

Robert W. Gordon collection, ca. 1906-1939

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Gordon, Robert Winslow
Title	Robert W. Gordon collection
Dates	ca. 1906-1939 (inclusive) 1900 1945
Quantity	9.75 linear feet, (19 containers, 2 volumes)
Collection Number	Ax 039
Summary	Robert Winslow Gordon was an authority on American folksong. The collection contains primarily collected folksongs, ballads, and lore.
Repository	University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives. UO Libraries--SCUA 1299 University of Oregon Eugene OR 97403-1299 Telephone: 541-346-3068 sparref@uoregon.edu
Access Restrictions	Collection is open to the public. Collection must be used in Special Collections and University Archives Reading Room. Collection or parts of collection may be stored offsite. Please contact Special Collections and University Archives in advance of your visit to allow for transportation time.
Additional Reference Guides	See the Current Collection Guide for detailed description and requesting options.
Languages	English
Sponsor	Funding for encoding this finding aid was provided through a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Historical Note

Robert Winslow Gordon was one of the first and foremost authorities on American folksong. Gordon was born on September 2, 1888 in Bangor, Maine. He was the eighth descendant in a direct line from Alexander Gordon, a Scotsman who came to the colonies as a political prisoner in 1652.

In 1906 Gordon attended Harvard University on scholarship to the English Department. By 1912 he was teaching within that department and he then began his research into folk poetry. Gordon's initial course work was in the ballad, but curiosity soon led him to the collection of folksongs in his spare time. He began experimenting with cylinder recordings, an uncommon practice even among established folk scholars of the time.

In 1918 Gordon accepted a position as Assistant Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. While at Berkeley he became editor of the "Old Songs" department of a pulp publication called Adventurer Magazine. This position allowed Gordon to collect and record a vast array of folksong material from regions spanning the entire United States. These he presented to the public

with historical and critical commentary. This mingling of the popular and academic spheres was unappreciated by Gordon's Berkeley peers. However, some scholars hold this to be the finest work published in American folk song of the time.

In 1924 Gordon returned to Harvard and made plans to embark upon a field trip more extensive than any that had yet been taken in the study of folk song. He proposed to begin in Asheville, North Carolina travelling through the United States and into Canada, and ending in Newfoundland. Gordon set out in 1925 but financial and personal considerations, combined with the overwhelming amount of material that he found in and about the Asheville area, severely limited the original scope of his vision. However, it was in Asheville that he collected an array of material concerning the folksong "Dixie" among others. This was the first of many trips Gordon would make into the southern states for the collection of folk song.

Between 1925 and 1928 Gordon left the constraints and responsibilities of the university behind him and moved his family to Darien, Georgia. In Darien he conducted extensive fieldwork and supported his household through his work with *Adventurer*, and as a roving correspondent for *The New York Times*. It was here that Gordon found the time to engage in theoretical work that he felt university life had denied him. His work at this time involved the context for development and performance of Negro folksongs, chants, shouts, spirituals, and chanteys.

In 1928 Gordon established the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. This was the first national center devoted to American Folk Culture. Gordon held this position for five years during which time he continued his collection and recording in the south. By the time Gordon parted ways with the ACLS, the archive contained some 8,000 texts with music for some 700 titles, all indexed. During this period Gordon also did research and gave testimony on the behalf of Victor Records in a claim of authorship suit brought against that company concerning "Old 97." This case came before the court in 1933. At this point Gordon was recognized as an authority in his field.

From 1934 until his retirement in 1958, Gordon worked for the Department of the Interior, the English Department of George Washington University, and the Navy Department, engaging his passion for folklore in his spare time. He collaborated with many others in his field, published a number of articles, and held lectures and discussions at local social clubs in the Washington D.C. area. After his retirement Gordon moved in with his daughter and her husband in McLean Virginia. He died on March 26, 1961 at the age of 71.

Content Description

The Robert W. Gordon Collection represents one of the largest collections of American folk song outside of the Library of Congress. It contains approximately 4,000 song texts and fragments, 2,250 of which were privately collected and 1,700 of which were transcribed from published sources. It also includes a comprehensive first-line index.

The Collection contains seven bound volumes of songs, ballads, and lore collected and/or transcribed from published sources. Subjects represented include sea serpents, camp meetings, contemporary Civil War accounts, Dan Emmett, pre-minstrel songs, early minstrel songs, minstrel songs, "Dixie", "John Brown", Negro and white spirituals, play-party songs, cowboy songs, and sailor songs.

The Gordon collection also contains songs and lore privately collected by Gordon in California, North Carolina and Georgia, as well as from readers of *Adventurer Magazine*, in which Gordon edited a column called "Old Songs Men Have Sung." Included are songs of war, camp songs, soldier songs, early American minstrel, Negro and white spirituals, murder ballads, sea songs, Irish ballads and

songs, many versions of various classed folksongs, cowboy songs, and some songs from folk-song collector Mary Newcomb not included in her manuscript, "Songs My Mother Sang".

The collection includes three apparently complete manuscripts from private collectors that may not be found in the Library of Congress. The first is Songs of the Dogwatch by Joseph McGinnis, which contains carbon copies of song texts and hand printed music representing songs of the sea, whaling ships, the Great Lakes, the Erie Canal, and chanteys. The second is a photostat copy of Songs My Mother Sang by Mary Newcomb, which contains song texts with music representing Child ballads, ballads and songs of the British Isles, sentimental and humorous songs, Negro and pseudo-Negro songs, and dance and play-party songs. The third is Collection of Folksongs by Betty Bush Winger, which contains white, Negro, and pseudo-Negro religious and spiritual songs.

Included as well are papers from Joanna Colcord's Roll and Go, with notes and variants of songs appearing in that book. There are also letters, documents, bills and accounts for Gordon's role in the George vs. Victor suit concerning "The Old 97", as well as various texts of that and other classed folksongs.

The collection also contains tear sheets from "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" dating from June 1922 to September 1927, as well as published material from the New York Times and Gordon's book Folksongs of America. Finally, there are volumes of Gordon's class notes from Harvard University in the collection as well.

Administrative Information

Detailed Description of the Collection

Description

[Guide to the Robert W. Gordon Collection](#)

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Ballads, Irish--United States

Folk songs--United States

Murder--Songs and music

Sea songs

Spirituals (Songs)

Personal Names :

Colcord, Joanna C. (Joanna Carver), 1882-1960

Newcomb, Mary, 1894-1967

Geographical Names :

Asheville (N.C.)--Social life and customs

United States

Avi Neuman

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