Folklife Today
March 2020: On the Road With Alan Lomax, a “By the People” Campaign from the Library of Congress

Announcer (00:01):
From the Library of Congress in Washington, D C

W.H. Stepp plays fiddle (00:13):

Stephen Winick (00:28): Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm Stephen Winick, the writer and editor in the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. And I'm here with John Fenn, the Head of Research and Programs at the Center.

John Fenn: Hello. We are excited to tell you about an initiative in which the Library of Congress is crowdsourcing transcriptions of manuscript pages.

Stephen Winick: That doesn't actually sound like it has much to do with folklife, but we promise you that it does.

John Fenn: Right. And that's because some of the manuscripts we're talking about are the fieldnotes and other handwritten or typewritten papers of Alan Lomax.

Stephen Winick: So let's begin by setting the stage a little. Alan Lomax spent almost 70 years as a folklorist and ethnographer collecting, archiving, and analyzing folk music. His career began in 1933 when his father, John Lomax, was asked to be the new head of the Archive of American Folk Song, which had been established here at the Library of Congress in 1928. And That's the archive that now belongs to the American Folklife Center, where John and I work.

John Fenn (01:24): Yes. And in this role as head of the archive, John Lomax took charge of a large repository of manuscripts and cylinder recordings. And then soon after taking over, John enlisted his son Alan's help in expanding that collection through disc recordings. After several years of collecting, Alan became the archive's "assistant in charge" in 1937, and he continued to make field trips and create recordings for the Library of Congress until 1942.
Stephen Winick (01:50): Alan Lomax documented a lot of important musicians during his time at the library, including folks like Woody Guthrie, Vera Hall, Lead Belly, and Son House. In 1938 he did what we might consider the first oral history of a roots musician when he interviewed the great jazz piano player Jelly Roll Morton extensively here at the library. So let’s hear just a snippet of those interviews.

Alan Lomax (02:15): [Piano] Jelly Roll, tell us about yourself. Tell us where you were born, who your folks were, when, how.

Jelly Roll Morton (02:26): Well, I would tell you, as I can understand, my folks were in the city of New Orleans long before the Louisiana Purchase and all my folks came directly from the shores—or not shores—I mean from France. They crossed the world, and the other world, and they landed in the new world years ago. I remember so far back is my great grandmother and great grandfather.

Alan Lomax (03:13): Tell us about what their names were.

Jelly Roll Morton (03:13): Their names...My great grandfather's name was Émil Péché, that's a French name. And the grandmother was made Mimi Péché. It seems to be all French and as long as I can remember those folks never was able to speak a word in American or English.

Alan Lomax (03:31): Did they own slaves?

Jelly Roll Morton (03:35): Well, I don't know. I don't think they had no slaves back then in Louisiana. I don't think so. I don't know. But they never spoke of anything like that. But anyway, my great...my Grandmother, her name was Laura, she married a French settler in New Orleans by the name of Henry Monette. That was my grandfather. And either one of them spoke American or English.

Stephen Winick (04:07): Again, that was Jelly Roll Morton in 1938. So in 1942 Alan Lomax left the Library of Congress, but he spent the rest of his life recording music in America, Europe and the Caribbean. And the Library eventually acquired those collections as well. So we have all the Lomax collections from 1933 until his retirement in the 1990s. He was responsible for some of the first high quality stereo field recordings made on tape in the late 1950s including this spiritual sung by Almeda Riddle.
Almeda Riddle (04:37):  
I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger  
I'm traveling through a world of woe  
But there's no sickness, toil, or danger  
In that bright land to which I go.  
I'm going there to see my mother.  
She said she'd meet me when I come.  
I'm only going over Jordan; I'm only going over home.  
I know dark clouds are gonna gather around me  
And I know my way'll be rough and steep  
But beautiful fields lie just before me  
Where God's redeemed their vigils keep.

John Fenn (06:05): That was Almeda Riddle with a verse of "Poor Wayfaring Stranger" recorded by Alan Lomax in Arkansas in 1959. Now, Lomax didn't confine himself to recording in the U.S. As Steve said, he did record all over Europe and the Caribbean. Let's hear a dance recorded in Carriacou, Grenada in 1962.

(06:25): [Drumming and singing in Grenada Creole by a group including Ferguson Adams (Sugar Tamarind), Daniel Aikens, Larena Clement, May Fortune, Mannie James, Caddy Lazarus, Jemina Joseph, Beatrice Lazarus, Tida Lazarus, Mrs. Silvisa, and Matilda Noel.]

John Fenn (07:37): So that was part of the big drum dance, "Ju Noel, Juba Lo" recorded by Alan Lomax in Grenada. And as always when we play an excerpt of a song here on the podcast, we'll try to include the full audio over at the blog, which is at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

Stephen Winick (07:52): That's right. So do check out the blog. Now today on the podcast, we're interested not only in this fantastic music but also in the fact that Lomax took notes during his fieldwork and he wrote them up later into drafts of all kinds: books, radio scripts, and articles, for example. And he also wrote and received letters relating to all these audio collections. And right now we've got a project underway through which you can get access to images of all these pages so you can read them. And more importantly you can help out the Library of Congress by transcribing them. The website for that is crowd.loc.gov.
And to tell us more about this effort, we have two special guests here, Lauren Algee and Victoria Van Hyning. They are Senior Innovation Specialists and community managers for “By the People.” Hello.

Lauren Algee: Hi.

Victoria Van Hyning: Hi.

John Fenn: So let's start with absolute basics. Victoria, what is crowdsourcing?

Victoria Van Hyning: So crowdsourcing has actually been going on for easily a century in science and other disciplines and often through libraries and cultural heritage organizations where an institution or an academic might invite people to help them gather data, better understand collections, conduct scientific research. In the last 20 years or so, it's gone online first through NASA. And now you know, dozens of institutions around the world. You're making an open call to people anywhere who have an internet connection to help you out with making your data more accessible, uclassifying it. So that could be describing what's in an image or in the case of what we're doing here at the Library, transcribing documents.

Stephen Winick: Great. Could you tell us a little bit about the history of crowdsourcing efforts at the Library of Congress before the “By the People” project?

Lauren Algee: Crowdsourcing is not new at the library. We've asked for and received really generous help from the public to enhance our collections for a long, long time. As Victoria alluded to, this could be, you know, even pre digital technology. Our longest ongoing project at the library is the Flickr project, which is run by the Prints and Photographs Division and that celebrated its 10th anniversary last year. It asks the public to help identify information about images from P and P. This can include dates, locations, and people pictured in those prints and photographs. And then staff reviews new comments weekly for new information to add to the Library of Congress's image descriptions. And since 2008, over 12,000 picture descriptions have been improved, corrected, or expanded through Flickr with this help from the public. The Archive of American Public Broadcasting also has an active crowdsourcing collaboration with WGBH in Boston. And that helps to improve the accessibility of machine generated transcripts in screen captures for video. So you can help out with that. It's
still running at fixitplus.americanarchive.org, and there's been lots of other
small scale crowdsourcing projects at the library over the years. But this is
the first project to really be Library of Congress wide and to involve a big
platform that we've put online.

John Fenn (10:47): So let's talk about the origin and the basic idea behind
the “By the People” project.

Victoria Van Hyning (10:52): So “By the People” started up in 2018 in
October and it was an idea that had been kicking around between the folks
in OCIO, including the Labs team and Kate Zwaard, the now director of
digital strategy folks in the Library Services, and particularly Manuscripts.
And the idea was that we have all these collections going online all the time,
which is partly a preservation effort. So the more that people use the digital
surrogates instead of the documents themselves, the longer the originals
will last. But also just to make it so that anybody around the world with
internet can access documents and really spend time sort of gloating over
them in their own homes or, or as they're doing research. The
transcriptions though that are produced on “By the People” really help to
make search go down to the page level. So the goal is to get transcriptions
that bring us right down to the page and to engage people in the process of
making that knowledge and really our exploring collections as well.

John Fenn (11:54): We should say quickly for our non Library staff
listeners. OCIO is Office of Chief Information Officer.

Victoria Van Hyning (12:00): Thank you. I have been taken over by the
acronym monsters.

Stephen Winick (12:06): So, it sounds like the “By the People” project takes
its name from the Gettysburg Address: government of the people, by the
people, for the people.

Lauren Algee (12:14): That's right. So one of our very first campaigns was
“Letters to Lincoln,” which includes letters, correspondence written to the
president by his cabinet as well as legal and political colleagues and rivals
and everyday Americans. So it's a really incredible collection of materials
that we invited the public to work on with us. And the name was suggested
by the library Civil War and Lincoln curator, Michelle Krowl. We
announced it on the 155th anniversary of Lincoln's famous speech, the
Gettysburg Address, several versions of which are at the library and we gave
it that name in part because we were working on Lincoln materials, but also because it perfectly embodies the ethos of this project. It centers the contributions of volunteers. This project is “By the People.” So our goal is opening the treasure chest of Library of Congress collections to those people, inviting them in and empowering them to open the door even more widely for those who come after. Before we had a platform or collections determined, we had two key design principles which were trust and approachability. So it's always about putting our volunteers first, even in our name and we want to make sure we're crediting how generous they are with their time and brain power. So we were really happy to come up with that name.

John Fenn (13:25): That's great. I have another question. Why are we doing this? Why are online handwritten and typescript pages so much more useful once they're transcribed?

Victoria Van Hyning (13:34): I think we're doing it for a few different reasons. One is when you put a document online, it doesn’t automatically become more discoverable, and although the library may include great descriptive metadata about the documents, it usually doesn’t go down to the page level. So a lot of the really meaty and interesting content, whether that's place and people's names or specific turns of phrases or information about maybe causes that people were involved in, that's usually not going to come to the surface when we're describing these documents. But the transcriptions get us there. So they're absolutely vital for that.

Stephen Winick (14:11): So what you're saying is that if you search for a document, for example, by a person's name, you might get the whole document, but the whole document might be 400 pages before it's transcribed.

John Fenn: And their name might not be in the title.

Stephen Winick: And it might not be in the title. If it's in the metadata, you're lucky and it'll come up. But once the document's transcribed, the individual pages on which that person's name is, is mentioned, will turn up. And that makes it a lot easier to find those references.

John Fenn (14:35): Access.

Victoria Van Hyning (14:35): That's exactly right.
Stephen Winick (14:35): So to piggyback on John's question there, why is crowdsourcing the way to go for this type of work? Rather than having computers transcribe these pages?

Victoria Van Hyning (14:45): Computers are getting to the point where they can automatically read a lot of the documents that we are digitizing and making available, but that technology is really cutting edge. It's expensive, it's proprietary. And there are also so many places where it fails. And the effort to train a computer to read each different kind of handwriting from each different period and each different language is just the work of decades and so far really has been decades of effort that have gone into trying to train computers in how to read handwriting. Whereas human brains are incredibly flexible and resilient in ways, in ways that computer programs aren't. So we're really just not at a place where the technology is good enough. And also once we start bringing technologies in the loop to read documents, we're also potentially removing opportunities for people to engage in the process of interpretation. Um so we'll be thinking about that. We are thinking about that as a team in the long term. How does crowdsourcing change to accommodate changes in technology, but how can we also keep people engaged with the material in this really visceral way?

John Fenn (15:58): So the process of rendering these pages, the manuscript pages machine readable, which means we can search for the text on a computer has two steps, transcription and review. Transcription as I understand it, is basically keying in the text. So reading the handwritten or TypeScript manuscript in one window and then typing on my computer what I see in the other one. What's the review part?

Lauren Algee (16:20): With our model, it's consensus based and requires at least two people to complete a document. So one to transcribe and one to review. But a page could potentially go through several rounds of transcription and review before it's marked as complete. So John, if you transcribe a page, you type out everything you see there. And you think you've gotten it all and gotten it accurate. So then I can then come along as a reviewer. I see that this page needs review and I just compare the two and see if it looks right to me as well. And if it does, then I just click accept and then it was just the two of us. But if I see something that might need an edit that I interpret slightly differently or maybe I can read something you couldn't, I can click edit and I can make that change and then resubmit it for review by another volunteer. (17:05) So a simple page could just take the two of us. Something more complex could take a few rounds of edit. But the
idea is that, you know, two brains are better than one, five may be better than two. So the idea is eventually we get there to a completed page that we can agree is right and review is incredibly important. We think of it as a safety net. So it's not just about getting to the most accurate transcription, but it also gives volunteers, sort of the, the, the safety of knowing that they can try, that they could make mistakes, but they'll learn from them and somebody else will always be reading this page. So we hope that it gives them, you know, the welcome to, to give it a go and do their best. And you do need to re to register, review, you don't have to register to transcribe, but if you register you can also tag and then you can track your work. And we really try to point people to review because it's that final step before we can make things available on loc.gov as Victoria was talking about for research and access. So we need, need people to help us close that loop by becoming reviewers.

Stephen Winick (18:09): And am I right in thinking that the Library of Congress came up with the software this runs on?

Victoria Van Hyning (18:14): Yeah, that's a great question. So there are a number of different platforms out there, but the library um under the leadership of Megan Ferriter decided that we should really build something that will allow us to directly take content from our library website, loc.gov, put it into our crowdsourcing website, which is crowd.loc.gov and then once a transcription and the review and any tagging has happened, bring the data back to the library's website. And that really critical pathway is something that a lot of institutions I think find they need to make for themselves. Having said that, the library hopes that Concordia, which is the code base that was developed here and launched on “By the People” in 2018 will be something that other institutions could fork and build on and adapt to their own import and export systems and needs. And that can be found on get hub under the Library of Congress's Concordia repository.

John Fenn (19:10): And just to be clear, anyone can participate in “By the People?”

Victoria Van Hyning (19:15): Yes, that's right. Anybody can take part in “By the People.” As Lauren said, you do not need to create an account if you want to transcribe or you just want to go and read the documents. If you want to review other people's work or if you want to add tags, then you'll need to create an account. The nice thing about creating an account as well is that you can then go back and see the pages that you've worked on and
their current status. So maybe you transcribed at a month ago. You go back and you see, Hey, somebody has reviewed it and now it's complete.

Lauren Algee (19:42): That's one of the benefits of it being online. Anyone can go to crowd.llc.gov and jump right in. You don't need an assignment from us. You don't need special training. There's a guide to get you started. So it's, it's all about empowering folks to, to just jump in.

Stephen Winick (19:57): Great. besides the Alan Lomax campaign, what are some of the other campaigns within “By the People?”

Lauren Algee (20:03):

We are adding new collections and pages all the time and we're really working towards fully representing the breadth and depth of the library's treasures. This year we celebrated the centennial of the 19th Amendment with the papers of five different women's suffrage movement leaders. So that includes Susan B. Anthony, Mary Church Terell, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anna E. Dickinson and Carrie Chapman Catt. So you can transcribe Susan B. Anthony is daybooks showing all the stops she made everywhere across the country to stir up support for women’s voting rights. Um we mentioned letters to Lincoln which has been fully transcribed. It still needs a lot to review. We also have diaries and other writings by Clara Barton drafts and publications of Walt Whitman. And we launched Rosa Parks’ papers on her birthday this year. So that was really exciting. And we just recently added a campaign called “Herencia: Centuries of Spanish Legal Documents,” which is our first entirely non-English campaign. So it includes papers mostly in Spanish, but also Latin and Catalan. And it pertains to laws and decrees of Spanish Kings, government officials, and the Catholic church, including the Spanish inquisition and Papal Bulls. So it's a really fascinating new collection for us.

John Fenn (21:15): And I'll just add in, one of my favorite collections that I've done a lot of transcribing in is the handwriting competition. One.


John Fenn (21:32): And learning how to handwrite again with a different arm, if they had lost an arm in combat. So just really compelling stuff. So how's it going? Are we getting lots of pages transcribed?
Lauren Algee (21:42): Yeah, so it's been just about, not even a year and a half since we launched and volunteers have completed 55,000 transcriptions so that those have gone through transcription and review and an additional 50,000 pages have been transcribed and are just waiting for that review pass. We launched 9,000 pages of Lomax last fall and all of those have had a first pass of transcription. 3,500 are fully transcribed and completed and we're excited to be adding more of Lomax as materials this spring. So we'd love to have all of that first group completed. So if people listening want to jump in and help us with review, that would be incredible. Those Rosa Parks papers that we added in February, that was our fastest moving campaign yet All 1,700 pages of that were transcribed in just two weeks and we only have about a hundred that still need review. So things are moving quickly, but we still need lots of review and we still need transcribers and there's lots of space for people to join in. We're always adding new things.

Stephen Winick (22:39): Amazing. So what is the biggest takeaway for each of you from this project?

Victoria Van Hyning (22:40): I think one of the really wonderful things that we've seen is that people are taking “By the People” and really running with it and hosting their own transcribe-a-thons or review-a-thons or other public programming and public libraries and university libraries. We're seeing people bring it into their classrooms. And the nice thing about that is they can do whatever programming works for them on their own time. They can help people connect with, for example, documents in their own special collections. So maybe for a women's history month we're seeing a lot of folks use “By the People” transcribe-a-thon, but then also look at their, for example, college or public library archives and say, Hey, did you know our students, our community that we have these things if you also want to come in and connect with the physical documents. So that suggests to me that we're not just making a tool that serves the needs of the libraries or individuals gaining new skills in paleography or reading old handwriting or engaging with the past. But we're also creating tools that work for programming needs for folks all over the country and indeed abroad as well.

Lauren Algee (23:56): Yeah and just to add to that, you know, we've seen such a wide, wide range of volunteers, you know, from retirees and seniors working on this all the way to middle school classrooms. And I think what's really amazing is people like to talk about how, you know, students
nowadays, can they read cursive, can they do this? And students we've really seen take to it wonderfully. And, and for them it's like a puzzle that it has to be put together. That's really fascinating to watch. And teachers have told us that what's great about is that it has real world impact. It's not just another assignment that goes into a drawer. And I think that's what's so wonderful for everyone that we hear from about this experience is that you know, you're doing something that, that serves the Library and serves others and you're also opening your own mind and, and learning about history. So I think the, the impact we've heard about from the people who've taken part is, is my favorite part, but it really shows that this goes much further beyond just the Library's walls.

Victoria Van Hyning (24:48): And I just, I have one more that I have to sneak in. Which is that the transcriptions also help people who have accessibility and access needs. So who are using screen readers and knowing that a document image that can be read by screen readers is now accessible in his transcribed form. And we do hear from a lot of participants that that's hugely motivating as well.

Stephen Winick (25:08): Yeah, I think that's really important too.

John Fenn (25:11): Well Lauren and Victoria, thank you so much for being on the podcast with us.

Victoria Van Hyning (25:15): Thanks for having us.

Lauren Algee (25:16): Thanks.

Stephen Winick (25:16): Thank you.

John Fenn (25:18): So Lauren and Victoria reminded us of just how many pages there are in these collections, which again you can find at crowd.loc.gov and partly there are a lot of pages because in some cases Lomax worked on book projects, and drafts of these book projects are also in the collections. He wrote a book about Jelly Roll Morton for example.

Stephen Winick (25:35): And another his books was *The Rainbow Sign* which was based on his interviews with Vera Hall from Alabama. She's probably best known for the spiritual "Trouble so Hard," and her voice from that song was sampled and used as the main element in Moby's hit "Natural Blues" in 1999. But the interviews with Vera Hall are wide ranging
and include information on African American life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They cover topics like courtship, cooking and small spoken genres like riddles. She also was a great singer, of course, and I recently ran across an unusual Vera Hall recording from 1948. This is her version of the bad man ballad “Stagolee.”

Vera Ward Hall (26:16):
Don’t you remember, you remember, one dark, stormy night
Stagolee and Billy O’Lyon, they had that noble fight
Bad man, Stagolee, wasn’t he bad, he bad with a gun?

Billy O’Lyon told Stagolee, please don’t take my life
I got three little childrens, and a dear little loving wife
Bad man, Stagolee, wasn’t he bad, he bad with a gun?

Stagolee told Billy O’Lyon
I don’t care for your three little childrens, either your loving wife
You done stole my Stetson hat and I’m bound to take your life
Bad man, Stagolee, wasn’t he bad, he bad with a gun?

Stagolee pulled out his 44, it went “bum-bum-bum”
It wasn’t long before Billy O’Lyon was laying on the floor
Bad man, Stagolee, wasn’t he bad, he bad with a gun?

John Fenn (28:05): Again, that was Vera Hall with "Stagolee." Another great manuscript in these collections, very similar to the Vera Hall interviews is a set of about 2000 pages of interviews with Bessie Jones of the Sea Island singers from Georgia. The interviews cover all kinds of topics from spirituals and children's games to stories about her parents and grandparents. There are folktales in these interviews and also her personal feelings about laughter and courtship and marriage. It's just an incredibly wide ranging set of interviews conducted by Lomax and his coworker Antoinette Marchand. The interviews exist in audio form, but they've also been written up in manuscript and because of Bessie Jones’s strong Georgia accent, a lot of folks will have an easier time with the written versions.

Stephen Winick (28:43): Yeah, that is also an amazing set of recordings. Let’s hear a little clip of Bessie Jones demonstrating the clapping game called “Juba.”
Bessie Jones (28:52):
Juba, Juba, Juba
Juba this and Juba that
And Juba killed the yellow cat
And get over double trouble Juba!
You sift up the meal, you give me the husk
You cook up the bread, you give me the crust
You fry up the meat, you give me the skin
And that’s the way my mama’s troubles begin
Juba…and then it’s dancing
Juba! Juba!
You Juba up, and Juba down Juba all around the town
Juba for ma, Juba for pa, Juba for your brother-in-law
Juba! Juba!

Stephen Winick (29:33): Again, that was “Juba” by Bessie Jones. So we've talked to Lauren and Victoria about the history and the technical aspects of the “By the People” program, and we've heard a few great clips from the collections and talked about the related manuscripts. Now we have another guest to help us understand these collections. We're joined by Todd Harvey who is a reference librarian at the American Folklife Center and the curator of the Lomax collections. Welcome back to the podcast, Todd.

Todd Harvey (29:57): Thanks. It's great to be here.

John Fenn (29:59): Hey Todd. How did Lomax's collections get tapped to be part of “By the People?”

Todd Harvey (30:03): “By the People” had been working almost exclusively with the library’s manuscript division and they were kind of looking to expand at the same time that we are as, as we are always, on the lookout for new opportunities, and it just seemed like a pretty good fit.

Stephen Winick (30:21): And, and what do you think makes the Lomax collection such a natural for this project?

Todd Harvey (30:36):
So American Folklife Center collections have a unique ability to connect with ordinary people because by and large they’re documentation of ordinary people. And the Lomax collections kind of especially works along
these lines. When you think about it, the Lomaxes recorded in every city in small town in America and they recorded a thousand singers that you've never heard of. And the Lomax field notebooks are just full of descriptions of this. One of my kind of favorite pieces is something we showed at an exhibit the other day and, and if it's okay, I'll tell you the story about it.

Stephen Winick (31:05): Yeah, great.

Todd Harvey (31:06): We were doing an exhibit for one of the Library’s philanthropical groups and for staff and I brought in a page from the notebook from 1941 in Mississippi and it featured a young man named McKinley Morganfield who's a tractor driver and a farmer. And the, the page just describes an interview with him down to his record collection that listed it in great detail. And that would have been interesting and fine except that this guy showed up two years later in Chicago as “Muddy Waters.” And so now we have in the, the crowdsourcing data, a description of Muddy Waters's record collection. And you know, before now, if you had searched for Muddy Waters, you probably wouldn't have found it anywhere in the...in that particular part of the Lomax collection. But now you can find out his record collection.

Stephen Winick (31:59): Yeah, that's pretty amazing though. All of that documentation of that trip and Muddy Waters and some of those people is just amazing to find. And now what you can dig out through searches is a lot greater than before, where you essentially had to read through the page images in order to find anything. That's fantastic.

Todd Harvey (32:15): Exactly right.

John Fenn (32:17): So let's hear a little of how McKinley Morganfield sounded back then in 1941.

McKinley Morganfield aka Muddy Waters (32:34):
Well I'm a rambling kid
I been rambling all of my days
Yes, I'm a rambling kid
I been rambling all of my days
Well, you know my baby she want me to stop rambling
So she says she will change her ways
Well, now it ain't no use to you rambling
When your baby don't want you rambling around
Yes, now it ain't no use to you rambling
When your baby don't want you rambling around
Well now, you know if you keep on rambling
She be done drove on out of this town

No I ain't gonna ramble, babe
And I ain't gonna ramble no more
Yeah now, I ain't gonna ramble, child
And I ain't gonna ramble no more
Well, you know if I keep on a-rambling
I'd be drifting from door to door

Stephen Winick (34:29): Again, that was "Rambling Kid" by McKinley Morganfield, otherwise known as Muddy Waters. And one of the great things about this collection too is that you get to hear things like that: African-American string band music from the Son Sims Four with mandolin and fiddle and guitars, including the young McKinley Morganfield, who was just coming to be known as Muddy Waters.

John Fenn (34:49): So there's that really rich example of Mr. Morganfield and he's just one of the fantastic musicians recorded in that field project in 1941 and 1942. But Todd that seems like an obvious trip to include. So how have we decided to include thousands of other pages of Lomax notes and manuscripts? What was the decision making behind that first batch that we put into “By the People?”

Todd Harvey (35:13): Well, I think we've made a decision to, to play it safe in a sense and put the richest body of material out there. And that was the field notebooks. It was, it was something that a lot of people knew something about because he's the man who recorded the world after all. And so we, we chose as our first release his field notes from, from the United States and from the Caribbean, from the Western hemisphere. And that, that's, it seems to have gone over quite well.

Stephen Winick (35:41): That's terrific. So one of the collections that's in this first phase is Lomax’s 1938 field trip to Michigan and Wisconsin. And Todd, I know that you happen to have written an ebook all about that trip. So would that research task have been easier if these notes were transcribed and, and available as searchable text in those days?
Todd Harvey (36:03):
Um, certainly easier. Maybe not quite as fun but, but exactly right. You can, you can now or very shortly we'll be able to do kind of full text searching on these notebooks. I have some, some fun examples from Michigan if you're interested.


Todd Harvey (36:21): One of the parts of the trip that was most interesting to me was he was working in the upper peninsula of Michigan in the early fall, late summer of 1938, and he connected with a Finnish American squeezebox player named Aapo Juhani. And little did he know, but Aapo also practiced some of the rituals that were brought from Finland with him. And one of the pages in his Lomax's field notebook goes like this: "September 28th: Aapo at the spring. Mrs. Korvenpaa (who was kind of an informant for them) and son, Forester, Aapo, and self are present. Aapo can cure people who are cursed. He can also curse people who insult him. To cure a burn, he brings ice from the North to cool the burn." And then it goes through this long ritual where he goes to a spring and he chips in some pieces of silver and uses some birch leaves and things like that. It's a really rich, rich description and I think it will be useful for researchers not only in folk religion, but also folk medicine and things like that. And so it's a, for me, a great example.

Stephen Winick (37:31): And is that an example of one where we don't actually have a sound recording of that event? What we have is basically these notes,

Todd Harvey (37:38): Well it, we don't have a sound recording, but we do have film footage. Lomax opted to take his film camera with him on that. And so this is kind of a, a script to the film footage that we have. It's quite lovely.

Stephen Winick (37:52): And it's, it's color silent film if I recall.

Todd Harvey (37:55): It sure is.

John Fenn (37:56): Well, we don't have any sound recordings of the ritual, but we do have oppose accordion playing. So let's hear what he sounded like.

Aapo Juhani (38:28):
[Accordion playing and wordless singing]


John Fenn (39:51): So Todd. Are there any other pages that really stand out from other collections?

Todd Harvey (39:55): Well, I was mentioning the, the Muddy Waters page and, and I often like to think about what went into the field trip in order to make it possible. And so I chose a letter from the Librarian of Congress that was a kind of letter of introduction that Lomax was able to take with him. And and it goes like this, to whom it may concerns lie 23rd 1942 mr Alan Lomax, his assistant in charge of the archive of American folk song in the music division of the Library of Congress. He's at present, engaged in recording folk music in Tennessee, Mississippi and surrounding areas in this work. He's being assisted by several students from Fisk university. All of the records which mr Lomax make will be deposited in the archive of American folk song in the Library of Congress for the use and benefit of the American people. Such courtesies and facilities as maybe afforded him will be appreciated by the authority of the library, Luther Evans acting librarians. It's quite a wonderful bit of early 20th century language and custom

Stephen Winick (41:02): And this letter was especially important for Lomax when recording in the segregated South when a white man who was interested in speaking to or interacting with African Americans was often viewed with suspicion by both sides. I think sometimes being from the federal government didn't help with local white authorities, but the letter explained that his activity was at least nominally apolitical and it might serve to get him past the white gatekeepers in these communities.

Todd Harvey (41:25): Yeah, excellent point. And I wonder if, if he had the letter with him when he was he writes in his autobiographical novel land where the blues began about being arrested, uh, because of associating with
African Americans and um, they, they thought he was some sort of a spy or something like that. Yeah. So I don't know if that letter helped at all.

Stephen Winick (41:34): Sometimes Lomax was able to form quite friendly relationships with African American musicians on these trips and one of them was David Edwards, later known as Honeyboy Edwards. We know the interaction was genuinely appreciated by both sides because both Lomax and Edwards wrote about it Lomax in The Land where the blues began and Honeyboy in his book, the world don't owe me nothing. They genuinely seem to like each other. Now that these field notebooks have been transcribed, you can search on the name Edwards and find Lomax as first impressions, which I'll read out. A magnificent guitarist, reckless, clever, strong as a Panther, a swagger, a young man of many women.

John Fenn: That's great. Let's hear a little of Honeyboy Edwards from that trip.

David "Honeyboy" Edwards (42:46):
Oh Lordy Lord, Oh Lordy Lord,
Hurt me so bad, for us to part
But someday baby, you ain't gonna worry my life anymore.

So many nights, since you been gone
How much I been a worrying, myself alone.
But someday baby, you ain't gonna worry my life anymore.

[guitar solo]

So many days, since you went away,
How much I been a worryin' both night and day
But someday baby, you ain't gonna worry my life anymore.

So that's my story, all I have to say to you
Bye Bye baby, don't care what you do
But someday baby, you ain't gonna worry my life anymore.

Stephen Winick (44:30): Again, Honeyboy Edwards with worried life blues. And one of the things Honeyboy was worried about was that he had been drafted for World War II and he was off to see the draft board right after his recording sessions with Lomax and Lomax kind of assumed Honeyboy had
gone off to war. And then right after that, Lomax himself left the Library of Congress for the Office of War Information and then the army. So they totally lost touch. As it turns out, Honeyboy got deferred for an old injury and he never went off to war after all, but he and Lomax never saw each other again until 1978.

John Fenn: Right. And 1978 was when the Library of Congress did a special concert for the 50th anniversary of what is now the American Folklife Center archive. Honeyboy was invited to play and Lomax was invited to be in the audience and we have audio of their reunion plus one song from Honeyboy, which we'll put up on the blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife.

Stephen Winick: So Todd, we know that the first phase of the campaign is winding down in the sense that 9,000 pages have been transcribed and a lot of those have been reviewed as well. And we're continuing with that review process and we think that in May we'll be releasing a new wave of pages. So tell us about those collections.

Todd Harvey (45:31): Yeah. Isn't it amazing that hundreds of people have engaged with this collection more than we, we knew who were fans of the Lomax collection. And so I think those people were particularly drawn to the American field notes in the, in the next iteration we have British Isles fieldwork. Lomax lived in Europe during most of the 1950s and made several trips around the British Isles. And so those notebooks are, are really interesting in that they document what was happening and where, where he was recording who he was recording but, but there are also journals in there that talk about what was going on for him and, and it's a kind of, it's an interesting transitional place for him. He's approaching middle age, he's starting to think about really broad ideas about the way musics travel with people in their diasporas. And this stuff comes through in his journals. It's, it's quite exciting.

Stephen Winick: We can't wait for those manuscripts to be transcribed so we can have even fuller access to those really rich collections of British and Irish material. There's some really great stuff in there, which I've been listening to for many years actually. So I'm really happy that this stuff is going to come out. So Todd, thanks so much for joining us.

Todd Harvey: Yeah, it's my pleasure. You know, we, in this process with crowdsourcing, we get to engage with people in a whole new way both in individually making friends, new friends along the way, but all those people...
get to say I've contributed to the Library of Congress. And so I think it's a really great opportunity for the American Folklife Center and for the library. So thanks for having me today.

Stephen Winick: Yeah, thank you for coming.

John Fenn: Indeed.

Stephen Winick (47:17): So I mentioned that I've been listening to Lomax's British and Irish recordings for years. Here's “The Herring's Head” by Seamus Ennis, which is part of my life because it's a song I actually sing with a couple of the groups I perform with. And I learned it from this recording. Now Ennis wasn't just a singer, he was also a bagpiper and a folklorist and he helped arrange Lomax's field trip in Ireland. And so he was really important in this trip. So again, Seamus Ennis singing “The Herring's Head.”

Seamus Ennis (47:46):

There once was a man who came from Kinsale
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
And he had a herring, a herring for sale
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling

Sing man of Kinsale with a herring for sale
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
And indeed I have more of my herring to sing
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling

So what do you think they made of his head?
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
The finest griddle that ever baked bread,
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
Sing herring, sing head, sing griddle, sing bread
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
And indeed I have more of my herring to sing
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling

So what do you think they made of his back?
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
A nice little man and his name it was Jack
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
Sing herring, sing back, sing man, sing Jack
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
And indeed I have more of my herring to sing
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling

So what do you think they made of his hair?
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
The grandest rope for the seat of a chair
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
Sing herring, sing hair, sing rope, sing chair
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling
And indeed I’ve no more of my her ring to sing
Sing aberumvane, sing aberoling

John Fenn (49:09):
Oh, that's great. And there will be notes in “By the People” about Lomax’s trips with Seamus Ennis and other great performers. There’s one more from those collections that I think would be especially appropriate to play for a transcription project. This is Bob and Ron copper from Sussex, England singing. “Come Write Me Down.”

Bob and Ron Copper (49:30):
Come write me down ye powers above
The man that first created love
For I’ve a diamond in my eye
Where all my joys and comforts lie
Where all my joys and comforts lie

"I will give you gold, I'll give you pearl,
If you can fancy me, my girl.
Rich costly robes that you shall wear,
If you can fancy me, dear girl."

"It's not your gold shall me entice
To leave all pleasures to be a wife,
For I don’t mean or intend at all
To be at any young man's call."

Stephen Winick (50:57): Very cool. Bob and Ron Copper. Bob Copper was a
fantastic singer, but also a folklorist and a BBC radio presenter. And in 1994, he and his family came here to the Library of Congress and performed a concert for the American Folklife Center. We have a recording of that in our archive too, 50 years after this Lomax recording,

John Fenn (51:17): Which reminds me of one more item. One of the iconic field notebooks in these collections is from Lomax’s trip to Haiti in 1937. It’s got all kinds of notes, but also drawings, diagrams of drums in their positions during rituals, all sorts of useful information. The recordings that go with those notes documented Haitian culture at a crucial historical moment, and they’re among the earliest known extensive documentation of Haiti. After the massive earthquake in 2010 the association for cultural equity and the Library of Congress helped get copies of all those materials back to Haiti. During that trip, Lomax recorded a great singer that he simply called Francilia, queen of song. We don’t even know her last name, but one of the songs she sang was “Nou Tout Se Moun.” Let’s hear it,

Francilia (52:00):
Singing in Haitian Creole

Stephen Winick (53:04): That was “Nou Tout Se Moun” from Francilia whom Lomax recorded in Haiti. So we do have another surprise piece of music for you. But first we want to urge you again to visit crowd.loc.gov and start transcribing or reviewing pages from this great campaign.

John Fenn: We also want to thank our guests, Victoria Van Hyning, Lauren Algee and our own Todd Harvey.

Stephen Winick: And of course Jon Gold, our engineer, the folks who let us use their studio, Mike Turpin and Jay Kinloch, and Alan Lomax and all his helpers and singers who contributed their voices to this podcast. And all our colleagues at the library who helped us deploy this podcast as well.

John Fenn: So we mentioned one more surprise song. Every year we challenge contemporary artists to learn songs from the archive and perform them in a special showcase at Folk Alliance International. This year Lakou Mizik from Haiti performed their own take on Francilia’s “Nou Tout Se Moun.” So let’s hear that to take us out.
Stephen Winick: Remember: blogs.loc.gov/folklife for full audio of any item excerpted in this podcast and crowd.loc.gov for “By the People.” Here’s Lakou Mizik

Lakou Mizik (56:02):
Music with vocals in Haitian Creole

Announcer (56:23): This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.