

Folklorist records history through song



1/25/23 AVERY COUNTY — Folklorist Derek Piotr is piecing together bits of history and culture through song, recording each straight from the source and archiving them to ensure they're never lost.

Piotr's journey of "songcatching," as he has previously called it, started in Elk Park in 2020. In December of 2019, he came across a collection of traditional Appalachian ballads in the Library of Congress. "Bolakins," sung by Lena Bare Turbyfill, caught his ear and led him to drive down to Elk Park in search of more information.

His search led him to the house of Nicola "Aunt Nicky" Pritchard, who was at the time Turbyfill's last living daughter. Pritchard recalled her mother singing ballads like "Bolakins" around the house and at county fairs.

Over the time he spent researching Turbyfill, her family "adopted" Piotr, inviting him to their family reunions and deeming him an honorary Turbyfill, he said. As he got closer to the family, he heard more stories and unlocked more of their memories. One such instance that sticks out in his mind is a recording listed as "How Aunt Lena Turbyfill Talked Fire Out of a Burn" on his website.

In the recording, Betty Bare and Bobbie Bare recall a time that Aunt Lena Turbyfill "talked the fire out of a burn," which is an old Appalachian faith healing tradition of sorts. Piotr explained that 100 years ago, that wasn't information that Appalachians typically trusted outsiders to have. The Bares may have been more willing to divulge the information now that it's not as prominent or strongly practiced anymore, but it was still a special moment to him, he said.

"It still was kind of a big deal that they would be willing to explain that kind of folk practice, that's not singing of course," he said. "As best as they could, they described the event. And they even say that she wouldn't let you hear the prayer that she was saying, so it was even really kept secret to them by Lena when she was healing her, but it sure worked. I'm grateful that they were willing to kind of go through that memory."

Piotr grew up in Connecticut. The idea for recording other people came from his grandmother, who told a lot of stories. Piotr occasionally recorded his grandmother telling stories or giving directions to old places that she'd been to, he said.

"When I was doing research on Lena Turbyfill, who grew up and lived in Elk Park most of her life, I got to meet Lena's daughter, who was still alive at the time," he said. "She reminded me a great deal of my grandma. The difference, obviously, was that Nicky sang and my grandma didn't sing. When I went to meet her, I bought a brand new recorder, and she wanted me to take down what she could remember. So it really felt like what I had been doing with my grandma, but in a really more formal way."

While Piotr has an interest in music, he does this because he's truly interested in the music of people's memory and their families, he said. His research focuses on quirky, personal versions of traditional songs or traditional songs with ties to people's memories and stories.

"I made a few other recordings while I was down visiting with Nicky," he said. "I talked to Charlie Glenn in Banner Elk and his wife, and then I talked to Bobby McMillon while he was still alive. Then both Nicky and Bobby passed away, and it became really clear to me that these songs might be around forever, like on YouTube or in some form or fashion on a record, but the specific versions of these songs and the stories that go with them leave when the person is gone."

Piotr's log stretches far beyond North Carolina, Appalachia and even the United States, and he plans to keep adding to it.

"As I keep going with the website, it becomes, in a way, less about Appalachia and more just about people's memory and their family," Piotr said. "But I also would say that the Appalachian recordings form a huge chunk of the website, and I would say that the songs and the stories and the just proficiency of the actual playing, if it's like a banjo or something, is more vibrant. It's more like (it's) cared for. I've heard other banjo players in other areas and there's something about Appalachian players where they really treat it like a member of their family, (and) not just something they kind of hobby with."

The dozens of songs logged on Piotr's fieldwork archive represent only a fraction of the songs, as well as the personal stories behind them, that have never been recorded and risk dying out with the people who sing and tell them. He hopes that the archive will serve as a way for people to revisit old memories in the future, and he encourages people who have songs to share to reach out to him. No matter how weird, insignificant or short it may seem, Piotr said he would love to hear it. He can be reached at piotrmain@gmail.com, and his recordings can be found at <https://fieldwork-archive.com/>.