

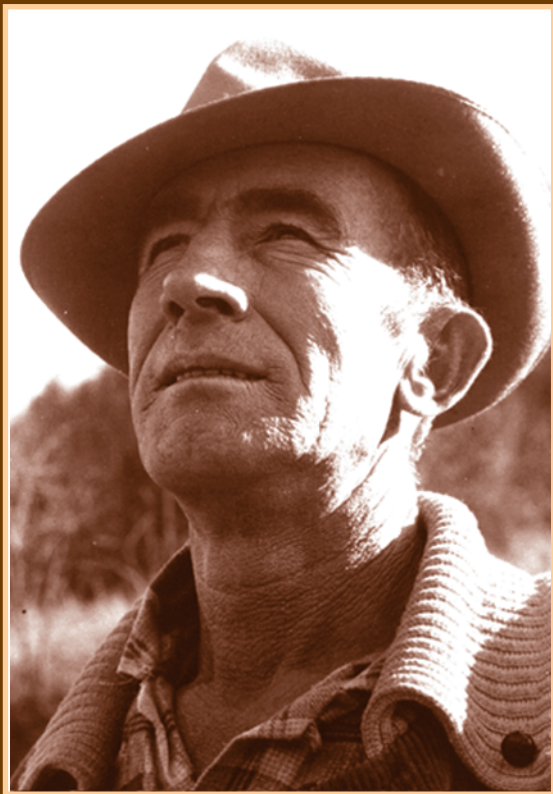
Frank Proffitt

of Reese, NC

*Traditional Songs
and Ballads of
Appalachia*



Folk-Legacy Records
CD-1



Frank Proffitt

Although Frank Proffitt died in November of 1965, I have decided to print the notes for this recording as I originally wrote them, nearly forty years ago. Bessie Proffitt is gone now, as well, and their son Ronald was killed in an automobile accident after finishing graduate work in physics at the University of Kentucky. Franklin, now known as Frank, has been carrying on his father's tradition of making music, singing and playing dulcimer and banjo in many programs presented in North Carolina schools. Here, then, are the notes from 1962:

Frank Proffitt, tobacco farmer and part-time carpenter, lives in the rugged mountains of northwestern North Carolina near Reese, a rural postal station that you won't find on a map. To locate the general area, look for Sugar Grove, near Boone. Local residents call the area "the Beaver Dams country." Stone Mountain stretches its bulk along one side of the valley, and up behind Frank's house is timber-covered "Hoss Ridge" where, during the Civil War, farmers hid their horses to prevent their being commandeered by passing troops or rustled by raiding marauders. As Frank pointed out, "A man could lose his stock either way!" His house is situated in a hollow now called "Mountindale," but Frank says "It used to be called Pick-Britches Valley, and I call it that yet." Frank built the house with his own hands, a small but comfortable home for his family.

Frank and his wife, Bessie (nee Hicks), have six children. Oliver, the eldest, is in the Air Force; Ronald, next in line, is studying at Kentucky's Berea College, which leaves only Franklin, Eddie, Gerald and Phyllis at home. This is not a large family by mountain standards, but Frank has had to work hard to keep them all well-fed and in school. The mountains of

North Carolina are beautiful, and Frank loves them as only a mountain-man can, but they are hard and rough as well. Although tobacco is a good cash crop, the small mountain farm can produce only so much, and Frank has sometimes been forced to leave his family to seek work elsewhere. During the war he worked at Oak Ridge. (“I was just a carpenter, working on the buildings. I didn’t have any idea what they were making over there.”) For awhile he worked in a spark-plug factory in Toledo, Ohio. During what he calls “Hoover times,” he built roads with the WPA. (“That was when a pound of fat-back cost three cents and when you wanted to send a letter you’d take an egg to the Post Office to swap for a stamp.”) Things are much better now, of course. His tobacco crop, some strawberries, and his carpentry work make it possible for him to stay at home with his family. His home-made banjos and dulcimers help out a lot, too. Last year, an important part of his income came from the sale of these handsome instruments, fashioned along the patterns learned from his father. Working in the old house (once his father’s) on the hill behind his home, it takes Frank nearly a week to hand-carve, fit, and finish an instrument, but the result is well worth the effort. His appearance with Frank Warner at the 1961 University of Chicago Folk Music Festival did a lot to stimulate sales in that area. And little wonder — anyone who hears him coaxing such fine music out of his home-made, fretless banjo will readily understand why Chicago’s banjo-pickers were anxious to try their hand at it.

Most of Frank’s songs have come to him through his family. His father, Wiley Proffitt, used to sing to Frank as they worked together in the fields or up in the woods, cutting timber. Wiley Proffitt was the proud son of a “Southern Yankee” — a Tennessee man who went “across the mountain to join the boys in blue” during the Civil War. Frank’s aunt, Nancy Prather, was another fine ballad singer. Frank took care of her in the months

preceding her death and, at that time, made a conscious effort to learn all of her songs and ballads, for Frank was interested in his people and their history. He not only loved the old songs, he was aware of their value and deliberately set out to preserve them.

It was in 1937 that Frank and Anne Warner went to visit Bessie's father, Nathan Hicks, on "the Beech" — Beech Mountain, North Carolina. They had heard that Nathan made dulcimers and sought him out in their quest for old songs and ballads. When they made plans to return the next year for more song-swapping, Nathan made sure that his son-in-law would be there for the occasion — a truly exciting event in the lives of these isolated mountain folk. This, then, was the first meeting between the two Franks — Warner and Proffitt — and the beginning of a lasting friendship. It was during this first meeting that Frank sang "Tom Dooley" to Frank Warner, the version of the song which, later, was to sell several million records and become, perhaps, the best known folksong in America.

We, of Folk-Legacy Records, consider Frank Proffitt to be one of this country's finest traditional artists. We are proud to offer this as the first in our series of authentic field recordings. For a catalog of our products, write to us at, Box 1148, Sharon, CT 06069, or visit our web site at www.folklegacy.com. Our E-mail address is folklegacy@snet.net.

The Songs

1. TRIFLING WOMAN (*Proffitt*)

Some years ago, Frank was working on a logging job with a fellow who was constantly complaining about the way his wife treated him. In fact, one day he came to Frank, moaning that he was so miserable he would kill himself, if only he had a gun. Frank laughs, "I was just ornery enough that I wanted to see if he really would, so I went and got him one." When the man

backed down, Frank decided to commemorate his misery in song. This is the result.

*O Lord, I've been a-working,
Working like a dog all day,
Trying to make another dollar
For you to throw away.
(You trifling woman, you!)*

*You spend all my money;
You go dressed so fine,
While I wear old clothes
And I don't have a dime.*

*You won't bake my bread,
You won't cook my beans;
You want to stand by that haul-road
So you can be seen.*

*Well, I'd rather be a-hanging,
Hanging from an old grape vine,
Than to know I'd have to spend my days
With you all the time.
(You're running me crazy, woman!)*

*Well, I've been a-working
Ten long hours a day,
Trying to make another dollar
For you to throw way.*

2. CLUCK OLD HEN (*trad.*)

Popular as both a fiddle and a banjo tune, Frank says he has known this one all his life. He explains that “every banjo-picker in the mountains around here knew that one.” Describing the version which later came out of Nashville as a fiddle tune titled “Cackling Hen,” Frank says, “They put it on a much higher speed, with lots of running up higher. I kind of liked it, but it didn’t have much of the old flavor left.” Here Frank makes good use of his home-made banjo, which has no frets. For more on this style of playing, see the note for “Reuben Train.”

*Cluck, old hen, cluck and squall,
You ain't laid an egg since way last fall.*

*Cluck, old hen, cluck and sing,
You ain't laid an egg since way last spring.*

*My old hen, she won't do;
She lays eggs and 'taters, too.*

*Oh, I've got a good old hen;
She lays eggs for railroad men.*

*Old hen cackled, she cackled in the lot;
The next time she cackled, she cackled in the pot.*

3. MORNING FAIR (*trad*)

Not often found in this form, this broadside ballad is widely popular in America as “The Butcher Boy,” perhaps because it was so frequently printed in the early songsters. Brown (see bibliography) points

out that it appeared as a stall ballad in both Boston and New York. Frank learned his splendid variant from his aunt, Nancy Prather. The ballad is usually found with the following as the final couplet:

*And on my breast place a turtle dove
To show the world that I died for love.*

See: Belden, Brown, Cox, Eddy, Linscott, Gardner/Chickering, Randolph.

*As I woke up one morning fair,
To take a walk all in the air,
I thought I heard my true love say,
"Oh, turn and come my way.*

*"You told me tales, you told me lies.
You courted a girl worth more than I,
But gold will fade and silver will fly;
My love for you will never die.*

*"Oh, tell me, Willie, oh, tell me, please,
Do you take her upon your knees
And hug and kiss her all so free,
And tell her things you won't tell me?"*

*"Is it because that I am poor
That you turn me far from your door
To wander out in a cruel, dark world,
Because you love a rich man's girl?"*

*“She gave me cake, she gave me wine;
I rode out in her carriage fine.
She set herself upon my knee
And begged and kissed me all so free.*

*“Her father gives to me his land,
And also of his daughter’s hand.
To give it up, a fool I’d be,
To trade it all for love of thee.”*

*She went upstairs, up to her bed;
An aching was all in her head.
A rope she tied around the sill;
They found her hanging, cold and still.*

*There in her bosom was this note,
All with her pen, these words she wrote:
Heap up my grave so very high,
So Willie can see as he rides by.*

4. BONNIE JAMES CAMPBELL (*Child 210 - trad.*)

One of the most concise and beautiful of all the ballads, this is extremely rare in tradition. In fact, no trace of it has been found recently in either England or Scotland. DAVIS III points out that only six texts have been reported from North America — three from Canadian sources, two from West Virginia, and one from Virginia. A seventh text, as yet unpublished, is in the records of the Federal Writer’s Project as having been collected in Kentucky. Child printed only four texts of the ballad, all from Scottish sources. While all of Frank’s verses appear in one or another of the

versions in Child, no single one of them is as complete as Frank's. Indeed, this would appear to be the most complete text ever reported. The Virginia text (DAVIS III) contains six of the seven stanzas in the present text and was obtained from a former resident of Watauga County, North Carolina, not far from Frank's home. Frank learned the ballad from his father, adding that his aunt Nancy knew it, too. He tells us that it was quite widely known in his part of the mountains "as a fiddle tune," although the words were rarely sung, "because it's awfully hard to fit 'em in when you play it as fast as it always was played." This may explain why BROWN failed to recover the ballad in North Carolina.

See: Barry, Combs, Davis III.

*Booted and spurred and bridled rode he,
A plume in his saddle and a sword at his knee.*

*Back come his saddle all bloody to see;
Back come his steed, but never come he.*

*Riding on the highlands, steep was the way;
Riding in the lowlands, hard by the Tay.*

*Out come his old mother with feet all so bare;
Out come his bonnie bride, riving of her hair.*

*The meadow's all a-falling, and the sheep all unshorn;
The house is a-leaking and the baby's unborn.*

*But Bonnie James Campbell nowhere can you see
With a plume in his saddle and a sword at his knee.*

*For to home come his saddle all bloody to see;
Home come the steed, but never come he.*

5. LORD RANDALL (*Child 12 - trad.*)

Frank sings two versions of this very popular ballad, the present one and a more Americanized one in which the protagonist's name is Jimmy Ransome. Both were learned from his "father and other kinfolk." Asked which he preferred, Frank simply remarked that they were quite different. GEROULD points out that this ballad has been found "as far east as Czecho-Slovakia and Hungary, as far north as Scotland and Sweden, and as far south as Calabria." The verses referring to the death of the dogs are comparatively rare in the versions of the ballad that have been recovered in this country, although they are quite commonly found in the "Croodlin' Doo" texts. BRONSON prints 103 tunes and texts from the English language tradition, and only four of the American versions contain similar references. DAVIS III prints two texts (one with tune) with the dog stanzas, one of which is included in Bronson. BROWN prints four texts, none of which make reference to the dogs. Frank's text, therefore, can be compared favorably to any reported in this country.

See: Belden, Bronson, Brown, Cox, Davis III, Eddy, Flanders, Gardner/Chickeering, Linscott, Randolph, Sharp, etc.

*Oh, it's where have you been, Lord Randall, my son?
Where have you been, my handsome young one?
I've been a-hunting and a-rambling, Mother, make my bed soon;
I'm a-tuckered and a-wearind and I fain would lie down.*

*What did you spy while a-hunting, Lord Randall, my son?
What did you spy while a-hunting, my handsome young one?*

*My bonnie so true, Mother, make my bed soon;
I'm a-tuckered and a-wearied and I fain would lie down.*

*What did you eat for your supper, Lord Randall, my son?
What did you eat for your supper, my handsome young one?
Fried eels and fried onions, Mother, make my bed soon;
I'm sick unto death and I fain would lie down.*

*Was there scraps from the table, Lord Randall, my son?
Was there scraps from the table, my handsome young one?
My dogs ate them all, Mother, make my bed soon;
I'm sick to the heart and I fain would lie down.*

*Where might be your dogs, Lord Randall, my son?
Where might be your dogs, my handsome young one?
They ups and they died, Mother, make my bed soon;
I'm sick unto death and I fain would lie down.*

*I'm afeared you are poisoned, Lord Randall, my son.
I'm afeared you are poisoned, my handsome young one.
I'm afeared I am poisoned, Mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm sick unto death and I fain would lie down.*

*What are you leaving to your mother, Lord Randall, my son?
What are you leaving to your mother, my handsome young one?
My cattle and oxen, Mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm sick unto death and I fain would lie down.*

*What are you a-leaving to your sister, Lord Randall, my son?
What are you a-leaving to your sister, my handsome young one?*

*My gold and my silver, Mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm sick unto death and I fain would lie down.*

*What are you leaving to your brother, Lord Randall, my son?
What are you leaving to your brother, my handsome young one?
My houses and lands, Mother, make my bed soon;
I'm sick unto death and I fain would lie down.*

*What do you leave to your bonnie love, Lord Randall, my son?
What are you leaving to your bonnie love, my handsome young one?
Hell-fire and damnation, Mother, make my bed soon,
For I'm sick unto death and I fain would lie down.*

6. HANDSOME MOLLY (*trad.*)

Found masquerading under a variety of names in the American collections, this song has even made the grade with “hill-billy” performers. Peggy Seeger says she learned it from a program of southern hill-billy music and has included it in her *American Folksongs for Banjo* (Folk-Lyric FL-114). George Banman Grayson, a blind fiddler who, incidentally, came from Frank Proffitt’s neighborhood, recorded it for Victor in 1927. Doc Watson sings the same version Grayson recorded on Folkways FA 2355 — *Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley’s*. Frank’s song is very similar to Grayson’s, not surprisingly, since, as Frank puts it, “That’s a well-known song up here.” Frank takes it a good deal slower, arranging the verses a bit differently, and there are a few minor textual variations, but, essentially, it’s the same song. Frank has his version from his father and his aunt and “from others around here.” LOMAX II notes that the song has recently been found in Ireland by Peter Kennedy.

See: Brown (“Lover’s Lament”), Lomax II (“Lovin’ Hannah”) Sharp (“The Irish Girl”), plus Davis I, McGill, Randolph, and others.

*I wish I was in London, or some other seaport town.
I’d step my foot in a steamboat; I’d sail the ocean ’round.*

*While a-sailing around the ocean, a-sailing around the sea,
I’d think of handsome Molly wherever she might be.*

*She rode to church a-Sunday; she passed me on by.
I saw her mind was a-changing by the way she rolled her eye.*

*Don’t you remember, Molly, when you gave me your right hand?
You said, if you ever married, that I’d be the man.*

*Now you’ve broke your promise; go marry who you please.
While my poor heart is aching, here lie at your ease.*

*Her hair was black as a raven, her eyes as black as a crow;
Her cheeks were like lilies that in the morning grow.*

*If I was in London, or some seaport town,
I’d step my foot in a steamboat; I’d sail the ocean ’round.*

7. REUBEN TRAIN (*trad.*)

LOMAX II prints a version of this song which has been collated from several “picked up through the years along the song-hunting trail.” He states that it was a harmonica-blower’s tune and a great favorite among country banjo-pickers and fiddlers in the South. He adds that “one occasionally meets a singer who knows a few verses of the song,” but

that he has “never heard it sung in ballad form.” It seems quite likely that Frank Proffitt has done much the same thing in gathering his “ballad form” version from various mountain musicians with whom he has played in the past. BROWN prints two versions, one of which contains seven stanzas; Lomax’s collation contains eight stanzas, as does the version recorded here. I have not found the song elsewhere in print, although a four stanza version may be heard on the Folkways album mentioned in the note for “Handsome Molly” (again performed by Doc Watson), and Ralph and Richard Rinzler’s excellent notes point out its relationship to both “Train 45” and the familiar “900 Miles.” They also add a short discography. This was the first tune Frank learned to play on his homemade banjo, and here the fretless instrument may be heard in a style not unlike the bottle-neck style favored by a number of African-American guitarists. Sliding the fingers up and down the neck produces the slurred notes. Frank says, “You can’t hardly do this on a fretted banjer; it takes a lot of clearance on the neck with nothing to get in the way.”

See: Brown, Lomax II.

*Oh, Reuben’s coming down the track
And he’s got his throttle back
And the rails are a-carrying him from home.*

*If the boiler don’t bust,
’Cause it’s eat up with rust,
I’ll soon be a long ways from home.*

*If you don’t believe I’m gone,
Look at the train I’m on;
You can hear the whistle blow a thousand miles.*

*I'm a-going down the track;
I ain't never coming back,
And I'll never get no letter from my home.*

*Well, the train run so fast
Till I knowed it couldn't last,
For the wheels was a-burning up the rail.*

*Old Reuben had a wreck
And it broke old Reuben's neck,
And it never hurt a hair on my head.*

*Now I'm walking up the track,
Hoping I'll get back;
I'm a thousand miles away from home.*

*If I ever get back to you,
You can beat me black and blue,
For I'll never leave my shanty home.*

8. TOM DOOLEY (DULA) (*trad.; arr. Lomax/Warner/Proffitt*)

Thomas Smith, of Watauga County, North Carolina, wrote to BROWN that this now-famous murder ballad “has been sung and played for many years in Watauga... There is hardly a fiddler or banjo-picker in our country who cannot play ‘Tom Dooley’.” The Brown collection contains three distinct ballads based on the murder of Laura Foster by Thomas C. Dula in Wilkes County, North Carolina, in 1966. (See BROWN, #'s 302, 303, and 304.) Frank Proffitt's ballad seems, essentially, to be 303, with additional verses, two of which appear in 304.

Since the song achieved such wide popularity, much has been written about the murder. Those who want the whole gruesome story may read it in BROWN, Volume II, pp. 703-714. The editors quote at length from *North Carolina Reports* and from the telegraphic report of a correspondent of the New York *Herald* who covered the trial for that paper. Be prepared for real tabloid stuff, however, involving a particularly brutal murder, another woman who may have been an accomplice, and the possibility of both pregnancy and venereal disease. The fanciful tale with which Lomax described the affair in *Folksong USA* seems to be based more upon folklore than upon fact. Certainly it makes a much more romantic story than does the sordid truth.

Frank Proffitt recalls this as the first song he ever heard his father pick on the banjo. That, plus the fact that his grandmother knew Laura Foster slightly, always made the song especially meaningful for him. It was one of the first songs he sang for Frank Warner in 1938. ("Frank asked me if I knew any songs about hangings — about gallows and ropes and such — so I tried to think of some. 'Tom Dooley' came to my mind right off, of course, and I sang it for him, along with 'Hold Up Your Hand, Oh Joshua' and 'John Hardy'.") Warner returned to record the song in 1940. His adapted version, really quite different from those published elsewhere and, indeed, quite different from the version sung here, was published, along with the charming "Yankee Schoolteacher" yarn, by Lomax in 1947. It was this Lomax/Warner adaptation of Frank Proffitt's version of the ballad that became the great hit of late 1950s.

See: Brown, Davis I, Henry, Lomax I.

*Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang your head and cry;*

*You killed little Laurie Foster,
Poor boy, you're bound to die.*

*You met her on the mountain;
There you took her life.
You met her on the hillside;
You stobbed her with a knife.*

*Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Oh, hang your head and cry.
You killed little Laurie Foster;
Poor boy, you're bound to die.*

*This time tomorrow,
Reckon where I'll be —
Down in yonders valley,
A-hanging on a white oak tree.*

*Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Oh, hang your head and cry.
You killed little Laurie Foster;
Poor boy, you're bound to die.*

*This time tomorrow,
Reckon where I'll be —
Hadn't a-been for Grayson,
I'd a-been in Tennessee.*

*Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Oh, hang your head and cry.
You killed little Laurie Foster;
Poor boy, you're bound to die.*

*You met her on the mountain;
It was there, I suppose,
There you went and killed her,
And then you hid her clothes.*

*Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Oh, hang your head and cry.
You killed little Laurie Foster;
Poor boy, you're bound to die.*

*I'll take down my banjo;
I'll pick it on my knee
For, this time tomorrow,
It'll be no good to me.*

*Hang your head, Tom Dooley,
Oh, hang your head and cry.
You killed little Laurie Foster;
Poor boy, you're bound to die.*

9. I'M GOING BACK TO NORTH CAROLINA (*trad.; arr. Proffitt*)

These verses sung here may be primarily Frank's creation. Certainly they differ considerably from the two texts published in BROWN, one of which was taken from the singing of Bascom Lamar Lunsford and entitled "My Home's Across the Smoky Mountains." Peter

Seeger combines the two texts in Brown on his Folkways album *Nonesuch* (FA 2439 with Frank Hamilton). The fact that a simple folk lyric such as this often appears with a wide variety of texts would suggest that singers insert, quite freely, verses and phrases common to the tradition of such songs. Clarence Ashley and the Carolina Tar Heels recorded a similar version of the song for Victor in 1928 (Victor 40100). Frank says it would be hard to say where he first heard this song, or when, but that it was one of the numbers he used to play and sing in the groups with which he “made music in people’s homes around here, years ago.”

See: Brown.

*I’m a-going back to North Carolina (3 times)
And I never expect to see you any more.*

*How can I ever keep from crying (3 times)
When I never expect to see you any more?*

*My home’s across the Blue Ridge Mountain; (3 times)
I never expect to see you any more.*

*Yeah, I’m a-going back to North Carolina,
I’m a-going back to North Carolina,
I’m a-going back to North Carolina;
I never expect to see you any more.*

10. MOONSHINE (*trad.*)

BROWN reports this “laudation of the potency of the mountaineer’s favorite product” from the manuscripts of Obadiah Johnson of Avery County, North Carolina. RICHARDSON also prints it

(with the tune) in *American Mountain Songs*. Frank's text and tune are almost identical with those, except that he omits one verse which refers to the Volstead Law and clears up the obviously confused final verse, published in both works as:

*The moonshiners are gettin' mighty slick,
And the bootleggers are gettin' mighty thick;
If they keep on baggin', they better beware,
They'll be selling each other, I declare.*

Frank first heard the song at a party he attended near Chilhowie, Virginia, when he was about seventeen years old. He persuaded the young daughter of the singer to write out the verses for him and teach him the tune. Since I first wrote these notes, I have come across another fairly complete text in Morris' *Florida Folksongs*.

*Come all you people, if you want to hear
Of the kind of booze they make around here;
Made away back in the rocks and hills,
Where there's plenty of the moonshine stills.*

*One drop will make a rabbit whip a bulldog;
A taste will make a rat whip a wild hog;
It'll make a mouse bite off a tomcat's tail
And a tadpole raise a fuss with a whale.*

*A feist will bite off an elephant's snout;
It'll make a poodle dog put a tiger to rout;
It'll make a toad spit in a blacksnake's face
And a hardshell preacher fall from grace.*

FRANK PROFFITT *of Reese, North Carolina*

Traditional Songs and Ballads of Appalachia



CD-1

1. Trifling Woman (*Proffitt*) - 2:16
2. Cluck Old Hen - 2:10
3. Morning Fair - 2:48
4. Bonnie James Campbell (Child 210) - 1:25
5. Lord Randall (Child 12) - 3:27
6. Handsome Molly - 1:43
7. Reuben Train - 2:56
8. Tom Dooley (*Lomax, Warner, Proffitt*) - 2:43
9. I'm Going Back to North Carolina - 1:53
10. Moonshine - 1:40
11. Rye Whiskey - 2:31
12. I'll Never Get Drunk No More (*Proffitt*) - 2:32
13. Wild Bill Jones - 3:25
14. Gyps of David (Child 200) - 2:56
15. Song of a Lost Hunter (Child 68) - 4:23
16. Sourwood Mountain - 2:30
17. Going Across the Mountain (*Proffitt*) - 2:14

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