

BEN BOTKIN AND THE ARCHIVE OF AMERICAN FOLK SONG

[This essay was delivered by Alan Jabbour as a paper at the conference honoring Benjamin A. Botkin at the Library of Congress, November 2001.]

I'll begin by warning that I am not a proper biographer of Ben Botkin. Jerrold Hirsch has pored attentively over his published and unpublished corpus and has done extensive interviewing with Botkin's family and friends. Jerrold's publications have provided important insights into the intellectual milieu into which Botkin's life and work fit – both the influences on him, and also his many contributions to the intellectual and cultural life of America. I can add only a handful of miscellaneous observations. But I knew Ben Botkin, knew his co-workers, and was hired by the same man who hired him at the Library of Congress, Harold Spivacke. I've been a denizen of the same Federal world that he inhabited, though in a quite different generation. Thus I hope that my thoughts about his Washington career, seen through the eyes of a successor who likes to read bureaucratic tea leaves, may provide some stimulation as we reflect on Botkin's legacy.

Ben Botkin's Washington period encompasses the years 1937 through 1945, an eight-year span that can fairly be called a seminal stage in his life. His years in Washington DC were quite comparable in personal and intellectual consequence to his years in Oklahoma and Nebraska – that earlier Plains period that also clearly influenced his life and worldview. The Plains period was longer – roughly 1921 through 1937 -- and came at a more formative early stage of his life. But it was interrupted by a return to New York City for a few years, and by shifts back and forth between Oklahoma and Nebraska. Those Washington years, coming when he was in his later 30s and early 40s, were equally formative, for during this period he contributed to and was in turn shaped by the intellectual ferment of the New Deal and the challenges of the War years in Washington.

One might be tempted to subdivide Botkin's Washington years into the Federal Writers Project period followed by the Library of Congress period. But in fact he arrived in Washington in 1937 as a Julius Rosenwald Fellow to do research at the Library of Congress in southern folk and regional literature. Rosenwald was a Library benefactor, and the fellowship for Botkin may have been upon the suggestion of John Lomax, who was already ensconced at the Library as Honorary Curator of the Archive of American Folk Song. Lomax, as a Harvard-educated Texan and an effective lobbyist and networker, might well have supported Botkin as a fellow folklorist with Harvard ties and Oklahoma connections.

I can't chart the exact sequence that led Botkin from being a Library of Congress research fellow to joining the Federal Writers Project. Suffice it to say that he was soon infected by the excitement of New Deal Washington and, as a writer and student of literature, joined the Federal Writers Project in 1938. His position was as national folklore editor, and he quickly set about creating and coordinating national initiatives to collect folklore throughout the United States. By the end of 1938 he became chair of a newly reorganized, WPA-wide Joint Committee on Folk Arts.

McDonald's Federal Relief Administration and the Arts describes that first meeting of the WPA Joint Committee on Folk Arts. Botkin, representing the Federal Writers Project, was elected Chairman. Vice-Chairman was Charles Seeger of the Federal Music Project. Other representatives included Herbert Halpert of the Federal Theater Project, C. Adolph Glassgold of the Federal Art Project, Ernestine Friedman of the WPA Education Division, S.B. Child of the Historical Records Survey, and Nicholas Ray of the WPA Recreation Division. The meeting was at the offices of the American Council of Learned Societies, which had encouraged the meeting – perhaps at the suggestion of Charles Seeger. Nick Ray later interacted with Alan Lomax and the Archive of American Folk Song. Halpert was a folklorist who made an important field trip through the South in 1939 under joint WPA and Folk Archive auspices. Seeger was the famed musicologist who had previously worked for the Resettlement Administration and later headed the Music Division of the Pan-American Union. Child's Historical Records Survey had John Lomax on its payroll for a while, during which Lomax also worked as Honorary Curator of the Archive of American Folk Song.

What am I getting at here? In the 1960s some student radicals used to denounce the “interlocking directorates” in American business. It is fair to say that the same sort of intricate networking occurred in the cultural sector during the WPA era in Washington. This was a kind of club of mostly men who shared many social and intellectual interests and often university ties, and who had in common a social vision that related powerfully to their New Deal mission. Many of them were relatively young, and the burgeoning of New Deal programs attracted them to Washington and placed them in positions of surprising authority in the Federal infrastructure. This made for heady times, and we still can feel today the reverberations of their excitement and commitment.

This cozy club of cultural cohorts was not simply agreeable socially; it also yielded important results. A cogent illustration is Herbert Halpert's 1939 field recording trip through the South. The Joint Committee on Folk Arts sponsored the trip; Ben Botkin planned and coordinated it in his role as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Folk Arts, and Herbert Halpert of the Federal Theater Project did the actual fieldwork. He used the Library of Congress recording equipment as his field equipment and the Federal Theater Committee truck as transportation, and he coordinated with WPA workers in various states for local contacts and documentary photography along the way. The trip ranged from Virginia to Mississippi, then to Florida and back into Georgia and the Carolinas. It lasted several months and garnered 419 field-recorded discs with an enormous geographical and cultural range: ballad singing from Appalachian Virginia, Jack tales from Cade's Cove, Tennessee, White fiddlers and Black lining-out hymns from northern Mississippi, and a Florida recording session with author and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. Thus one of the most productive field trips in the Archive, which has fed numerous documentary publications over the years, was also a poster for the buddy network that propelled the cultural accomplishments of the New Deal.

Another cooperative project led to Ben Botkin's next assignment in Washington. The Federal Writers Project had developed an important project, the Ex-Slave Narrative Project, under John Lomax's enthusiastic guidance before Botkin's arrival in

Washington. The project, originally proposed by Lawrence D. Reddick of Kentucky State Industrial College, sought to interview former slaves about their first-hand recollections of the experience of slavery. In fall of 1939, when the Federal Writers Project was being devolved from federal to state control, Botkin received a new assignment that thrust him back into a more intimate relationship with the Library of Congress. A special Library of Congress project of the Federal Writers Project, which he spearheaded, undertook editing a set of the ex-slave narrative manuscripts for permanent deposit at the Library. The finished results of his editorial work are a multi-volume research compendium now reposing in the Library's Rare Books and Special Collections Division. The project was perhaps the first major oral history project ever, and certainly one of the most significant ever. For many years the additional manuscripts from the ex-slave narrative project were in the Folk Archive; they are now in the Library's Manuscript Division.

In 1942 Washington was rapidly changing, as the Federal agencies of the New Deal era dissolved and wartime agencies burgeoned. Alan Lomax decided to move from his position as Assistant in Charge at the Archive to the new Office of War Information. John Lomax remained the titular head as Honorary Curator, but he spent his part-time energies on fieldwork and lecturing, so someone was needed to run the office. Ben Botkin took the position as Assistant in Charge.

Botkin's tenure with the Archive of American Folk Song lasted less than three years. They were the war years, and nearly all federal spending had to be linked to the war. Supplies for fieldwork – not only gasoline and tires but also discs for field recording -- were hard to obtain. Aluminum was reserved for the war effort, so those discs that could be obtained for field recording and laboratory duplication were glass-based instead of aluminum-based and proved fragile and hard to work with. Botkin's annual report for the Archive in 1943-44 expresses frustration at the difficulties in furthering the work of the Archive: "Another year of war has continued to restrict the Archive of American Folk Song from its peacetime activity of collecting folk songs in this country. It is impossible to arrange for recording expeditions without an uninterrupted supply of gasoline and tires."

But acquisitions for the Archive continued unabated, often involving duplication of private collections by the Library's Recording Laboratory. There was a lively program of exchanges with various Latin American countries, apparently stimulated by wartime concerns to keep the Western Hemisphere closely allied with the United States. Other collections grew out of direct studio recordings of visiting musicians by the Recording Laboratory. All in all, the annual list of acquisitions is surprisingly strong for a small office in a cultural agency smothered by wartime concerns.

A major initiative of Alan Lomax before his departure was the experimental new series of documentary albums of folk music. Lomax had produced six albums in 1942 before his departure, and they had proved a critical and popular success as well as a useful tool for institutional and international exchange. So Botkin pressed ahead to expand the series, and he was able to edit five new albums that were finally released in 1945. The new

releases included field recordings from the Lomaxes – notably from the African American project done in collaboration with Fisk University in Coahoma County, Mississippi -- but also a generous portion of recordings from Halpert's 1939 trip, and the fruits of some other collectors as well. Two of the albums Botkin edited are personal favorites of mine: Negro Religious Songs and Services and Sacred Harp Singing (albums number 10 and 11).

Botkin began his position with the Library as Assistant in Charge, inheriting Alan Lomax's title in the shadow of John Lomax's title Honorary Curator. But at some point he became "Chief of the Archive of American Folk Song." He no longer worked under the shadow of John Lomax, and the title "Chief" suggests an independent stature for the Archive, though he still reported administratively to the Chief of the Music Division, Harold Spivacke.

It is interesting to note that Botkin's Washington career constantly interacted with John Lomax's. The two seem to have evolved a complementary relationship – John Lomax the older, more assertive, more political; Ben Botkin the younger, more reserved, more scholarly. Lomax clearly offered Botkin important help and support throughout Botkin's Washington years. On the other hand, John Lomax was not nearly so well accepted as Botkin in the scholarly world. There had been an embarrassing incident in 1937 when the American Folklore Society had failed to lend its support for the Federal Writers Project. There was the implication that a more scientifically trained folklorist was needed, and John Lomax seemed by implication not to fit the bill to the Society's satisfaction. Federal Writers Project administrator Henry Alsberg had responded by hiring Ben Botkin. So Botkin as a close colleague clearly provided Lomax with an academic insurance policy of sorts – an academic respectability and ease of access that Lomax could not count on by himself. Thus was born a tacit complementarity uniting them.

In 1944 and 1945 there were signs of a shift in energies on Botkin's part. He made public appearances around the country reading papers at scholarly conferences. And he returned to his first love: writing and editing for publication. In 1944 the Treasury of American Folklore appeared and became such an enormous popular success that one can still easily locate copies in used bookstores. And in 1945 Botkin produced a selected volume drawn from the ex-slave narratives he had gathered for the Library of Congress, entitled Lay My Burden Down. It was the first of a distinguished line of publications drawn from the ex-slave narrative project that continue to appear right up till today.

The Archive's annual report for 1944-45 concludes: "The Chief of the Archive of American Folk Song resigned on June 1, 1945, to devote full time to writing and lecturing in his field." Ben Botkin moved from Washington to New York State. His Washington period was over, and he returned to the life that seemed finally most compelling to him: the life of writing and reflection. Neither his personal accounts nor those of others suggest any deep unhappiness with the tensions of administrative life in the federal maw. And though life in wartime Washington must have had its frustrations, he must have anticipated that peace was at hand, and he might have hoped for a fresh

start after the war was over. But I believe he didn't go FROM the Archive so much as he went TO the world of writing. Emboldened by the success of the Treasury, he simply chose a way of life that seemed closer to his dreams as a writer and intellectual. He continued to be a public folklorist – but now in a private capacity.

Ben Botkin's Washington years were intertwined deeply with the Archive of American Folk Song. Even when he was with the Federal Writers Project, his work intersected closely with the Archive. The alliance with John Lomax united two men of differing perspective and temperament, but of a similar inclination to look comprehensively at the grassroots creative underpinnings of the American experience. The larger network of collegial cooperation proved a key element in the success of many of the cultural enterprises of the New Deal, despite political opposition and the inefficiencies of working with a multi-agency federal and state coalition. It was a triumphant period in the American cultural enterprise, and both Ben Botkin as an individual and the Archive of American Folk Song as a cultural institution were at the very epicenter of the enterprise.