

# Murder ballads, supernatural mysteries, and faith healers: Why I decided to create a fieldwork archive

Written By: [Derek Piotr](#) April 5, 2023

Tags: [Field recording](#) / [Folk](#)



[Derek Piotr surveying the Helen Hartness Flanders Collection at Middlebury College, Vermont](#)

## ***Folklorist Derek Piotr shares recordings from his fieldwork archive.***

I made my first recording for the [Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive](#) in March, 2020, and formally launched the project as a web platform (with the godly help of [my assistant](#)) in August 2022. I committed to accumulate at

least 200 recordings and put them public somewhere. Given the red-tape-jungle of academia/library digital spaces, I decided to found my own territory. Since its founding, the archive has grown almost threefold (at time of writing 550 individual recordings).

In browsing it you'll hear singing from all walks of life: from nuns to bartenders; twentysomethings to centenarians; folk-song scholars, siblings making barnyard noises in unison; residents of a nursing home collectively remembering patriotic standards; farmers singing murder ballads; and legends of the folk scene sharing their earliest memories of learning through home-singing. You will hear stories of hospice journeys, faith healing practices, tornado survival, and supernatural hauntings.

How Aunt Lena Turbyfill Talked Fire out of a Burn  
Betty & Bobbie Bare, Elk Park, N.C., April 22, 2022  
Collected and transcribed by Derek Piotr.

Betty: "I got burned. And my mother is the one that asked Aunt Lena to come take care of it."

Bobbie: "Well, did she actually ask her, or was she just walking that day?"

Betty: "Bobbie, I don't know..."

Bobbie: "Back then, there wasn't a lot of vehicles around here, and, she walked, people just walked..."

Betty: "She mighta been walkin'..."

Bobbie: "We were in the driveway..."

Betty: "I don't remember honey, I simply don't."

Derek: "How'd you get burned? Was it a coal stove, or a carburetor, or...?"

Betty: "No, no, had a motorcycle fall over on me, couldn't get it off, and it burned my leg, tailpipe of it, burned it."

Dianne: "Was it a full size motorcycle, or a little one, or...?"

Betty: "Full size, wasn't it, Bobbie?"

Bobbie: "I have no remembrance of that motorcycle."

Dianne: "Other than that it was a motorcycle. Oh, I guess that was a lot of trauma, though. I can't even imagine how that would hurt."

Betty: "It burnt for...oh, it was a BAD burn, bad burnt. And, I'd been to the doctor and everything, and nothin' was workin', was it, Bobbie?"

Bobbie: "It really wasn't, it..."

Betty: "It was a mess, and she just come..."

Bobbie: "She walked over and she said 'I CAN blow that fire out. And, I think she was on her way to Uncle June's, or to Carlos', and... why we were out there, I don't know, and it mighta been that Mama ask her to come by, but she said 'I can...'"

Betty: "...blow the fire out."

Bobbie: "Yeah, she said 'I CAN blow that fire out.' and, well of course, Betty was interested, 'cos her leg was so sore."

Betty: (laughing) "Absolutely."

Bobbie: "And she did, she really did. I mean, it wasn't an instant healing, to my remembrance, but it wasn't long before it was completely gone."

### *Transcript of interview from the Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive*

Doing this work is as thrilling as it is difficult. There's an underlying heaviness to documenting the private memories of tradition-bearers, and psychic breaks are often necessary. One such pause yielded a list for ISC of my five favorite recordings du jour. These preferences shift daily, or moment-to-moment, but outlining them occasionally in an autoethnographic fashion is one path to sanity.





Fran Block and Dan Gardella performing in their home

## Fran Block – Oif’n Pripitchik (n.538)

<https://fieldwork-archive.com/538.html>

I met Fran and her partner, Dan Gardella, on the advisement of [Guy Wolff](#). Dan is primarily an Old-Time fiddler, living in Plymouth, Connecticut, and Guy has played out with him many times. My duty since returning to New England has been to at least attempt to raise the community of Northeast Old-Time to some modicum of prominence, so I’ve have made hundreds of recordings in Connecticut, as well as some in Vermont and Massachusetts. Dan dazzled me during our time together with spry standards like “Harvest Home” and “The De’il in the Kitchen,” but Fran left the strongest impression. She shared some of the earliest memories she had around music. This, as a fieldworker, is essential information: the first music that someone was conscious of absorbing. Fran sang several Hebrew songs she learned in her school days, as well as “Oif’n Pripitchik” a Yiddish song that her grandmother, Ethel Cohen, and great-aunt sang all the time. Fran sang with some reluctance, but I am overjoyed she made the effort.



*Erica Warnock singing from her father's book*

## **Erica Warnock – Come Again, sweet love doth now invite ([no. 505](https://fieldwork-archive.com/505.html))**

[fieldwork-archive.com/505.html](https://fieldwork-archive.com/505.html)

Erica is Guy's wife; they live in Bantam, Connecticut. There was a similar delight in discovery when working with Erica. Guy is a proficient musician and can play the hell out of several instruments, including but not limited to spoons, banjo, and concertina. I was, however, more impressed to learn that Erica grew up in a household that sang madrigals! At some point after her father (James Byron) passed, she found a handwritten diary with all stripes of songs autographed into it – everything from "Billy Boy" to "Rest, Sweet Nymphs."

"Come Again..." is a Dowland madrigal, and one of the typical bedtime songs that Erica's father sang. It was unexpected, collecting madrigals for the archive – and a very welcome surprise.





## Carmen McCord Hicks – The Patched-Up Old Devil ([no. 478](https://fieldwork-archive.com/478.html))

[fieldwork-archive.com/478.html](https://fieldwork-archive.com/478.html)

I have known Carmen, of Bon Aqua, Tennessee, for years through my association with Appalachian Old-Time singing swaps. Carmen's relatives were documented by Harmony Korine's father, Sol, in [a documentary called "Mouth Music"](#) in 1981, and sang many wonderful ballads, primarily at home with their family.

Here, Carmen sings an obscure folk-song called "The Patched-Up Old Devil." very few instances of this ballad are reported – the only other available one comes from Arnold Keith Storm, of Mooresville, Indiana, who "had learned most of his repertoire from his father, who had in turn learned it from his own father." That the plot of this particular song invokes Dahl-ian levels of shape-shifting creepiness is a thrilling bonus!

Peacock discovered an extensive singing tradition within this family and he spent the next several weeks in St. Paul's recording songs from several family members. With his movie camera he documented Everett, Freeman and Becky performing. Although the film contains no sound, the visual images of Becky and Freeman singing provide a nice complement to his field tapes. In his summer's field report he later remarked:

The Bennetts of St. Paul's are a rare phenomenon, even in rural Newfoundland. Centered about two brothers, Everett and Freeman, the whole family eats, lives and breathes folksong. Everett's two sons Clarence and Jim, seem to be growing into the tradition too, in spite of their rather weak musical gifts. And Freeman's wife [Becky] (also a Bennett before marriage) is practically an institution in herself. Her musical sense is highly developed and soon overshadows the somewhat unpleasant nasal quality of her voice, a quality reminiscent of Indian voice production.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Folk Music in Newfoundland 1958 Report*, by Kenneth Peacock. For short biographical sketches of Clarence, Everett, Freeman and Becky (Rebecca) Bennett and their family connections see Herbert Halpert and John Widdowson, *Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of Oral Tradition* 2 vols. (Breakwater and Garland Publishing, 1996) 1062-1066.

*Information on the Bennet family, Anna Guigné, 2004*

## Fanny Bennett – Grief Is a Knot ([no. 493](#))

[fieldwork-archive.com/493.html](http://fieldwork-archive.com/493.html)

Frances "Fanny" Bennett, sister of Becky, is a youthful 105. That the archive now houses [two centenarians](#) is nothing short of miraculous; most of the work I do now focuses on members of the Traditionalists (b. 1928-45), more aptly named "Silent Generation" – members of the Greatest Generation (b. 1901-27) are harder to find. This was the most impromptu recording I've yet made: On a call with Frances' daughter, I was explaining my interest in the Bennett family (having [worked with recordings of them](#) in my archival compiations), and her mother burst suddenly into song on the other end. I had to rush to my laptop and get *something* turned on – generally I record on a Zoom H4, but a MacBook microphone will certainly work when required.



Aless and Cam

singing in their home

## Alessandra Delia-Lôbo and Cameo Delia – Till the Clouds Rolled By ([no. 385](#))

[fieldwork-archive.com/385.html](http://fieldwork-archive.com/385.html)

One of great aspect of this project is the ability to share new things with old friends. Several people I have known for over ten years have come forward with song memory and shared their singing. Aless is an amazing example of this. I have known her and [her husband](#) for almost 15 years, but only recently discovered that Aless and Cam both grew up hearing their grandfather sing British folk tunes. “Till the Clouds Rolled By” is a humorous, unfortunately stereotyping folk song that is a chief example of the clunky sort of “humor” prevalent in diminutive English ballads. The absolutely seamless unison singing of both sisters, and Aless’ baby, Frances, singing her own “song” in the background makes this recording one of the most exciting I’ve taken.

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*Derek Piotr is a folklorist, researcher and performer whose work focuses primarily on the human voice. His work covers practices including fieldwork, vocal performance, preservation and autoethnography; and is primarily concerned with tenderness, fragility, beauty and brutality. He has collaborated with artists including Scott Solter, Nathan Salsburg and Thomas Brinkmann across various disciplines. His work has been supported by The Traditional Song Forum and The Danbury Cultural Commission, and has featured on Death is Not the End and BBC. He recently launched the [Fieldwork Archive](#).*