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Guest Article: Top Five from The Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive (so-far)

written by [FRUK Staff](#) 21 October, 2022

Folklorist Derek Piotr recently reached the milestone of having recorded 300 recordings for his Fieldwork Archive – he shares his top five with Folk Radio.

I began archiving folksong, poetry, memories, interviews and tales in 2020. The Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive focuses on the “non-singer”; in other words, someone with no background in musical performance but who can still relate a song or folkloric memory. However, this collection features a wide variety of informants, including professional singers, descendants of musicians, laypeople, and ballad scholars. The vast majority of the recordings in this archive showcase unaccompanied vocal performances.

I recently reached the milestone of having recorded 300 recordings (312 at last count) for the Archive, so I felt it was time to celebrate a little bit by outlining five current standouts.

Sr. Frances Smallkowski – “Pójdźmy wszyscy do stajenki” ([Archive Link](#))

I often visit retirement communities and nursing homes looking for folksong – my informants tend to be longliving, and so my success rate often goes up. This was not exactly the case at Saint John Paul II Center in Danbury, Connecticut, where Sr. Frances works. After feeling disheartened at the fact that none of the residents seemed to be able to pull out the old songs, Sr. Frances totally surprised me with a couple of Polish hymns she'd known since childhood. While I am constantly on the hunt for the “everyperson” to know a song, and while that doesn't necessarily guarantee a supremely musical result, it is always a joy beyond joy to find an exceptional singer with good tone, control and emotion. I found all these things in the singing of Sr. Frances.

Derek Piotr · Pójdźmy wszyscy do stajenki

Brenda Riddle – “Gravel in Almeda’s Gum (Tornado Story)” ([Archive Link](#))

I have been in touch with Almeda Riddle's descendants recently, which is an enormously moving experience for me. Almeda has been one of my favourite singers for years, and hearing stories about her life and small fragments of songs on the lips of her grandchildren has been incredible. Here, Brenda explains how a piece of gravel from the 1926 Heber Springs, Arkansas tornado was finally removed from Almeda's gum in 1986 – a full sixty years she carried that stone around with her!

Derek Piotr · Gravel in Almeda's Gum (Tornado Story)

Betty Smith – “Barbara Allen” ([Archive Link](#))

An oft-oft-trod ballad gains new form here. Betty Smith, of Black Mountain, NC, a veteran of the folk scene since the early 70s, here performs the first song she can remember learning – although she doesn't exactly *remember* learning it, feeling that the song she's just known since always. Her text reveals an unusual image – “he trembled like an aspen” – and helped bring something to the conversation around this universally sung ballad. That Betty is 94 and still singing is a fierce inspiration.

Derek Piotr · Barbara Allen

Judy and Dennis Cook – “The Keeper” ([Archive Link](#))

Judy was actually my 300th recording with her version of “The Feathery Wife”, but I so adore her rendition of “The Keeper”. She had lamented that she'd like to do both parts with me, but due to Zoom's audio lag, she ought to just sing it by herself. That's when Dennis appeared in the frame and helped her sing the other part. A truly charming spontaneous moment that will always stick with me.

Derek Piotr · The Keeper

Steve Gardham – “Early Pearly” ([Archive Link](#))

I had known and loved Steve's recording of his mother singing this same tune from his Yorkshire Garland Group website – the song is so saccharine as to somehow be powerful, a so-bad-it's-good Penny Dreadful style Victorian tale of woe and woe-is-me. Steve gave me a number of songs from his family that he remembers growing up, including this one. You can hear the original that his mother sang at the Yorkshire Garland Group page. <http://www.yorkshirefolksong.net/song.cfm?songID=126>

Derek Piotr · Early Pearly



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Visit The Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive here: <https://fieldwork-archive.com/>