie, Twelvetrees plays a Havana prostitute and pickpocket working for her lover "Johnnie" at a bar. There, she falls in love with a handsome sailor, who wants to run away with her. While the film bares little resemblance to either the actual crime or the ballad, it was the first in a long line of media that decided to take inspiration from Frankie and Johnny without any heed to the real Frankie Baker.

In 1933, another film titled *She Done Him Wrong,* was released by Paramount Pictures, starring Mae West and based on West's own play *Diamond Lil*. Though none of the characters have names associated with Frankie and Johnny (West's character is named Lady Lou, her criminal pimp is named Gus), the film was heavily coded to reference the ballad. As previously discussed, black music– particularly blues ballads like Frankie and Johnny– was associated with vice and prostitution. In *She Done Him Wrong*, West plays a bawdy bar singer even as the nation was in the midst of prohibition. Her boss and benefactor deals in prostitution– also known as "white slavery — to fund Lou's lavish lifestyle. Lady Lou commits a murder (though not her partner) when she's attacked in a jealous rage. West even sings the entirety of *Frankie and Johnny* in the film, dripping in diamonds. Recall Richard Clay's recollections of a young Frankie Baker, "She dressed very richly… diamonds as big as hen's eggs in her ears."

West had a life-long fascination with *Frankie and Johnny*. It was considered her signature song, one that she had performed from the beginning of her career until her death.[271] While Mae

[271] Morgan, 138. Note: In fact, it played as she was laid to rest at Forest Lawn.

West is known today for the steps she took to challenge Hollywood's racial bigotry, such as insisting at least one black actress be employed on the set of *She Done Him Wrong*, she undoubtedly profited off appropriated black music and culture.[272] West was moving towards practicing what we would call intersectional feminism, or feminism that prioritizes the acknowledgement that experiences of oppression compound when people's identities are composed of multiple oppressed groups, and that the addressing of these discriminatory practices must benefit the most oppressed to be positive progress.[273] However, while West believed in the uplifting and representation of black women in film spaces, she was ultimately still benefitting from the exploitation of black narratives, imagery, labor, and culture. As a white woman taking on attributes that were stereotypically associated negatively with black women, West became what Stacy Morgan calls a "compelling alternative to the stuffy dictates of Victorian sensibilities."[274] Black women who acted as black women were usually not even permitted on screen.

Though other films, plays, and performances took on the characteristics of Frankie and Johnny, it was Mae West's performance that garnered Frankie Baker's attention. After seeing the film in Portland, Frankie reported that people began to come by her house to gawk at her. Speaking with journalist McClure, she recounted, "When Mae West's picture was in town, men and women would gather in front of my place and point. Some of them would come in and get a

[272] Morgan, 147-8. Note: This black actress was the icon Louise Beavers, whose career focused on black advancement and advocacy.
[273] The Britannica definition of intersectionality reads as follows: "Intersectionality emphasizes that different dimensions of identity are not isolated from one another; instead, they intertwine and overlap in intricate ways, resulting in distinct advantages or disadvantages, benefits or harms." See: August Samie, "Intersectionality," Encyclopædia Britannica, May 16, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/intersectionality.
[274] Morgan, 148.

shoe shine, and probably ask me if I was the St. Louis woman. They even called me at my home and asked me silly questions. I'm so tired of it all I don't even answer anymore."[275]

In 1935, Frankie filed a lawsuit against Mae West and Paramount Productions for $100,000.[276] At this time, Frankie was working in Portland as a shoe shiner. She felt that West and Paramount had profited off her name and story, and wished to be compensated. Frankie and her lawyer accused West and Paramount of "bringing [Frankie] into 'public scandal, infamy, shame, and disgrace.'"[277] Neither Paramount or the press took her seriously. One article from The Oregonian, who could not even get her name correct in their coverage, called her "an embittered n—-" who was upset at the "light-hearted millions" who sang "of her tragic romance."[278] The article went on to detail "Frankie and Johnnie has been sung by American soldiers moving into front lines and marching towards death, lightening the accumulated horror of war. It has brightened long nights of miners and trappers in the arctic. It has been shouted in speaks and dives, and crooned in the fine homes, it has cut hours to minutes at millions of parties."[279] The message couldn't be clearer. Frankie's pain did not matter. Her story was no longer her own. It belonged to the American public– at least, the white American public.

The case never went anywhere. Frankie's lawyers believed it would be too difficult to definitively prove she was the Frankie of *Frankie and Johnny*. A year later, in 1936, a film called *Frankie and Johnny* was released by Republic Pictures starring white actress Helen Morgan. The film, featuring an all-white cast, followed the narrative of the ballad more closely, and stirred up

[275] John Russell David, "Tragedy in Ragtime: Black Folktales from St. Louis" (thesis, 1976), 218.
[276] Webster A Jones, "Heroine of 'Frankie and Johnnie' Files Bond in $100,000 Suit," *The Oregonian*, May 25, 1935.
[277] Jones.
[278] Jones. Note: In the article, Jones erroneously calls her both Frankie Baker and Frankie Huston, presumably after John Huston whose play and puppet show were based on her life.
[279] Jones.

even more interest in Frankie Baker. In 1938, she brought a lawsuit against Republic Pictures for two hundred thousand dollars.[280] This time, the suit made it to court, where an all-white jury ruled against her. One newspaper article snarked that "nobody would know Miss Baker is the wronged Frankie of song and screen, if she didn't keep complaining about it."[281] However, all Frankie said she wanted was peace and enough money to live. She told McClure, "I know I'm black, but even so I have my rights. If people had left me alone, I'd have forgotten this whole affair long ago. Now they can start paying me."[282] She said she was suing for two hundred thousand dollars because she knew she'd only get "a dime on the dollar."[283]

This was not how the opposition saw it. Republic Picture's lawyer venomously defended the use of her story and accused Frankie of "[wanting] to appropriate for her own use one of the finest ballads in American folklore. If you give her a verdict, she will have a claim against everybody who ever sang the song. Send her back to Portland, Oregon, and her shoe shine business; for an honest shine, let her have an honest dime. Don't make her a rich woman because forty years ago she shot a little colored boy here in St. Louis."[284] The jury struggled to reconcile the elderly woman on the stand with the larger-than-life girl in the song. Even more difficult, they could not relate to a poor black woman like they could a pretty white actress.

Frankie Baker was not the only person to "become" folklore while still alive. However, most people who lived through their "folklorification" were cast as folk heroes and not jealous lovers or bitter elderly women. They were also mostly white men. I propose the term

---

[280] "Grieving Frankie Claims Damages," *The Oregonian*, April 22, 1938.
[281] "Frankie and Johnny WERE Sweethearts, but, Frankie Says It Was the Famous Song That Done Her Wrong" *The Oregonian*, December 17, 1939.
[282] McClure, as quoted in David, 218.
[283] Herbert S Lampman, "Song Heroine Tight-Lipped," *The Oregonian*, October 18, 1939.
[284] "Song Wrong Again! Frankie Killed Johnny With One Shot, Says Friend," *The St. Louis Star Times*, October 28, 1939.

"folklorification" here to mean one whose likeness or caricature becomes embedded in popular culture, specifically during their lifetime so that there becomes a "real" and "folkloric" figure existing as a living concept at the same time. There are a few instances of this occurring, largely concentrated in figures of the American West. Exploits of famous frontiersmen and cowboys were popular fodder for dime novels in the mid- to late 19th century."[285]

Kit Carson unknowingly became one of these archetypal heroes. In 1842, Carson was hired to guide an expedition for the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, led by John C. Frémont. This expedition would be the first mapping of what would become the Oregon Trail. Frémont hired Carson on two subsequent expeditions and wrote glowing praises of Carson's skills as a trapper and mountain man in his official reports. These reports were noticed by newspapers, who published stories of Carson in the West. Eventually, he became a muse for dime novel authors, who transformed him into a fantastical hero. By 1849, Carson was a well-known character by the American public, who craved more of his adventures.

Much like Frankie Baker, Kit Carson was not initially aware of his celebrity and once he understood what had happened to him, he wished for it to go away.[286] Unlike Frankie Baker, his fame created a positive cultural image of Carson, casting him as a rugged hero of the Wild West. Where Frankie was followed across the West by *Frankie and Johnny*, Carson was largely left alone by the general public. The folklorification of Kit Carson served him well, even if he was not fond of it. He was hired to lead expeditions, had a respected military career, and held public office. Carson became a symbol of the American West and the romanticized spirit of progress

[285] Justine Macauley, "How the West Was Played: The Influence of Wild West Shows on American Identity and Perceptions of Gender, 1870 to 1920," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History* 15 (May 2010): 24–43, 33.
[286] ibid.

and adventure. His status as a white man undoubtedly had an influence on this. This can be seen not only in Carson's comparison to Frankie Baker, but also to Calamity Jane.

There are few female American folk heroes based on real people, and Martha Canary—better known as Calamity Jane—being one of the most prominent.[287] Calamity Jane was sometimes a wife, sometimes a prostitute, sometimes a villain.[288] She was never a hero in her own right, only when beside the male members of the Wild West dime novel pantheon. Her sexuality was heavily exaggerated while her other "feminine" traits, such as her time as a nurse during Deadwood, South Dakota's smallpox epidemic, were minimized.[289] While Jane was able to eke out a living from her notoriety, acting in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West arena shows later in life, she was never given the same respect or reverence as her male peers, even as she became "the most written about woman of the Pioneer West."[290]

As far as I can tell, there have been no other folklorified black women besides Frankie Baker. However, as previously referenced newspaper accounts detail, her race was constantly mentioned in press coverage, even as it was systematically erased from artistic interpretations of the ballad. Though Frankie escaped a jail sentence and the death penalty, her life became her punishment. I suspect this is why there are proportionally fewer variants of Frankie and Johnny in which Frankie is executed or haunted by killing Albert. In Bruce Redfern Buckley's exploration of nearly three hundred variants, only thirty-five feature Frankie dying by capital punishment or suicide.[291] Her punishment is more potent for the audience if Frankie is forced to

[287] James D McLaird, "Calamity Jane: The Life and the Legend," *South Dakota History* 24, no. 1 (February 15, 1994): 1–18, 16.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Buckley, 103.

live with her guilt and actions for the rest of her life, and therefore the modes of restorative justice seen in *Omie Wise* and *Tom Dooley* are unnecessary.

Frankie Baker's bravery at this time cannot be understated. Black women were expected to fit very specific social parameters. Much like the murder victim existed within the binary of "pure" and "impure," black women were stereotypes to inhabit one of two roles—either the hypersexualized, over-passionate "seductress" associated with youth and light skin, or the desexualized, maternal mother figure associate with darker skinned women.[292] Neither of these roles were positive. Scholar Mahassen Mgadmi explains,

> The bipolar conceptualization of Black and White womanhood assigned Black women all the negative traits of disgrace whereas White women were attributed all the idealized aspects of 'true womanhood', such as piety, deference, domesticity, passionlessness, chastity, cleanness fragility and. Here are, Black women were conceived and pictured as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly and dirty. There was a breadth of stereotypical perceptions of Black women, which placed them outside the enclave of delicacy, femininity, respectability and virtue.[293]

Mgadmi emphasizes that the images of "acceptable" black women were governed by White patriarchal values, which led to "The Black reformists' strategy of racial advancement [placing] an exaggerated importance on Black female deference."[294] This meant that the pressure of "proving" that black people deserved equal treatment rested primarily on the shoulders of black women. As Kimberlé Crenshaw writes in her landmark essay on intersectionality, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which

[292] Mgadmi**.**
[293] Mgadmi.
[294] Mgadmi.

Black women are subordinated."[295] No matter what a black woman did, it was likely she would fall into one of these categories in some way, rendering her socially unacceptable.

In her time in the public eye, Frankie occupied both sides of this binary. In her youth, she was a seductress. As a prostitute, this association with seduction was very clear. She served clients that were black and white, something that made her exceptionally more dangerous to the white patriarchy. In shooting Allen Britt, she was placed into the categories of over-passionate and violent. As an older woman, she was desexualized and domineering, acting against the studios that were profiting from her story. While the papers painted her as a bitter, lonely old woman, when considering the ways she purposefully separated herself from traditional notions of acceptability and femininity, the depth of her bravery is more evident. She defied the norms of being a wife and a mother, choosing instead to remain single for the rest of her life. She left her home and family in St. Louis to travel alone to Portland, Oregon. She was a business owner, a hard worker, and the first recipient of the Portland Urban League's lifetime membership award for her service to the organization.[296] Her willingness to bring Paramount and Republic to court forced Frankie to embrace Frankie and Johnny in a way that she had attempted to avoid her entire life, attempting to reclaim her own narrative.

Frankie spent the last years of her life in Eastern State Hospital, forcibly institutionalized as her health failed her. The deep trauma of shooting Allen Britt never left her—as her memory began to deteriorate, she could still recount the murder in detail, and at least once, claimed she

[295] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (March 12, 1998): 139–67, 140.
[296] McMeniman's History Department, "The Real Frankie Baker," McMenamins Blog, September 29, 2022, https://blog.mcmenamins.com/the-real-frankie-baker/.

was the one who had written *Frankie and Johnny*.[297] She was known for playing solitaire and sitting peacefully in the sun. This image of Frankie, as an elderly woman who loved playing cards and picking flowers, is far different from the Frankie of *Frankie and Johnny*. This was the private Frankie, the real woman behind the folklore.

Fig. 4.1: A photo of Frankie Baker, taken 10/31/1949, age 73[298]

Fig. 4.2: Eastern Oregon State Hospital, Pendleton, OR, 1918[299]

[297] ibid.
[298] Oregon Historical Society, *Frankie Baker*, photograph, *McMenamins*(Portland, OR, January 28, 2014), Portland, OR, https://blog.mcmenamins.com/he-was-her-man-but-he-done-her-wrong/.
[299] *Eastern Oregon State Hospital, Pendleton, OR*, photograph, *Oregon Bluebook* (Salem, OR: Oregon State Secretary of State's Office, 1918), Pendleton, OR.

V: CONCLUSION

...Right away Mary Anne flew in from Atlanta
On a red eye midnight flight
She held Wanda's hand and they worked out a plan
And it didn't take them long to decide
That Earl had to die[300]

Murder ballads are still being written. Though the true crime murder ballad has largely fallen out of favor, songs about murder and tragedy continue to dominate radio waves.[301] The form is still largely associated with the genres of folk, blues, and country music, but can be seen in the work of artists from all over the spectrum: The Beatles' *Maxwell's Silver Hammer* and *Rocky Raccoon*; Bob Marley's *I Shot the Sheriff*; Eminem's *Kim*. The urge to sing about violence and tragedy persists today, but with a noticeable shift—almost all of the most popular contemporary murder ballads are sung by and from the perspective of women.

In exploring these modern murder ballads in connection with what has been established about the sociocultural importance of true crime murder ballads, we can examine the shifts in connotations of murder ballad subjects and the people who sing them. Common themes remain: restorative justice, stereotyping, gender expectations, and racial connotations all factor into these modern murder ballads, as well as the persistent American interest in murder, though in different forms than the true crime murder ballad. Further, I will explore how modern murder ballads

[300] The Chicks, *Goodbye Earl*, CD (Nashville, TN: Monument, 2000).
[301] Note: This is not to suggest that murder ballads about real events are not being written and sung, however, they do not meet all of this thesis's requirements for a true crime murder ballad, namely that the ballads or sources of the ballads fail to be recorded shortly after the crime or during trial proceedings by a member of the local community. Recall Bob Dylan's *The Lonesome Death* of Hattie Carroll from the introduction. Another example of this is The Boomtown Rats' *I Don't Like Mondays*, a song about the Cleveland Elementary School Shooting in San Diego, perpetrated by Brenda Spencer in 1979. Though the song is about a real person and was written less than a month as the actual event, The Boomtown Rats were not from the same community as Spencer (the band was Irish while Spencer was from California) and the song does not convey the narrative like a traditional ballad.

continue to act as a form of cultural catharsis, but fundamentally display a shift in the *intention* of creating a murder ballad.

The lyrics above are from the playfully violent country song *Goodbye Earl*. Though the lyrics female-focused, the genre of country music has historically been a male-dominated and thematically misogynistic genre. As scholar Delia Poey explains, "[g]iven the structure of the industry, which is patriarchal, with men dominating the commercial aspects as well as the artistic side as songwriters and performers, it is not surprising that even as country songs have dealt extensively with issues of home and family, including discord and conflict, they have been overwhelmingly from a strictly male perspective."[302] Evolving from Appalachian and Southern folk music, the blues, and African musical traditions, "country" first emerged as its own distinct genre in the 1920s.[303] Later meshing with rock and roll and eventually pop, country quickly became a cornerstone of American music. The genre is primarily associated with white, rural communities, even though it has always drawn from marginalized communities.

Black performers and musical traditions such as spirituals, gospel, and the banjo revolutionized popular music. Similarly, female songwriters and performers have been involved in country music since its inception, with notable figures like Maybelle and Sara Carter of the still-influential Carter Family gaining prominence as early as 1927. Today, many country icons are women; Patsy Cline, Emmylou Harris, June Carter Cash, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Reba

[302] Delia Poey, "Striking Back without Missing a Beat: Radical Responses to Domestic Violence in Country Music's The Dixie Chicks and Salsa's Celia Cruz," *Studies in Popular Culture* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 1–15, 3.
[303] "Country Music Timeline: Articles and Essays: Dolly Parton and The Roots of Country Music: Digital Collections: Library of Congress," The Library of Congress, accessed May 18, 2025, https://www.loc.gov/collections/dolly-parton-and-the-roots-of-country-music/articles-and-essays/country-musictimeline/.

McEntire, and Brandi Carlile to name a few. Women have long been exploited for their talent and brutalized in lyrics across the genre, largely because the "traditional" audience for country is straight heterosexual rural white men. However, it's now more common to flick on the radio and hear a song about a woman killing her man—and getting away with it—than ever before. Murder ballads, which have long been dominated by male singers, are now being taken on by female artists, and they are reconstructing the narrative.

There has been an intense cultural shift since the late 1990s in how female country artists sing about violence, and particularly murder. It has been hard to miss the way women are characterized and how female agency is presented in murder ballads these days, which have evolved since *Frankie and Johnny* drove Frankie Baker from her home in St. Louis. Now, white female country musicians are placing themselves in fictionalized murder ballads and allowing themselves to act on socially unacceptable behaviors as a form of cultural catharsis. Arguably, this shift was spearheaded by The Chick's (formerly The Dixie Chicks) 2000 smash-hit *Goodbye Earl.* The song, which tells the story of lifelong best friends Mary Anne and Wanda murdering Wanda's abusive husband, transforms the murder ballad from a mournful, serious affair into an upbeat and comedic country song. The song holds almost no resemblance to traditional murder ballads, melodically bubbly and bouncing, and accompanied by a full band. Earl's death is celebrated, not only by the woman he abused, but by her friends, the narrator of the song, and even the wider community. The Chicks gleefully sing "it turns out he was a missing person/Who nobody missed at all."[304]

[304] The Chicks, *Goodbye Earl.*

Though The Chicks were hugely popular at the time of *Goodbye Earl's* release, a number of radio stations refused to air the song.[305] Concerned parents called and emailed to say that depictions of murder on the radio were too much, and the lack of punishment was spreading a negative message. The Chicks chose to respond within the liner notes of their album, writing "The Dixie Chicks do not advocate premeditated murder, but do love getting even."[306] The public outcry centered on the argument that The Chicks did not punish Mary Anne and Wanda for killing Earl. There is no description of guilt, no prison sentence, and no damnation of their souls. In fact, *Goodbye Earl* criticizes the police system, showcasing how it failed to keep Wanda safe via restraining order and the lack of interest in finding Earl at all. In this way, *Goodbye Earl* participates in the tradition of restorative justice for the wronged and the abused.

In the last twenty-five years, dozens of songs in this mold have topped the charts, accompanied by far less backlash. Carrie Underwood is perhaps the most prolific of the white female country artists "reclaiming" murder ballads, with Miranda Lambert not far behind. Underwood, an Oklahoma native, is a prime example of a 21st century female pop-country star who has found success recasting older narratives for new audiences. Modern country music often draws on feelings of nostalgia to appeal to both younger and older audiences. Music scholar William Reynolds describes this nostalgia as "myth achieving the status of truth" that colors the past as a place of "simpler times and former 'glory.'"[307] As such, 21st century country often

[305] Brad Kava, "Song's Ban Unleashes Debate on Violence in Pop Culture - Killing 'Earl' a Dilemma for Country Station," *The Mercury News*, March 14, 2000.
[306] The Chicks, *Goodbye Earl*. Note: prior to 2020 The Chicks' name was The Dixie Chicks, which they chose to change to remove associations with white nationalism and American slavery.
[307] William M Reynolds, "Redneck Piece of White Trash: Southern Rebels and Music: Epistemologies of Class, Masculinity, and Race Identity," *Counterpoints*434, no. CRITICAL STUDIES OF SOUTHERN PLACE: a reader (2014) (2014): 66–77, 70.

seeks to replicate the styles, forms, and themes of prior music while producing content for modern audiences.

Carrie Underwood's discography is most often in the form of repurposed murder ballads *Two Black Cadillacs* (2012), *Blown Away* (2012), *Choctaw County Affair* (2015), and *Church Bells* (2015) all made the charts and were received favorably by critics and audiences alike. Underwood's narratives focus on women who have been abused or wronged by men and then take power into their own hands, either killing the abusive men directly or orchestrating the circumstances of their death.[308] The message has shifted from trying to guide young women away from "dangerous" behaviors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to illustrating a revenge fantasy in the present-day. Modern murder ballads teach that if a young woman finds herself in dangerous personal situation, murder is a potential exit plan. And most importantly, the women in these ballads never get caught.

In American murder balladry, this shift towards narratives that display female agency and expressions of power are becoming more common while tolerance of prolonged intimate partner violence has decreased. While this evolution in action and outcome makes sense, I argue that these songs, though presenting themselves as more feminist-centered narratives, serve to undermine the original purpose of the true crime murder ballads that passed through oral tradition. The satisfaction from these female-forward murder ballads comes from the same place as the satisfaction audiences find in the true crime genre, without the need for a real crime to occur. These ballads present murder as something that can be acceptable when considered within

[308] Note: *Blown Away* and *Church Bells* deal with domestic abuse while *Two Black Cadillacs* and *Choctaw County Affair are* narratives about infidelity.

a sympathetic context, and the singers rely on this murder as the ultimate way to display their agency.

These songs also benefit from the cultural notion that ballads are a low-class form of entertainment, enjoyed and perpetuated by more undesirable sectors of society, even as the singers exist within a much higher socioeconomic class and often benefit from white privilege. Further, the female singers of these country murder ballads take on a very characterized voice and aesthetic. The Southern white woman portrayed in this ballad is more active with her agency, but remains an idealized victim. She is abused or cheated on. She is passive in this abuse until she takes one extreme act of vengeance. And when the crime is done, another crime is never committed, and therefore, no action must be taken against her.

These fictional events allow listeners to sympathize with the murderer and condone her actions without the same kind of moral conundrum that accompanies traditional true crime content. There is no question of who the guilty party is—many of these ballads are completely transparent with the fact that the women can be murderers, and then celebrate them for their actions. These narratives mirror the gallows ballads of 17th century England where a criminal was already convicted by the time a ballad was written about them. However, instead of repenting for their actions as in ballads of the past, modern songs allow the perpetrator to escape justice.

This is an interesting inversion of the way we have seen restorative justice function in the core ballads I have discussed in this thesis. Where ballad singers altered the narratives to ensure that John Lewis and Ann Melton were haunted by guilt as punishment for their (alleged) crimes, and where Frankie Baker was followed by her crime for the rest of her life, there is no reemergence of the murder victim in these songs. Instead, the act of murder is catharsis. For

modern, female-forward murder ballads, the act of revenge and restorative justice are achieved by the wronged woman, and as such, there is no need for the intervention of the law or a vengeful spirit. Here the escape from traditional legal boundaries is celebrated as a success rather than condemned, a kind of reclamation of agency. The moral of the songs has therefore shifted. No longer is the ballad conveying the message that justice will come for those who have done wrong (committed a murder). Instead, it now communicates that there will be no repercussions if a murder is a form of justice in itself, making murder no longer morally wrong within the "correct" contexts. These murders are presented not only as personal revenge or retribution, but as an act of public good. The abusive and cruel men who have harmed the women in contemporary country murder ballads have been removed from society, and though murder is not condoned, the narrative presents the actions as a necessary evil. While these murders aren't really being committed, the songs about them still reveal shifting social values and acceptable behaviors. While one could argue that Frankie Baker was a woman who got away with murder, she differs from these modern ballads in many ways, not only because of the real-life consequences of her fame, but the public need to see the ballad version of her punished.

Interest in the Appalachian murder ballad is still evident through these modern ballads, even if they depart from the traditional ideological messaging of the 19th century. I believe murder ballads in the 21st century fulfill a different purpose than their predecessors, serving as a form of cultural catharsis rather than a way to communicate genuine expectations of behavior. In turn, the true crime podcast, as briefly discussed in the introduction, has supplemented the cultural need for media that outlines social behaviors and the dangers of crossing them. Through these podcasts, the tangible consequences for both perpetrators and victims are explored when

these boundaries are crossed and are often interpreted by audiences as a 'how to' guide to staying safe in a constantly changing world.

Despite this, I argue that the importance and impact of the 19th century true crime murder ballads still can and should inform our scholarship about gender, race, identity, and violence in the 19th century. Less than one hundred years ago, Frankie Baker's life was destroyed because of the influence and prevalence of murder ballads. The stereotypes perpetuated in media and song regarding the subjects of these murder ballads still color the pop-cultural view of Appalachia.

To conclude, I emphasize that we must treat these songs as living, evolving culture. True crime murder ballads do not only tell the story of a crime, but they reveal the cultural context of the communities that produced them. They act as a way to punish the guilty, even when the law failed. They reinforce the boundaries of what is familiar and what is "other," and act to connect Appalachia with trans-Appalachia as culturally connected regions. They serve as a lens to examine the difference between the Victorianized norm of the 19th century and the insulated landscapes that rejected these norms. In examining the true crime murder ballad, we can see the uniquely American developments in balladry. The enduring need to sing these songs, and the hunger with which we still listen to them, makes a lot of sense. True crime murder ballads provide us with connections to the past and to humanity in a way that other songs will never achieve.

In song, we can observe which narratives were powerful enough to be transmitted orally across time and place. We can use these songs, their evolutions, and their variants to examine changes in cultural values as different versions emerged and spread out from the communities that produced them. As a form of early news media, true crime murder ballads documented real crimes and consequences, and provided frameworks of acceptability. These frameworks speak to

gender dynamics, crime, justice, and vengeance. They acted as emotional catharsis when victims were unable to be suitably avenged, but simultaneously acted as a form and venue for stock figures within the cultural consciousness.

Not only do these songs give us clues to the contexts in which ballads were produced, they also shed light onto processes of "othering" of groups that did not conform to increasingly popular Victorian ideologies in the United States. These ballads served as a uniting feature between Appalachia and the trans-Appalachian communities that migrated towards the Ozarks, opening ways to examine the parallel stereotypes between black and rural Appalachian communities. They also serve to expose the dangers and harms of forcing prescribed pop-cultural identities onto oppressed populations.

True crime murder ballads fill in the gaps of how media sensationalism and the perception of Appalachia evolved over the 19th century. They also provide insight into the pervasive nature of violence against women in the American cultural framework. Even today, we can see the ripples of true crime murder ballads—in the new forms of media that came to replace their social functions like true crime podcasts and fictionalized ballads, in the female-driven country ballads of the 21st century, and in Americans' persistent interest in death and dying.

Listen to these stories. I'll tell you no lies.

Appendix A: A Playlist

To listen to the accompanying murder ballads written about and referenced in this thesis, see:

(code to scan on Spotify)

Or: use this link "This is a Traditional Song; We Can't Let You Stay Happy Long": Playlist

Track Listing:

1. Bob Dylan: *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, from *The Times They Are A-Changin'* 1964.
2. Doc Watson*, Little Omie Wise,* from *Doc Watson,* 1964.
3. Doug Wallin, *Omie Wise*, from *Classic Mountain Songs from Smithsonian Folkways*, 2002 (compilation album).
4. Doc Watson, *Tom Dooley*, from *Doc Watson*, 1964.
5. Frank Proffitt, *Tom Dooley*, from *Frank Proffitt of Reece, North Carolina*, 1962.
6. The Kingston Trio, *Tom Dooley*, from *The Kingston Trio*, 1958.
7. Doc Watson, *Frankie and Johnny*, from *The Legendary Doc Watson*, 2001 (compilation album).
8. Jimmie Rodgers, *Frankie and Johnny*, from *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, 2013 (compilation album).
9. Lead Belly, *Duncan and Brady*, from *Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection*, 2015 (compilation album).

10. Lloyd Price, *Stagger Lee*, from *Lloyd Price Greatest Hits: The Original ABC-Paramount Recordings*, 1994 (compilation album).

11. Mae West, *Frankie And Johnny*, from *The Fabulous Mae West*, 1956.

12. The Chicks, *Goodbye Earl*, from *Fly*, 1999.

13. Carrie Underwood, *Two Black Cadillacs*, from *Blown Away*, 2012.

14. Carrie Underwood, *Blown Away*, from *Blown Away*, 2012.

15. Carrie Underwood, *Church Bells,* from *Storyteller*, 2015.

16. Carrie Underwood, *Chocktaw County Affair*, from *Storyteller*, 2015.

Appendix B: *Omie Wise*

Braxton Craven, *Life of Naomi Wise: true story of a beautiful girl, enacted in Randolph County, N. C., about the year 1800*[309]

Come all you good people, I'd have you draw near,
A sorrowful story you quickly shall hear; A
story I'll tell you about N'omi Wise, How
she was deluded by Lewis' lies.
He promised to marry and use me quite well;
But conduct contrary I sadly must tell, He
promised to meet me at Adams' Springs He
promised me marriage and many fine things.
Still nothing he gave but yet flattered the case,
He says we'll be married and have no disgrace,
Come get up behind me, we'll go up to town, And
there we'll be married, in union be bound.
I got up behind him and straightway did go
To the banks of Deep River, where the water did flow;
He says, "Now, Naomi, I'll tell you my mind,
I intend to drown you and leave you behind."
O! pity your infant and spare me my life; Let
me go rejected and not be your wife.
"No pity, no pity," this monster did cry,
"In Deep River's bottom your body shall lie."
The wretch then did choke her, as we understand,
And threw her in the river below the milldam. But
it murder or treason, Oh! what a great crime To
murder poor Naomi and leave her behind.
Naomi was missing they all did well know,
And hunting for her to the river did go;
And there found her floating on the water so deep, Which
caused all the people to sigh and to weep.
The neighbors were sent for to see the great sight,
While she lay floating all that long night, So
early next morning the inquest was held,
The jury correctly the murder did tell.

[309] Braxton Craven, *Life of Naomi Wise: True Story of a Beautiful Girl, Enacted in Randolph County, N.C., about the Year 1800* (King, NC: Newsum Book Co., 1851).

Doc Watson, *Little Omie Wise*[310]

Oh, listen to my story, I'll tell you no lies
How John Lewis did murder poor little Omie Wise
He told her to meet him at Adams's Springs
He promised her money and other fine things

So, fool-like she met him at Adams's Springs
No money he brought her nor other fine things
"Go with me, little Omie, and away we will go
We'll go and get married and no one will know."

She climbed up behind him and away they did go
But off to the river where deep waters flow
"John Lewis, John Lewis, will you tell me your mind?
Do you intend to marry me or leave me behind?"

"Little Omie, little Omie, I'll tell you my mind
My mind is to drown you and leave you behind."
"Have mercy on my baby and spare me my life
I'll go home as a beggar and never be your wife."

He kissed her and hugged her and turned her around
Then pushed her in deep waters where he knew that
She would drown

He got on his pony and away he did ride
As the screams of little Omie went down by his side
T'was on a Thursday morning, the rain was pouring down
When the people searched for Omie but she could not be found

Two boys went a-fishin' one fine summer day
And saw little Omie's body go floating away
They threw their net around her and drew her to the bank
Her clothes all wet and muddy, they laid her on a plank

Then sent for John Lewis to come to that place
And brought her out before him so that he might see her face
He made no confession but they carried him to jail
No friends or relations would go on his bail

[310] Doc Watson, *Little Omie Wise*, vinyl recording, *Doc Watson* (New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964).

Doug Wallin, *Omie Wise*[311]

I'll tell you a story of little Omie wise
How she became diluted by John Louis's lies
He told her to meet him down by Adam's spring
Some money he would bring and some other fun things

Then fool like she met him at Adam's spring
No money he brought her nor other fun things
No money, no money to flatter the case
We'll go and get married there'll be no disgrace

John Louis, John Louis, please tell me your mind
Do you intend to marry me or leave me behind
Little Omie, little Omie, I'll tell you my mind
My mind is to drown you and leave you behind

Please pity our baby and spare me my life
I'll go home a beggar and won't be your wife
He hugged her, he kissed her, he turned her around
He threw her in deep water where he knew she would drown

He jumped on his pony and away he did ride
The screams of little Omie went down by his side
It was on last Wednesday morning, the rain was pouring down
The people searched for Omie but she could not be found

Two boys went a-fishing on a fine summer's day
They saw little Omie go floatin' away
They threw their net around her and pulled her to the shore
The body of little Omie was searched for no more

They sent for John Louis, John Louis came by
When confronted with her body he broke down and cried
You can shoot me, you can hang me, for I am the man
I drowned little little Omie in Yonders ol' mill dam
My name is John Louis, my name I'll never deny
I drowned little Omie, I'll never reach the sky

[311] Doug and Jack Wallin, *Omie Wise*, CD, *Family Songs and Stories from the North Carolina Mountains* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1995), https://folkways.si.edu/doug-wallin/omie-wise/american-folk-old-timeprose/track/smithsonian.

Mary Woody, *A True account of Nayomy Wise*[312]

To Such as here and Wants to know
A woman Came Some years ago
Then from a Cunty named by hide
In Randolph after did reside
And by Some person was defild
And So brought forth a basturd Child
She Told her name neomy Wise
Her Carnal Conduct Some did despise
It was not long till She another
that might be Cald a basturds Brother
And Being poor and Credit low
From hous to hous She had to go
And labor hard in tiol and pain
Herself and babes for to maintain
The Second Child neomy bore think She
Into a neighbors man Ben Sanders Swore
And now She Seems give up to Sin
Too much neglecting grace within
In Eighteen hundred Six the year
She was over come a gain we here
And by a lewis was defiled And a
third time became with Child a
Sprightly youth a lively man Such
was accounted Jonathan
He held himself of high degree
But too fond of Carnality
Although her case was Surely Sad
The girl it Seems apeard glad
That She had known So brave a man
Of So high Rank as Jonathan
She by a yongster was beguild
And pleased to find herself with Child
And She So Sensless was of Shame
She Seemd rejoiced and likd it well
Ans bold Enough the Sin to tell
And with the Scandel So Content
She told it mostly Where She went
Lewis then was offended high

[312] Mary Woody, "A True Account of Nayomy Wise," Wikisource, the free online library, c.1815, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_true_account_of_Nayomy_Wise

To be exposed far and nigh
Fof [?] his own Credit Such Regard
he promist her a grate Reward
If She Would keep it quite Conceald
And never let it be Reveald To keep
it Secret then Lewis Chose and not
the matter to expose To his disgrace
and open Shame Nor bring
dishonor to his name
Although Shed Caus to morn and weep
Yet She a Secret Cannot keep
So void of fear grief or Shame
What [?] he Said She would proclaim
All Which inraged Lewis So
He thought Some further yet to do
He did not Choose her for a wife
But threatened Hard to take her life
Its huist he thought Vile work to Try
Join murder [to] Carnality
So Carry on the mass[acre?]
And bring about the tragedie
Such tails She told against his Will
He threatened that he would her kill
She disregarded what he said
And of his threats Seemd not afraid
She liked her State So very weell She
Still inclind of it to tell
And Lewis then with anger filled
We guis he Thought She must be Killed
She to the hous of Adams Came
And Lived a While about the Same
A School hous to that place Was near
She promisd him to meet him there
A mournful Story to Relate In 1807
date the poor young woman ded was
found She [in?] deep River being
drownd
The People Thought non[e] more likely than
The angry Vexed Jonathan
Might in a Vile and Wicked fit
The Vile base murded might Comit
And under water force her head
Until he found that She was dead
Now look and See some reasons why

[—?] think he made her drownd and die
I think he dont give reasons why
Theyd meet at a School house So nigh
And made naomy promiss well
Of theire appointment none to tell
When he was gone then soon behold
She of the Same to mary told
The[y?] went that night the both did go
But did not meet it happend So
Next day he Came a gain its said
And then a new appointment made
He told her then he thought he might
Apoint to meet next Sunday night
And Chargd her that She might Conceal
The mater unto none reveal
But she not fearful but was bold
To mary Adams Soon She told
And mary told her not to go
Least that he might some mischief do
He out of fury rage and spite
To her some private mischief might
There was no danger then she said
And seem'd of Lewis not afraid
Was tender hearted She believe'd
Tho by him She was mutch deceive'd
When night came on She took a pail
But to return did Shorely fail
She went with it towards the Spring
Just like She went to water bring
That seemd a long a tedious night
Not knowing what there happebed might
To mary long it Seemed to be
And tedious to that family
And when next morning plainly Came
Naomi wont returned home
Then mary went unto the Spring
And found her not a Shocking thing
But near the Same the pail She found
And Standing on or near the ground
So thare it was with water filled
And mary though she was killd
And then She did to denis go
And thought Shed Let the neighbors know

About the matter and inquire
What he thought or did disire
Might yet be dun and further Said
There had been two apointments made
To meet there With Some intent
I realy think for mischief bent
And further more She also Said
He has murderd her I am afraid
But denis thought he would not killl
But he persuads against her will
To Sware the Child to other man
And Clear himself So if he Can
A Cunstable then Lewis Was
And Some aquainted With the Laws
A precept had he did prepare
To make the girl the Child to Sware
Before it was born What Could it be mand [?]
Unless he went himself to Screen [?]
Or that it might tend to his honor
to have the Crime laid all upon her
And Denis dennis Said or hoped Some
That soon she back again would Come
When mary thus Such thoughts are thine
And thy opinion is not mine
And then insisted he might go
To Joseph Elliots for to know
If she was thare or had been seen
For thare some time her Child had been
And if She lives above the ground
Some there She thought She might be found
For denis Went but found her not then
Came with him the sad Elot Then to the
schoolhous Both Repair
And found his hors tracks plenty thare
Not many Sises grat and Small
He thought one hors had made them all
He Came and went plain to their Sight
and had Been thear in both the nights
Or its to travel took the day
and one towards the River Way
He did Conclude and did agree
That She away must taken be
To tell about naomy Wise
And why [?] on the morrow day

To hast away to Curnal gray
And then before the Curnal Sware
About Naomy as the are
And tell how She was missing too
Let [?] him consider What to do
Which When he came to understand
He give a warent to Command
The [?] Lewis to be taken why [?]
That Justice might be done? thereby
But Scarcely home When mary heard
Naomy ded had then appeard
She in deep River being found
And most inhumanly She Was drowd
The neighbors Soon Collected Were
and many people being there and med
was Sent to Lewis take
and fetch him there a prisoner make
The[y] brought him there firmly bound
Unto the place Where She was drownd
Next day the[y?] brought him Strongly tied
Unto the Bank or River Side
I guis to Lewis it was tring
For to be brought Where She was Lying
Was guarded here and Where he found
A Larg concors [?] ware standing round
Would not the heart of any been
Much moved and peirded at Sutch a seen
If theyd but think and take a vaiu [view?]
She was with Child and murder too
And the unhapy Victome See Of Such a
Wicked Cruality then bound With Cord
So fast and Strong Which to Such people
did belong
And then the orders the[y] Ware Such
He Was requested her to touch
And So he did We understand
With a pale face and a trimbling hand
The Crowner then a Jury had
To try the mater which was sad
And divers people furder more
To [?] what the[y] knew the[y] also Swore
And Mary adams did begin
And Swore to what is within And
William Wadkins did declare that

Lewis had been Surely thare At
his own house that very day
 And in the evening went a Way (seting)
 After the sian of the Sun
 And he towards the Schoolhouse run
 And also Wadkins did declare
That it was not two miles from thare
Ann Davis also Sworw and Said
A noise was at the river made
Shrieking [?] and a dofful Sound
In that Same night that She Was drownd
Shrieks Was awful two or three
A morning [?moaning] then it Seem to be
Supprising Shrieks a Shocking Crying
As if Some Woman might by dying
Which people Recond Was not more
That fifty perches [16 1/2 feet] from the dore
 Some others might or as now mentioned be
 Who Said the Same as Well as She
 More Witnesses I mintion might
 If I to tell it took delight
 To them acounts min taking heed
 The Crowners Jury all agreed
 Neomy then was Carried by
 Said Lewis Who had made her die
 She in deep River being found
 I[n] humanly and basely drownd
 Amittance of Carnal gray

Appendix C: *Tom Dooley*

Thomas C. Land, *The Death of Laura Foster*[313]

The Murder

The tragedy I now relate
Is of poor Laura Foster's fate
How by a fickle lover she Was
hurried to eternity.

On Thursday morn at early dawn
To meet her groom she hastened on,
For soon she thought a bride to be
Which filled her heart with ecstasy.

Her youthful heart no sorrow knew
She fancied all mankind were true.
And thus she gaily passed along
Humming at times a favorite song.

Ere sun declined toward the west
She met her groom and his vile Guest;
In forest wild they three retreat
And look for Parson there to meet.

Soon night came on with darkness drear
Yet still poor Laura felt no fear. She
thought her lover kind and true
Believed that he'd protect her too.

Confidingly upon his breast
She laid her head to take some rest;
But soon poor Laura felt a smart,
A deadly dagger pierced her heart.

No shrieks were heard by neighbors round
Who were in the bed sleeping sound. None
heard the shrieks so loud and shrill, Save
those who did poor Laura kill.

---

[313] Thomas C Land, "The Murder of Laura Foster," essay, in *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore; the Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society*, vol. 2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), 707–10.

The murder done they her conceal
And vow they'll never reveal To
dig the grave they now proceed
But in the darkness make no speed.

But dawn appears, the grave not done,
Back to their hiding place they run,
And there in silence wait till night To
put poor Laura out of sight.

The grave was short and narrow, too.
But in it they poor Laura threw,
And covered with some leaves and clay,
And hastened home at break of day.

The Search

Since Laura left at break of day
Two days and nights had passed away;
The parents now in sorrow wild Set in
search of their lost child.

In copse and glen, in wood and plain
They search for her but all in vain;
With aching hearts and pensive moans,
They call for her in mournful tones.

With sad forebodings for her fate
To friends her absence they relate,
With many friends all anxious, too,
Again their search they do renew.

They searched for her in swamps and bogs,
In creeks and caves, and hollow logs;
In copse and glen, and bramble too; But
still no trace of her they view.

At last upon a ridge they found Some
blood all mingled with the ground.
The sight to all seemed very clear
That Laura had been murdered there.

Long for her grave they search in vain.
At length they meet to search again,
Where stately pines and ivies wave,
At last they found poor Laura's grave.

The Resurrection and Inquest

The grave was found as we have seen
Mid stately pines and ivies green.
The Coroner and Jury too, Assembled
this sad sight to view.

They take away the leaves and clay
Which from her lifeless body lay. They
from the grave her body take And
close examination make.

When soon the bloody wound they spied,
 Twas where the deadly dagger pierced her side;
The inquest held, this hapless maid Was then
into her coffin laid.

The Jury made the verdict plain,
 Which was, poor Laura had been slain;
 Some ruthless fiend had struck the blow,
Which laid poor luckless Laura low.

Then in the church yard her they lay
 No more to rise till judgment day
 Then robed in white we trust she'd rise
To meet her Saviour in the skies.

Doc Watson, *Tom Dooley*[314]

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry; You
killed poor Laurie Foster, And you
know you're bound to die.

You left her by the roadside
Where you begged to be excused;
You left her by the roadside,
Then you hid her clothes and shoes.

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster, And
you know you're bound to die.

You took her on the hillside
For to make her your wife;
You took her on the hillside, And
there you took her life.

You dug the grave four feet long
And you dug it three feet deep;
You rolled the cold clay over her And
tromped it with your feet.

Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry; You
killed poor Laurie Foster, And you
know you're bound to die.

"Trouble, oh it's trouble
A-rollin' through my breast; As
long as I'm a-livin', boys, They
ain't a-gonna let me rest.

I know they're gonna hang me,
Tomorrow I'll be dead,
Though I never even harmed a hair On
poor little Laurie's head."

[314] Doc Watson, *Tom Dooley*, vinyl recording, *Doc Watson* (New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964). Note: these are allegedly the lyrics passed down through the Watson family since the time of the murder.

Hang your head, Tom Dooley, Hang
your head and cry;

You killed poor Laurie Foster, And
you know you're bound to die.

"In this world and one more
Then reckon where I'll be; If is
wasn't for Sheriff Grayson, I'd
be in Tennessee.

You can take down my old violin And
play it all you please.
For at this time tomorrow, boys, It'll
be of no use to me."

Hang your head, Tom Dooley, Hang
your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster, And
you know you're bound to die.

"At this time tomorrow Where
do you reckon I'll be?
Away down yonder in the holler Hangin'
on a white oak tree."

Hang your head, Tom Dooley, Hang
your head and cry;
You killed poor Laurie Foster,
And you know you're bound to die The Kingston Trio, *Tom Dooley*[315]

[Spoken]
This one next tells a story of a lot of different people
We would like to have a sing along, this one if you're through with your dinner
If you're not through just spray along, folks it's alright
Everybody, sing good and clear
We'll be all on air on the Andy Williams show next year
[Sung]
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley Hang
down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die

[315] The Kingston Trio, *Tom Dooley*, CD, *The Kingston Trio* (Hollywood, CA: Capitol Records, 1958).

I met her on the mountain
There I took her life
Met her on the mountain
Stabbed her with my knife
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry (poor boy)
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die
This time tomorrow
Reckon where I'll be
Hadn't been for Grayson
I'd-a been in Tennessee
Well now, boy
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry (oh, boy)
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die
Well now, boy
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry (poor boy)
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die
This time tomorrow
Reckon where I'll be
Down in some lonesome valley
Hangin' from a white oak tree
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry (poor boy)
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die
Well now, boy
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry (poor boy)
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die
Poor boy, you're bound to die
Poor boy, you're bound to die
Poor boy, you're bound to die

Frank C. Brown Collection of NC Folklore, *Tom Dula*[316]

Hang down your head Tom Dula
Hang don your head and cry;
You killed poor Lara Foster
And now you're bound to die.

You met her on the hill-top,
And God Almighty knows,
You met her on the hill-top
And there you hid your clothes.

You met her on the hill-top,
You said she'd be your wife,
You met her on the hill-top
And there you took her life.

[316] Maude Minish Sutton, "Tom Dula," in *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore; the Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society*, vol. 2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), 712.

Frank C. Brown Collection of NC Folklore, *Tom Dula's Lament*[317]

I pick my banjo now, I
pick it on my knee.
This time tomorrow night It'll
be no more use to me.

The banjo's been my friend
In days both dark and ill.
A-layin' here in jail It's
helped me time to kill.

Poor Laura loved me well,
She was both fond and true;
How deep her love for me I
never really knew.

Her black curl on my heart,
I'll meet my fatal doom, As
swift as she met hers That
dreadful evening's gloom.

I've lived my life of sin, I've
had a bit of fun. Come, Ann,
kiss me goodby, My race is
nearly run.

One more night and more more day.
And where do you reckon I'll be? Down
in the valley, the valley so low Hanging
on a white-oak tree.

[317] Maude Minish Sutton, "Tom Dula's Lament," in *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore; the Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society*, vol. 2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), 713–14.

Appendix D: *Frankie and Johnny*

The Leighton Brothers, *Frankie and Johnny, or, You'll Miss Me in the Days to Come*[318]

Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts, they had a quarrel one day,
Johnny he vowed that he would leave her, said he was goin' away, He's never comin' home,
He's goin' away to roam.
Frankie she begged and pleaded, cried, "Oh Johnny, please stay,"
She says, "My honey I have done you wrong, but please don't go away."
Then Johnny sighed,
And to his Frankie cried —

"Oh I'm goin' away, and I'm goin' to stay
I'm never comin' home,
You're goin' to miss me hun, in the days to come,
When the winter winds begin to blow,
The ground is covered with snow, You'll think of me and you will wish to be Back with your lovin' man.
You're goin' to miss me hun,
In the days, days, days to come."

Frankie says, "Listen now Johnny, to prove my love is true,
Every dollar I can save, dear, I'm goin' to give to you.
So I think now dear,
That ought to keep you here."
Johnny says, "Listen now Frankie, don't want to tell you no lie,
I've lost my heart to another queen, her name is Nellie Bly."
Then Frankie groaned,
As her Johnny moaned —

"Oh I'm goin' away, and I'm goin' to stay
I'm never comin' home,
You're goin' to miss me hun, in the days to come,
When the winter winds begin to blow,
The ground is covered with snow, You'll think of me and you will wish to be Back with your lovin' man.
You're goin' to miss me hun,

[318] Leighton Brothers and Ren Sheilds, *Frankie and Johnny, or, You'll Miss Me in the Days to Come.* (New York, NY: Tell Taylor Music Publishers, 1919).

In the days, days, days to come."

Frankie then said to her Johnny, "Say man, your hour is come,"
From under her silk kimona, she drew a forty-four gun.
Oh, it was a bear,
'Twas quite a large affair.
Johnny he dashed down the stairway, cryin', "Oh Frankie don't shoot,"
Frankie took aim with her forty-four, five times with a rooty-toot-toot
As Johnny fell, then Miss
Frankie yelled —

"Oh I'm goin' away, and I'm goin' to stay
I'm never comin' home,
You're goin' to miss me hun, in the days to come,
When the winter winds begin to blow,
The ground is covered with snow, You'll
think of me and you will wish to be Back
with your lovin' man.
You're goin' to miss me hun,
In the days, days, days to come."

"Send for your rubber-tired hearses, go get your rubber-tired hacks,
Take lovin' Johnny to the graveyard, I shot him in the back
With my great big gun, Just as he went to run.
Send for a thousand policemen, detectives right away,
Lock me down in the dungeon cell and throw the keys away.
My Johnny's dead,
Just because he said —

"Oh I'm goin' away, and I'm goin' to stay
I'm never comin' home,
You're goin' to miss me hun, in the days to come,
When the winter winds begin to blow,
The ground is covered with snow, You'll
think of me and you will wish to be Back
with your lovin' man.
You're goin' to miss me hun,
In the days, days, days to come."

Gene Greene, *Frankie and Johnny*[319]

Frankie and Johnnie were lovers,
Oh, Lordie how they could love!
They swore to be true to each other,
Just as true as the stars above,
He was her man, but he done her wrong.

Frankie and Johnnie went walking
John in his brand new suit.
Then, "oh good Lawd," says Frankie
"Don't my Johnnie look real cute!" He
was her man, but he done her wrong.

Frankie she was a good woman,
And Johnnie was a good man,
And every dollar that she made
Went right into Johnnie's hand,
He was her man, but he done her wrong.

Frankie went down tn the corner,
Just for a bucket of beer.
She said to the fat bartender, "Has my
lovinest man been here?" He was her
man, but he done her wrong.

"I don't want to cause you no trouble,
I don't want to tell you no lie;
But I saw your man an hour ago
With a gal named Alice Bly,
And if he's your man, he's a-doing you wrong."

Frankie looked over the transom,
And found, to her great surprise,
That there on the bed sat Johnnie, A-
lovin' up Alice Bly.
He was her man, but he done her wrong.

Frankie drew back her kimono;
She took out her little forty-four;

[319] Gene Greene, "'Frankie and Johnny' by Gene Greene (1912)," Before the Big Bang, accessed June 4, 2025, https://beforethebigbang.com/tracklist/track-77/.

Root-a-toot-toot, three times she shot
Right through that hardwood floor, She
shot her man, 'cause he done her wrong.

Roll me over easy,
Roll me over slow, Roll
me on de right side, 'Cause
de bullet hurt me so.
I was her man, but I done her wrong.

The judge said to the jury
"It's as plain as plain can be
This woman shot her lover
It's murder in the second degree He was
her man, though he done her wrong.

This story has no moral
This story has no end
This story only goes to show
That there ain't no good in men
They'll do you wrong, just as sure as you're born

Mae West, *Frankie And Johnny*[320]

Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts,
Lord knows but how they could love,
Swore they'd be true to each other,
True as the stars above,
He was her man and he was doing her wrong,

Frankie went around the corner, to
get a bucket of beer,
Said to the man called Bartender,
"Have you seen my Johnny here?
He's my man, and he's doing me wrong."

"Ain't gonna tell you no stories, ain't
gonna tell you no lies.
I saw your man named Johnny 'bout an hour ago with
that gal named Nellie Blythe.
He's your man and he's doing you wrong."

Frankie want around to that hop joint,
bought along a great big forty-four,
she went inside and there she spied
Johnny on the floor.
He was her man, and he was doing her wrong.

"Turn me over Frankie, turn
me over slow,
Turn me over on my right side Frankie,
Why did you shoot so low?"
You was my man and you done me wrong.

Rubber-tired coaches, rubber-tired
hacks,
Is gonna take my man to the graveyard, ain't
never gonna bring him back.
He was my man and he was doing me wrong.

Bring on your million policemen,
bring on your million jails, Hold the
keys to that St. Louis River,
nobody's gonna hold my bail,

[320] Mae West, *Frankie And Johnny*, *The Fabulous Mae West* (Decca Records, 1955).

He was my man and he was doing me wrong.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Absolute History, and Suzanna Lipscomb. “The Deadly Secrets Of The Tudor Home | Hidden Killers.” YouTube, February 27, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD0McTYto3I&t=744s.

The American Philosophical Society. “The Lives of 18th Century Apprenticed and Indentured Children.” American Philosophical Society, 2024. https://www.amphilsoc.org/museum/exhibitions/children-archives/lives-18th-centuryapprenticed-and-indentured-children.

Anglin, Mary K. “Erasures of the Past: Culture, Power, and Heterogeneity in Appalachia.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, WHITENESS AND RACIALIZATION IN APPALACHIA , 10, no. 1/2 (Spring 2004): 73–84.

anon. “Frankie and Johnny WERE Sweethearts, but, Frankie Says It Was the Famous Song That Done Her Wrong .” *The Oregonian*. December 17, 1939.

anon. “Negro Shot by Woman.” *St. Louis Republic*, October 16, 1899.

anon. “Song Wrong Again! Frankie Killed Johnny With One Shot, Says Friend.” *The St. Louis Star Times*, October 28, 1939.

anon. “The Death Penalty.” *The New York Herald*, May 2, 1868. anon. “‘Stack-a-Lee’

and Early Ragtime.” *The Leavenworth Herald*, August 21, 1897.

Appalachia Then and Now: Examining Changes to the Appalachian Region Since 1965 § (2015).

AppState. “Ballad Traditions of Appalachia.” App State Digital Scholarship and Initiatives . Accessed May 17, 2025. https://dsi.appstate.edu/projects/mountainmusic/topics/dooley/balladtraditions.

Asheville History Museum. “Hang down Your Head, Tom Dooley Folklore Lesson.” Asheville History Museum. Accessed May 30, 2025. https://www.ashevillehistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2023/03/Tom-Dula-Teacher-Materials-PDF.pdf.

Atkinson, David. “The Ballad and Its Paradoxes.” *Folklore* 124, no. 2 (July 17, 2013): 123–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587x.2013.779837.

Baker, Liva. “The Defense of Levi Weeks.” *American Bar Association Journal* 63, no. 6 (1977): 818–24. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20744436.

Baptist, Edward E. “My Mind Is to Drown You and Leave You Behind.” Essay. In *Over the Threshold Intimate Violence in Early America*, edited by Christine Daniels and Michael V Kennedy, 1st ed., 94–110. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 1999.

Barnes, Joseph K, Joseph Janvier Woodward, Charles Smart, George Alexander Otis, and David Lowe Huntington. *The medical and surgical history of the war of the rebellion (1861-65) (Volume 1, Part 3)* . Vol. 1. 2 vols. Washington, DC: United States Surgeon-General’s Office, 1888. https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-14121350R-mvset.

Birdsall, Stephen S, and John William Florin. “Appalachia and the Ozark.” Essay. In *An Outline of American Geography : Regional Landscapes of the United States*. Washington, DC: Department of State. Bureau of International Information Programs, 1998.

Birdsall, Stephen S., and John Florin. *Outline of American geography: Regional Landscapes of the United States*. Washington, DC: United States Department of State, 2003.

Blevins, Brooks. *A History of the Ozarks, Volume 2: The Conflicted Ozarks*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019.

Blevins, Brooks. “Wretched and Innocent: Two Mountain Regions in the National Consciousness.” *Journal of Appalachian Study* 7, no. 2 (2001): 257–71. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41446485.

Bob Dylan. *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*. Vinyl recording. *The Times They Are AChanging*. New York, NY: Tom Wilson, 1963.

Bonzom, Alice. “A Crash-Course in Femininity? Female Criminals in the Victorian and Edwardian Era.” Collège de France, October 23, 2017. https://booksandideas.net/A-CrashCourse-in-Femininity.html.

The Boston Herald. “Her Personal Charms Might Attract.” *The Boston Herald*, August 6, 1893. https://www.famous-trials.com/lizzieborden/1429-news3.

Briggs, Charles L. “What We Should Have Learned from Américo Paredes: The Politics of Communicability and the Making of Folkloristics.” *Journal of American Folklore* 125, no. 495 (Winter 2012): 91–110. https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.125.495.0091.

Brooks, Katie Beth. “A Historiographic Account of Stereotypes, Ideology, and Education in an Appalachian Region.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 30, no. 2 (2024): 165–80. https://doi.org/10.5406/23288612.30.2.04.

Brown, Cecil, and Steve Inskeep. Revisiting the Ballad “Frankie and Johnny.” Other. *NPR Music*. NPR, November 24, 2004.

Brown, Cecil. “Godfather of Gangsta.” *The Guardian*. May 8, 2003.

Brown, Cecil. *Stagolee Shot Billy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Brown, Cecil. “We Did Them Wrong: The Ballad of Frankie and Albert.” Essay. In *The Rose & The Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*, 123–45. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005.

Brown, Frank Clyde. *The Frank C. Brown Collection of north carolina folklore; the folklore of North Carolina, collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the years 1912 to 1943, in collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society* . Edited by Norman Ivey White, Henry M. Belden, and Arthur Palmer Hudson. Vol. 2. 7 vols. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952.

Brown, Richard M. “Southern Violence-Regional Problem or National Nemesis?: Legal Attitudes Toward Southern Homicide in Historical Perspective.” *Vanderbilt Law Review*, Symposia: The Legal History of the South, 32, no. 1 (January 1979): 225–50.

Buckley, Bruce Redfern. “Frankie and Her Men: A Study of the Interrelationships of Popular and Folk Traditions,” 1962.

Burt, Olive W. “The Minstrelsy of Murder.” *Western Folklore* 17, no. 4 (October 1958): 263–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/1496190.

Bynum, Victoria E. *Unruly Women: The politics of social and sexual control in the Old South*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Campbell, John C. *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*. *Russell Sage*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921. https://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/Campbell_Southern%20Highlander%20Homeland_0.pdf.

Campbell, Rex R, Mary Campbell, and Colleen Hughes. *A Revolution in the Heartland: Changes in Rural Culture, Family and Communities, 1900–2000*. Columbia, MO: Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri, 2004.

Carlson, Peter. “A Regular Old Southern Maryland Boy.” *Washington Post*. August 4, 1991.

Causey, Ellen Fitzgibbons, and Michael R Pelt. “Revivals.” NCpedia, 2006. https://www.ncpedia.org/revivals.

The Chicks. *Goodbye Earl*. CD. Nashville, TN: Monument, 2000.

Child, Francis James. *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Edited by Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge. The Cambridge Edition of the Poetsed. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904.

Chilton, Martin. "How the Kingston Trio Revived Folk Music and Got America Singing." uDiscover Music, June 1, 2024. https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/kingston-triofolk-music/.

Claggett, Abigayle Anne. "'The Death of a Beautiful Woman': Women's Suicide by Drowning in 19th Century American Literature." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (Summer 2020): 1239–48. https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.54.60.

Cohen, D. A. "The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590-1850." *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 2 (December 1, 1997): 277–306. https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/31.2.277.

Cohen, Norm. "A Railroader For Me." Essay. In *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folk Song*, 459–529. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

Cooperman, Jeannette. "The Story of Segregation in St. Louis." St. Louis Magazine, October 17, 2014. https://www.stlmag.com/news/the-color-line-race-in-st.-louis/.

Cornwell, Rupert. "Obituaries: William Zantzinger: Subject of Bob Dylan Ballad ." *The Independent*. January 12, 2009.

"Country Music Timeline: Articles and Essays: Dolly Parton and The Roots of Country Music: Digital Collections: Library of Congress." The Library of Congress. Accessed May 18, 2025. https://www.loc.gov/collections/dolly-parton-and-the-roots-of-countrymusic/articles-and-essays/country-music-timeline/.

Craven, Braxton. *Life of Naomi Wise: True story of a beautiful girl, enacted in Randolph County, N.C., about the year 1800*. King, NC: Newsum Book Co., 1851.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (March 12, 1998): 139–67.

CUNY. "U.S. History, Cotton Is King: The Antebellum South, 1800–1860, Wealth and Culture in the South: Slavery and the White Class Structure." CUNY OpenEd, 2007. https://opened.cuny.edu/courseware/lesson/370/student/?section=2.

Dattilo, Delia. “Some Patterns of the ‘Murdered Sweetheart Ballads’ in Oral Tradition, Early Recordings, and Popular Culture.” *Studia Ethnologica Pragensia*, no. 1 (2023): 24–40. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1203967.

David, John Russell. “Tragedy in Ragtime: Black Folktales from St. Louis,” 1976.

Dawson, Kevin. “Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World.” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 1, 2006): 1327–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/4485894.

Deily-Swearingen, Susan. “Sectionalism.” Essential Civil War Curriculum , September 2020. https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/assets/files/pdf/ECWC%20TOPIC%20Sectionalism%20Essay.pdf.

Doc Watson. *Frankie and Johnny*. Vinyl recording. *Doc Watson*. New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964.

Doc Watson. *Little Omie Wise*. Vinyl recording. *Doc Watson*. New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964.

Doc Watson. *Tom Dooley*. Vinyl recording. *Doc Watson*. New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964.

Donovan, Patricia. “America’s Fascination with Murder.” University at Buffalo - The State University of New York, September 6, 2007. https://www.buffalo.edu/ubreporter/archive/vol39/vol39n2/articles/SchmidMurder.html.

Doug and Jack Wallin. *Omie Wise*. CD. *Family Songs and Stories from the North Carolina Mountains*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1995. https://folkways.si.edu/dougwallin/omie-wise/american-folk-old-time-prose/track/smithsonian.

Drake, Richard B. “Southern Appalachia and the South: A Region Within a Section.” *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 3 (1991): 18–27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41445597.

Eastern Oregon State Hospital, Pendleton, OR. Photograph. *Oregon Bluebook*. Salem, OR: Oregon State Secretary of State’s Office, 1918. Pendleton, OR.

Eller, Ronald D. “Introduction.” Introduction. In *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*, ix–xi. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1999.

Eyerman, Ron, and Scott Barretta. “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States.” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (August 1996): 501–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00160675.

Fletcher, John Edward. *The true story of tom dooley: From Western North Carolina Mystery to Folk legend*. Edited by Edith Marie Ferguson Carter. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015.

Foster, Stephen C. "Nelly Bly. the Popular Negro Song. Box 068, Item 018." The Lester S Levy Sheet Music Collection. Accessed May 18, 2025. https://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/collection/068/018.

Frank Proffitt. *Tom Dooley*. CD. *Frank Proffitt of Reese, North Carolina*. Folk-Legacy Records, 1962. https://folkways.si.edu/frank-proffitt/frank-proffitt-of-reese-north-carolina.

Fraser, Max. "Map of Transappalachia." February 23, 2024. Map. *Daily Yonder*. https://dailyyonder.com/qa-what-was-the-hillbilly-highway/2024/02/23/.

Frazier, Ian. "Legacy of a Lonesome Death." Mother Jones, 2004. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/05/legacy-lonesome-death-bob-dylan-hattiecarroll/.

Friedman, Lawrence M. "Front Page: Notes on the Nature and Significance of Headline Trials." *St. Louis University Law Journal* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 1243–84. https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1394&context=lj.

Gammond, Peter. *The Oxford Companion to Popular Music*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Pr, 1991.

The Grammy Museum. "The Kingston Trio and the Folk Revival." Grammy Museum, May 26, 2016. https://grammymuseum.org/exhibit/the-kingston-trio-and-the-folk-revival/.

"Great Appalachian Valley." May 10, 2010. Map. *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Appalachian_Valley#/media/File:Greatvalleymap.png.

Greene, Gene. "'Frankie and Johnny' by Gene Greene (1912)." Before the Big Bang. Accessed June 4, 2025. https://beforethebigbang.com/tracklist/track-77/.

"Grieving Frankie Claims Damages." *The Oregonian*. April 22, 1938.

Hacsi, Tim. "From Indenture to Family Foster Care: A Brief History of Child Placing." *Child Welfare*, Special Issue: Lessons from the Past: A History of Child Welfare, 74, no. 1 (1995): 162–80. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351315920-9.

Hall, Stuart. "Council of Europe Colloquy on 'Training In The Critical Reading Of Televisual Language.'" In *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Universirty of Leicester: Centre for contemporary cultural studies, 1973.

Hampson, Alice. “What True Crime Podcasts Have Taught Me About How to Avoid Getting Murdered (Fingers Crossed Obvs).” Capsule NZ, March 24, 2023. https://capsulenz.com/think/true-crime/how-to-not-get-murdered-capsule-nz/.

Harkins, Anthony. *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004.

Held, John, and Frank Shay. *My pious friends and drunken companions ; and, more pious friends and drunken companions: Songs and ballads of conviviality*. New York, NY: Dover, 1961.

Higgins, Billy D. “The Origins and Fate of the Marion County Free Black Community.” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 427–43. https://doi.org/10.2307/40027828.

Housman, John E. *British Popular Ballads*. Miami, FL: Royale House, 1975.

Hufford, Mary. “Interrupting the Monologue: Folklore, Ethnography, and Critical Regionalism.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 62–78.

Huston, John. *Frankie and Johnny*. New York, NY: B. Blom, 1968.

Hutson, C. Kirk. “‘Whackety Whack, Don’t Talk Back’: The Glorification of Violence Against Females and the Subjugation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Southern Folk Music.” *Journal of Women’s History* 8, no. 3 (September 1996): 114–42. https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0492.

Jack, Bryan M. *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2021.

Jennings, LaVinia Delois. *At home and abroad: Historicizing twentieth-century whiteness in literature and performance*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2010.

Jimmie Rodgers. *Frankie and Johnny*. Vinyl recording. Dallas, TX: Victor Talking Machine Company, 1929.

John W. Green. CD. *Wexford Girl*. Saint James, Beaver Island, MI: Alan Lomax, 1938. https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1939007_afs02282a/.

Jones, Webster A. “Heroine of ‘Frankie and Johnnie’ Files Bond in $100,000 Suit.” *The Oregonian*. May 25, 1935.

Kava, Brad. “Song’s Ban Unleashes Debate on Violence in Pop Culture - Killing ‘Earl’ a Dilemma for Country Station.” *The Mercury News*. March 14, 2000.

Kenny, Kevin. “Irish Immigrant Stereotypes and American Racism .” Picturing US History. Accessed May 17, 2025. https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/irish-immigrant-stereotypesand-american-racism/.

Keyser, Richard. “Chapter 1.0. Early Colonial Law and Courts: Introduction.” American Legal History to the 1860s, 2020. https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/ls261/chapter/chapter-two/.

The Kingston Trio. *Tom Dooley*. CD. *The Kingston Trio*. Hollywood, CA: Capitol Records, 1958.

Kirchner, Caitlin. “If I Had a Shotgun: Musical Protest against Misogyny in Murder Ballads.” *Oshkosh Scholar*, December 2017, 6–16. https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/79141/11460%20OshScholar18%20Kirchner.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Kurres, Richard, and Charles J Oswald. “It’s Frankie and Albert Instead of Frankie and Johnny.” *The Lakeland Ledger*, May 29, 1975.

Lampman, Herbert S. “Song Heroine Tight-Lipped.” *The Oregonian*. October 18, 1939.

Land, Thomas C. “The Murder of Laura Foster.” Essay. In *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore; the Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society* 2, 2:707–10. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952.

Lavender, Catherine J. “Notes on The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood, Prepared for Students in HST 386: Women in the City, Department of History, The College of Staten Island/CUNY.” CUNY, 1998. https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/386/truewoman.pdf .

Leach, MacEdward. *The Ballad Book*. New York, NY: A.S. Barnes, 1975.

Leighton Brothers, and Ren Sheilds. *Frankie and Johnny, or, You’ll Miss Me in the Days to Come.* New York, NY: Tell Taylor Music Publishers, 1919.

Lemons, J. Stanley. “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920.” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 102–16. https://doi.org/10.2307/2712263.

Levitt, Morris, Roger Furman, and Ernest Smith. “Wed, 05.16.1900 The Rosebud Bar, (Ragtime Venue) Opens.” African American Registry. Accessed May 18, 2025. https://aaregistry.org/story/the-rosebud-bar-the-spot-for-ragtime/.

Leyburn, James Graham. “Part III: Scotch-Irish in America.” Essay. In *The Scotch-Irish : A Social History*, 174–332. Chaple Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1962.

"Location of Randleman, North Carolina." n.d. Map. *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randleman,_North_Carolina.

Long-Wilgus, Eleanor R. *Naomi Wise: Creation, re-creation, and continuity in an American ballad tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: Chapel Hill Press, 2003.

Macauley, Justine. " How the West Was Played: The Influence of Wild West Shows on American Identity and Perceptions of Gender, 1870 to 1920." *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History* 15 (May 2010): 24–43.

Mae West. *Frankie And Johnny*. *The Fabulous Mae West*. Decca Records, 1955.

Massey, Carissa. "Appalachian Stereotypes: Cultural History, Gender, and Sexual Rhetoric." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 13, no. 1/2 (2007): 124–36.

Mauser, Alan J. "The Role of Farming in the Southern Highlands: An Historical Perspective." Essay. In *Emerging Patterns in the Southern Highlands* 2: Agriculture, 2: Agriculture:21–23. Boone, NC: Appalachian State University, 1986.

Mayo Clinic. "Syphilis." Mayo Clinic, September 10, 2024. https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/syphilis/symptoms-causes/syc-20351756.

McCarroll, Meredith. *Unwhite: Appalachia, Race, and Film*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2018.

McDonald, Art. "How the Irish Became White." University of Pittsburgh. Accessed June 4, 2025. https://sites.pitt.edu/~hirtle/uujec/white.html.

McGill, Meredith L. "What Is a Ballad? Reading for Genre, Format, and Medium." *NineteenthCentury Literature* 71, no. 2 (September 1, 2016): 156–75. https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2016.71.2.156.

McLaird, James D. "Calamity Jane: The Life and the Legend." *South Dakota History* 24, no. 1 (February 15, 1994): 1–18.

McMeniman's History Department. "The Real Frankie Baker." McMenamins Blog, September 29, 2022. https://blog.mcmenamins.com/the-real-frankie-baker/.

Mehring, Frank. "Murder on Record. Ballads about Love, Death, and the Deep South: Letter to the Editor." *Lied und populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 66 (2021). https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/240878/upload_in_progress_2066_240878.pdf?sequence=1.

Meredith, Dianne. “Migration and Adaptation of Popular Balladry in the US Appalachian Region.” *Scottish Geographical Journal* 117, no. 3 (January 2001): 169–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/00369220118737120.

Meyer, Philip. “What Does Such Baptizing with Water Indicate? (Romans 6).” Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, March 21, 2021. https://www.ielcth.org/what-does-suchbaptizing-with-water-indicate-romans-6/.

Mgadmi, Mahassen. “Black Women’s Identity: Stereotypes, Respectability and Passionlessness (1890-1930).” *Revue LISA / LISA e-journal* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 40–55. https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.806.

Mitchell, Thorton W, and State Library of North Carolina Government & Heritage Library. “Paths Walked by Tom Dula and Ann Melton.” Map. *NCpedia*. State of North Carolina, 1986. https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/dula-thomas-c-tom-dooley.

Morgan, Stacy I. *Frankie and Johnny: Race, gender, and the work of African American folklore in 1930s America*. 1st ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017.

Morley, David. Audience Research, January 31, 2009. https://web.archive.org/web/20090131045249/http://museum.tv/archives/etv/A/htmlA/audiencerese/audiencerese.htm.

Morton, Alison. “The Female Crime: Gender, Class and Female Criminality in Victorian Representations of Poisoning.” Midlands Historical Review, June 23, 2021. https://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/the-female-crime-gender-class-and-femalecriminality-in-victorian-representations-of-poisoning/.

Mulhall, Brenna. “The Romanticization of the Dead Female Body in Victorian and Contemporary Culture.” *Aisthesis: The Interdisciplinary Honors Journal* 8, no. 2 (November 2, 2017): 1–8. https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/aisthesis/article/view/46.

Myrover, Henry L, and James Henry Myrover. “Notes and Items of Travel in Western North Carolina.” *The Fayetteville News*, November 20, 1866.

Nagasaki, Ian. “To Show That All’s Equal: The Devoted Life and Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.” *Folklife Magazine*, February 9, 2023.

Nebeker, Eric. “ The Heyday of the Broadside Ballad.” UCSB English Broadside Ballad Archive, 2007. https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/heyday-of-the-broadside-ballad.

Nettl, Bruno. “Broadside Ballad | Traditional, Folklore & Balladry | Britannica.” Brittanica, May 5, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/art/broadside-ballad.

Nirvana VEVO. “Nirvana - Where Did You Sleep Last Night (Live On MTV Unplugged Unedited).” YouTube, December 21, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEMm7gxBYSc.

Nisbett, Richard E., Dov Cohen, Brian F Bowdle, and Norbert Schwarz. “Insult, Anger, and Aggression: An ‘Experimental Ethnography’ of the Culture of Honor.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 5 (November 27, 1995): 945–60.

Nobles, Gregory H. “Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 1989): 641–70. https://doi.org/10.2307/1922778.

Oregon Historical Society. *Frankie Baker*. Photograph. *McMenamins*. Portland, OR, January 28, 2014. Portland, OR. https://blog.mcmenamins.com/he-was-her-man-but-he-done-herwrong/.

O’Bryhim, Shawn. “Stock Characters and Stereotypes.” Essay. In *A Companion to Plautus*, 189–203. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020.

O’Malley, Michael. “Jim Crow and the 1890s.” Jim Crow Museum, 1999. https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/links/misclink/1980s.htm.

Peters, Brian. “Myths of ‘Merrie Olde England’? Cecil Sharp’s Collecting Practice in the Southern Appalachians.” *Folk Music Journal* 11, no. 3 (2018): 6–46.

Poey, Delia. “Striking Back without Missing a Beat: Radical Responses to Domestic Violence in Country Music’s The Dixie Chicks and Salsa’s Celia Cruz.” *Studies in Popular Culture* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 1–15.

Polenberg, Richard. “Frankie and Johnny (1899).” Essay. In *Hear My Sad Story : The True Tales That Inspired “Stagolee,” “John Henry,” and Other Traditional American Folk Songs* , 45–55. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.

Pope, Anne-Marie. “American Dime Novels 1860-1915.” The Historical Association. Accessed May 18, 2025. https://www.history.org.uk/student/resource/4512/american-dime-novels1860-1915.

Pugh, Hal E, and Eleanor Minnock-Pugh. *Naomi “Omie” Wise: Her Life, Death, and Legend*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2022.

Randall, Samuel Sidwell. *History of the common school system of the state of New York, from its origin in 1795, to the present time : including the various city and other special organizations, and the religious controversies of 1821, 1832, and 1840*. New York, NY: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor & Co., 1871. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=miun.aen6278.0001.001&seq=5&q1=In%20populous%20cities.

Ray, Kristofer. “Interpreting Native Trans-Appalachia, 1670-1770.” *XVII-XVIII: Société d’Etudes Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* 78 (2021). https://doi.org/10.4000/1718.8090.

Reynolds, William M. “Redneck Piece of White Trash: Southern Rebels and Music: Epistemologies of Class, Masculinity, and Race Identity.” *Counterpoints* 434, no. CRITICAL STUDIES OF SOUTHERN PLACE: a reader (2014) (2014): 66–77.

Richman, Sheldon L. *Separating School & State : How to Liberate America’s Families*. Fairfax, VA: Future of Freedom Foundation, 1994.

Rinzler, Ralph. “‘Tom Dooley.’” New York, NY: Vanguard Records, 1964.

Roberts, David. *A newer world: Kit Carson, John C. Fremont and the claiming of the American west*. Riverside, CA: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

Robertson, Cara W. “Representing ‘Miss Lizzie’: Cultural Convictions in the Trial of Lizzie Borden.” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 8, no. 2 (January 1996): 351–416. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/72833285.pdf.

Samie, August. “Intersectionality.” Encyclopædia Britannica, May 16, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/topic/intersectionality.

Scales, Stewart, Emily Satterwhite, and Abigail August. “Mapping Appalachia’s Boundaries: Historiographic Overview and Digital Collection.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 24, no. 1 (April 1, 2018): 89–100. https://doi.org/10.5406/jappastud.24.1.0089.

Schecter, Harold. “The Murder of ‘Omie Wise,’ 1808: Notes on a Killing.” The Yale Review, June 29, 2018. https://yalereview.org/article/murder-omie-wise-1808.

Schofield, Ann. "Lizzie Borden Took an Axe: History, Feminism and American Culture." *American Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 91–103. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40642497?seq=1.

Schwendemann, Glen. "St. Louis and the 'Exodusters' of 1879." *The Journal of Negro History* 46, no. 1 (January 1961): 32–46. https://doi.org/10.2307/2716077.

Shackelford, Laurel, and Bill Weinberg. *Our Appalachia: An Oral History*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988.

Shea, Kathleen E, Jan Cameron, Dan Krasnoff, and Chris Wilson. "Part I: The African-American Experience." St. Louis Missouri, 1995. https://www.stlouismo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/preservation-plan/part-iafrican-american-experience.cfm.

Slade, Paul. *Unprepared to die: America's greatest murder ballads and the true stories that inspired them*. London, UK: Soundcheck Books, 2015.

Slawinski, Scott. "A Tale of Two Murders: The Manhattan Well Case as Source Material for Charles Brockden Brown's 'The Trials of Arden.'" *Early American Literature* 44, no. 2 (2009): 365–98. https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.0.0063.

Smith, Carleton Sprague. "Broadsides and Their Music in Colonial America." Essay. In *Music in Colonial Massachusetts*53, 53:157–367. Boston, MA: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1980.

Smith, Henry Nash. "The Western Hero in the Dime Novel." *Southwest Review* 33, no. 3 (1948): 276–84.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll, and Charles Rosenberg. "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America." *The Journal of American History* 60, no. 2 (September 1973): 332–56. https://doi.org/10.2307/2936779.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Jacksonian America." *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1978): S212–47. https://doi.org/10.1086/649241.

Snyder, Thomas D. *120 years of American Education: A statistical portrait*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993.

"The Spinseters' Ball." *Time*. February 22, 1963.

State v. Tom Dula (Wilkes Criminal Action Papers 1866).

Stevens, Donald L. *A Homeland and a Hinterland: Historic Resource Study Ozark National Scenic Riverways*. Omaha, NE: National Parks Service Midwest Region, 1991.

Sutton, Maude Minish. "Tom Dula." Essay. In *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore; the Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society* 2, 2:712. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952.

Sutton, Maude Minish. "Tom Dula's Lament." Essay. In *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore; the Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society* 2, 2:713–14. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952.

Team, AV's Intern. "Whitewashing Reality: Diversity in Appalachia." Appalachian Voices, June 21, 2024. https://appvoices.org/2014/02/07/whitewashing-reality-diversity-in-appalachia-2/.

Three Days with Doc. *YouTube*, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5mZlriOogU.

"Tom Dula's Honeysuckle Covered Grave May Be Restored in North Carolina." *The Florence Morning News*, December 4, 1958.

Ulysses S Grant National Historic Site. "Black Life in St. Louis during Reconstruction (U.S. National Park Service)." National Parks Service. Accessed May 18, 2025. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/black-life-in-st-louis-during-reconstruction.htm.

Underwood, Richard H., and Ronald Pen. *Crimesong: True Crime Stories from Southern Murder Ballads*. Lexington, KY: Shadelandhouse Modern Press, LLC, 2020.

Waltz, Bob. "Remembering the Old Songs: Omie Wise." *Inside Bluegrass*, August 2000.

Watson, Harry L. "The Man with the Dirty Black Beard: Race, Class, and Schools in the Antebellum South." *Journal of the Early Republic* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.2012.0014.

Watts, Eugene J. "Black and Blue: Afro-American Police Officers in Twentieth-Century St. Louis." *Journal of Urban History* 7, no. 2 (February 1981): 131–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/009614428100700201.

Webb, Athena. "African Americans in Appalachia-- Featured Essay." Oxford African American Studies Center. Accessed May 17, 2025. https://oxfordaasc.com/page/2527.

Webb, Emily. “In the Mountains: The Scots-Irish Heritage in Appalachia.” lmc, March 17, 2022. https://www.lmc.edu/about/news-center/articles/2022/in-the-mountains-the-scots-irishheritage-in-appalachia.htm.

Weisbard, Eric. “A Simple Song That Lives Beyond Time.” *The New York Times*. November 13, 1994, sec. 2. https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/13/arts/pop-music-a-simple-song-thatlives-beyond-time.html.

Weller, Jack E. *Yesterday's people: Life in contemporary appalachia*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.

Wellman, Manly Wade. *Dead and Gone: Classic Crimes of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1954.

Wells, Robert V. *Life Flows on in Endless Song: Folk songs and American history*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

West, John Foster. *Lift up your head, Tom Dooley: The true story of the Appalachian murder that inspired one of America's most popular ballads*. Asheboro, NC: Down Home Press, 1993.

Whatley, L McKay. “Naomi Wise.” Notes on the History of Randolph County, NC, August 23, 2009. https://randolphhistory.wordpress.com/2009/06/03/naomi-wise/.

“Where Are the Ozarks?” 2024. Map. *Ozark Vitality*. https://www.ozarkvitality.com/region.

Wikimedia Commons. “Map of North Carolina Highlighting Wilkes County.” February 12, 2006. Map. *Wikimedia Commons*. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_North_Carolina_highlighting_Wilkes_County.svg.

Wiltenburg, Joy. “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism.” *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 5 (December 1, 2004): 1377–1404. https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/109.5.1377.

Woody, Mary. “A True Account of Nayomy Wise.” Wikisource, the free online library, 1AD. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_true_account_of_Nayomy_Wise.

Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. *Southern honor: Ethics and behavior in the Old South*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023.