

# COLLECTING AMERICAN VERSIONS OF OLD WORLD FOLK SONGS

**Uncle Sam Behind Movement to Preserve Survivals in This Country of English, Scotch and Other Ballads That Have Come Down from Colonial Times—Federal Bureau of Education Co-operating with Professor Smith of Virginia—A Movement of Great National Significance from Which Important Results Have Already Been Obtained**

By WALDON FAWCETT

TO collect the American survivals of old ballads—American versions of Old World folk songs—is the object of one of the latest undertakings of the United States Government. This country-wide quest for ballads that occupy a conspicuous place in the history of music is significant for several reasons. Obviously, it should produce results of value to practical musicians and to the lay public that is interested in musical history and musical progress. Added to this is the meaning of the movement as indicative of a deeper and more tangible interest in music on the part of our national Government, which, in the estimation of many persons, has heretofore been remiss in this respect.

The search for the old ballads is being prosecuted by the Bureau of Education of the Department of the Interior, in co-operation with Dr. C. Alphonso Smith, the Edgar Allen Poe Professor of English in the University of Virginia and founder and president of the Virginia Folk Lore Society. Here is another element that has significance not only in the present instance, but likewise for the future, namely, the manifest willingness of the Federal Government to co-operate with individuals and private agencies in movements in behalf of musical progress, and to bear the major portion of the expense connected therewith. Particularly has this been the recent policy of the Bureau of Education, which has been aroused to an appreciation of the place which music should hold in the life of the people by observation of the success of the introduction of music in the public schools and the resultant benefits.

The quest for old ballads which is being prosecuted by the joint forces above mentioned has now been in progress for several weeks and the interest manifested by the public and the results achieved have been most encouraging. In inaugurating this work it was decided for various reasons to confine the first quest to English and Scottish popular ballads, but the moving spirits in the enterprise had it in mind from the outset to expand the scope of the search later. This desire on their part has been strengthened by many of the expressions that have reached them. It is urged that the ballads of other nationalities, for instance, the Irish, which have been extensively rooted in America, should be sought out and perpetuated in similar manner and particularly have many volunteer correspondents insisted that Uncle Sam should do something toward the compilation of a complete, authentic, official chronicle of the old negro melodies.

## National Significance

In explaining the governmental quest for old ballads, P. P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education, said: "Whatever has, at any time, appealed to the best emotions and moved the heart of a people must have for their children and their children's children political, historical and cultural value. This is especially true of folk tales and folk songs.

"The English and Scotch popular ballads which we are now seeking helped to mold the character of the men and women who made up the larger part of the colonial population of this country. For generations these ballads of the lowlands and highlands of England and Scotland were sung along the Atlantic coast and in the valleys of the Appalachian Mountains. The descendants of English, Irish and Scotch-Irish colonists took many of them with them on their march across the continent, and the ballads were familiar in childhood to millions of men and women whose children have never heard them. Before the march of the public school, the public



Dr. C. Alphonso Smith, the Chief Figure in the National Movement to Preserve American Survivals of Old World Ballads—Above, a Typical Old Southern House Occupied by One Family for Several Generations. It Is in Such Places That the Search for the Old Songs Is Being Prosecuted with Especial Vigor

library, urban civilization, and modern industrial and commercial life, they have vanished, but they still have their value, and we should not permit them to be lost out of our life. The nation will be poorer if we do.

"The first step in our present undertaking is to determine where any of these ballads or their variations are now to be found among the people and the Bureau of Education welcomes the co-operation of Dr. Smith in the collecting of the survivals of these ballads. I hope that every person who is in a position to give any information regarding the old ballads will help us, for such co-operation may result in saving to the nation many valuable treasures."

To the correspondent of MUSICAL AMERICA, Dr. Smith, at the University of Virginia, stated that he was well satisfied with the progress made in the limited time that has elapsed since the national project was undertaken. Said he: "The movement has aroused great interest all over the country." Professor Smith is especially insistent upon the importance of prompt action in this matter. "If our American versions of these old ballads are not collected quickly," said he, "they can never be collected at all. It is now or never. Many influences are tending to obliterate them. Catchy, but empty songs, not worthy of comparison with them, the decadence of communal singing, the growing diversity of interests, the appeal to what is divisive and separate in our national life, the presence of the artificial and self-conscious in modern writing are depriving our homes and schoolrooms of a kind of literature which, for community of feeling, for vigor of narrative, for vividness of portraiture, and for utter simplicity of style and content is not surpassed in the whole history of English or American song."

## Virginia's Pioneer Society

Asked to tell MUSICAL AMERICA what impelled him to take up this work and, in turn, to enlist the national government in the crusade, Professor Smith said: "My interest in the matter is a thing of long standing, but it is only recently that I have begun to realize what a vast and interesting body of song literature handed down through oral tradition is waiting to be garnered. The Folk Lore Society of Virginia, which was founded on April 13, 1913, and of which I happen to be president, is an expression of this interest. This society, purely a State organization, was formed for the express purpose of collecting the English and Scotch ballads surviving from lip to lip in the State of Virginia, and has already found twenty-six of these old songs, a larger number, I believe, than has yet been reported from any other State. Three of these are Robin Hood ballads, not one of which has hitherto been found surviving in the United States."

Professor Smith asks MUSICAL AMERICA to make clear one point that has caused some confusion in the "letter campaign" which has been conducted from Washington in an effort to interest musicians, school teachers and others in this search for old ballads. "Our quest," explained the prime mover in the enterprise, "is not for old books, but simply and solely for the ballads that have survived without the aid of the printing press. The report of even a fragment of

one of these old songs will be welcome. It is desired to know, first, how many of the ballads and how many versions of the same ballad there are in each State, and to that end all persons who are willing to co-operate are asked to write down and send to Washington any versions of the ballads which they may discover. Two versions of the same ballad are almost as valuable to us as two different ballads.

"When the returns from the different States under this initial ballad census have been received and classified a circular giving the results will be sent to all who have co-operated. With this information in hand it is hoped that interested persons residing in each State in which there is no folk lore or ballad society will be impelled to form such an association on a definite basis of ascertained results, and thus continue the search. Those States or communities that already have such societies can use the information thus acquired in whatever way they deem best. It is believed, however, that State organizations will be found most efficient in this rescue work on behalf of the old ballads. Not until each State feels itself responsible for the collection of the ballads surviving within its own borders will the search be complete even approximately or the results at all satisfactory. But if each State joins in a sort of co-operative ballad union a work may ultimately be written that will be significant and interesting in the highest degree."

Because the United States Bureau of Education is intimately in touch with teachers in all parts of the country an effort has been made at the outset to induce all teachers to lend a hand in this quest. The officials also feel that teachers are especially well placed to unearth the well-nigh forgotten ballads because of their opportunities for coming in contact with the home life of families—mayhap in isolated communities. However, the crusade is by no means limited to teachers and the co-operation is besought of any and all persons who may feel impelled to enter into the movement. It is hoped that musicians will be only too anxious to further the quest in anticipation that material may be discovered which will prove available for concert programs.

## Professor Child's Researches

In order that all those who are helping in the ballad hunt may have a definite basis on which to work, the Bureau of Education has published for free distribution a list of the 305 old ballads enumerated in Prof. Francis J. Child's famous work on "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads." In view of the fact that no other investigators have ever succeeded in increasing the number of ballads noted in this authoritative research work, it naturally follows that the greatest interest will be aroused should the present search disclose any additional ballads or any worth-while versions, not heretofore known, of familiar ballads.

To an extent the task now undertaken by the Bureau of Education and Professor Smith may be said to supplement the work done by Professor Child, inasmuch as the last mentioned authority made no studied attempt to collect the American survivals of the old ballads, but dealt with this important phase of the subject only incidentally. The informa-

tion in the hands of Professor Child seemingly indicated the survival in the United States of only about seventeen out of the list of more than three hundred ballads. Latterly, however, at least fifty-six of the listed ballads have been located—brought over by the earliest settlers and kept alive through oral tradition ever since—and inasmuch as the organized search for this musical lore has scarcely started it is hoped that ultimately a surprising number of the time-tried songs will be disclosed.

Asked to say a word for MUSICAL AMERICA regarding the future of this new movement Professor Smith replied: "The quest has been so far confined to English and Scotch ballads, chiefly because these have been definitely numbered by former Professor Child of Harvard University, and because we can thus prosecute our search with a definite end in view; but I should like to see the movement extended to the quest of other legends and songs and traditions as soon as our quest of the popular ballad is ended."

## Federation Officers Visit Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES, March 31.—On Wednesday of last week, F. W. Blanchard, at the head of the local movement to bring the prize opera competition of the National Federation of Music Clubs to Los Angeles, gave a reception to the president of the federation, Mrs. J. E. Kinney, and to the vice-president, Mrs. Emerson Brush, who are in Los Angeles to make arrangements for the meeting of the federation here in 1915. They met in conference with Charles Wakefield Cadman, president of the National Congress of Musicians, which will also meet here at the same time. Mr. Blanchard's reception was held at the Gamut Club. A program was given by the Brahms Quintet, which played two movements of a Metzdorf Quintet; the Gamut Club tri-quartet, singing three numbers, and Mrs. L. J. Selby singing Mr. Grunn's "Life's Meaning." W. F. G.

## Stransky and Vogt Plan Joint Festival for New York in 1916

TORONTO, CAN., April 8.—A proposal of interest to New York music lovers was discussed here last week by Dr. A. S. Vogt, conductor of the Mendelssohn Choir of Toronto, and Josef Stransky, conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. It is the reproduction by these two organizations in New York of a big musical festival held in Berlin on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the German Emperor's reign. The program will include leading works of Beethoven, Brahms and Bach, conducted by Mr. Stransky and Dr. Vogt. It will be impossible to hold the concerts until 1916, one year after the choir returns from its European tour. The choir will probably not sing in New York on its way to Europe. R. B.

## Clarence Whitehill for Covent Garden

Clarence Whitehill, baritone, of the Chicago Grand Opera Company, has been engaged to sing at Covent Garden, London, this Spring. Mr. Whitehill sings his last performance with the Chicago company in Milwaukee, on April 25, in "Parsifal." His first performance at Covent Garden will be May 4.