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THE BARE FAMILY LEGACY
JIMMY BOYD
THE PREACHER AND THE BEAR

courtesy of Elizabeth Gwyn

Lena Bare Turbyfill

DARK-NATURED SONGS: THE BARE FAMILY LEGACY

By Derek Piotr and Jackie Hedstrom

Listening to field recordings can be an experience of intimacy and distance at the same time: intimacy because we hear the unedited sound of music just the way the artist made it, usually in a personal environment like their house or porch; and distance because, in most cases, we listen to field recordings divorced from their cultural context. Musician Derek Piotr became captivated by a 1939 recording of North Carolina singer Lena Bare Turbyfill (1905-1968), and this led him to learn as much as he could about her music. In the process, he became friends with many members of the Bare family – including Lena's grand-niece Jackie Hedstrom, a genealogist and the co-author of this article – who have shared not only family music, but memories of Lena and the other singers whose voices were captured in those 1939 field recordings. The following article brings together both Derek's experience as a listener and researcher, and Jackie's experience as a member of the musical Bare family lineage. -editor

Jackie:

The Bares were descended from the Hicks family, who had been among the earliest settlers in the Watauga-Avery County area of the North Carolina mountains. Old Sammy Hicks had made his way to that isolated area just prior to the Revolutionary War. He was a Loyalist, and learned to live off the land and in caves as he evaded the local Patriots. For several generations the Hicks, Harmon, Ward, and Presnell families intermingled and married. They gained reputations for being great storytellers, musicians, and naturalists.

Derek:

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, and had downloaded some compilations of Appalachian singing from the Library of Congress. 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 folk-based material for my new project. Lena Bare Turbyfill 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 Lena's character, clarity of mind, precision, warmth, and assuredness all struck me as I listened to the recording.

I later came to find 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.

Lena's recording was made by folklorist Herbert Halpert during his 1939 travels through the South. Contacting the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, I learned that Lena had, in fact, recorded 30 songs when Herbert Halpert visited North Carolina that year. What's more, her sisters Sabra and Lloyd, her father Frank Bare, and her sister-in-law Ethel Bare, also sang for Halpert.

When Halpert interviewed Lena on April 12th of that year, she explained that she had learned "Bolakins" 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 their mother at nighttime. Her mother, Mary Melissa "Molly" Bare, died when Lena was only seven. The content of "Bolakins" is bloody and shocking – one line goes, "We'll stick her little baby full of needles and pins" – and I was intrigued by the juxtaposition of the quality and warmth of Lena's singing with the cruelty of the ballad. Even more curious to me was the fact that it had been taught to her at such an early age.

The ballad singer and storyteller Bobby McMillon shared with me more of Herbert Halpert's 1939 recordings, including recordings of Samuel Harmon and his family in Maryville, Tennessee. The most poignant inclusion in these files, however, was a collection of recordings of Lena's eldest sister, Sabra Bare Hampton. Sabra was born in Elk Park, North Carolina, and moved to Morganton, in neighboring Burke County, when Lena was still young. This is where Halpert met her and recorded her, about a week after his visit with Lena. Sabra was about fifteen years older than Lena, so she had undoubtedly spent more time learning songs from their parents. Songs that Sabra sang for Halpert included a version of "Bolakins," which Sabra referred to as "Bolenkin"; "The House Carpenter"; a delightfully strange take on "Partridge in a Pear Tree"; and "Lily Schull." Halpert also made a recording of Lena and Lloyd singing "Lily Schull." They reported that they had learned the song from Sabra, who had learned it around 1913 from a man from Tennessee named Glenn Crosswhite. In that ballad, about a murder that took place at the turn of the 20th century, the victim is not merely killed, but her body also "shamefully burned." I was fascinated that these merciless tunes were seemingly staples within the family.

Jackie:

Derek wonders why so many of the Bare family songs are dark-natured. The truth is, the Bares' own lives were hard, and perhaps like parents who told children the gruesome Grimms' Fairy Tales to prepare them emotionally for life's hardships, my grandmothers taught their daughters and sons ballads of dark, dreadful deeds.

Molly Presnell Bare (1876 - c. 1910) – mother of Lena, Lloyd, and Sabra – was the eldest child of Elizabeth Hicks. According to family stories, her father was Harmon Presnell. Her parents were never married, and Harmon left Elizabeth when Molly was just an infant. Elizabeth soon married William Vance, and Molly grew up using the Vance surname. Elizabeth and William had at least two children together, Vica and William. She had another son as well, Thomas, whose birth may have been the cause of the couple's divorce.

By the turn of the 20th century, Molly had married Frank Bare and settled in the Cranberry township of what is now

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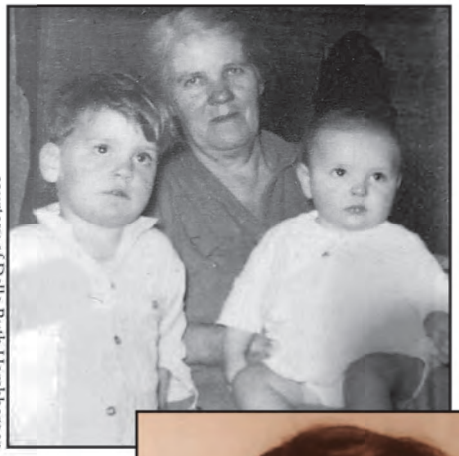

courtesy of Della Ruth Harshbarger

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Sabra Bare Hampton with grandsons Stanley and Steve Curtis, c. 1951; Lloyd Bare Bragg Hagie; Nicola "Nicky" Turbyfill Pritchard

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Avery County, near Elk Park, North Carolina. Frank Bare, who was older than Molly, was running – figuratively, from a troubled past, and literally, from a disgruntled first wife who had been holding a shotgun filled with buckshot when he left his previous home in Peaks Creek in Ashe County. He had experience in mining, and probably got work at the Cranberry Ironworks near Elk Park. According to the 1900 Mitchell County Census, 33-year-old Frank and 24-year-old Molly had been married for eight years. Of the seven children Molly had given birth to by then, only four were living: Arthur, eight years old; Sabra, seven; Jesse, three; and Edgar, one.

At the time of the 1910 census, Molly and Frank Bare were still living in the Cranberry. Molly had birthed five more children: Lee, eleven; Helton, seven; Lena, five; Lloyd, three; and Martha, two months. Within the year, their oldest daughter Sabra would marry Harrison Hampton. Another year later, Molly and Sabra would be pregnant at the same time – but both mother and daughter contracted German measles during their pregnancies. Sabra and her child, Mae, survived, though Mae was born suffering from measles. Molly and her unborn child passed from the disease.

Frank Bare must have felt incapable of taking care of his younger daughters without Molly. Sabra and Harrison took the two youngest daughters into their family. I'm not sure why, but Frank chose to allow a family traveling west to take Lena with them. Perhaps he didn't want to burden Sabra more, or he may have just been in shock. Lena had conflicts with this foster family; the Nesbaums, who were Catholic, tried to convince her to join their church. But even as a young girl she knew her mind, and had no wish to be converted. Ultimately she ran away, and returned to North Carolina. Despite their clashes, the foster family had given her some opportunities. Lena had learned to become a skilled seamstress. She had a natural talent for sewing, and was said to be able to look at a dress in the Sears Catalogue and construct it without any pattern to guide her.

Derek:

I was soon fortunate to be connected to Carlos Hicks, Lena's grandson, and his wife Dianne (daughter of famous Jack

Tales storyteller Marshall Ward), his sister Rayna, and other family members. They in turn introduced me to Lena's last living daughter, Nicola "Nicky" Pritchard, who was still living in Elk Park, only about 500 feet away from Lena's old homestead. In July of 2020, I traveled to North Carolina from my home in Connecticut, and Nicky had me over for a visit.

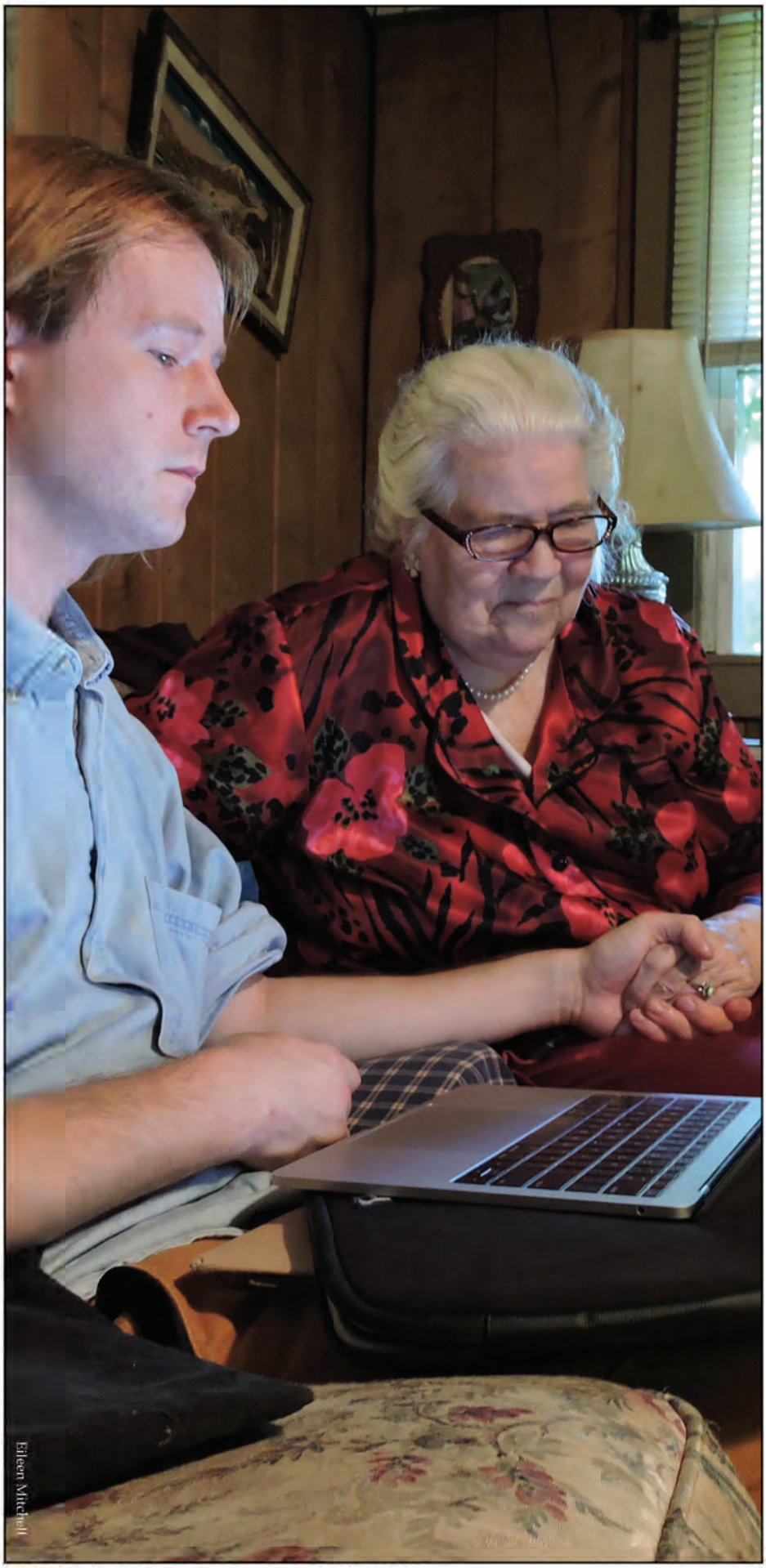
Nicky and I had had a few tentative phone calls with poor cellphone service before I came for this visit, and she had gradually begun warming to my interest in the family. But when I stepped through the door of her home and saw her face-to-face, I experienced one of those precious, rare instant rapports, in which there are no walls or trepidation. We laughed, we selfied. We held hands while she listened to old recordings with me, and while she herself sang.

Nicky remembered Bolakins enough to sing it for me and consented to be recorded. Her version was a perfect match to her mother's rendition, although it had been more than sixty years since she'd heard her mother's voice. When she had finished, I played Lena's recording off my laptop, which left Nicky in tears.

Jackie:

The 1920s brought huge changes in these families' lives. Sabra's husband Harrison and his only sibling, brother Henry, decided to sell the small tract of land that had been passed down to them from their mother's family. I suspect their reasoning was that the property wasn't large enough to support their families, and the economy was booming. They decided to look for work in the coalmines of West Virginia. Taking their widowed, invalid mother, they moved to Clifftop, West Virginia. Frank, Lena, Lloyd, and Martha soon joined them there. Both Lena and Lloyd married their first husbands in Clifftop. Lena married George Turbyfill, whose sister was married to her brother Jesse.

The family had no idea what a terrible mistake they had made when they sold out and left North Carolina. First, Harrison came down with pneumonia — or more likely, black lung disease, from breathing the coal dust. Since the family would have been living in the coal mining village, they were probably turned out of their home as soon as George became unable to work. Then



Nicky Pritchard listening to recordings with Derek Piotr.

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the Great Depression hit. Employment opportunities dried up. Frank Bare and his younger daughters returned to Cranberry Township, North Carolina.

Around this time, Frank started inflating his age. He reported himself on the 1930 census as being 75 years old, when he was actually only 62. He liked to tell everyone that he had fought in the Civil War, even though he was born in 1867. (I suspect that he hero-worshiped his mother's husband, who had in fact been killed in the War in 1863.) As he got older, he exaggerated his age even more – so much so that, when he remarried late in life, newspaper articles would be written about the 100-year-old who fathered a child, and eventually about his death at the supposed age of 105.

Lloyd Bare Bragg returned to Avery County as a widow, having lost her husband after only a year of marriage. She made her home as a servant for the Bowick family. George and Lena Bare Turbyfill returned to rent a farm near the Turbyfill homeplace on Elk River. George had served in World War I, and had been declared disabled due to "shell shock." Nowadays he would have been diagnosed as suffering from PTSD.

Harrison Hampton, knowing the family had no land to return to in Avery County, found a position as a tenant farmer in Prince Edward County, Virginia. For a couple of years this position provided well for the family. My mother Leola, their sixth child, remembered that farm as the best place they ever lived. For the first time she could remember, the family had plenty to eat. Unfortunately, a problem arose that caused them to move again, right at the worst of the Depression. They returned to Avery County, where they rented a small house near George and Lena's home.

With no work to be had, Harrison and his older sons John and Os hoboed around the country trying to find employment, and making it easier for Sabra to feed the family at home. Sabra had learned from her mother and grandmother how to cultivate the land and to grow crops in the limited growing season of the mountains. She had also learned to forage for wild plants, berries, and nuts, and to use wild herbs and plants for medicinal purposes. But even with all of Sabra's knowledge, more than likely my mom and some of her siblings would have starved to death during this time if it had not been for the generous nature of George Turbyfill. George received a small pension from his World War I disability. Each month he would go and purchase the basic foodstuffs, which he would then divide up, parceling it out between his family and the families of his and his wife's sisters.

My uncle Os Hampton was a favorite uncle for all of us nieces and nephews. He was fun-loving. I remember him greeting every one of his sisters with a kiss on the cheek and telling each that she was always his favorite, even if he had just told a sister standing next to him the same thing. He had served in the Army during World War II, and was injured in the Battle of the Bulge. He told stories of how he was knocked from his hospital cot because of nearby bombs exploding. While in the MASH unit doctors discharged him, telling him to go home and get his affairs in order, that he only had a couple of months left. I don't know what his injuries were, but he lived until July 1973. Os never married. He was a great flirt and women found him extremely attractive, but anytime one started getting too serious, he would tell her that his doctors had told him he only had two months to live. Whenever my grandmother Sabra scolded him for his womanizing, he would remind her that the doctors told him to get his affairs in order.

Derek:

Jackie has told me that she remembers her grandmother Sabra well. She also knew her uncle Oscar "Os" Hampton, who can be heard singing along with Sabra on many of the Halpert reels, and who taught Jackie one Child Ballad, "Our Goodman." Child Ballad 274 is a humorous folk song, often used as a campfire or play-party song, and one that's more familiar in Southern string band music as "Three Nights Drunk" or "Three Nights' Experience." The song describes a wife's efforts to explain away the evidence of her infidelity. Her husband returns home inebriated night after night, and each time finds his wife's lover's belongings around his home: a horse in the stable, a pair of boots, a hat on the hat-rack. The wife explains them away as familiar household sights that he is too drunk to recognize. Finally he asks her to explain the "head upon the pillow, where my head ought to be," and she responds that it is simply a cabbage head her mother had sent her. "I've been around this world, forty years or more," replies the husband, "but a moustache on a cabbage head I've never seen before." Jackie remembers hearing Os creating

different voices for the characters of the ballad, so when she performed the song over the phone for me, she made sure to change the register of her voice for the wife and the woebegone husband.

Jackie:

In his old age, Frank Bare remarried, to a girl who was younger than all of his daughters and many of his granddaughters. Not long afterwards, she became pregnant. By this time Frank was claiming to be close to 100 years old. A charismatic character, he loved being the center of attention. He often told tall tales, and flirted with the ladies. When I talk to any of my older cousins who had the opportunity to know him, all I hear is how much they loved him.

Derek:

Speaking on the phone one day with Nicky, I mentioned that Jackie knew "Three Nights' Experience." This prompted Nicky to recall fragments of that song, and she sang it over the phone to me. She recalled other songs, too, that Sabra had sung, once I had sung them back to her, such as "The House Carpenter" and "Paper of Pins".

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Jackie:

Eventually, Harrison and Sabra moved their family down to the lower countryside in Burke County, where he contracted to tenant farm, and later got a state job driving a bus for the prison. The middle-born children found employment in their mid-teens, either working in dairies or helping keep house for other people. This relieved their parents of having to provide room and board for so many children, especially as many of the older daughters left their own children with their parents to raise.

Derek:

In Sabra's recordings, made at the farm where she'd settled in Burke County, you can hear the sound of chicks chirping throughout much of the singing. Nicky vividly remembered the time she spent there as a young person. "That was not a short or easy trip, from Morganton over to us in Elk Park," she told me. "The roads were not paved and gas was expensive, so it was a very special occasion when Aunt Sabra would visit. And I was always her favorite, so when it came time to choose one of us to have a sleep-over on the farm, I was always her first pick."

Jackie:

All the women who recorded songs for Halpert endured hardships in their lives. My grandmother, Sabra Hampton, spent nearly a decade mostly as a single parent, trying to keep her own children and those of her older daughters fed and clothed. My mother remembered a time when her mother and all the girls in the household had to share a single pair of shoes and one coat among the five of them.

Sometime in the early 1950s Sabra was diagnosed with cancer of the mouth and tongue. She underwent surgery to have part of her tongue removed. I could never remember hearing Sabra's natural voice, as it had sounded before her surgery, until Derek shared her recording with me. It moved me to tears. Unfortunately, Sabra's cancer returned in the late 1960s. Through all her pain, Sabra retained the same joyful spirit up until just a few weeks before her death in 1970 at the age of 72. Her husband Harrison Hampton died one month later – according to doctors, of pneumonia, but our family knew it was from a broken heart. For all the hardships Sabra suffered, she passed along to her children and her younger siblings the joy of singing, of storytelling, and of laughter.

Lena was a gifted artist and singer, and though I never met her, I know from my mother's stories that she had a beautiful spirit. She learned the old songs from her mother Molly and her older sister Sabra. The older women in the family also taught Lena about nature and how to forage from the woods. Unfortunately, Lena only lived to the age of 63. In talking to her descendants, and remembering the affection my mother had for her, I know she was a remarkable, generous woman.

Lloyd Bare (Bragg Hicks Hagie) was a warm, loving, joyful woman. She suffered the death of three husbands and a son, and it's remarkable how she could endure that pain and still be so filled with laughter. She was a great jokester, and as a child I loved visiting her house on our trips back to Avery County. She covered her walls with plats with silly sayings, and loved laughing with us kids over them. She made her living as a servant of the Bowick family during the hard Depression years, but eventually remarried. She had a number of children, but insisted on living in her own home until the end. Once, a few years before passing, she fell in her home and couldn't get up. She called the county's emergency service and reported her problem to them, and told them where they could find her hidden key. She then warned them that if they messed up her new front door, she would come after them with her shotgun. She lived a long life, dying at the age of 95.

Nicky Turbyfill Pritchard was my mom's favorite cousin. She was more like a sister to my mom. Several years younger than my mom, she came to live with her to help with my older siblings when my mother lost her first husband. Nicky, still young and innocent, also joined my mom in working at Whippoorwill Dairy. My mom often laughed about how one morning, as the vet was examining the cattle, he mentioned that he needed to take one of the cows' temperature. Nicky turned and asked my mom if she could go to watch the vet; she said she wanted to see how he would get the cow to open her mouth for the thermometer. Nicky was back in no time, and as red as a beet with embarrassment.

Nicky loved nature. She loved gardening, and she knew more about natural remedies than anyone I knew. Whenever we got to visit, whether at my family farm in Morganton, or at her home in Elk Park, we would most often find ourselves wandering through the forest. It never failed that she would point out to us that this plant was good to make a tea for stomach ailments, or this one was good for treating something else. I loved to listen to her, because it made me remember how my grandmother would do the same when I was a child. Nicky was one of the sweetest souls I ever knew. I loved her as dearly as if she were an aunt rather than a cousin once-removed. In later years, due to both of our health issues, I didn't speak with her much. But the times that I did, it was like we just picked up our conversation where we had last left off. We just got each other.

The Bare women who shared their songs with Mr. Halpert in 1939 had already led difficult lives, but they had an inner strength that allowed them to face those hardships head-on. They filled their homes with love, laughter, storytelling, and singing. Their descendants carry on those same traits.

Derek:

Nicky and I spent many months discussing every topic under the sun—love, loss, flora and fauna, religion, nature, history, science—and she slowly began remembering more songs. Over eight months she came affectionately to refer to me as a "songcatcher," and sang versions of more songs, including "Pretty Polly" and "Frankie and Johnny." Nicky passed away in March of 2021, at the age of 86. The loss was a crushing blow to me, but I was so glad that during the final chapter of her life I was able to help stir memories of her past and celebrate them with her.

For me, it has been life-changing not only to get to know these recordings, but to connect with the living descendants of the singers. Their memories place the recordings in context, illuminating the world in which the singers lived. The songs are a lasting document of cultural heritage, and of the enduring beauty of mountain tradition.

Derek Piotr is a folklorist, performer, and composer based in New England. He recently curated a collection of field recordings, Last Wisps of the Old Ways: North Carolina Mountain Singing, *for the label Death Is Not the End.*

Jackie Hedstrom is a retired librarian, who supervised the local history collection at the High Point (NC) Public Library for 18 years. A writer of science fiction/fantasy and historical fiction, she is currently working on a novel about the Bare family's experience during the Civil War.