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Folkways

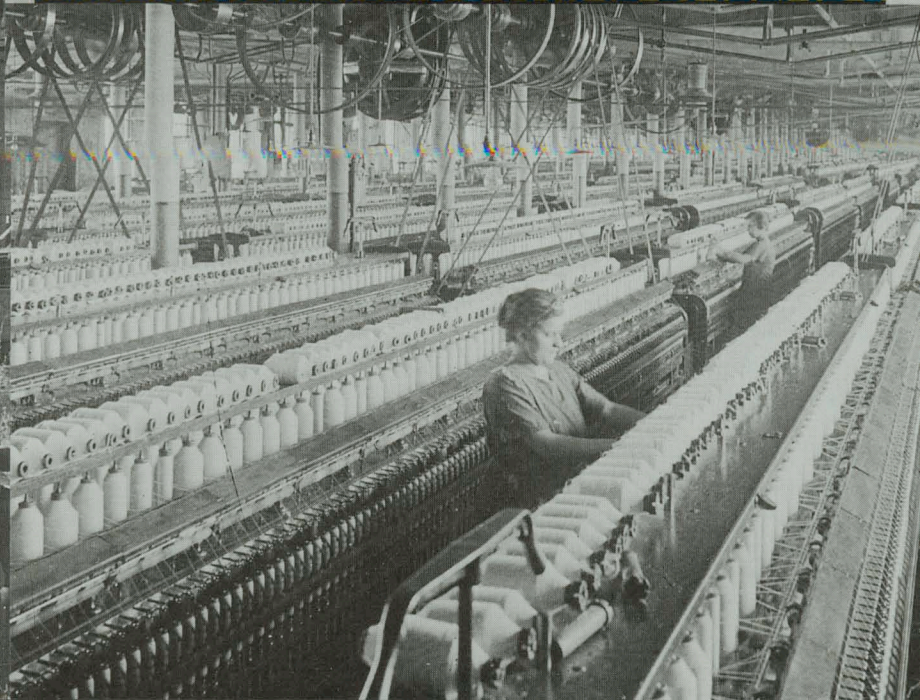
Smithsonian/Folkways Records
Office of Folklife Programs
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC 20560

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Nationally distributed by
Rounder Records, One Camp Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140
Printed in Canada



PETE SEEGER

AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL BALLADS



PETE SEEGER

American Industrial Ballads

1. **Peg and Awl** 2:26
2. **The Blind Fiddler** 1:17
3. **The Buffalo Skinners** 2:44
4. **Eight-hour Day** 0:56
(Words by John Hory)
5. **Hard Times in the Mill** 2:12
6. **Roll Down the Line** 3:12
7. **Hayseed Like Me** 1:13
8. **The Farmer is the Man** 1:41
9. **Come All You Hardy Miners** 1:56
10. **He Lies in the American Land** 1:57
(Andrew Kovaly)
11. **Casey Jones** 2:17
12. **Let Them Wear Their Watches**
Fine 3:36
13. **Cotton Mill Colic** 1:37
14. **Seven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent**
Meat 1:56
15. **Mill Mother's Lament** 1:35
(Ella May Williams)
16. **Fare Ye Well, Old Ely Branch** 2:09
(Aunt Molly Jackson)
17. **Beans, Bacon, and Gravy** 2:51
18. **The Death of Harry Simms** 2:11
(Jim Garland)
19. **Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues** 1:06
20. **Ballad of Barney Graham** 1:44
(Della Mae Graham)
21. **My Children are Seven in**
Number 3:56
(Words by Eleanor Kellogg)
22. **Raggedy** 2:27
(Words by John Handcox)
23. **Pittsburgh Town** 1:26
(words by Woody Guthrie/Woody
Guthrie Publications, BMI)
24. **Sixty Per Cent** 1:00
(words and music by Les Rice)

Credits:

Originally issued in 1956 as Folkways
FH 5251

Notes by Irwin Silber
Reissue edited and annotated by
Irwin Silber

Reissue supervised by Anthony Seeger
and Matt Walters

Remastered by Alan Yoshida,
The Mastering Lab,
Hollywood, California

Cover design by Carol Hardy
Photos courtesy of George Meany
Memorial Archives



0 9307-40058-2 8

Pete Seeger's performances of these 24 songs of American Industrialization are an American classic. Recorded in a period of Pete's supreme artistic flowering, these songs largely came out of the coal mines, the textile mills, and the highways of a land in agony. Carefully remastered, with a new introduction and detailed comments on each song by Irwin Silber.



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SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDS

Folkways Records was one of the largest independent record companies of the mid-twentieth century. Founded by Moses Asch in 1947 and run as an independent company until its sale in 1987, Folkways was dedicated to making the world of sound available to the public. Nearly 2,200 titles were issued, including a great variety of music, children's songs, world music, literature, poetry, stories, documentaries, language instruction and science and nature sounds.

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Introduction to the 1991 edition by Irwin Silber

Overuse has so injured us to the word "classic" that the very concept – let alone the word – has become suspect.

But classic is the word I kept getting drawn back to when Anthony Seeger, Director of Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, invited me to write a new introduction to their reissue of Pete Seeger's album of *American Industrial Ballads*. The dictionary defines "classic" as, among other things, "a work of enduring excellence," "serving

as a standard of excellence," and "historically memorable." This recording is certainly all that – and more.

The songs themselves are an American treasure. Many are priceless historical documents, recalling events and personalities that might otherwise have been lost or, at best, kept alive in the footnotes of academic theses. They are also works of art whose capacity to evoke the passions which first produced them has not diminished over the years. Pete, in his usual self-deprecating manner, would undoubtedly argue that his own "second-hand" renditions of these ballads would pale alongside the originals. Perhaps. But such comparisons, in most cases, are not even possible. Nor, in another sense, are they appropriate. For what Pete has done is more than a faithful reproduction of a unique body of musical lore. He has added to it musical and social insights which, in their own way, are as much rooted in a common cultural community as those originals were.

That community is, to a certain extent, Pete's own creation. To be sure, it had its own origins among people of the left at a time when the left itself enjoyed a large social base and was, therefore, an influential force in U.S. political life. But over the years, Pete's community has grown far beyond any narrow political definition. It has become rather, a community of values whose hopes, while more often than not at odds with harsh realities, embrace the best in our common human legacy.

It is in the nature of classics that they tend to live in a disembodied time and space; which, I suppose, is why we call them timeless. But Pete's *American Industrial Ballads* can be even better appreciated by keeping in mind when and under what circumstances – it was made. The year was 1957 and the anticommunist inquisition was still a fixture of our national discourse. In addition to facing the prospects of prison for "contempt of Congress," Pete remained effectively blacklisted from the normal channels of the music industry. (The idiocy of the times was syntonized a few years later when ABC-TV barred Pete from appearing on its folk song show, "Hootenanny" – a term which Pete, more than any other individual, had brought into popular use.) The seminal figure of the burgeoning encounter between folk song and Tin Pan Alley was thus confined to that somewhat esoteric

cultural territory in which Folkways Records symbolized the preference for innovation and intellectual integrity at the price of remunerative commerce.

In time, that choice imposed on Pete by the tyrannies of the age turned into a great gift for all of us. It was, for Pete and his audiences, a period of supreme artistic flowering; an achievement made the more worthy by the restrictions imposed by the small-minded politicians and entrepreneurs of that era. The ultimate irony, perhaps, was that during those years Pete's work memorialized the best in American culture and built a bridge between that legacy and the diverse cultural expressions which were then beginning to be heard on a world stage.

American Industrial Ballads also has a special place in my life. After recording the album, Pete suggested to Moe Asch that he ask me to write the booklet notes for the songs. It was my first association with Folkways Records. A year-and-a-half later, following my own unfriendly encounter with the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, I began working fulltime for Folkways, directing its promotional activity and coordinating its record production. Over the next ten years, I would help produce several score Folkways albums. At the same time, Moe and I jointly launched a publishing company, Oak Publications, which put out close to 100 titles dealing principally with folk music, topical songs, and blues.

One of our proudest achievements was the publication of *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*. First compiled by Alan Lomax in the early 'forties, with notes on the songs by Woody Guthrie and a foreword by John Steinbeck, this collection of folk-originated "protest" songs had become something of an unpublished legend for more than twenty years. The songs largely came out of the coal mines, the textile mills, and the highways of a land in agony. Many of the songs in *American Industrial Ballads* – fully half of them – are from this collection.

In a "compiler's postscript" to *Hard-Hitting Songs* written in 1966, Alan Lomax wrote words which may likewise serve as a postscript for the Smithsonian/Folkways reissue of Pete's *American Industrial Ballads*.

"The literary scholars, who seldom went into the field and collected their songs in the homes of the singers, have failed generally to perceive the undercurrent of tragedy and of protest that underlay the songs they footnoted and published. Since they had not been in the dismal prisons of the South; since they had not sat in the bare and flimsy shacks of sharecroppers and factory hands; since they had not seen the lines of sadness on the faces of the singers; or, even if they had seen such things, since they preferred not to see the singers as they were – people with a very low standard of living – scholars usually have not regarded folk songs as relevant to the real problems of everyday life.

"Since for most scholars folk song study has provided an escape from humdrum scholarship, they have too often presented their findings as simply entertaining and amusing (which, of course, they are), as a quaintly phrased view of a bygone time or as a fantasy escape from life. This is the reason, it seems to me, that academic critics have generally refused to accept the validity of the more pointed songs of protest that Woody and I put together in this volume . . .

"We were both pretty young at the time. We were both angry at the social injustice rampant in our world. In different ways we were both children of the Depression and we wanted to tell the story of what it had done to the people we knew. Woody, as a composer, believed that songs could change the world for the better. As a song editor, I believed that this collection was a testament to an unknown America, the folk poets who had become politically active and still kept their gift for song-making. Together we put together this angry book. No publisher would take it then because postwar America was afraid to look reality in the eye."

Although the songs are of another era, *American Industrial Ballads* is not a journey into nostalgia. It is a reminder of our unfinished business.

Irwin Silber
April, 1991

Introduction to the 1957 edition by Irwin Silber

American Industrial Ballads

Perhaps the single greatest shortcoming of America's "popular" music (the songs of Tin Pan Alley, etc.) is the formula which decrees that ninety-nine percent of our songs must deal with those passions (or lack of them) which light fires between two individual members of the opposite sexes. Granted that there is both a great interest in the subject and a great variety of ways to express either the sorrow or the joy of love, one wishes that the professional song-writer would occasionally consider some other subject also worthy of his efforts.

Of course, every once in a while an exception to prove the rule comes along – and songs like "Sixteen Tons" and "Tzena" and "Davy Crockett" ride the crest of the "Hit Parade" listings for a few months. Many of these exceptions come from folk song or folk song tradition – where the taboos on songs dealing with heroes, fighting, work and countless other subjects are not nearly as rigid. But it will certainly be a fine day for all of us when the creative energies of our talented lyricists and composers are directed at more fully reflecting all of life around us rather than just one part of life – important as that part may be.

Unlike our popular music, American folk song has never suffered from the restriction of subjects. Love, politics, death, taxes, work, and fun are equally important to the creators of our folk songs. Songs of love and labor are

easily the two leading subjects in the folk songs of most countries. But this is only natural, since nothing yet has come along to replace either occupation or procreation as the two most important pursuits of human beings.

The songs in this album have to do with occupation. They are called a collection of Industrial Folk Songs because most of them were written and sung as a result of the great industrialization of our country over the past hundred years. Some are hard-luck and hard-times songs. Some are frank propaganda pieces designed to inspire people to a particular action. Many are struggle songs, born out of some of the bitter class conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s. There are a few "industrial accident" songs ("The Blind Fiddler," "Casey Jones," and "He Lies in the American Land") and some which defy any such classification but are obviously products of our industrial era.

Most of the songs in this album can be dated as having been written in the last seventy-five years. More than half of them have been composed since 1920. They provide a matchless documentary of one aspect of the twenty years from 1920-1940 which is reflected nowhere else in our music – and only sparsely in our creative literature.

Three occupations dominate the song selection in this album: coal mining, textile, and farming. This is no accident or caprice. These three pursuits likewise dominate the great body of industrial folk song which exists in our country.

The song tradition among American miners is legendary. George Korson's unparalleled research in this field has documented this marvelous tradition. (See Korson's *Minstrels of the Mine Patch and Coal Dust on the Fiddle* for two excellent works on miners' folk songs.) Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that the coal miners were among the first to be organized on an industry-wide basis. The resulting unity and militancy of the union miners has produced a wonderful heritage of song. It is also true that some of the bitterest conflicts of industrial America have taken place in and around the mine fields. In this short collection alone, two martyrs to the cause of the miners' union are memorialized – Barney Graham and Harry Simms.

The textile workers of the south bring an unusual and interesting influence to bear on their song tradition. Fifty years ago, the families of these textile workers were largely poor mountain folk in the hill country of North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. Margaret Larkin, in an article about Ella May Wiggins (see "Mill Mothers Lament") describes their background this way:

"... they are suddenly confronted with modern industrialism, a giant that sprang to life in the South full grown. Within their time the textile mills have been built. Mill agents searched them

out on their poor, rocky farms. They learned to adjust their leisurely, disorderly life to the regimented order of the mill. They began to want things the people around them had. They took wage cuts; they felt the iron of the speed-up system. They found poverty in the midst of plenty more bitter than the communal poverty in the hills. Then a strike, and swift, brutal experience of a struggle with the boss and the 'law.' No wonder it all burst out in song, and that the songs bear that primitive beauty that taught poets seldom capture."

These textile workers also brought with them from their mountain farms a common body of folk song expression which was natural and indigenous to the entire textile community. The songs which grew out of the textile strikes and struggles were not "novelties" of strike gimmicks. They were as natural a form of expression for these disoriented hill folk as speaking.

It might seem odd to some to include farm songs in a collection of industrial ballads. But industrialization has had its effect on the American farmer too and the songs in this album reflect that fact. The high point of farmers' struggle against the ravages of industrialization came in the 1890s with the growth of the Populist Movement. "Acres of Clams," "Hayseed Like Me," and "The Farmer is the Man" all come from that period. The other farm songs represented here come from a later period.

A word about the artistic worth of this music. These songs are hard, crude, rough-shaped. They haven't gone through the fine comb of oral tradition of three and four and five generations which frequently make our more traditional folk songs such gems of perfection. But to the folklorist, the roughness and crudity of this near-contemporary expression provide the best insight into the very nature of folk song creation. For here is the folk process at work – right before our eyes. In an earlier age, when folk songs were not collected and recordings and sheet music of folk songs were not immediately published, many of these songs would have been lost forever. But these songs were collected from people – not those who remembered hearing them from someone else as children – but people who actually sang them or wrote them in response to the urgencies of their own lives.

There are lines and verses of infinite beauty in these songs – images which will rank with the finest produced in our folk song heritage. The last brief couplet of "Hard Times in the Mill" succinctly sums up the frustrating plight not only of the country-born textile worker, but of all who labor in mine and mill from "can't see to can't see."

Ain't it enough to break your heart?
Hafta work all day and at night it's dark.

For many years these folk songs were looked at askance by traditional scholars and folklorists. We will never

know how many of these songs were irretrievably lost because they did not meet the strict and arbitrary definitions imposed by folk song collectors. In recent years, however, as folk song and folklore have moved out of the domain of an interesting hobby and into the area of historical and sociological research, this body of protest material has achieved a new respectability. The ground-breaking work of many of the WPA folklore projects in the 'thirties was most helpful in this respect. The work of The Almanac Singers and, after them, of People's Songs and People's Artists helped keep alive the interest in this vital portion of our music. Individuals like Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, Zilphia Horton, Waldemar Hille, and many others early recognized the lasting value of these songs and helped to popularize them. And now John Greenway has collected many of these songs and put them into a book which is an indispensable, permanent reference work in the field *American Folksongs of Protest*.

Here on this recording is a brief sampling of America's industrial folk song. The songs are sung by Pete Seeger – and a better choice couldn't have been made. No American folk singer approaches these songs with greater warmth, affection, understanding, and humility. I am certain that Aunt Molly Jackson, Ella May Wiggins, Della Mae Graham, and all the other folk composers who have put a little bit of their lives on these records would be satisfied that Pete Seeger knew what was in their hearts when they wrote their songs.

1. Peg and Awl (1801-1804)

This early song provides an unusual social commentary on the first ravages of industrialization and the ensuing technological unemployment. (See *Folkways Anthology of American Music*, edited by Harry Smith, FP 2953.)

2. The Blind Fiddler (1850)

This haunting ballad comes from the huge storehouse of American folk songs which were treasured and preserved by an Arkansas woman named Emma Dusenberry. Waldemar Hille collected and noted over a hundred songs from Mrs. Dusenberry. Perhaps Mrs. Dusenberry sang this song with deeper feeling since she was blind herself. "The Blind Fiddler" dates from the second half of the nineteenth century in a period before workman's compensation and other social security measures helped to ease the tragedy of industrial accidents.

3. The Buffalo Skinners (1873)

Some critics have called this the greatest of our western ballads. There are many versions of it, and hardly a collection of cowboy songs exists without some form of the song. Folklorists have traced the roots of "The Buffalo Skinners" as far back as an old English love song called "Caledonia" which later became a sea song called "Canaday-I-O." The sea

song in turn became a Maine loggers' song which is an obvious ancestor of "The Buffalo Skinners."

It happened late one season in the fall of '53.

A preacher of the gospel one morning came to me.

Said he, "My jolly fellow, how would you like to go

To spend one pleasant winter up in Canada-I-O?"

In the tradition of the later song, the winter, journey, and job were far from pleasant.

Our food the dogs would snarl at, our beds were on the snow,

We suffered worse than murderers up in Canada-I-O.

The next trace we have of the song comes from lumberjacks in Michigan who called it "Michigan-I-O." Finally it found its way out to the western plains in the heyday of buffalo hunting. The wanton destruction of the wild herds of buffalo on our western plains was a cruel and wasteful orgy which, in a few short years, deprived the Plains Indians of one of their main sources of food. Small wonder, then, that "the Indians watched to pick us off, while skinning the buffalo."

Jacksboro, Texas, was the capital of the buffalo hunters, reputed to be the meanest and toughest of all cowboys – a legend which this song certainly helps to reinforce. The eminent folklorist John Lomax met an old cowboy who actually claimed to be in the party which left old Crego's "bones to bleach on the range of the buffalo."

"On the way back to Jacksboro [recounts the oldtimer] one of the boys started up a song about the trip and the hard times and old Crego and we all set in to help him. Before we got back to Jacksboro we had shaped it up and the whole crowd could sing it."

4. Eight-hour Day (1886)

The movement for the eight-hour day for American workers is one of the beacon lights in the history of the American labor movement. Starting during the Civil War, the high point of the fight was reached in 1886 when 340,000 workers demonstrated on May 1st in more than a dozen cities. As a result of the demonstration in Chicago, the famous Haymarket Square frame-up ensued. In 1877, four leaders of the eight-hour day movement in Chicago, the "Haymarket martyrs," were executed.

The miners were among the first to win the eight-hour day. Their victory was achieved during the famous strike of 1897 which was fought specifically for that reason.

These two verses are from a longer song called "The Knights of Labor Strike" written by John Hory. (See Korson, *Songs and Ballads of the Anthracite Miner*, and Foner, *American Labor Songs of the 19th Century*.) The tune, known as "Wild Amerikay," is from colonial times.

5. **Hard Times in the Mill** (1890)

This song was learned from the singing of Lessie Crocker, a worker in the knitting mills of Columbia, South Carolina, and a member of Local 252 of the Textile Workers of America. She says, "This song was composed by my mother and some of the old spoolers in the mill forty years ago."

The melody is "Hard Times in Cryderville Jail," which seems most appropriate for the subject. About "Cryderville Jail," Woody Guthrie comments:

"Reckon this is one of the best jail house songs I know. There is 'Birmingham Jail,' but it don't say enough. There's the 'Prisoner's Song,' but it don't say much either. There's 'Moonlight and Skies,' but it brags a little too much on the deputies . . . 'Cryderville Jail' ain't no sissy song. If you can't ride it like you find it, why just leave it along. A man will pop up and sing it once in a while...a real man."

6. **Roll Down the Line** (1890)

In the 1890s, in the mining country of eastern Tennessee, convict labor was used in the mines to force the miners' union to accept company terms. Over a period of months open warfare broke out between the miners and the National Guard. The miners actually took over the mines and released the convicts. Eventually, the miners were starved into submission and defeated in battle. Their leaders went to prison.

This song, from the town of Coal Creek, comes from that intense struggle. Apparently it is a miner's version of a song which was sung by the Negro convicts who were working the mine. As presented here, it is from the singing of Uncle Dave Macon, long a star on Nashville's Grand Old Opry radio program. Uncle Dave was a young man at the time of the Coal Creek Rebellion, and probably learned the song first hand.

7. **Hayseed Like Me** (1890-1896)

The period from 1890-1896 was highlighted by the most successful of a long string of unsuccessful third party movements in the United States. During these years, The People's Party, better known as The Populists, made a determined bid for political power which nearly frightened the wits out of the two old parties and had a lasting effect in legislation benefiting the farmer and the laborer.

The Populists grew out of a number of existing groups including the National Union Labor Party, The Farmers Alliance, and the Greenback Party. It was primarily a farmers' party and represented the protest of the small farmer against the ravages of monopolies and the railroads. In the election of 1892 it polled better than a million votes, which would be equivalent to some five million votes today. In the course of its few years it elected four governors of mid-western states, a few United States Senators and dozens of Congressmen.

It was a singing movement with all of the wonderful singing tradition of all protest movements, as well as the farmers' own song heritage. This song was one of the most popular of the Populists' campaign ballads.

The lyric first appeared in The Farmers Alliance, the newspaper of the Populist organization of the same name, in 1890. The tune, "Old Rosin the Beau," was a perennial in nineteenth century political song, serving among others, William Henry Harrison, Henry Clay, James K. Polk, and Abraham Lincoln.

8. **The Farmer is the Man** (1890-1896)

The most famous and most lasting of the songs inspired by the Populist movement is "The Farmer is the Man." Its lyrics sum up, far better than any of the Populist tracts and pamphlets, the plight of the farmers in the 1890s. That it has lasted and is still popular today among farmers is as much a reflection of the continued problems of our farmers as it is a tribute to the quality of the song itself.

9. **Come All You Hardy Miners** (1900-1910)

Collected by Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle from the singing of Finlay "Red Ore" Donaldson of Bell County, Kentucky.

This early miners' union song apparently dates from the period around the turn of the century when John White was the president of the United Mine Workers of America. Interestingly enough, John White, after a short term in office, subsequently deserted the miners' union and eventually wound up working for the coal companies.

10. **He Lies in the American Land** (1900)

Words and music: Andrew Kovaly.

This song was written around the turn of the century by Andrew Kovaly, a Slovakian steel worker of Pittsburgh. Jacob A. Evanson, in Pennsylvania Songs and Legends, quotes the story of the song in Kovaly's own words:

"I was a young foreman in a Bessemer mill here in McKeesport. A very good friend of mine, a member of my crew, had saved enough money to send to Slovakia for his family. While they were on their way to America he was killed before my eyes, under an ingot buggy. I tried to grab him but it was too late. It was terrible. I felt so bad that when I met his wife and little children at the railroad station I hardly knew how to break the sad news to them. Then I made this song. My friend was very proud of America, and it was with pride and happiness that he looked forward to raising his children as Americans. The song made me feel better, and also my friend's wife. But she cried very hard. I have never forgotten it."

11. **Casey Jones** (1906)

Legend has it that the train wreck commemorated by this famous ballad is

the worst disaster in railroad history. In point of fact, the actual circumstances surrounding Casey Jones's famous last ride are far different than the song would lead us to believe. The train, hardly going to San Francisco, was the Illinois Central Cannonball Express running south from Memphis, Tennessee, to Canton, Mississippi. The wreck was bad enough, but it was far from a case of two locomotives meeting head on and what Carl Sandburg calls "a helluva way to run a railroad." Casey's train smacked into some boxcars which were being moved off the main line into a siding near the town of Vaughn, Mississippi.

Casey Jones was born John Luther Jones near the town of Cayce, Kentucky, and he got the nickname Casey from his home town. Many ballads of Casey Jones sprang up after the accident which occurred the night of April 29, 1906. In one form or another, these ballads picked up stray verses from other songs and travelled around the country.

A couple of vaudevillians, Tallifero Sibert and Eddie Newton, after hearing the folk ballad, composed a popular song which they copyrighted in 1909. It soon swept the country and, pretty much in this form, has retained its popularity over the years. The martyred Wobbly troubadour, Joe Hill, wrote an enormously popular parody a few years later in which Casey was depicted as a strike-breaker who kept his Southern Pacific train running during a strike. Incidentally, people who knew her say that the slighting references to Mrs. Casey Jones's "other papa on the Salt Lake Line" is as far from the truth as possible. The ballad which immortalized the heroic engineer who died with his hand on the throttle has left poor Mrs. Casey Jones a lasting victim to typical masculine prejudice.

12. **Let Them Wear Their Watches** (Fine 1910)

Here's another textile workers' song - hard, bitter, and unadorned, like the life described. But then a moment of beautiful and profound poetry comes out of these depths, a simple four-line rhyme from which the title of the song is derived. Will Geer heard a woman in the West Virginia mountains singing this song and he wrote it down. She said she had made it up herself to the much parodied "Warren Harding's Widow."

13. **Cotton Mill Colic** (1926)

There are many verses to this cotton mill colic (complaint) which probably dates from the mid-1920s. One interesting verse says:

Twelve dollars a week is all I get,
How in the heck can I live on that?
I got a wife and fourteen kids,
We all got to sleep on two bedsteads.
Patches on my breeches, hole in my hat,
Ain't had a shave since my wife got fat.
No use to colic, they're all that way.
Can't get the money to move away.

14. **Seven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat** (1929)

Bob Miller and Emma Dermer have copyrighted (1929) "Leven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat," which seems to be closely related to this sharecropper's song. In *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, Woody quotes "Sampson Pittman, talking about these cotton-farmer blues he made up," as follows:

"These blues was composed in nineteen and twenty-seven on the condition of the farmers and on the shortness of their cotton. I thought it was very necessary to put out a record of these things. I composed them of the necessity of the farmers. It was very popular among everyone that heard it and became to be well known. The town merchants laughed to think of such a song being composed."

Subsequent parodies on the song have been interesting. The Almanac Singers wrote a consumer song to the tune and called it "Fifty Cent Butter and Fifty Cent Meat" (1940). That was changed to eighty cents in 1946, and has kept going up each year. I've heard singers get all out of breath trying to keep up with rising prices and sing this song at the same time.

15. **Mill Mother's Lament** (1929)

Among the bloody battles which illuminate the bitter struggles in the textile mills of the south is the strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929. On September 14, 1929, at the height of the conflict, a slight, twenty-nine-year-old woman was murdered by an armed company mob. Her name was Ella May Wiggins, who wrote "song ballads" for her union and the strike.

"I'm the mother of nine," she said. 'Four of them died with whooping cough, all at once. I was working nights and nobody to do for them, only Myrtle. She's eleven and a sight of help. I asked the super to put me on day shift so I could tend 'em, but he wouldn't. I don't know why. So I had to quit my job and then there wasn't any money for medicine, so they just died. I never could do anything for my children, not even to keep 'em alive, it seems. That's why I'm for the union, so's I can do better for them.'" (Margaret Larkin, "Ella May Wiggins and Songs of the Gastonia Textile Strike." Sing Out, vol. 5, no. 4.)

This succinct and bitter commentary Ella May put into a song, "Mill Mother's Lament." When Ella May was lowered into her grave, before the eyes of hundreds of her fellow union members who had come to pay their last respects, one of the workers sang her song.

16. **Fare Ye Well, Old Ely Branch** (1930)

The hard-bitten, hard-hitting songs of Aunt Molly Jackson sum up a whole period in the coal mines of Kentucky during the first years of the Depression. If proof is still needed that most of our fiery American radicals are home-grown, Aunt Molly Jackson is the living proof. Born in 1880 in Clay County, Kentucky, Aunt Molly comes from a

family which lived in Clay County for seven generations.

"I've been framed up and accused of being a Red," says Aunt Molly, "when I did not understand what they meant. I never heard told of a Communist until after I left Kentucky – then I had passed fifty – but they called me a Red. I got all of my progressive ideas from my hard, tough struggles, and nowhere else." (John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*.)

About "Fare Ye Well, Old Ely Branch," which was composed sometime around 1930 or 1931, Aunt Molly says:

"Old Hughes, the coal operator up at Ely Branch, had been expecting a strike for two weeks' back pay, so he didn't order nothing for the commissary. There was nothing left but dried beef and canned tomatoes. Now my husband liked a lot to eat, and since you can't buy food nowhere else excepting at the commissary, he decided we got to leave. He was a machinist and was missed more than any other one of the men. Also we had just moved into our first new house. It was all nice and wallpapered up, and golly, I felt sorry to leave. So I composed this piece and went down and dropped it by the spring where all the women had to go to get water, so that it would get around without no one knowing who wrote it. But Mrs. Burrow, she saw me and said, 'What's that you dropping down? A love letter?' So I showed it to her and told her, 'Don't you say nothing about who wrote it.' But Jack Welsh's wife, she knew my handwriting 'cause I'd writ some letters for here, and pretty soon to my house come John Yager, the bookkeeper down at the store. He says, 'I'll give you \$5.00 if you make up a tune to that.' So I sat right down and sang out a tune right off. Later, after we moved, old Hughes met me and said, 'You didn't do me no harm by that song. I printed it up and made fifty dollars selling copies at twenty cents apiece to the men.'"*(Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People.)*

17. Beans, Bacon, and Gravy (1931)

There are a number of claimants for authorship of this famous Depression song, according to John Greenway, but, like so many good folk songs, it probably grew over the years being polished by any number of Depression-weary workers who could laugh the bitter laughter of irony – so often a man's best friend when times are hard.

18. The Death of Harry Simms (1932)

Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, professor of folklore at NYU and the University of Tennessee, tells the story behind this ballad. The following is taken from *The People's Song Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 6-7.

"The strike in the soft coal camps in Bell County, Kentucky, first started in 1931. . . .

"Harry Simms, a young organizer from Springfield, Massachusetts, nineteen years old, as tender-hearted as he was strong-minded, was at this

time organizing in the South. Sometime in the winter of 1931 he came to Pineville and worked energetically and tirelessly among the young people of the NMU (National Miners Union). He took an active part in the leadership of the strike. He made powerful speech after powerful speech. 'Spell-binder,' the miners called him. A good part of the time he stayed with Jim Garland, one of the main spark plugs of the strike, and with Tilmon Cadle, another native leader, and with other miners and their families. . . .

"Word, in the course of the strike, came to the miners in Pineville that their friends outside of Kentucky were sending in five truckloads of food and clothing. These people wanted to test the democracy of Kentucky and to show that they could, as friends of the miners, come into this feudal area and distribute relief. They had called for a demonstration of the miners on the day of the arrival of the trucks and Harry Simms had been chosen to lead the miners out of Brush Creek to Pineville to get their share of relief. . . .

"Jim Garland, who loved Harry Simms as a brother, warned the latter against going up Brush Creek because gun-thugs were always running that road. Simms replied, 'It's my job to lead the men to Pineville, and gun-thugs or no gun-thugs, I'll go. If they pop me off, don't waste time grieving after me, but keep right on going. We'll win.' In the company of Green Lawson he set out. As they were walking up the road going to Brush Creek the jitney bus that runs along the railroad came along with two gun-thugs aboard. As soon as they spotted the two miners they jumped off the bus, their six-shooters smoking. Harry Simms fell. He was taken to the hospital at Barbourville. Four days later he died. On the very same day that he lay dead in Barbourville, the two gun-thugs were acquitted under the protection of 900 state troopers and 175 special police.

"Despite all their troops and guns and state of martial law, the police at Barbourville were so terrified of a demonstration of the miners at this flagrant murder that they would not turn the body over to a separate person; only to a committee of three. They allowed no funeral to be held. 'They was to be no talkin', no walkin', no marchin' behind that corpse there. The Committee was to put him on a train and get him out of there.' The Committee – Tilmon Cadle, Gertrude Hessler, Jeff Franz put the body of the radiant youth on the train to New York. He lay in state at a Coliseum in Manhattan. Jim Garland told the great crowds of mourners how Harry Simms had labored so unselfishly and so courageously in the bloody coalfields of Bell County, Kentucky. And then Jim wrote this song to his friend."

19. Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues (1932)

Not only is this blues from the textile mills of Winnsboro, North Carolina, one of the best-known of the cotton mill songs, but it has also inspired subsequent songs. "The Marathon

Electric Blues" written in 1952 by striking workers at the Marathon Electric Plant in Wausau, Wisconsin, is obviously inspired by this song – possibly through southern textile workers who emigrated northward during the Depression.

20. Ballad of Barney Graham (1933)

The history of American labor is filled with pages of violence, blood-letting, murder, and martyrs. Barney Graham was the organizer of the miners in the famous Davidson-Wilder strike of 1933 (see notes for "My Children are Seven in Number," Track 22). At the height of the strike, the company imported a Chicago gun-thug who murdered Barney Graham in broad daylight on the streets of Wilder. The song was composed by Barney's daughter, Della Mae.

21. My Children are Seven in Number

Words: Eleanor Kellogg
Music: "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean"

In the winter of 1933, the coal miners of the twin valley towns of Davidson and Wilder in Tennessee went on strike. The one-industry towns were completely company-run. The miners were paid in scrip which could only be used at the company store. In fact, when the miners struck, the company turned off the electricity in town and took the doors off the miners' homes.

But the miners held out. The company then turned the struggle into a lockout – importing hired strike-breakers at better pay than the union had ever received, and protecting them with the National Guard.

Leader of the striking miners was Barney Graham. At the end of April, Barney was shot by a Chicago gangster specifically brought in by the company for the job.

A number of songs came out of this bitter strike in two little mining towns in Tennessee. Few labor songs have ever summed up the goals of a strike more precisely than this strangely moving ballad.

22. Raggedy (1936)

Words: John Handcox
Music: "How Beautiful Heaven Would Be"

John Handcox was a Negro sharecropper and lay preacher – and an organizer for the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in 1936. Handcox wrote a number of songs for the sharecroppers, whose singing tradition called for and inspired hymns and ballads for their union. "There Are Mean Things Happening in This Land" and "The Man Frank Weems" are two of Handcox's other compositions which were well-known among the sharecroppers.

23. Pittsburgh Town

Words: Woody Guthrie
Music: "Crawdad"

Pete Seeger tells the following story of the origin of this ballad:

"The song was made pretty much by Woody Guthrie, the Okies' balladist. That was back in the summer of 1941 when he and I and two other fellows – a jalopyful of modern troubadours – stopped in Pittsburgh on a country-wide junket. The early war boom was on, and Pittsburgh was an awesome sight. This song . . . was the result of communal effort, but mostly Woody Guthrie's."

Today, under the title of "Pittsburgh is a Great Old Town," the song is very popular in Pittsburgh and, in one version, is actually sung by Pittsburgh children in the public schools. Needless to say, this "official" version does not include the inspired pun on the Jones and Loughlin Steel Company, nor, in fact, much of the original but the tune and general construction.

24. Sixty Per Cent

Words and Music: Les Rice

Les Rice, the composer of this song, is a New York State apple farmer and one-time president of the Ulster County chapter of the Farmers Union. His songs have made him well-known to farmers throughout the northeast. Perhaps his most well-known composition is "Banks of Marble" which achieved great popularity among union members throughout the country and even in Canada, where new verses have been found.

This song, written around 1948-49, deals with the farmer's perennial problem of "parity" and how it affects the farmer's life.

I'm sixty per cent an American,
I'm sixty per cent a man.
That's what parity says I am,
That's the law of the land.
Now, do I work sixty per cent of each day?

Eat sixty per cent of my meals?
And does my truck take me into town
On sixty per cent of it's wheels?

Now will my chicks be content to eat
Just sixty per cent of their mash?
And will the middleman give my throat
Just sixty per cent of a slash?
Now all you workers in city and town,
I know your budget's a mess;
But when you get down to that last lousy buck,
Remember I've forty cents less!

Credits:

Originally issued in 1956 as Folkways
FH 5251
Notes by Irwin Silber
Reissue edited and annotated by
Irwin Silber
Reissue supervised by Anthony Seeger
and Matt Walters
Remastered by Alan Yoshida, The
Mastering Lab, Hollywood, California
Cover design by Carol Hardy
Photos courtesy of George Meany
Memorial Archives