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Lena Turbyfill: A Folklore Legacy

New England folklorist uncovers dozens of recordings of a North Carolina folk singer recorded for the WPA.

by Derek Piotr



Lena Turbyfill, a folk singer from Elk Park, Carolina; courtesy of Derek Piotr

During the Great Depression, the Work Projects Administration (WPA) program acted as both work relief and cultural documentation for the United States. One of the WPA's initiatives was to record the Southern states' folklore. A folk singer from Elk Park, North Carolina, **Lena Bare Turbyfill** was featured on one of these records. Turbyfill's life story was not only documented through her songs but through narratives recorded by Dr. Herbert Halpart.

Derek Piotr discovered Lena Turbyfill's recordings—child ballads, local murder songs, banjo and dulcimer pieces, alongside tape transfers and close harmony singing—and has been piecing her and her family's lives together since. Piotr was able to connect with Lena Turbyfill's last living daughter, Nicola "Nicky" Pritchard, who was also recorded for the WPA project, before she passed away in 2021. In his continued effort to tell Turbyfill's story, Piotr sat down with **Jackie Hedstrom**, a relative of Turbyfill, to compile the following interview.

Derek Piotr: When I first heard Lena Turbyfill's singing, I could tell I had discovered an exceptional performer. Many versions of well-known songs, like "Four Nights Drunk" or "Hangman," were performed with unusual local titles ("Old Fool," "'Hold up Your Hand, Old Joshua!' She Cried") and to uncommon melodies. Lena Turbyfill also sang ballads like "Lamkin" ("Bolakins") or "In Seaport Town," which had a cruel, violent undertone. Her character, warmth and clarity of mind juxtaposed fiercely with the bloody and merciless songs in her repertoire. Despite nearly a century having passed from the recording session itself and my encounter with Lena Turbyfill's voice, the high fidelity of the material offered an inviting cross-section of Lena Turbyfill and her family's tenor and position in the world.



Lena Turbyfill and her family; *courtesy of Pamela Dial*

I quickly became interested in not only working with these family recordings (the majority of which had not been published before), but in meeting Lena Turbyfill's descendants. My initial goal was to find out what they could tell me about their family tradition. I discussed Lena Turbyfill's proclivity for apple butter cooking and dancing with her many grandchildren, and heard stories of her immeasurably difficult life. The biggest blessing in getting to know Lena Turbyfill's family, however, came when it was suggested that I look up her last living daughter. Pritchard was still living in Elk Park, barely 500 feet from her original homestead and, despite being in poor health, consented to a visit with me. Though she was one of Lena Turbyfill's youngest children, Pritchard had enthusiastically embodied many of her mother's traditions and traits: from wildcrafting, to remembering the lexicon of her forebears (her grandfather, Frank Bare, would "put the kiver" on you when you spent the night, "kiver" being archaic dialectical British for cover or quilt).

Jackie Hedstrom: My mom had often told me stories about her favorite aunt, **Lena Turbyfill**, Pritchard's mama. I guess as a child, I assumed that Lena Turbyfill had died young, because no one ever talked about

her—not my grandmother, who had been like a second mother to her, not my mom, not Lena Turbyfill's younger sisters or Pritchard. So it came as a big surprise when one day my mom announced that she and I would be attending Lena Turbyfill's funeral. I remember responding that I thought she had died long ago, and why had I never met her? Mom simply replied that Lena Turbyfill and uncle George Turbyfill had divorced long ago and that George Turbyfill had raised their younger children. That in itself was surprising, because divorce was so unusual for that generation.

Piotr: Lena Turbyfill and her husband George Turbyfill had divorced when Pritchard was small, so she had only a few memories of her mother, but everything she said about Lena Turbyfill was magical: 'Mama could make a dress without any pattern, just by looking at a picture of it in a catalog. 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.'

Lena Turbyfill also helped Pritchard win a Little Miss Shirley Temple contest when Pritchard was three by sewing her dress for the pageant. 'I remember it had red rick-racks all around the bottom, and she had sewn little hearts in a pattern. I have no idea where I got patent-leather shoes from, because we must have had to borrow them, but Mama got them for me and I ended up winning the pageant.'



Piotr: Pritchard 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. The first thing Pritchard said to me was 'you don't have to wear that silly old [Covid] mask' and invited me to meet her, literally, face-to-face. We laughed, we selfied. We held hands while she listened to old recordings with me and while she herself sang. The weeks before of spotty communication gave way to a new and enduring friendship.

Pritchard suffered from a rare form of carcinoid lung disease, which made breathing hard and singing harder. Nevertheless, she removed her oxygen mask and sang for me an entire ballad unassisted. Despite this enthusiasm for her family tradition, Pritchard could initially recall a complete version of just this one song at the time of our visit. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that “Bolakins,” a variant of “Lamkin,” was mercilessly, gratuitously gory: ‘My hairs would all stand on end, and I’d say, ‘Mama, did they really stick the baby full of needles and pins?’ and she’d reply ‘no child, that’s just some old story.’ Gradually, though, Pritchard did remember other songs, like “Paper of Pins” and “Tom Dooley” and began to sing these down the phone to me, and songs soon became a staple of our late-night phone calls.

Hedstrom: Unfortunately, the beautiful, talented, fun-loving Lena Turbyfill was lost to this world far too early. The family lost her long before the day of her physical death. In rediscovering Lena Turbyfill’s collection of songs, and making it his goal to learn more about a woman that captured his heart through decades-old recordings, Piotr has helped to heal old buried wounds for Lena Turbyfill as family. He has helped to restore their pride in the mother, or grandmother, she had been before her illness had overtaken her. The real Lena Turbyfill was the enchanting, gifted woman who recorded the old ballads and songs handed down to her by her mother and her older sister.

Piotr: Pritchard 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. More importantly, these are lifelong friendships I’ve forged that I can count as some of the brightest of my life.