



CLASSIC AMERICAN BALLADS

from SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS



Smithsonian Folkways

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from SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

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Compiled and annotated by Jeff Place, Katie Ortiz, and Max Smith

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INTRODUCTION

Among American record labels, Folkways Records (now Smithsonian Folkways) has been one of the few to continuously produce and distribute high-quality recordings of American folk music. Folkways founder Moses Asch made a commitment to artists that their Folkways recordings would never go out of print. In 2002, Smithsonian Folkways initiated its *Classic* series with the hope that these compilations would serve as “doors” for listeners into the Smithsonian Folkways Collection, which includes many artists and styles. This particular album focuses on ballads composed in the United States about events that took place over the last three centuries. The recordings date predominantly from the 1940s to 1960s.

Immigrants from the British Isles to the United States brought their ballads with them. For many years, scholars turned their attention to these ballads—although often it was the poetry in the lyrics that interested the academics more than the music. Ballad scholar Francis James Child undertook to catalog variant forms of 305 ballads originally from the British Isles, trying to find the “most pure” forms of these songs. Olive Dame Campbell, teaching in western North Carolina, discovered that many of the “isolated” mountain residents still remembered the old ballads. She and Cecil Sharp collected songs there and often found ballads that had ceased to be sung in England and Scotland.

One British tradition was the “broadside” ballad. Composed about current newsworthy events in the country and sold for pennies, broadsides served as a method of transmitting news from place to place. They could be about a murder or a satire of a disliked member of the aristocracy. Many songs and rhymes we know today, such as “Froggie Went A-Courting” and “Little Jack Horner,” started out as political satires; their original meaning lost, they have become just beloved children’s rhymes.

Upon coming to this country, immigrant bards began to adopt the ballad form to write broadsides about events here. The earliest one on this album is the Colonial-era ballad “Springfield Mountain.” In 1950, ballad scholar Malcolm Laws (1919–) published a collection of songs in which he cataloged ballads composed in the United States (he called them “Native American” ballads) the same way Child had done for the British ballads. He assigned each song a letter and number, grouping songs by type and linking variants of the same song. These designations became a song’s “Laws number.” The majority of the songs on this album were in his collection and helped inspire this compilation.

In the days before radio, television, and the Internet, there were fewer avenues for spreading the word of spectacular events—the kinds of news stories that would go “viral” today. But certain stories captivated the American imagination—the Hindenburg disaster, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and the wreck of the “Old 97” train in Danville, Virginia. Americans followed the news of a spelunker, Floyd Collins, trapped in a Kentucky cave; the freezing death of a young girl in Maine on New Year’s Eve inspired a ballad and a line of children’s dolls. Grisly crimes, like the murder of Pearl Bryan in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, got huge press coverage, and entrepreneurial ballad writers jumped right in with new songs to cater to the public’s thirst for details.

In the early 20th century, furniture manufacturers who sold record players mounted in fine wooden cabinets began to manufacture companion records as well. In the 1920s, these companies realized that the record-buying public loved songs of “tragedy and death,” and that “folk” material on record would make money for them. Some of the top-selling records of the decade were ballads about disasters. Vernon Dalhart’s version of the ballad “The Wreck of the Old 97” is considered the

first million-selling country music record. Another top seller was Ernest Stoneman's 1924 recording "The Sinking of the Titanic."

Record producers would commission songwriters to write a ballad in a timely fashion about a current news event and would rush the record to market. In one such case, record executive Polk Brockman contracted songwriter Andrew Jenkins to compose a song about the sensational story of Floyd Collins' entrapment in Sand Cave, Kentucky. Brockman was not disappointed with the subsequent record sales.



Many of these "topical" ballads have become American folk songs, thought to be anonymous in composition even though they are of recent vintage, and during the "folk song revival" of the 1950s and 1960s, entered performer's repertoires.

Drawn from among the hundreds of folk albums Moses Asch released during his career, this collection includes some of the important ballads created in the United States over the last 250 years.

Jeff Place, 2014

THE SONGS



BANKS OF THE OHIO

Doc Watson, vocal and guitar; Bill Monroe, vocal and mandolin

(Law's F5; from Smithsonian Folkways 40064, 1993; recorded May 17, 1963, at the Ash Grove in Los Angeles by Ralph Rinzler)

“Banks of the Ohio” is a 19th-century murder ballad, and one of the most popular of the genre. It has roots in the British ballad, “The Wexford Girl,” but in this version, the crime takes place on the Ohio River. The narrator brings his lover for a stroll along the riverbank, and when she rejects his marriage proposal, he murders her. The first commercial recording of the song was the 1927 release by Red Patterson’s Piedmont Log Rollers.

Doc Watson (1923–2012) was born in Stoney Fork Township, North Carolina (later known as Deep Gap), and was one of the best acoustic guitar players of the 20th century.

Bill Monroe (1911–96) was the “Father of Bluegrass.” In the 1930s he performed with his brother Charlie and sometimes also his brother Birch as the Monroe Brothers. He had a long career, most famously with the Blue Grass Boys. Many of the great musicians who passed through the Blue Grass Boys went on to start groups of their own and spread bluegrass music all over the country.

BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE

Pete Seeger, vocal and banjo

(Laws C20; also known as “The Belle of Long Lake,” “The Rackets Around Blue Mountain Lake”; from Folkways 5003, 1954/ Smithsonian Folkways 40153, 2006; recorded early 1950s)

Blue Mountain Lake is located in the Adirondacks in northeast New York State, and the song is about a fight in a lumber camp in that region. Folklorist Helen Hartness Flanders, a specialist in songs of the northeastern United States, heard this ballad at the home of Herbert Haley, and he spoke of it as “Dorset’s Song.” Haley remembered that Charlie Dorset, who played a fife and was a lumberman on Long Lake, just north of Blue Mountain Lake, made up the song about a fight. The lumber crew boss was named Griffith (Flanders 1939, 175); in other versions of the song the boss is named Mitchell.

Folklorist Frank Warner also collected a version of the song in the Adirondacks. He had met people who knew the Sullivan Brothers and Jim Lou—characters in the song who worked together at the lumber camp and were involved in the fight—and knew that Bill Mitchell—according to the song, the man who was beat up—had a bad reputation (Warner 1952). Apparently the lumber company was the Griffin Company in Glens Falls, New York.

Pete Seeger (1919–2014) was the most significant American folksinger of the 20th century. Pete grew up surrounded by music. His father was the eminent musicologist Charles Seeger, and his mother Constance was a concert violinist. In addition, his siblings Mike, Peggy, and Penny and various cousins and relatives by marriage have had successful recording careers.

His series *American Favorite Ballads* included over 100 of the best known American folk songs. Seeger was one of the major figures in the folk song revival and an important influence on many of the other musicians in the genre. He first recorded this song on 78 rpm disc for Asch in an album called *Hudson Valley Songs*.



CLAUDE ALLEN

Hobart Smith, vocal and guitar

(Laws E6; from Folkways 2390, 1964; recorded September 6, 1963, in New York by Peter Siegel)

This ballad is about Floyd and Claude Allen, a father and son who were sentenced to death for their involvement in a 1912 courtroom shooting in Hillsville, Virginia. Floyd Allen (born 1856) was being tried for assaulting a deputy who had arrested Allen's nephews without a warrant (Rinzler 1961). The Allens had made a pact among themselves that any one of them would die before being imprisoned. According to one account of the trial, Floyd told the judge he'd kill him if he was sentenced. After the judge, Thornton I. Massie, pronounced sentence, Floyd pulled out his weapon and killed Massie (*Roanoke Times*, March 15, 1912). Other accounts say no one knows who fired the first shot, but before the fray was over no fewer than 200 shots had been fired. In any event, Floyd's son Claude (born 1889) was accused of shooting and killing the judge, with Floyd the alleged accomplice in the gunfight. Floyd's brother Sidney (Sidna) was also involved. A separate ballad called "Sidna Allen" was written about the events.

To fill an urban public's demand for a good story, the *New York Times* concocted a tale of a band of 20 violent mountaineers storming the courtroom in an attempt to rescue Floyd (September 15, 1912). Throughout the Allens' trial, false newspaper stories held public opinion in thrall and, despite a lack of hard evidence, Floyd and Claude were convicted and sentenced to death. Before their executions, both wrote lengthy statements professing their innocence. Claude's statement reads: "My last words to the people of Virginia are: I knew absolutely nothing of any conspiracy and do not believe there was one. I did not fire the first shot and did not shoot until my father had been shot at. I did not kill Judge Massie. Those who have wronged me I forgive and hope we shall meet in a better world where sorrow is never known. Pray God's blessing upon our dear old State and to all her people I say farewell. I am with a clear conscience."

Hobart Smith (1897–1965) was a multi-instrumentalist from Saltville, Virginia. A lifelong

musician, Smith played locally in southwest Virginia, including the well-known White Top Festival during the 1930s. Along with his sister Texas Gladden, he was invited to perform at the Roosevelt White House. Alan Lomax recorded both Smith and Gladden for the Library of Congress in 1942. This recording comes from a series of concerts presented by the Friends of Old Time Music in New York.

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COLE YOUNGER

Dock Boggs, vocal and banjo

(Laws E3; from Folkways 2392, 1965/ Smithsonian Folkways 40108, 1998; recorded June 3, 1964, in Norton, Virginia, by Mike Seeger)

Cole Younger was born in 1844 in Missouri. During the Civil War, he joined a group of guerilla fighters which included Frank James. Under their leader William Clarke Quantrill, they conducted raids and attacks on Union troops, and both Younger and James went on to serve in the Confederate Army. When they returned home after the war, they found that their military service left them disenfranchised. The Younger and James families then joined forces and turned to crime to support themselves. For this, their wartime skills came in handy. They became notorious as bank robbers, and from 1871 through 1876 the men lived as successful outlaws. Their bold crimes served as the stuff of legends, later inspiring songs and stories from people who read about them in newspapers all over the nation.

In September 1876, however, the James-Younger band's successful streak came to a fateful end. The group decided to target a bank in Northfield, Minnesota, perhaps because it was connected to the former Union general Benjamin Butler. Unlike their many triumphant robberies executed before, this attempt failed miserably. The cashier who refused to hand over the money was shot, and the robbers fled empty-handed. In the wake of previous crimes, they had always been able to rely on



the sympathy of neighbors and other former guerilla fighters to hide them from law enforcement. In this instance, though, the townspeople turned on the outlaws and helped to hunt them down. Frank and Jesse James escaped, but all three Younger boys were caught and imprisoned for life (Anderson 1972). Cole was eventually granted a full pardon in 1903, at which point he returned home. In his later years, he partnered with Frank James again in the James-Younger Wild West Show. He also wrote an autobiography, *The Story of Cole Younger by Himself*.



The ballad was first recorded by Marc Williams for Brunswick in 1930. Cowboy singer Edward Crain's recording was included in the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and thus introduced many later singers to the song.

Moran Lee "Dock" Boggs (1898–1971) was from Norton, a coal-mining town in the Virginia panhandle. Boggs was influenced by the African American music in his region, and his banjo playing has a blues feel to it. After recording for Brunswick Records, Boggs had hoped a music career might help him avoid the mines; instead he worked as a miner most of his life, retiring in 1952. He was rediscovered by Mike Seeger in the 1960s and played various folk festivals, including the 1963 Newport Folk Festival and the 1969 Festival of American Folklife (Place 1997).



COWBOY'S LAMENT (STREETS OF LAREDO)

Buck Ramsey, vocal and guitar

(Laws B1; also known as "Streets of Laredo," "St. James Infirmary," "St. James Hospital," "Gambler's Blues," and "Young Trooper Cut Down in His Prime"; from Smithsonian Folkways 50002; recorded January 27, 1995, at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering, Elko, Nevada)

"Cowboy's Lament" is the Western cousin of a folk song from England, "The Unfortunate Rake," which has been around for many centuries. The rake was a young soldier "draped in white linen" who was dying from mercury poisoning from a treatment for syphilis. "The Unfortunate Rake" itself is related to earlier ballads from the British Isles, "The Bard of Armagh" and "Handful of Laurel," the latter also about a syphilis-inflicted youth. The song has appeared as the New Orleans barroom ballad "St. James Infirmary/Hospital." As "Streets of Laredo" it has become an American folk song standard recorded by over 100 American musicians and taught in schools and summer camps, where the students are unaware of its origins. The version known as "Streets of Laredo" was written by cowboy Frances Henry Maynard and published in 1876.

Texan Buck Ramsey (1938–98) was a singer, working cowboy, and roughrider at ranches along the Canadian River. In 1963, he was thrown from a horse and was paralyzed. He spent his remaining years in a wheelchair and became a writer, singer, poet, and songwriter. He attended the yearly Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada. In 1995 he was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Smithsonian Folkways released his recording *Hittin' the Trail* in 2005.

BOLL WEEVIL

Sam Hinton, vocal and guitar

(Laws 117; from Folkways 7548, 1972)



The boll weevil is a small insect that migrated north from Central America to the American South around 1892, inflicting devastating damage to the cotton crop. With such a profound effect on farmers and farmworkers, the plague became an obvious subject for songs, such as: “Dixie Boll Weevil” (John Carson, 1924); “The Boll Weevil” (Jaybird Coleman, 1927); “Boll Weevil” (Lindsay and Connor, 1928); “Boll Weevil Rag” (Charles Griffin, 1934); “Boll Weevil Been Here” (Willie Williams, 1936); and “Boll Weevil Blues” (Oscar Woods, 1940). Blues legend Charlie Patton recorded his “Mississippi Bowaevil Blues” in 1929.

Over the years a standard version of a song containing a dialog between a farmer and the weevil has emerged, and it is now considered an American folk song. Carl Sandburg remembered first hearing John Lomax singing that version around 1920 (Sandburg 1927, 8). Lead Belly performed a similar version with some additional verses. It was recorded many times during the folk song revival, including a popular version by Burl Ives in 1956. Brook Benton’s pop single of “Boll Weevil” in 1961 went to number two on the charts.

Sam Hinton (1917–2009) was a beloved West Coast folksinger and an inspiration to many younger musicians. He recorded 56 songs for the Library of Congress in 1947 and recorded numerous albums for Decca and Folkways during the folk revival, of both children’s and adult folk songs. Hinton was a marine biologist and professor and had a long career at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography before moving to the University of California-San Diego.



DUNCAN AND BRADY

Lead Belly, vocal

(Laws 19; also known as “Brady” and “Been in the Job Too Long”; from Folkways 2014, 1951/ Smithsonian Folkways 40044, 1996; recorded possibly Summer 1947)

“Duncan and Brady” is a popular folk song in both black and white tradition that has been performed by many over the years. The song is based on an actual historical incident. James Brady, a St. Louis policeman, was fatally shot on October 6, 1890, allegedly by a bartender, Harry Duncan, in a fight at the Charles Starkes Saloon, which was in the dangerous Third Police District. Some—including Duncan—thought that Starkes was the shooter, but Duncan was arrested and convicted. His appeals went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, making the case notorious in its day. Duncan was later executed for the crime.

This song, better known as “Brady,” has been found by the Library of Congress at various places. The Lomaxes recorded convicts singing it at Parchman Farm in Mississippi in 1933 and Blind Jessie Harris in Alabama in 1937. It was first recorded commercially by Wilmer Watts and His Lonely Eagles in 1929. Many singers performed it during the folk revival, including Tom Rush and Paul Clayton.

Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) (1888–1949) was one of the 20th century’s most important repositories of traditional American song. After being released from prison in 1934, he recorded a large body of songs for the next 15 years. Many of his songs, including “Brady,” have been learned and performed by others in the years hence. Lead Belly’s version of this song was picked up during the folk revival by singers like Dave Van Ronk and now is considered a standard.

FLOYD COLLINS

*Paul Clayton, vocal and guitar**(Laws G22; also known as "The Death of Floyd Collins"; from Folkways 2007, 1957)*

This ballad was commissioned by record executive Polk Brockman in Atlanta. Brockman asked songwriter Blind Andrew Jenkins if he could compose a song about the Floyd Collins tragedy, in the hopes the record would allow the Okeh record company to cash in on the nationwide interest in the Collins case.



Collins (1887–1925) was adept at exploring caves in the area around Mammoth Caves, Kentucky. As a result of his discoveries, some caves were opened as tourist destinations. On one expedition, on January 30, 1925, in Sand Cave, a boulder pinned his left leg, and he was trapped. As attempts were made to rescue him, thousands of spectators gathered near the mouth of the cave awaiting news; millions more listened on radio, and the national press followed the story in detail. Shortly after rescuers located Collins, a cave-in on February 4 sealed the entrance. They then dug an alternate shaft, but Collins died before they reached him. The ordeal lasted 17 days. His family later recovered his body for a proper burial.

Polk Brockman gave the newly composed song to local Atlanta fiddler John Carson to record, but Vernon Dalhart's recording soon thereafter resulted in bigger sales. Dalhart was a light opera singer whose real name was Marion Try Slaughter; he had taken his stage name from two Texas towns he had lived in but recorded under many pseudonyms. Dalhart had a successful career in the 1920s recording country ballads. He was so prolific no one record company could handle his output. His recordings of topical ballads sold by the millions.

Paul Clayton (1933–67) was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and trained as a folklorist at the University of Virginia. He was one of the major early figures in the 1950s Greenwich Village folk revival and an influence on Bob Dylan. Dylan modified the tune to Clayton's "Who'll Buy

Your Chickens When I'm Gone" into his classic "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright." Clayton recorded for six record labels and the Library of Congress. Although his career was short, he left behind a strong recorded legacy of the songs he had collected all over North America.

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FRANKIE AND JOHNNY

*Rolf Cahn, guitar; Eric Von Schmidt, vocal and guitar
(Laws 13; also known as "Frankie Baker" and "Frankie and Albert"; from Folkways 2417, 1961; recorded May 15, 1960)*



The song "Frankie and Johnny" has become an American folk standard. In October 1899, a murder took place in a St. Louis apartment (St. Louis murders have inspired multiple ballads, such as "Duncan and Brady"). Frankie Baker (1876–1952) killed her lover Al "Albert" Britt in a jealous rage after he went to a dance with another woman, Nelly Bly. In some lyrics, Frankie was a prostitute and Al, her pimp. The version known as "Frankie and Johnny" was created by Tin Pan Alley composer Hughie Cannon in 1904. It was so popular that by the 1920s, folklorists like Carl Sandburg were collecting it and publishing it in folk song collections. Sandburg included a set of songs based on the character of Frankie in his *American Songbag*. He felt the song pre-dated the 1899 crime (Sandburg 1927, 75); although the "wronged" woman and the crime of passion were undoubtedly themes in many ballads, this version of "Frankie and Johnny" begins with Cannon's composition.

Folk musician Rolf Cahn (1924–94) was adept at playing both country blues and flamenco, and at one point he accompanied flamenco singer Chinin de Triana. He was a well-known singer in the San Francisco Bay area and recorded a number of albums during the folk song revival. Eric Von Schmidt (1931–2007) was one of the folksingers associated with the Cambridge (Mass.) folk scene during the 1960s folk song revival. A cited influence on Bob Dylan, Von Schmidt was also a painter and illustrator. He made albums of traditional folk songs and his own compositions throughout the 1960s and 1970s.



JOHN HENRY

John Jackson, vocal and guitar

(Larvs I; from Smithsonian Folkways 40181, 2010; recorded October 25, 1997, at The Barns of Wolf Trap, Vienna, Virginia)

“John Henry” in all its variants is arguably the most famous American folk song, and the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archive and Collection alone contains hundreds of versions. Of African American origin, the ballad has made John Henry a mythic character in American culture, epitomizing man against machine.

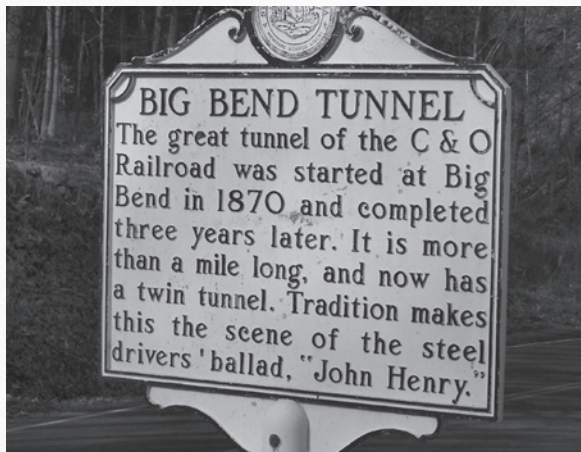
The song deals with the digging of the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia, where the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad was being built in 1872 (Place 1997). John Henry claims that by using a ten-pound hammer, he can dig a tunnel through Big Bend Mountain quicker than a machine. He succeeds but dies of exhaustion.

Research has led to some other theories about the setting of the story and John Henry’s identity—or existence. John Garst (2002) argues that the contest took place at either the Coosa Mountain Tunnel or Oak Mountain Tunnel near Leeds, Alabama, in September 1887. He identifies the hero as a former slave named Henry, based on an eyewitness account documented in the 1920s. Scott Nelson believes the hero of the story to be an African American freedman, John William Henry, a Virginia prisoner hired out to do labor, and places the contest between Talcott and Millboro, Virginia. The “white house” near where Henry is buried could be the white building that stood at the Virginia State Penitentiary at that time (Nelson 2006).

The song has been interpreted many ways; the variants include West Virginia’s Williamson Brothers and Curry’s “Gonna Die with a Hammer in My Hand”; “The Death of John Henry” by Uncle Dave Macon (1870–1952); “New John Henry Blues” by Bill Monroe (1911–96); and

“Spikedriver Blues” by Mississippi John Hurt (1893–1966). Folksinger Josh White devoted an entire side of one of his LPs to versions of the song.

Born in Woodville, Virginia, John Jackson (1924–2002) was an exemplar of the “piedmont blues.” He learned to play guitar and banjo from his father and other members of his extended and highly musical family. In 1949 he and his wife Cora moved to Fairfax Station, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. In 1964 folklorist Chuck Perdue heard him playing and brought him to the attention of Chris Strachwitz, who recorded him extensively for his Arhoolie label. Through the 1960s to the 1990s, Jackson recorded for Rounder and Alligator, and toured Europe and Asia. After his death, Smithsonian Folkways issued a compilation of live concert recordings titled *John Jackson: Rappahannock Blues* (SFW 40181).





II. JESSE JAMES

*Sis Cunningham, vocal and tambourine; Mike Millius, vocal and guitar;
Wes Houston, vocal and bass*

(Laws E2; from Folkways 5315, 1972)

The James Brothers, Jesse and Frank, are probably the best known of the Western outlaws that were celebrated in the 19th and 20th century in books and media. Jesse James (1847–82) and his brother were members of a Confederate guerilla organization that carried on raids against Union forces. After the war, the brothers turned their talents to crime. Based out of Missouri, they formed the James-Younger gang, which robbed trains and banks between 1871 and 1876. After a botched robbery in Northfield, Minnesota, led to the capture and death of some of the members (see track 4), the gang regrouped. Jesse James was killed by gang member Robert Ford to collect a bounty. James is often fictionalized as a “Robin Hood” character rather than presented as a cold-blooded killer.

Agnes “Sis” Cunningham (1909–2004) and her husband Gordon Friesen were the editors and driving force behind *Broadside* magazine. Details about her life can be found in the introduction to Ronald Cohen’s *Wasn’t That a Time* (1995).



BILLY THE KID

Woody Guthrie, vocal and guitar

(from Smithsonian Folkways 40103, 1999; recorded April 19, 1944, in New York by Moses Asch)

Billy the Kid (William H. Bonney) was born 1860 in the New York area. After Bonney’s mother died from tuberculosis in 1874, his stepfather separated Billy and his brother and put them both into foster care. Bonney worked some odd jobs but fell into petty theft and was first arrested in 1875. He managed to escape jail by shimmying up the chimney—an act that changed him from a petty criminal into a fugitive. From that point, his misdemeanors snowballed into larger crimes. He was



18 when he first committed murder. Somewhere between his notoriety as a young outlaw and his short stint as a gunman in the Lincoln County War in New Mexico, he was nicknamed “Billy the Kid” for his gruff reputation and childlike face. Despite the song’s claims, the Kid did not kill 21 men (the number was closer to eight or nine). He was 21 years old when he was shot down by Sheriff Pat Garrett in July 1881.

Billy the Kid was immortalized as the “boy-bandit king.” Somehow he became America’s outlaw sweetheart, a lovable, wayward ruffian yet with a reputation brutal beyond his years. The fascination with the Kid has led to countless versions of his story.

The song was written by Blind Andrew Jenkins (1885–1957) in

January 1927 after he read a current biography of the outlaw. It was recorded by Jenkins and also by the popular singer Vernon Dalhart in 1927.

Woody Guthrie (1912–67) is considered the foremost American folk song composer of the 20th century. His 2,000-plus songs include the American classics “This Land Is Your Land” and “So Long It’s Been Good to Know You” (he used the melody of “Billy the Kid” for part of that song).



13. THE DEATH OF THE LAWSON FAMILY

Glen Neaves, vocal and guitar

(from Folkways 3831, 1968; recorded July 1961 by Eric Davidson)

One of the most notorious murders in the southeastern United States occurred on Christmas Day, 1929. Charlie Lawson (1886–1929), a tobacco farmer from Stokes County, North Carolina, had taken his family to town a few days before the holiday to purchase new clothes and to pose for a family photograph. On Christmas Day, at their home near Lawsonville, North Carolina, Charlie bludgeoned and shot his wife and six children with a shotgun before meticulously placing their heads on pillows. Sparing the life of one son, he then killed himself. Many theories were put forth as to why Charlie, who was known to have a temper but generally thought of as a normal guy, would have done it. The story horrified those who heard the news, and the case became famous. Five thousand people attended the funeral. Charlie Lawson's brother turned the murder site into a tourist attraction, staging elements of the Christmas celebration in the house; people drove from far away to see the place until it was torn down. A tell-all expose was written and a documentary film produced.

Walter Smith, a North Carolina string band musician, penned this song in 1930 and recorded it as "The Murder of the Lawson Family." Due to the spectacular nature of the crime, the record was one of the best sellers of 1930. Smith's group, the Carolina Buddies, also included North Carolina recording artists Posey Rorer and Buster Young.

Glen Neaves (1921–83) was from the small town of Fries, Virginia, and worked at the Fries Mill. Though born in Jefferson, North Carolina, he lived and performed in the musically rich Galax area for over 35 years. He was one of the core members of an old-time group that recorded four albums for Folkways in the 1980s. Eric H. Davidson (1937–) had approached Moses Asch in 1972 with a proposal to record the musicians, known as the Pipers Gap Bluegrass Band, the Bluegrass Buddies, and then the Virginia Mountain Boys. Membership in the group changed over time, but the other core musicians were Cullen Galyean, Ivor Melton, and Bobby Harrison.

NAOMI WISE

*Doug Wallin, vocal and fiddle**(Laws F4; also known as “Omie Wise,” “Naommi Wise,” “jealous Lover”; from Smithsonian Folkways 40013, 1995; recorded 1992–93 in Madison County, North Carolina)*

The ballad “Omie Wise” dates back to the 19th century. It was first published in 1874 in conjunction with a story written by Braxton Craven, president of North Carolina’s Trinity College, about the 1808 murder by Jonathan Lewis of his pregnant lover Naomi Wise in Randolph County, North Carolina (“Omie Wise” 1964).

The real Naomi was born in 1789 and (most likely because she was an orphan) worked for a family, the Adams family, in Randolph County. Jonathan Lewis worked as a clerk in a store owned by Benjamin Elliot in Asheboro, North Carolina, and every weekend he would ride his horse past the Adams farm on his way to visit his family. The story goes that Naomi and John fell in love when he stopped one day to ask her for a drink of water, then helped her carry her bucket back to the house.

From there, the variations in the story take all sorts of twists and turns. Some say the two shared a genuine love until Lewis’ mother urged him to marry a wealthier woman; most claim that Naomi was murdered to cover up a pregnancy out of wedlock; all tell of the pure and beautiful woman who so naively placed her trust in a malicious man’s love.

The only contemporary account available of Naomi Wise comes from a handwritten poem entitled “A true account of Nayomy Wise” by Mary Woods. According to Woods’ poem, and backed by the records for “bastardy bonds” in the Randolph County Papers (located in the North Carolina State Archives), Naomi Wise had borne two children out of wedlock by the time she met Lewis: Nancy and Henry Wise, born in 1799 and 1804 respectively. In Woods’ version of the tale, Naomi became pregnant by Lewis and demanded that he marry her rather than post a bastardy bond. Naomi is still the victim of murder, but she is not the innocent and virginal character in the ballads.

Perhaps the most dramatic telling is the literary version of the tale, written by Craven, and revised and reissued for many years after its initial publication in 1874. (Craven, having mixed feelings on the work, used the pen name Charlie Vernon. The 1888 version bears the name M. Penny.) In the text, the story of Naomi's murder is embellished with long passages on her handsome beauty and innocence, and the purity of a woman's love as second only to God.



The ballad itself (perhaps the first written version) is printed on the final pages. A 1964 edition of *Sing Out!* speculates that this literary account brought the story of Naomi Wise into the folk scene, and made an impression deep enough to inspire countless retellings and songs.

Whatever the circumstances of Naomi Wise's situation, her story ended when she was drowned in the Deep River in 1808 by Jonathan Lewis, who was arrested and held in the Randolph County jail. He managed to escape—it is worth noting that his employer (and brother of the woman he planned to marry instead of Naomi) was in charge of guarding his cell. Many years later, Lewis was recaptured and brought to trial, but he was acquitted for lack of sufficient evidence. It is said that he confessed to the murder of Naomi Wise on his deathbed in 1820.

Today Randolph County still has several landmarks dedicated to its most famous murder. The Naomi Wise Spring and Naomi Falls are both located in the Deep River, where her body was found and her gravestone lies.

The ballad was first recorded by Morgan Denmon for Okeh in 1927.

Doug Wallin (1919–2000) came from around Sodom, North Carolina, an area rich in ballad singers, and none stronger than the Wallin and Chandler families. Doug's mother Berzilla was recorded by John Cohen years earlier, and it is from her that Doug learned many of his songs. Many other songs were collected from Wallin's relatives by British folklorist Cecil Sharp in the early 20th century. The murder took place a few counties northeast of Wallin's home.

Wallin won a prestigious National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1990. A recording of Doug and his brother Jack, produced by Wayne Martin, was released in 1995 by Smithsonian Folkways in conjunction with the North Carolina Arts Council.



PEARL BRYAN

Bruce Buckley, vocal and guitar

(Laws F3; from Folkways 2025, 1955)

Pearl Bryan of Greencastle, Indiana, the daughter of a well-to-do farmer, was murdered in 1896. Her decapitated body was found in an orchard near Fort Thomas, Kentucky. Investigators eventually were able to identify the body from the pair of brand new shoes she had purchased in Greencastle.

Pearl had told her mother that she was going to Cincinnati to visit friends. Her mother, concerned a few days later that she hadn't heard from Pearl, read about a body that had been found; it fit Pearl's description, and she rushed immediately to Cincinnati (Burt 1958, 29–30).

From there, detectives quickly retraced Pearl's steps and tracked down the taxi driver who had delivered her to a boarding house in Cincinnati. Pearl had then dispatched the taxi driver to pick up a man by the name of Scott Jackson, or if not him, then a man by the name of Alonzo Walling. Jackson and Walling were both dentistry students in Cincinnati, and Jackson was a friend of one



William Wood, the son of a minister in Greencastle. Wood had given Pearl instructions to head to Cincinnati and meet Jackson and Walling. Both Jackson and Walling were apprehended by the police and admitted to killing Pearl, but quickly changed their stories, blaming one another for Pearl's death. They claimed that Wood had asked them to give Pearl an abortion, but in doing so administered too much cocaine, killing her.

Jackson and Walling never confessed where they hid Pearl's head, keeping the police searching for months afterwards. During their trial, Wood was not

called up as a witness, nor was he considered as a suspect in the crime. On May 20, 1897, Jackson and Walling were hanged for the murder of Pearl Bryan.

Folk song scholar Gus Meade cites the authors of the song as John and Rosalie Carson, who composed it in 1926. Country string musicians Burnett and Rutherford first recorded it in 1926.

Bruce Buckley was a New York state folklorist and professor at the Cooperstown Graduate Program.



16. SAM BASS

Hermes Nye, vocal and guitar

(Laws EA; from Folkways 2128, 1955)

Sam Bass (1851–78) was a Western outlaw who robbed stagecoaches in the 1870s along with his partner in crime, Joel Collins, and their gang based out of Texas. One 1877 robbery near Big Springs, Nebraska, netted them 65,000 dollars but resulted Collins’ death. With a new gang, Bass continued his string of robberies, but authorities were determined to stop them. He was wounded in a gun battle near Round Rock, Texas, and died days later. He became another outlaw legend in subsequent dime novels and stories; the Bass character would also appear in later movies and television shows.

Gainesville, Texas, resident John Denton composed this famous cowboy ballad in 1879 (Thorp [1908] 2013, 135–36). It was published in N. Howard (“Jack”) Thorp’s important *Songs of the Cowboys* in 1908, and later in John Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs*.

Hermes Nye (1908–81), from East Texas, was a novelist, lawyer, folksinger, and also a folklorist interested in the folk songs of Texas. He compiled a number of folk song collections and songs of American history for Folkways in the 1950s.

17. SPRINGFIELD MOUNTAIN

Bascom Lamar Lunsford, vocal and banjo
(*Laws* G16; from *Folkways* 2040, 1953)

“Springfield Mountain” tells of the death of Timothy Myrick (Merrick) in western Massachusetts in August 1761. One day Myrick went out to mow a hayfield, where he was bitten by a rattlesnake, and he died within two to three hours. He was 22 years old (Clayton 1956). Although an original composer of the song cannot be identified, the first versified version of the incident can be found in Joseph Fiske’s *Rhymed Almanac* for 1765 (Hinton 1966). “Springfield Mountain” developed into four different versions, some serious and some comical, and was widely popular in the early 19th century (Clayton 1956). The comical versions poked fun at rural New Englanders and were a hit in minstrel shows.



Bascom Lamar Lunsford (1882–1973), “The Minstrel of the Appalachians,” was a banjo player, fiddler, country lawyer, and an avid collector of Appalachian folk songs. From South Turkey Creek near Leicester, North Carolina, in 1928 he founded the Mountain Dance and Folk Song Festival in Asheville, which he was involved in his entire life.

Lunsford traveled extensively around the area collecting and memorizing songs from his neighbors. He recorded hundreds of these songs, mainly for the Library of Congress.

TOM DOOLEY

Glen Neaves, vocal and guitar; Roscoe Russell, guitar; Ivor Melton, mandolin; Warren Brown, bass; Ted Lundy, banjo

(Laws F36; from Folkways 3811, 1962; recorded July 1, 1961, by Eric H. Davidson)

“Tom Dooley” is the song most often credited with kicking off the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. The ballad had appeared in songbooks and had been collected by Frank Warner from North Carolina musician Frank Proffitt. It had also been recorded by the 1920s string band, Grayson and Whitter. (Fiddler G.B. Grayson was related to “Sheriff Grayson” in the song.) But its big moment came in 1958, when a version released by the Kingston Trio became a hit.

Thomas C. Dula (pronounced “Dooley”) served as a Confederate soldier during the Civil War but was captured and detained until war’s end. Upon returning home to Wilkes County, North Carolina, Dula resumed relationships with both Laura Foster and a married woman named Ann Melton. Dula reportedly contracted syphilis from Foster and passed it to Melton. In late May 1865, Foster went missing; she was found in mid-June, stabbed to death in a shallow grave. There is no consensus about who killed Foster, but many people who lived in the area around that time believed that Melton was at least as responsible for the murder as Dula (Craig 1986). Why Melton was never tried in court is uncertain, but Dula was convicted and sentenced to be hanged the following year, in 1866.

For information on Neaves, see track 13.



TYING A KNOT IN THE DEVIL'S TAIL

*Cisco Houston, vocal and guitar**(Laws B17; from Folkways 2022, 1952; recorded early 1950s by Moses Asch)*

This song comes from the pen of Gail A. Gardner (1892–1988). A working cowboy from Prescott, Arizona, Gardner wrote it as a poem in 1917, and it was later put to music by Billy Simon (Seeman 1983, 2). “Powder River Jack” Lee first recorded a popular version of the song in 1930 for Victor. Although often mistakenly thought to be of “folk” origins, it has become one of the classic American cowboy songs.

Katie Lee interviewed Gardner about writing the song. “I was ridin’ to camp at the old Dearing ranch near Thumb Butte one evening with the late Bob Heckle. We’d been celebrating in town and were pretty well juggled up, when one of us remarked that the devil got cowboys who did the things we’d been doing, and the other replied that if the devil monkeyed with us, we’d neck him to a black-jack oak just like a steer. Imagination took over from there, so I sat down at the desk in the club car and wrote on Santa Fe Limited stationery the verses of the Sierry Petes. Incidentally, the name comes from the Sierra Prieta Mountains, just west of Prescott. An old miner I knew in these mountains always called them the Sierry Petes, not peaks” (Lee 1977, 211).

Cisco Houston (1918–61) was another of the cast of characters who recorded for Moses Asch in his early years. Houston spent his youth working various jobs in the West, including as a ranch hand, and picked up songs along the way. During World War II, he served in the Merchant Marine along with his frequent musical partner, Woody Guthrie. Houston and Guthrie made many duet recordings for Asch, and it was Cisco whose keener sense of musical time would keep Woody on beat. Houston died of cancer at the young age of 42, too early to enjoy the fame he would have likely had during the folk revival of the 1960s.

20

YOUNG CHARLOTTE

Pete Seeger, vocal

(*Laws G17; also known as "The Frozen Girl"; from Folkways 5210, 1960*)

This ballad began as “A Corpse Going to a Ball,” a poem American humorist Seba Smith (1792–1868) wrote in 1843 for a Maine newspaper. In 1840 Smith had seen a report in the *New York Observer* about a young Maine woman who froze to death on New Year’s Eve because she did not want to cover her “ball dress.” It was later put to music, and the young woman’s fate moved singers; the song went through various changes and was carried west by settlers.

The story gained enough public interest that in a rather morbid twist, a small porcelain doll called a “frozen Charlotte” began to be marketed around 1850. The dolls continued to be made until the 1920s and were used as bath toys. Poor, ill-fated Charlotte lived on in the minds of little girls.



The ballad was first recorded by Miller Wikel for Paramount Records in 1929. For information on Pete Seeger, see track 2.

21

WASN'T THAT A MIGHTY STORM?

The Tex-I-An Boys

(*also known as "The Galveston Flood"; from Folkways 5328, 1961*)

“Friday, September 7, 1900 started out oppressively hot, then, turned into one of those seemingly perfect days when the wind swings around out of the north. People who should have been attending to business on the strand took off early to frolic in the breakers. It was a day for getting out, experiencing life” (Cartwright 1991, 163). No one knew what was to come—the deadliest natural disaster in American history. That night a terrible hurricane hit Galveston Island. The waves



washed away most of the houses that were not on high ground, and between 6,000 and 12,000 residents perished in the storm. When rescue teams were able to get to Galveston, they were shocked at what they found. After the hurricane a great seawall was constructed so that, although the city is still often in the path of hurricanes coming off the Gulf, it is now better protected.

Various songs were written about the event, including “Wasn’t That a Mighty Time”

or “Wasn’t It a Mighty Storm,” composed years later. In April 1934, John Lomax, recording for the Library of Congress, visited Darrington State Farm, a prison in Sandy Point, Texas. There he recorded J.L. “Sin Killer” Griffin, a well-known African American Texas minister, leading a congregation drawn from inmates. Lomax also recorded Sin Killer singing this spiritual, which he claimed to have written. His mother had perished in the flood.

During the folk song revival, it was recorded by both Eric Von Schmidt and Tom Rush and became known to folk music enthusiasts.

The Tex-I-An Boys were a group of five young men who specialized in Western songs. Members included John Lomax Jr. (whose father had recorded Sin Killer), Pete Rose, Jim McConnell, Howard Porper, and Ed Badeaux. Badeaux was a longtime employee of Folkways Records who also recorded a number of solo albums.

22

ZEBRA DUN

Joan O'Bryant, vocal and guitar

(*Laws B16*; from *Folkways* 2134, 1957)

Cowboy music scholar Guy Logsdon refers to “Zebra Dun” as one of the oldest and best traditional cowboy songs. First published in Jack Thorp’s *Songs of the Cowboys* in 1908, it shows how cowboys played hard practical jokes that sometimes backfired (Logsdon 1994).

“Zebra dun,” or bay dun, is a reference to a certain coloration of a horse’s coat affected by the dun gene.

The song was first recorded by Jules Allen in 1928 for Victor. This recording of it comes from Joan O'Bryant’s Folkways LP *Folksongs and Ballads of Kansas*. O'Bryant (1923–64) was a folklore teacher in Kansas and Colorado who also performed folk songs on guitar and recorded two albums for Folkways in the 1950s. She was killed in a Colorado automobile accident in 1964.

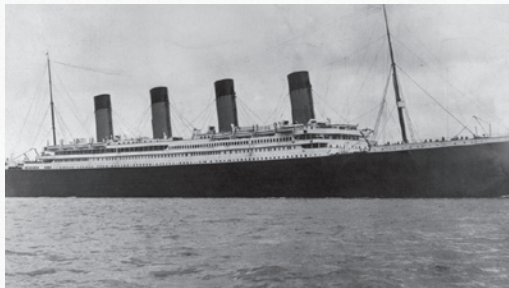
23

THE TITANIC

Pink Anderson, vocal and guitar

(*Laws D24*; also known as “*When That Great Ship Went Down*”; from *Folkways* 3588, 1984; recorded 1960 in Spartanburg, South Carolina, by Sam Charters)

The RMS *Titanic* was a British passenger liner, the largest ship on the sea at that time. On her maiden voyage across the Atlantic in April 1912 she carried some of the richest people in the world as well as immigrants to the United States. Passengers were segregated by class on different levels of the ship, and African Americans were not allowed on board at all. On April 15, the ship struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic. Of 2,224 passengers, over 1,500 perished. The *Titanic*



had been marketed as the best ship ever constructed, and her sinking was the news event of 1912. The wreckage was finally located in 1985, and artifacts are now in museums.

The *Titanic* disaster inspired a number of ballads and was particularly important to African American musicians, who were acutely aware of the irony that

Jim Crow laws had saved them from a watery grave. Many believed the ship's owners had received divine retribution. In the 1920s Ernest Stoneman recorded a *Titanic* ballad that was his most popular song. Other versions were recorded by Frank Hutchison ("The Last Scene of the Titanic") and Blind Willie Johnson ("God Moves on the Water"). This ballad was later recorded by both Roy Acuff and Woody Guthrie.

Pinkney Anderson (1900–74) was born in Laurens, South Carolina. A self-taught guitarist, he played the streets in Spartanburg as a youngster. Along with his musical partner, Simmie Dooley, he worked medicine shows, and recorded four sides for Columbia in 1928. A songster with a diverse repertoire of ballads, country songs, and even minstrel show pieces, he was rediscovered in the 1960s and he recorded several albums for Prestige, Riverside, and Folkways. The rock group Pink Floyd came up with its name by combining the first names of Pink Anderson and Floyd Council (who was another bluesman).



THE LOUISVILLE BURGLAR

The Iron Mountain String Band: Eric H. Davidson, banjo; Caleb Finch, fiddle; Peggy Haine, vocal and guitar

(Laws L16B; from Folkways 2473, 1973)

The ballad of the Louisville Burglar provides a great example of the folk process. It is believed to be an Americanized revision of an English ballad called “Botany Bay,” but appears in many forms, including “The Boston Burglar,” “The Whitby Lad,” and “Frank James, the Burglar.” Although most renditions follow the same outline, singers changed the place names and details to fit the stories they sought to tell. The opening line, “I was raised up in Louisville, a town you all knew well,” frequently swaps out Louisville for another town, as happens later in the ballad with the location of the jail. In this sense, there are multiple histories to the song. The burglar has worn many faces, and the song’s localizations may reference specific events and people. (The Boston version, for instance, may allude to Levi Ames, a young burglar sentenced to death in 1773.)

The Iron Mountain String Band has been playing old-time music for over 40 years. The core of the group has been Eric H. Davidson (1937–) on banjo and Caleb Finch on fiddle. Davidson and Finch with their associates began traveling to the southern Appalachians to seek out older regional old-time string band musicians from whom they could learn (Davidson 1975). The recordings of these musicians made during their travels led to numerous Folkways releases. Founded in New York City, the band was influenced by the music of the legendary Grayson County Bogtrotters, the greatest of the Galax, Virginia, string bands in the 1930s (ibid.). Davidson and Finch were able to play and study with Wade and Fields Ward, two of the original members of the Bogtrotters.

25. THE F.F.V. (ENGINE 143)

Annie Watson, vocal

(*Laws G3; also known as "Georgie Collins," "The Wreck of the C&O," "Engine 143," "The Brave Engineer," "The Wreck of the F.F. & V.," from Smithsonian Folkways 40192; recorded August 2, 1962, in Deep Gap, North Carolina, by Ralph Rinzler*)



The history of the train the Fast Flying Vestibule (also known as the Fast Flying Virginian or F.F.V.) can be found in Harry Smith's notes to the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (SFW 40090). The wreck referred to in the song was that of the C&O's Number 4 train on October 23, 1890; engineered by George Alley (1860–90), it struck a rock caused by a landslide near Don, Virginia.

The song is best known as the "The Wreck of the C&O," but is also recognized as "Engine 143" from the Carter Family's

1929 recording (Norm Cohen pointed out that the engine was actually 134, not 143 [Cohen 2000, 188]). The Carter Family's version is familiar to modern country music enthusiasts through its inclusion in the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Ballad scholar John H. Cox collected ten versions of the song in the South between 1915 and 1918; Norm Cohen believes them to be of Anglo-American origin and all from the same unknown writer because of how similar they were to one another 25 years after the event (*ibid.*).

The song was first recorded by George Reneau in 1924 as "C&O Wreck" (Meade 2002, 46). This rendition is by Annie Watson, the mother of guitarist Doc Watson.

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9628



Born of the British ballad, its American offspring was the blank canvas for all type of tale, the more calamitous or scandalous, the better. Jesse James and Billy the Kid, train wrecks and hurricanes, the *Titanic* and Tom Dooley, fatal lovers' quarrels and foiling the devil, all and more were normal fare, served up in a song. *Classic American Ballads* is 25 tracks of time-worn tragedy drawn from the deep fount of the Smithsonian Folkways archives. 74 minutes, 40-page booklet with extensive notes and photos.

1. Banks of the Ohio 3:32
Doc Watson and Bill Monroe
2. Blue Mountain Lake 2:47
Pete Seeger
3. Claude Allen 3:50
Hobart Smith
4. Cole Younger 1:50
Dock Boggs
5. Cowboy's Lament (Streets of Laredo) 3:21
Buck Ramsey
6. Boll Weevil 2:12
Sam Hinton
7. Duncan and Brady 1:08
Lead Belly
8. Floyd Collins 3:27
Paul Clayton
9. Frankie and Johnny 6:39
Rolf Cahn and Eric Von Schmidt
10. John Henry 3:22
John Jackson
11. Jesse James 3:51
Sis Cunningham, Mike Millius, Wes Houston
12. Billy the Kid 2:04
Woody Guthrie
13. The Death of the Lawson Family 1:54
Glen Neaves
14. Naomi Wise 3:06
Doug Wallin
15. Pearl Bryan 2:54
Bruce Buckley
16. Sam Bass 1:59
Hermes Nye
17. Springfield Mountain 2:31
Bascom Lamar Lunsford
18. Tom Dooley 2:11
Glen Neaves, Roscoe Russell, Ivor Melton, Warren Brown, Ted Lundy
19. Tying a Knot in the Devil's Tail 2:14
Cisco Houston
20. Young Charlotte 4:05
Pete Seeger
21. Wasn't That a Mighty Storm? 2:41
The Tex-I-An Boys
22. Zebra Dun 2:32
Joan O'Bryant
23. The Titanic 2:52
Pink Anderson
24. The Louisville Burglar 3:09
The Iron Mountain String Band
25. The F. F. V. (Engine 143) 3:56
Annie Watson



