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TOP STORY

FOLKLORE

An Appalachian odyssey in the art of songcatching

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Derek Piotr and Nicola Pritchard listening to rendition of 'Bolakins' by Lena Bare Turbyfill recorded for the Library of Congress in 1939.

Photo courtesy Derek Piotr

ELK PARK — Long before the advent of written language, stories, history and folklore were passed down through oral tradition. Tales would be shared across the generations, typically with the use of song being the most effective tool to ensure that the oral tradition survived. The practice has been widespread throughout human history and in cultures across the globe, including the traditions of Appalachia.

In December of 2019, when New England-based musician Derek Piotr was writing music for a solo album, he came across a collection of traditional Appalachian ballads from the Library of Congress. An aficionado of the human voice, Piotr's highly-trained ear immediately recognized the archaic resonance of one tune whose sound was so authentic that it interested him to no end.

Piotr had to know more about the mysterious ballad, so in July he packed up his truck and ventured south until he arrived in Elk Park, the home of the descendants of the woman who sang the song recorded for the Library of Congress on April 12, 1939. Piotr has released numerous projects of his own, but Piotr is not just a musician, a DJ or a classical connoisseur, but Piotr is also a songcatcher, and the tune that he caught this past summer like fireflies in a jar was "Bolakins," sung by Lena Bare Turbyfill.

Bolakins was a very fine mason

As ever laid stone

He built a fine castle

And the pay he got none

"Where is the gentleman?

Is he at home?"

"He's gone down to Marion

For to visit his son."

As Piotr writes, "The art of song catching 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."

Earlier this year, Piotr was hard at work coordinating with the Library of Congress to have the more than three dozen recordings of Turbyfill's singing digitized. Only two recordings of Turbyfill's singing have ever been published. The rest are stored on tape reels and stacked away in the archives of the Library of Congress. Piotr had success working with the library, and even had a cabinet full of the recordings ready for him to listen to and choose which ones he wanted to digitize. However, his date at the library (March 26) was canceled, and the pandemic has significantly delayed the digitization process. So Piotr decided to do more research himself and try to track down "Bolakins" through the rest of Turbyfill's kin.

"Bolakins" is a variant of the song "Lamkin," one of the oldest Scottish ballads still in circulation and has even been transmuted into unusual titles such as "Squire Relantman" and "Bold Ankin." In the recording captured by Dr. Herbert Halpert as part of the Southern States Recording Expedition, Turbyfill explains that she learned the particular tune from her mother, who taught it to her when she was only five years old. Turbyfill would sing with her sisters during the day and repeat the tune to her mother at night. All the while, the tune became etched into her memory.

Turbyfill's mother, Mary Melissa "Mollie" Bare (Presnell), died when Turbyfill was only seven years old. As Piotr writes, he was intrigued by the tune's "bloody, shocking and alien" contents. Moreover, Piotr found it interesting

how “Bolakins,” similar to “Ring Around the Rosie,” which was written about the bubonic plague, can contain such haunting lyrics but be repeated incessantly by children.

“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,” Piotr said.

“Where is the lady?

Is she at home?”

“She’s upstairs sleeping,”

Said the foster to him.

“How will we get her down

Such a dark night as this?”

“We’ll stick her little baby

Full of needles and pins.”

They stuck her little baby

Full of needles and pins

The foster she rocked

And Bolakins he sung

While blood and tears

From the cradle did run

“It’s something you don’t forget,” Nicola Pritchard, the last living daughter of Lena Bare Turbyfill, 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 would reply ‘No child, it’s just an old story.’”

Pritchard said that her mother would sing the tune when they were at family reunions or performing chores around the house. Family members say that Turbyfill had also performed traditional ballads at venues like the Rhododendron Festival and county fairs. Among the other songs Turbyfill would sing from memory included Appalachian staples such as “Hangman” and “Muskrat.”

“Bolakins” or “Lamkin” are known as child ballads and constitute the peculiar tradition of children and their parents reciting haunting tunes while the little ones were put to sleep. The German word for the phenomena is called “schadenfreude” or the experience of feeling a pleasant sense of relief on hearing of someone else’s misfortune. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, referred to the phenomena as “displacement” or a defense mechanism against negative emotions in which these emotions are re-directed toward something else or someone else. However, the 19th century scholar and folklorist Francis James Child was more blunt in his explanation of the tune, which was first collected by Bishop Percy in 1775, calling it “the terror of countless nurseries.”

"I must have been about five or six," Pritchard 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."

Piotr tracked down the rest of Turbyfill's descendants looking for other traces of the song though the family's ancestry, which can be traced back to the Presnells, a group who have a long history of settling in Appalachia and come from a long line of English, Irish and Scottish heritage.

Down come our lady

Not thinking any harm

Old Bolakins

He took her in his arms

"Bolakins, Bolakins,

Spare my life one day

I'll give you many marigolds

As my horse can carry away

"Bolakins, Bolakins

Spare my life one hour

I'll give you daughter Bessie

My own blooming flower."

In a conversation with Maynard Bare Turbyfill, the son of Lena Bare Turbyfill, Maynard tells Piotr that he did not remember much from his mother's singing, having been estranged from her side of the family after Lena and his father, the World War I Veteran George Washington Turbyfill, divorced when he was two or three years old.

"She was always singing," Maynard remembered of his mother. "But when you're a kid, you don't really pay much attention to it. We didn't do much singing around each other, but sometimes individually we would sing. She (Lena) used to always sing a lot when she was around, what little bit I remember of her. She would sing to you, and my Dad used to play a french harp and (mountain) harp."

Maynard, who lives in Michigan, recalled the people of Appalachia that he remembers as holding a tradition of bringing ballads over from the "old country" and sitting around the porch and singing in the evening. Maynard said he did not remember any ballads of his own.

In other interviews with family members, Diane Ward Hicks (granddaughter-in-law of Lena who lives in Banner Elk) told Piotr of her father, Marshall Ward, and his tradition of recounting "Jack Tales" or old, archetypal fairy tales that had also been passed down orally through the generations. Ward's stories were written down by folklorist Richard Chase and published in a collection of old Appalachian stories called "The Jack Tales." While these were similar to the child ballads in their brutal content, Hicks made no mention of "Bolakins" in her interview.

Additionally, Rayna Thompson (another one of Lena's granddaughters) did not recollect any ballads being passed down to her, yet she did recall Lena's tough upbringing. Thompson, who was named by Lena, remembered her singing while stirring the apple butter but did not recall any of those songs herself.

During Piotr's time conducting research on the family's tradition, he discovered that the tradition was actually disappearing and that Nicola Pritchard was likely the last one in the family to have the clearest recollection of her mother's ballads.

"You better keep your daughter Bessie

For to run through the flood

And scour a silver basin

For to catch your heart's blood."

Daughter Bessie climbed up

In the window so high

And saw her father

Come riding hard by

"Nearly a century has passed since Lena's first transmission of the ballad (transcribed by folklorist Maurice Matteson as 'Bolakin' in 1933), and my collection of the song from Nicola in 2020. I felt at the time that I'd grabbed hold of a live wire, and was carrying the laurels of centuries-old tradition of 'songcatching,'" Piotr said.

During this time in Elk Park getting to know Pritchard and her family history, Piotr later recalled her as a "remarkable woman." Now 86 years old, Pritchard was 10 when her mother and father divorced and still lives near the site that the original recording of her mother's ballad took place. She described herself as being the closest in likeness to her mother out of her many siblings. Pritchard remembers much about her grandfather, J. Frank Bare, and his folk lexicon and traditions, such as the storing of harvested apples over the winter in a "hill cellar."

Piotr said that Pritchard seems to "know a little something about everything." In the traditional spirit of Appalachian Wildcrafting, Pritchard would collect black cohosh and ginseng from the mountainside to cultivate in her garden and lamented at the time most of them were swept away by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. She also recalled the Deluge of 1940, or the Forty Flood, which swept down the mountain for five days. Pritchard said she was traumatized for years after.

When it came time for Piotr to record Pritchard's rendition of "Bolakins," he said he was impressed by her determination to "get the ballad out" despite suffering from a rare form of carcinoid lung disease. Pritchard never touched a cigarette unlike her mother, who Pritchard described as having "Pica" or a disorder that gave her mother the urge to eat strange things like the cigarette ashes she would flick into her open hand and then pop into her mouth.

"(Pritchard's) persistence was so great that she removed her mask and sang for me the entire ballad unassisted," Piotr said.

After Piotr received a near-complete rendition of the tune from Pritchard, he proceeded to play her mother's recording, whose content was remarkably similar to the words Pritchard remembered despite not hearing them for almost 60 years. When Pritchard heard the voice of her mother singing the same ballad that had been sung to her over countless nights when she was a child, she could not help but be moved to tears.

"Oh, father, oh, father,

Can you blame me?

Old Bolakins

Has killed your lady.

"Oh, father, oh, father,

Can you blame me?

Old Bolakins

Has killed your baby."

They hung old Bolakins

To the sea-gallows tree

And tied the foster

To the stake of stand-by

"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," Piotr said.

To hear Lena Turbyfill's rendition of "Bolakins" from the Library of Congress, click to [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search "Bolakins" and click on the first result. For those who would like to transmit their own family's ballads to Derek Piotr, he can be reached at (203) 460-0576 or by emailing piotrmain@gmail.com.