

# Songcatching “Bolakins”

[Admin](#)

*Please welcome guest author Derek Piotr. Derek is a performer, folklorist and author based in New England, whose work focuses primarily on the human voice. His work covers genres as diverse as electronic, classical, and folk, and is primarily concerned with tenderness, fragility, beauty and brutality. He has collaborated with artists including Maja Ratkje, Don't DJ, and Thomas Brinkmann across various disciplines. His work was nominated by the jury for Prix Ars Electronica in 2012, and has featured on UbuWeb and BBC.*

I first heard the singing of Lena Bare Turbyfill in December of 2019. I had been researching traditional Appalachian balladry for a project of my own, a solo album, and had downloaded some compilations of Appalachian singing from the Library of Congress.

For a long time I've had an interest in folk music and revered the singing of Joni Mitchell and Jean Ritchie, as well as the collection efforts of Alan Lomax and Shirley Collins. Shirley and I have been in touch via email for almost a decade. The time had come, I thought, to crystallize my appreciation of folk music into a studio record of my own.

Up until this point, I had mostly made electronic or classical music, so I intended to do some deep immersion listening to provide me with context for my material.

Lena was featured on the Library of Congress' "Anglo-American Ballads: Volume 2" collection, singing a song called "Bolakins (Lamkin)". At the time, I had no idea what any of this meant, but was struck by Lena's character, clarity of mind, precision warmth and assuredness.

I later came to find out that “Bolakins” is a variant of “Lamkin”, one of the oldest Scottish Ballads still in circulation; the song has been transmuted into such unusual titles as “Squire Relantman” and “Bold Ankin”, and has been covered by the likes of Steeleye Span and featured (as “Long Lankin”) on the Adult Swim program *The Shivering Truth* as recently as 2018.

In the recording, after she completes her rendition, Dr. Herbert Halpert interviews Lena. Dr. Halpert had come to the American south in the spring of 1939, on what is now known as his [Southern States Recording Expedition](#). Halpert operated roughly around the same time as Alan Lomax, as both folklorist and recordist. He recorded in places as diverse as Louisiana, New York, and Newfoundland. He went on to found the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive in the late sixties.

When he interviewed Lena, April 12th, 1939, she explains that she learned this particular song from her mother, who taught it to her when she was only five years old. Lena learned the song by singing it with her sisters during the day, and by singing it back to her mother at nighttime. Her mother, Mary Melissa “Mollie” Bare (Presnell), died when Lena was only seven.



Lena Bare Turbyfill

The content of “Bolakins” is bloody, shocking, and alien. One line goes, “We’ll stick her little baby full of needles and pins.” I was intrigued by the quality and warmth of Lena’s singing, juxtaposed fiercely with the content and cruelty of the ballad. More curious to me was the fact that it had been taught

to her at such an early age.

There were other interesting entries in “Anglo-American Ballads: Volume 2”, but Lena’s was the one that magnetized me most. I did more research on her singing career, but the only other published entry I could obtain was “Lily Schull”, a more recent Tennessean ballad about a murder that took place at the turn of the 20th century. The victim in the tale is not merely killed, but her body also “shamefully burned”. Lena and her younger sister Lloyd sing “Lily Schull” in unison for Halpert, a tune they learned from their elder sister Sabra, and this recording is collected on *Oh My Little Darling: Folk Song Types* (New World Records, 1977).

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Lena Turbyfill & (Mrs.) Lloyd Hagie 1939 recording of “Lily Schull” for Herbert Halpert

Fascinated by these merciless tunes seemingly being staples within the family, I ended up contacting the Library of Congress directly, and discovered that Lena had, in fact, recorded 30 titles for their archives when Herbert Halpert had visited North Carolina in 1939. Halpert recorded not only Lena, but her sisters Sabra and Lloyd, her father, J. Frank Bare, and her sister-in-law, Ethel Bare.

I decided to submit a formal request to digitize these nearly 5 dozen recordings of the family. Before digitization occurred, I was invited to the Library of Congress to listen to the tape reels and select, definitely, what I wanted to transfer. A listening cabinet was prepared for me. Flurries of emails were exchanged. We picked a date for the engagement: March 26, 2020. Needless to say, Covid-19’s prevalence that month halted any chances of me visiting the stacks in person, and has, at time of writing, significantly delayed the digitization process.

I then decided to do more research remotely, and ended up being connected to Carlos Hicks, Lena’s grandson. Through Carlos, I met his wife Diane (daughter of Marshall Ward, the famous Jack Tales teller), as well as Carlos’

sister Rayna, among other members of the family.

All these communiqués finally led me to Lena’s last living daughter, Nicola “Aunt Nicky” Pritchard, who still lives in Elk Park, NC, only about 500 feet away from Lena’s old homestead. I decided that in lieu of visiting the archives at the Library of Congress, I ought to visit the family instead, and drove by truck to Elk Park in July of 2020.

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Lena Turbyfill’s 1939 recording of “Bolakins” with Herbert Halpert

Lena had recorded many songs, some of which were play-songs (“Paper of Pins”, “Skip to my Lou”), some of which had local interest (“Cumberland Gap”, “Lily Schull”), and some of which were [Child Ballads](#), (“The House Carpenter”, “Hangman”).

Child Ballads are the category “Bolakins” falls into, and this category’s name is misleading. Though oral history generally dictates that these songs are most often handed down parent-to-child (many other examples I’ve come across of “Lamkin” indicate that the son learned the tune from his father, or the daughter her mother), the namesake “Child” belongs to Francis J. Child, a folklorist of the nineteenth century who catalogued some of the oldest Scots-Anglo ballads by number.

There are three hundred and five songs that Child thought significant enough to earmark, “Lamkin” among them. The only tune Nicola remembered, indeed, was “Bolakins”. When I visited with Nicky, I was able to receive a near-complete rendition of the tune. Lena had passed away in 1968, so Nicky’s memory of the song spans approximately 60 years, undoubtedly due to its gory content.

When Nicky had finished transmitting her unabated memory of the song, I proceeded to play Lena’s recording, and she was moved to tears. Nearly a century has passed since Lena’s first transmission of the ballad (transcribed



by folklorist Maurice Matteson as “Bolakin” [no ‘s’] in 1933), and my collection of the song from Nicola in 2020. I felt at the time that I’d grabbed hold of a livewire, and was carrying the laurels of centuries-old tradition of “songcatching”, one in a long line of giants that include Appalachian visitors Lomax and Halpert, but also Olive Dame Campbell, Jane Hicks Gentry and Bascom Lamar Lunsford, British pioneers like Cecil Sharp, and New England luminaries like Helen Hartness Flanders.



Lena holds Nicola's daughter Vera.

The art of songcatching has captured the hearts and minds of many over the years, appealing equally to artists as to archivists, professors as to performers, with the sensation of turning over a rock and finding lost gold. To hear an archaic version of a song that may have originated in Scotland or Britain by pre-settlers as many as 500 years ago is to hear a piece of our past as Americans; the initial branch from which we broke off and flowered.

Lena and her husband, George Washington Turbyfill, divorced when Nicola was about 10 years old, but nevertheless Nicky maintains that, in her opinion, she is the most like her mother out of any of her many siblings. She spent a great deal of time with her mother, as well as her grandfather, J. Frank Bare, and remembers much of his folk lexicon and traditions, such as storing harvested apples and other produce over winter in a “hill cellar”; a cellar which is dug directly out of the side of a hill and lined with straw and leaves to preserve the yield.

Nicola herself is a remarkable woman, now 86, and was a pioneer for her family. In the seventies, she successfully diagnosed her son's dyslexia, ahead of the school system, and continues to be one of the most knowledgeable

people I've ever spoken with, knowing the correct medical definition for most any disorder. When I related a particularly visceral anecdote from Carlos about Lena: "she'd sit there doing crosswords and smoking a cigarette, without any ashtray. She'd just flick the ash into her open hand and pop it in her mouth. Never seen anybody do that!" Nicola had a characteristically level and learned reply: "Yes, that's called Pica, where you want to eat strange things, for instance sand, or laundry detergent powder. I knew Mama had Pica."

Nothing seems to phase Nicky, and she seems to know a little something about everything. In the last century she had, in the traditional spirit of [Appalachian Wildcrafting](#), collected black cohosh and ginseng from the mountains to cultivate in her garden, and lamented at most of them being swept away by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. She also remembers the [Deluge of 1940](#), otherwise known as the Forty Flood, a catastrophic event which swept down the mountain for five days. Nicola remembers being traumatised by thunderstorms for years after.



I was struck, too, by her determination to "get the ballad" out for me. Nicola suffers from a rare form of carcinoid lung disease. In contrast to her mother she never touched a cigarette in her life, but nevertheless has been burdened with tumors all throughout her lungs, which give her terrible attacks. But, her persistence was so great that she removed her oxygen mask and sang for me the entire ballad unassisted.

Lena was herself an exceptional figure, from Nicola's memory: "She could make a dress without any pattern, just by

Aunt Nicky recites/sings "Bolakins" from memory.

looking at a picture of it in a catalogue.

She could sew anything. One time a rabbit got into a tussle with one of our dogs and it ripped the skin clean off. We looked down in the rabbit burrow and saw about a dozen babies. Well, Mama was able to sew the skin right back on the poor thing so it could go back to the burrow to raise its young."

Aunt Nicky's 2020 recording of "Bolakins"

Nicola remembers Dr. Halpert's visit as well. "I must have been about five or six", she recalls, "but I do remember him visiting, and when they had set up to record there were a great many wires strung everywhere, strung mostly, if I remember, to the kitchen doorknob. Just wires, everywhere in the kitchen". Naturally, Nicola has also sent her DNA off for ancestry information, seeing that her preoccupation with her family's history is so strong for her. "My blood shows that I've got English, Irish, and Scottish ancestry. My mother's mother was a Presnell, and they have a long history of settling in this region".

Lena recorded thirty titles during that afternoon with Halpert, and I copied them down and read them off, title by title to Nicky. Only some does she vaguely remember, perhaps due to them being Appalachian staples ("Hangman", "Muskrat"), and her hearing them through the years by other performers. Only "Bolakins" remained cemented in her repertoire.

"It's something you don't forget," she had said. "I remember asking her when she'd sing that song, I'd say 'Mama, did they really stick the baby full of needles and pins?' and she'd reply 'no child, it's just an old story'". But Lena sang it all the time, whenever there were family reunions, or, just around the house. I have heard rumours from the family that Lena had also performed traditional ballads at venues such as the Rhododendron Festival and county fairs, while I can find no concrete evidence of this, "Bolakins" was undoubtedly among her setlists.





Lena Turbyfill's daughter Nicky and Derek Piotr listen to the 1939 "Bolakins" recording.

It is a curious transmutation of a ballad over nearly five hundred years, the last wisps of which can still reach us in the present day. I've no doubt that, tucked elsewhere in the hills of Avery County and beyond, similarly transfigured songs still exist, waiting to be caught. It is my fond hope to next year be out in the field, catching some of them.