John Fenn: Welcome to Folklife Today! I’m John Fenn, the head of research and programs at the American Folklife Center, and I’m here with Steve Winick, a folklife specialist at the American Folklife Center and the creator of the Folklife Today blog.

Steve Winick: Ahoy!

John Fenn: When Steve says “ahoy,” you know we’re going to be talking about Sea Shanties! All of you out there in social media land might be hearing about the sudden popularity of sea shanties, which have been blowing up TikTok recently. And here at the American Folklife Center, we have some of the greatest collections of sea shanty field recordings in the world. So if you’re a devoted fan of ShantyTok and you’re looking for material, the American Folklife Center is a great resource. And it just so happens that my co-host Steve Winick is our staff’s sea shanty specialist, both as a scholar and as a singer, so we decided to give you an introduction to our shanties.

Steve Winick: That’s right! Everything old is new again, and apparently that applies to sea shanties as well.

John Fenn: So let’s begin with the basics. What are shanties?

Steve Winick: Well, some people use the word to mean any song sung by sailors, and some of the most popular TikTok shanties aren’t technically shanties. Properly speaking, shanties are work songs sung aboard ships and boats. The word shanty, referring to this kind of song, turns up in the 1850s in the context of shipboard singing.

John Fenn: So I’ve seen the word spelled with an s and I’ve seen it spelled with a c. What’s the deal with that?

Steve Winick: Yeah, that discrepancy goes back to the earliest days of the word. I only know of two instances of the word in writing from the 1850s, one of which is spelled with a c and one with an s. The theory is that the word comes from the French “chanter,” to sing, which would explain why it would begin with a ch but sound like an English sh. An alternate theory is
that the songs came to sailors from loggers who used similar work songs, and who sometimes drove logs right down the rivers to waiting ships where they would meet the sailors. Loggers lived in buildings called shanties, so the theory is that these were “shanty songs” which sailors then abbreviated to “shanties.” There’s no really direct evidence for either etymology, but if I had to bet I’d bet on Chanter!

John Fenn: So let’s hear a field recording. What’s our first shanty, Steve?

Steve Winick: this is a song called “Pay Me My Money Down.”

John Fenn: I think a lot of people may know this from Bruce Springsteen, who recorded it on his album “The Seeger Sessions.” And of course Bruce learned it from Pete Seeger.

Steve Winick: exactly. But Pete Seeger learned it from the Sea Island Singers from coastal Georgia, and that’s who we’ll hear singing it in a field recording by Alan Lomax.

John Fenn: Excellent, let’s hear it!

John Davis and the Sea Island Singers:

Pay me, pay me
Pay me my money down
Pay me mister stevedore
Pay me my money down
Oh, pay me, oh, pay me
Pay me my money down
Pay me or go to jail
Pay me my money down

Think I heard my Captain say
Pay me my money down
Tomorrow is my sailing day
Pay me my money down

Oh, pay me, you pay me
Pay me my money down
Pay me or go to jail
Pay me my money down

I wish I was Miss Albie Jones’s son
Pay me my money down
I’d sit in the house and drink good rum
Pay me my money down

Oh, pay me, you pay me
Pay me my money down
Pay me or go to jail
Pay me my money down

John Fenn: So, I’ve heard the full field recording, Steve, and they talk about singing the song while loading lumber into the hold of a schooner. So I guess they weren’t sailors themselves. Is this really a shanty?

Steve Winick: That’s a very good question! Yes, it is! The first time this song turns up in any source, it’s one of the very first articles on shanties, from the Atlantic Monthly in 1858. So it was definitely sung aboard ships. But the specific verses about pay me or go to jail aren’t in that version.

John Fenn: So what’s going on in those verses?

Steve Winick: well, the prevailing story is that it reflects the time just after emancipation, when white bosses might be trying to get out of paying their black laborers, and the roustabouts had to be pretty assertive to demand their money. Whether that story is fully true or not, I wanted to include the song to represent the centrality of African Americans and Afro-Caribbean people to the Shanty tradition, which is often forgotten. Some of the most reliable sources on shanties tell us that often the most valued singer onboard a ship was a black sailor, and we can see the connections between shanties and field hollers and other land-based work songs that African Americans knew.

John Fenn: So, if these were work songs, why did people sing while they worked?

Steve Winick: The main reason was to coordinate the labor. We think the shanty had antecedents going back a long way, but as a developed genre it
probably dates to the mid-nineteenth century, when shipping companies were trying to deliver more cargo with fewer paid sailors, making it really important to maximize the work you could get out of a few men. Tasks on board ship often required several men to pull on a rope or work a lever on a windlass at exactly the same time, and a song could really help you do that more efficiently. One of the words used for pulling on a rope was “Haul,” and you get that word in a lot of the classic shanties, including “Haul on the Bowline.” People say this song goes back to the time of Henry VIII because that’s when the Bowline was an important rope to haul on, but I don’t actually believe that—as I said, shanties didn’t really rise to importance until the 19th century and there’s no evidence of this particular song before the 1850s.

John Fenn: so the recording we have is a retired sailor named Richard Maitland singing. He lived at Sailor’s Snug Harbor in Staten Island, which was a retirement home for sailors, and Alan Lomax recorded him in 1939.

[Haul on the Bowline]

Richard Maitland:

Now this is short song that’s usually used in pulling after-sheets, or hauling down a tack.

Haul the bowline, the long-tail bowline
Haul the bowline, the bowline haul

Haul the bowline, Kitty you’re my darlin’
Haul the bowline, the bowline haul

Haul the bowline, We’ll all haul on together
Haul the bowline, the bowline haul

Haul the bowline, We’ll haul for better weather
Haul the bowline, the bowline haul

Haul the bowline, We’ll bust or break our banner
Haul the bowline, the bowline haul

Steve Winick: So a short-haul shanty like that was used for tasks where you had to pull strongly down on the rope a few times—in that case, on the word “Haul!” But there were also songs for more sustained tasks like setting sails using moveable yards, which were spars that could slide up or down along
their section of mast. So our next song is for that task, and that kind of shanty is often called a “Halyard Shanty” after the rope that moves that yard. The song is known as “Dead Horse.”

John Fenn: Wait, “Dead Horse?” That’s kind of a weird title!

Steve Winick: Yes, I’ll mention that on our website this song is called “Poor Old Man,” but when we released it on an album, first in the 1950s and then on CD in the 1990s, we changed the title to “Dead Horse.” And that’s because it’s referring to a particular tradition among sailors, and it refers specifically to the sailor’s advance. Usually, the sailor went to sea after his credit ran out ashore, so he used an advance on his wages to pay his creditor, which was usually the boarding house master where he lived. And then for the first one to three months of his voyage he was just working off his debt—which was known as paying for a dead horse. They sometimes had a little ceremony when the horse was paid and the sailor was actually earning money.

John Fenn: I guess that makes sense. Now the next recording we have is Captain Leighton Robinson with a group of singing sailors. They were recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell in California in 1939.

Leighton Robinson:

A poor old man came riding along,
And we say so, and we hope so,
A poor old man came riding along,
Oh, poor old man.

Poor old man, your horse he must die,
And we say so, and we hope so,
Poor old man, your horse he must die,
Oh, poor old man.

And if he dies I'll sell his skin
And we say so, and we hope so,
And if he dies I'll sell his skin
Oh, poor old man.

And if he lives we’ll ride him again
And we say so, and we hope so,
And if he lives we’ll ride him again  
Oh, poor old man.

John Fenn: So Steve, you’ve explained some of the kinds of work that needed coordinating. Were there other reasons to sing shanties though?

Steve Winick: Well, there was one main other reason, which was just to relieve the boredom of repetitive tasks. Some tasks on the ship like pumping out the hold or raising the anchor by means of a capstan, were just boring. They needed the men to work at basically the same speed but not with the precision of setting sail. And they had a type of shanty with more sustained singing from the workers, often called a capstan shanty. And one of the best known is “The Amsterdam Maid,” which was kind of a racy song.

John Fenn: And we’re going to hear Charles J. Finger sing it. He was a prolific author, but had also sailed in tall ships and sung shanties during shipboard work. He published collections of sea shanties and of cowboy songs, so he was kind of a fan of John Lomax, who was one of the first scholars and collectors to work on cowboy songs. Finger visited the Library of Congress in 1937, and John and Alan Lomax recorded him. The chorus here is sung by Finger’s daughter, who came with him to Washington, along with the Lomaxes.


In Amsterdam I met a maid  
Mark well what I do say!  
In Amsterdam I met a maid  
And she was mistress of her trade  
I’ll go no more a roving with you fair maid  
A Roving, Roving, since Roving’s been my ru-u-i-n  
I’ll go no more a roving with you fair maid  

I touched this fair maid on the toe  
Mark well what I do say!  
I touched this fair maid on the toe  
Said she "young man, you're very very low"
I’ll go no more a roving with you fair maid
All together, boys!
A Roving, Roving, since Roving’s been my ru-u-i-n
I’ll go no more a roving with you fair maid

Make fast there, boys!

John Fenn: You know, hearing Charles J. Finger’s daughter singing along there reminds me that we haven’t heard many women singing shanties.

Steve Winick: That’s quite true. It was unusual for women to go to sea as working sailors, and most commercial shipping lines wouldn’t hire them back in the days of shanties.

John Fenn: So do we have any recordings of women singing them?

Steve Winick: We do, and for that we’ll go to the Caribbean, where in some shore-based communities people did tasks like rowing and hauling nets as fishermen, and even hunting whales, from shore-based boats. In these communities, you did seafaring tasks but didn’t need to set sail for months in order to do them, so women participated more in that kind of work. And in those communities, women knew and sang shanties.

John Fenn: Great, let’s hear one of those. This is “We All Going Ashore” by a group of men and women from Anguilla, including Florence Brooks and Edith Lloyd.

Group of women from Anguilla:

Captain captain where are you bound
Oh, we all going ashore
Oh, one and two and another
Oh, we all going ashore

We are going ashore but not to stay
Oh, we all going ashore
Oh, one and two and another
Oh, we all going ashore

Oh, loan me the boat and pull on the oars
Oh, we all going ashore
Oh, one and two and another
Oh, we all going ashore
We are going ashore this evening so
Oh, we all going ashore
Oh, one and two and another
Oh, we all going ashore
Oh, one and two and another
Oh, we all going ashore

John Fenn: Wow, I love the more pronounced polyphony that you hear in the African American and Caribbean versions of sea shanties. You can hear the African heritage and the continuity with that quite clearly.

Steve Winick: I agree, and of course even in the versions sung by white people there are a lot of African influences. The shanty was a really syncretic genre, and as most of the early observers and later scholars mention, African, Celtic, and English music and song seem to have been the main ingredients in English-language shanties.

John Fenn: So I’m assuming this doesn’t exhaust our supply of shanties?

Steve Winick: not by a long shot! All of the people and groups that we’ve played today have more recordings online. More than that, there are some really great singers we didn’t have time to feature, like a retired sailor named Patrick Tayluer, whom I wrote a whole article about and whom I want to do a whole episode on someday.

John Fenn: And we also had several collectors like James Madison Carpenter and Robert Winslow Gordon who collected on wax cylinders and in manuscript form, so they’re not ideal for a podcast but they’re still fascinating. There’s a whole lot of material to explore online on the loc.gov website.

Steve Winick: yes, and there’s also a good bit at culturalequity.org, which is the Alan Lomax archive’s site.

John Fenn: but I bet you’re blogging about shanties, too, Steve.

Steve Winick: Yes, if you go to blogs.loc.gov/folklife, you can look for my posts on shanties there.
John Fenn: So we have one last shanty to give you, because Steve himself is a shanty singer with a group called Ship’s Company Shantymen. In 2018 they performed in our archive challenge concert at the Library, and we have some of that audio.

Steve Winick: Yes, this is from one of those collections where there are a lot of manuscript items with no audio, so you need someone to bring these alive, and I took up that challenge with my friends Mike Bosworth, Myron Peterson, and Dallas Valley.

John Fenn: Before we go, let’s thank all the singers and collectors we featured in this episode, and let’s thank our team here at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, including our engineer Jon Gold. Let’s thank all our colleagues at the Library of Congress who help us deploy this podcast!

Steve Winick: So we put me on at the end so you can turn me off whenever you want, for which—you’re very welcome. But before that, we should also say, thanks to all of you for listening to the Folklife Today podcast.

Steve Winick: Our first song was collected by James Madison Carpenter, a great American collector of the 1920s and early 1930s, kind of an underrepresented era in folksong collected. And he collected both in the United States and in the UK. He was American, he was from Mississippi in fact, but he was a Harvard Scholar and he was really interested in sea shanties and nautical music, and he wrote his dissertation about that. But his adviser was a man named George Lyman Kittredge, and Kittredge had been the assistant of Francis James Child, who was such a famous ballad scholar that we have a sub-genre of ballads that we refer to as “Child Ballads.” And one of the reasons Carpenter was very interested in this particular song is that it is a sea shanty, and it’s a very well known sea shanty, it’s a version of “Blow the Man Down,” possibly the best-known sea shanty there is. But, the lyrics are totally different from most other versions of “Blow the Man Down,” except for the refrains. And the lyrics are in fact one of these Child ballads, which is a story about the devil. Carpenter collected this combination of “Blow the Man Down” and the devil ballad twice in New York City at Sailors’ Snug Harbor in Staten Island, which was a home for retired sailors, and once in Cardiff, in South Wales. And I kind
of combined verses from these three versions of this song, to get the one that we’re going to do.

As I was a walking one morning in spring
Way-hey, blow the man down
I found myself next to an old country inn
Give me some time to blow the man down

So I set myself down and I ordered some gin
Way-hey, blow the man down
A commercial traveler was the next to come in
Give me some time to blow the man down

We talked of the weather and things of the day
Way-hey, blow the man down
Says he, “Here’s a story I’ve learned on my way”
Give me some time to blow the man down

It’s of an old tailor in London did dwell
Way-hey, blow the man down
The Devil he came to him once out of Hell
Give me some time to blow the man down

Says he, my good friend, now I’ve come a long way
Way-hey, blow the man down
Especially this visit to you for to pay
Give me some time to blow the man down

Not you nor your son nor your daughter I crave
Way-hey, blow the man down
Its your dirty old wife; she’s a drunken old Jade
Give me some time to blow the man down

So the Devil he bundled her into a sack
Way-hey, blow the man down
And away down to hell with the wife on his back
Give me some time to blow the man down

There were three little imps who stood outside the gates
Way-hey, blow the man down
She pulled off her slipper and stove in their pates
Give me some time to blow the man down
There were three little devils all bound down in chains
Way-hey, blow the man down
She took off the other and bashed in their brains
Give me some time to blow the man down

These six little devils for mercy did bawl
Way-hey, blow the man down
“Chuck her out daddy, she'll murder us all!”
Give me some time to blow the man down

She’s can’t live in heaven, she’s not fit for hell
Way-hey, blow the man down
I reckon that London’s a place she could dwell
Give me some time to blow the man down

So the Devil he bundled her back in the sack
Way-hey, blow the man down
And back to the tailor took her on his back
Give me some time to blow the man down

She went down to hell and she came back again
Way-hey, blow the man down
Which proves that the women are tougher than men
Give me some time to blow the man down

Thank you! That was James Madison Carpenter’s version of “Blow the Man Down,” mostly from Dennis O’Connors, of New York City....

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