



Dinkytown Before Dylan

Gene Bluestein and the Minneapolis Folk Music Revival of the 1950s

Melinda Russell

DURING THE 1950S, American studies scholar and musician Gene Bluestein collected, performed, recorded, and taught folk songs to Minnesotans of many ages, promoting through music a message of cultural diversity at a time when the Twin Cities were on the cusp of significant demographic and social change.

Bluestein (1928–2002) made his presence felt during the single decade he lived in Minnesota while pursuing graduate degrees at the University of Minnesota. In addition to teaching at the university and in the community, the self-taught musician (banjo, 12-string guitar, and steel drums, among other instruments) was a Minnesota media pioneer, producing educational radio and television folk music programs used in schools and local libraries across the state. He also produced two record albums on the Smithsonian Folkways label in 1958—one the Minnesota statehood centennial project *Songs of the North Star State*—and a third recording by Appalachian musician Buell Kazee.¹

Though the two musicians never met—one came to town in 1959 just as the other left—Bob Dylan moved into a Twin Cities music scene nurtured and shaped by the pioneering work of Bluestein and others. Dylan's first serious biographer, *New York Times* music critic Robert Shelton, interviewed erstwhile Dylan roommate Harry Weber in 1966 in order to understand Dylan's Minneapolis milieu. Weber, then a PhD candidate in Latin literature and a ballad scholar, recalled: "When I arrived in Minneapolis in 1955 with a guitar . . . folk music was very much underground. The older people came from the Old Left. Their idea of folk music was a union song—[Pete] Seeger and *The*

People's Song Book. Gene Bluestein was the big folk wheel on campus." Weber's insistence that he and Bluestein were in separate generations recognizes that something new was felt to be happening at the very end of the 1950s. Weber's Minnesota-born roommate, of course, famously went on to transform the national folk and rock scene.²

GENE BLUESTEIN WAS THE SON of Jewish immigrants from what is now Moldova. His parents met in New York City where both were members of the left-wing Furriers Union. After earning a BA degree from Brooklyn College, Bluestein relocated from Brooklyn, New York, to Minneapolis in 1950, with his wife, Ellie, so that Gene, then 22 years old, could begin graduate work in English and American studies at the University of Minnesota. He and Ellie had met at Camp Kinderland (Yiddish for "children's land"), then in Hopewell Junction, New York, a transformative experience for both. The youth camp was founded by members of the Workmen's Circle, a leftist Jewish fraternal organization. (Both the camp and the organization still exist.)

Already a fan of folk music, then abundant in New York City, Bluestein was influenced by a frequent visitor to the camp, Pete Seeger, who led campers in hootenannies on the tennis courts. Bluestein reminisced in later years: "Actually the first time I saw the banjo and saw Pete play it, I said 'This has got to be my instrument. I must have one.' It just hit everything. It was American, it was African, it was just a special voice. And especially Pete's approach to it was so interesting to me and important in my own attitude." Bluestein's and Seeger's paths would cross again, in Minnesota.³

Then as now, American studies was an innovative and boundary-crossing enterprise, and the university's program, founded in 1945, was among the best in the country. The department provided a home for those who wished

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FACING: Publicity shot of Gene Bluestein for 1956 appearance at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.



Pete Seeger, 1955.

to study aspects of American culture, such as folk and popular music, science fiction, and television across conventional academic disciplines. Bluestein's unique blend of performance, American studies, ethnomusicology, and folklore studies displayed the interdisciplinarity at the heart of American studies. A 1952 issue of *Minnesotan Magazine* (published for University of Minnesota staff members) shows American studies committee members from multiple departments gathered for a meal and describes the burgeoning program, started only a few years earlier, as one of the top three in the country. It begins, "An oil painting by Thomas Hart Benton, a recording by Leadbelly [sic], a Sherwood Anderson novel, a treatise by Thorstein Veblen, Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization*, and Lloyd Warner's *Yankee City*—all these are proper subject matter of the University's program in American Studies."⁴

Gene and Ellie encountered both anti-Semitic and anti-black racism while living in Minnesota: one landlord asked their religion and refused them housing and another asked if they would stop having black friends over. The Bluesteins also befriended a St.

A Minnesota Daily profile from July 3, 1953, characterized Bluestein as "probably the leading student and performer of folk songs in this area."

Croix calypso band playing an extended gig in St. Paul; its members had been made to enter through the venue's back door. But Ellie also remembers living in Minnesota as a wonderful time, when they greatly enjoyed the affordable cultural life of the Twin Cities: the symphony, theater, jazz, dance, and sports. The Bluesteins moved around the metro area as their family grew—the couple's four children, Joel, Evo, Jemmy, and Frayda, were all born during the family's time in Minnesota—from a basement apartment in central Minneapolis to a place in Northeast, followed by a first-floor unit in Seven Corners on the West Bank. Seeking more space for their active children, the Bluesteins then lived in houses, first in St. Paul and then Minneapolis, where Ellie remembers flooding the front lawn in the winter so the kids could skate.

Gene had no teaching assistantship at first, so Ellie supported them by working in the mail-order department of Sears, handling correspondence; later she would type theses and dissertations. Bluestein eventually supplemented the family income by working as director of music at St. Paul's Temple of Aaron religious school. He finished his MA in English literature in 1953 and moved on to the PhD program in American studies, perhaps a strategy for dual academic legitimacy given the newness of American studies in the academy.⁵

Bluestein was distinctive in approaching folk music not just through academic study but through performance. A 1953 article in the *Minnesota Daily* described

Plankety-plank Grad Studies, Plays Folk Songs

By Ted Schwartz.

Mention folk singing to most people and they think of Burl Ives playing "The Blue Tail Fly."

But mention folk singing to Gene Bluestein and he'll bring out his banjo and play you anything from a 200-year-old sea chantey to a lonesome song of the Kentucky hills.

Gene, an American studies graduate student, is probably the leading student and performer of folk songs in this area. Recently he appeared as a guest expert on American folk songs over radio station WDCY. He was also interviewed by Bill Cleary on his program, "Let's Talk It Over."

PARADOXICALLY, Gene, who has often taught labor union members to sing their own songs, was not permitted to play his banjo on the radio. He's not a member of the musician's union.

Gene comes from Brooklyn, N. Y. He became interested in folk songs about eight years ago when he heard Pete Seeger, the famous banjo player who organized the "Weavers." Gene decided he wanted to learn to play the banjo so he got himself an old fashioned five string instrument, similar to Pete's and began teaching himself by listening to records.

"The only hard thing was learning to 'double thumb,'" Gene says. (Roughly, this means making a banjo go plankety-plank instead of just plain plank-plank.) "Once you're through with that it's easy."

GENE'S REPERTOIRE of folk songs is extremely varied but he says he likes Elizabethan folk songs best. These are mostly plaintive love songs, which were brought over to America by the Scotch-Irish. Besides these, his

favorites are protest songs like the ironic "Preacher and Slave," once sung by the radical International Workers of the World.

The words are set to the Salvation Army hymn tune, "Sweet Bye and Bye."

"You will eat, bye and bye, In that glorious land above the sky."

Work and pray, live on hay, You'll get pie in the sky when you die."

Gene will be picking up more songs like this when he starts work on a doctorate in American folk music next year. His career plans are all set. He wants to teach, do research, and play professionally.

"FOLK SINGING is really fun when you get an audience singing along with you," says Gene. "You should have seen the way a bunch of social workers I played for this year caught on to 'Ain't It A Shame. First I'd sing, 'ain't it a shame to beat your wife on a Sunday' and they'd all chorus back, 'ain't it a shame. They were all singing and clapping their hands. They really went crazy."

Gene doesn't agree with people who think America is too civilized to produce any more folk songs. "People don't have to be poor or backward to produce folk songs," he says. Gene doesn't believe folk songs are going to die out "as long as there are groups to sing them."

For Salutation

India Seeks Compromise Between Village, Industry

By Diane Tanner

Editor's note: Spanner Diane Tanner, education junior, is studying Indian village life. Her letter was written from Sevagram, India.

Our first taste of village life in India was here in Sevagram—the

this would upset Indian economy completely.

The real India is its villages. The Congress party, on the other hand, wants to bring industry to India. Nehru says the nation cannot possibly be built up without manufacturing.

Bluestein was distinctive in approaching folk music not just through academic study but through performance.

Bluestein as “probably the leading student and performer of folk songs in the area” and, at 25, already engaged in public scholarship, making appearances on WDGY-AM radio. “His eclectic repertoire includes labor songs, sea shanties, and ‘Elizabethan’ folk songs.” This article mentions Bluestein’s roots in Brooklyn and his finding inspiration in Pete Seeger, whom he’d met “8 years ago.”⁶

Folk performer William Hood, who met Bluestein in 1957, reported that Bluestein had learned banjo from Seeger’s self-published 1948 book *How to Play the 5-String Banjo*. Bluestein made his own long-neck banjo (a Seeger invention that added three additional frets to the neck for low tuning) as they were not yet commercially available: “Gene was the first banjo player I knew to have created a copy of Seeger’s ‘long neck banjo.’ That was a couple years before Vega began manufacturing them.”⁷

The arrival of musicologist Johannes Riedel (1913–96) to the faculty of the university’s music department in

1953 was a boon to Bluestein’s graduate school education. Riedel was a scholar with catholic tastes; his interests ranged from baroque music to Ecuadorian folk music to American soul and came to include local music-making in Minnesota. He sent his young students into the field to collect songs: some of these are in the Library of Congress collection; Riedel’s students sang material from their own families and collected from local elders. Riedel was on the committee that advised and evaluated Bluestein’s dissertation, “The Background and Sources of an American Folksong Tradition,” and their academic interests were closely connected. In addition to scholarly inquiry into American folk music, each worked to assert a place for popular music within his discipline(s), something of an oil-and-water venture at the time.⁸

A group of children, ages 6 to 12, ply Bluestein with questions as he sang in the galleries of Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1958.



Two 'U' Teachers, ans Were Reds in '51

Red Charges Are 'Fantastic,' Teachers Say

By CARL T. ROWAN
Minneapolis Tribune Staff Writer

Jules Chametzky, University of Minnesota teaching assistant, Wednesday denied charges that he was a member of the Communist party in 1951.

Another teaching assistant—Eugene Bluestein—called a similar charge “fantastic and extremely erroneous,” but he declined to comment when asked whether he is or ever has been a Communist.

Mrs. Barbara Roehrich, 1214 SE, Fourth street, testified in Washington yesterday that Chametzky, Bluestein and the latter's wife, Ellie, were denied “responsible” positions in the Labor Youth league of Minneapolis (LYL) until their transfers from the Communist party in New York to the party in Minneapolis came through.

Chametzky, 25, 1620 SE, Fourth street, called this testimony “utterly fantastic.”

“I am not, have never been and never will be a member of the Communist party,” he said.

The university said last night both men will be questioned and that every effort will be made to get the facts.

Chametzky, a candidate for a



JULES CHAMETZKY
“I'm no Communist”

Minnesotans Called Reds Are Listed

By Staff Correspondent
of the Minneapolis Tribune

WASHINGTON — Following is a list of the 22 Minnesotans described as Communist party members at a Washington hearing Wednesday by Mrs. Barbara Louise Roehrich of Minneapolis:

Martin Mackie, district chairman, and Carl Ross, district secretary of the

City Woman Testifies in Washington

By WILBUR ELSTON
Minneapolis Tribune Staff Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Twenty-two Minnesotans, including two teaching assistants and at least five former students at the University of Minnesota, were described Wednesday as members of the Communist party during the period from 1949 to 1951.

The testimony came from Mrs. Barbara Louise Roehrich, 23, wife of Victor D. Roehrich, both of 1214 SE, Fourth street, Minneapolis, during a hearing on Attorney General Brownell's petition asking that the Labor Youth league (LYL) be designated as a Communist front organization.

(U.S. RED PROBE Reveals Father's Pica for Curbs—Page 24.)

Mrs. Roehrich told the subversive activities control board she knew the 22 as Communists while she was herself a Communist and LYL member in Minneapolis. She quit both organizations in 1951.

IN ADDITION to the University of Minnesota people, Mrs. Roehrich named as Communists a Minneapolis labor union official, a candidate for alderman in a Minneapolis municipal

in Minneapolis in 1957. This was the difficult period after August 18, 1955, when Seeger, following his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, was cited for contempt of Congress. As had been the case earlier with his popular folk singing group, the Weavers, Seeger was blacklisted from commercial gigs. As Ellie Bluestein described Seeger's situation in the mid- to late 1950s: “He just couldn't get work. A lot of the people who were his devotees were by then teachers, assistants, graduates—he says this in one of his biographies—and they brought him around the country doing concerts. And not at universities [where he was not welcome before the late 1950s], but at houses and coffeehouses . . . and so he stayed with us when he came to Minnesota.”¹⁰

Gene Bluestein was no doubt sympathetic to Seeger's plight, after he and another university teaching associate, Jules Chametzky, were named during a 1954 Washington, DC, “subversive activities control board” hearing as being members of the Communist Party from 1949 to 1951, a charge Bluestein described in a press account as “fantastic and extremely erroneous.” A university board of inquiry cleared them of these charges, but according to historian Iric Nathanson, “a cloud of suspicion continued to hover over them.” Ellie describes the experience as “very frightening”: she was home with their first child, Joel, when a reporter called her for a comment on the page-one story in the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*.¹¹

Meanwhile, Bluestein kept busy while working toward his PhD degree. He wrote for *Sing Out!*, the influential magazine of the folk music and folk song movement, and performed and taught in multiple settings around the Twin Cities, including the YWCA and Walker Art Center, before audiences of small children, college students, and adults. He traveled to the South in 1955 and 1957, recording folk musicians Buell Kazee, Reverend C. H. Owens, Fiddlin' Bill Jones, Billy Edd Wheeler, and others. During the summer of 1955, he was music director at Camp Hawthorn (now Camp Sabra), run by the St. Louis (Missouri) Jewish Community Center.¹²

In the later 1950s, Bluestein turned his focus to a number of Minnesota-based projects. In January 1958, he began a television show on American folksong on educational station KTCA Channel 2, airing on Wednesday nights at 9:00; he followed that up in the spring with the *World of Folksong*. A third show, in 1959, focused on the history and development of folksong. Bluestein's work with Minnesota musicians and on Minnesota's folksong heritage formed the basis of his *Minnesota School of the Air* educational radio programs, which were distributed for use in classrooms in 15-minute lessons throughout the state in 1958–59.¹³

“Witness Says Two ‘U’ Teachers, 20 Minnesotans Were Reds in ‘51,”
Minneapolis Morning Tribune, January 14, 1954.

One university student Bluestein made an impression on was future Minnesota governor Wendell Anderson. “Gene Bluestein was a Humanities instructor and played guitar and sang folksongs and had a little bit of a beard, so he was suspect [emphasis original],” Anderson said in a recollection of memorable courses and instructors from his undergraduate days at the university (1950–54). Academic institutions were central in sponsoring folk musicians, but—as Anderson's comments allude—the university's imprimatur did not remove folk music's countercultural associations. These began in the 1930s and 1940s when the music was reinvented and adapted in support of left-leaning political reform and labor movements, including in Minnesota (see sidebar). In the charged Cold War environment of the early 1950s, these associations were considered suspicious and could lead to blacklisting or job loss.⁹

Such was the situation for Seeger, among many others. Repaying the debt to his mentor, Bluestein helped arrange local engagements for Seeger, including concerts at Carleton College in 1956 and 1958, and at the Unitarian Society

Precursors to the 1950s Minnesota Folk Scene

Increasingly fine-grained research by folk music scholars suggests that, rather than a single folk music revival occurring between 1958 and 1964 (presaged by mini-revivals), the United States had something of a “long folk revival” taking place over much of the twentieth century. Just as it would be erroneous to imagine that Dylan’s arrival in 1959 marked the beginning of interest in folk music in Dinkytown, collecting, presenting, performing, and publishing folk music had been going on in Minnesota well before Bluestein arrived in 1950. At midcentury, the Twin Cities had an established history of receiving folk figures, especially (but not solely) connected to local colleges and the University of Minnesota, and of nurturing groups of scholars, players, listeners, and tastemakers.¹

Early activity in Minnesota focused on collecting little-studied regional music. Historian Theodore Blegen published *Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads* in 1936. The following year, Sidney Robertson and Minnesotan Marjorie Edgar recorded Minnesota musicians performing Scots Gaelic, Serbian, and Finnish music. (See page 328.) Edgar, like Bluestein, performed the material she collected, sometimes wearing Finnish traditional dress, at women’s and social clubs such as the Businesswomen’s Club, College Club, and Women’s Association of the Church of the Redeemer. She often gave a talk called “Songs of the North Woods,” in which she would describe the settings of the songs she sang. In 1938, folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax (best known for collecting folk music recordings for the Library of Congress) wrote to both Blegen and Edgar in preparation for a recording trip Lomax was planning (but did not ultimately take) to Minnesota, noting that the area was “terra incognita” to him and that he would need “helpful natives.”²

By the 1940s and 1950s, emphasis shifted from folk song collecting to performances and public education. As in many university towns and big cities, folk luminaries made Twin Cities appearances throughout these decades at the University of Minnesota and nearby colleges. Quirky balladeer John Jacob Niles, with his keening tenor and homemade dulcimers, visited four times in the 1940s, in 1956 and 1957, and again in 1965.³ Alan Lomax, by then established as folk’s preeminent public scholar, gave lecture-demonstrations on various aspects of the American folk tradition five times between 1940 and 1963, once at Carleton College and four times at the University of Minnesota. Folklorist/performer Frank Warner visited in 1947, the same year the Folk Dance Federation of Minnesota was founded to “promote the growth of folk dancing.” Composer, educator, and author Elie Siegmeister taught a course on American music during the 1948 summer term at the University of Minnesota and gave a public talk and radio presentations

on “A Composer’s Evaluation of American Folk Music.”⁴

From the mid-1940s until the mid-1950s, the Folk Arts Foundation of America (FAFA) focused locally (despite its name) to “preserve, promote, and popularize . . . folk culture.” FAFA included a Songs Committee headed alternately by Marjorie Edgar and Burton Paulu, director of KUOM, the University of Minnesota radio station. Records show Paulu in charge of a project in which Finnish, Polish, and Welsh folk songs were recorded and held in a KUOM archive, now lost. U of M history professor and FAFA member Philip D. Jordan hosted a KUOM radio program focused on the “history and development of American folk song.”⁵

Two nationally known figures, Pete Seeger (1919–2014) and Lead Belly (1888–1949), also played important roles in developing a local folk music culture. Pete Seeger’s avuncular mentorship of neophyte folkies was felt from afar via his records and in person during his occasional visits. (Seeger, as the main story shows, had a direct and personal influence on Bluestein.) In 1941, the same year Seeger joined the topical, pro-union Almanac Singers and one year before he was drafted, he visited Minnesota

Influential folk fanzine The Little Sandy Review, published 1959–65 in Minneapolis, featured singer-songwriter Cisco Houston (left) and folklorist Alan Lomax (right) on its covers.



with groupmate Woody Guthrie. They stayed in Duluth with Henry and Irene Paull, principal activists in the 1937 timber workers strike. Seeger returned to Minnesota in 1950–51, performing in-house concerts locally. He also made multiple appearances in the region in the mid- to late 1950s (some arranged by Bluestein), including in Iowa City and Ames, Iowa, and Madison, Wisconsin. Eschewing applause and emphasizing do-it-yourself music-making, Seeger aimed to create new musicians rather than entertain passive audience members. His call to discover one's musicality was a siren song for innumerable young adults of the period, including local old-

time musician Lyle Lofgren (1936–2014), who attended Seeger's 1957 Unitarian Society performance and immediately thereafter began a lifetime of music-making. Jon Pankake and Paul Nelson, who would go on to found the pioneering *Little Sandy Review*, drove to Ames, Iowa, to see Seeger that same year. Both purchased guitars; Nelson's guitar teacher, at Schmitt Music, was Gene Bluestein.⁶

Another important factor in the development of a local folk music subculture was the Upper Midwest tour of Lead Belly (Huddie William Ledbetter) in early winter of 1948. Lead Belly's stay in Minnesota, a year before his death, and about the time symptoms of his ALS

disease must have been manifesting, was an extended one and had a powerful afterlife in a tape recording (*The Minneapolis Private Party*) made on November 21, 1948. The tape circulated for at least the next decade among local musicians, who took up and reworked Lead Belly's ideas, including Dave "Snaker" Ray, himself an influence on Bob Dylan.⁷

From Marjorie Edgar well before the folk boom to *A Prairie Home Companion* well after it, and including the Dinkytown and West Bank musical scenes of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, the story of Minnesota's folk revival spans the twentieth century.⁸

Notes

1. Christine A. Kelly uses the term "long folk revival": "'A Link in a Chain': An Audiotopic Analysis of Pete Seeger, 1955–1962," Fisher Digital Publications, Spring 2013. Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). Specific explorations of folk music activity outside of the "narrow" revival include Jeanne Anderson, "Maury Bernstein and the Snoose Blvd. Festival," Twin Cities Music Highlights, <http://twincitiesmusichighlights.net/snooseblvd>; Evo Bluestein and Juliana Harris, eds., *Road to Sweet's Mill: The West Coast Folk Music Revival in the 1960s & '70s* (Fresno: Press at California State University, 2017); Rachel C. Donaldson and Ronald D. Cohen, *Roots of the Revival: American and British Folk Music in the 1950s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

2. Theodore Blegen, *Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1936); Theodore C. Blegen, Martin B. Ruud, and Gunnar J. Malmin, *Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936). Fuller portraits of Edgar's work may be found in James Leary, *Folksongs of Another America: Field Recordings From the Upper Midwest, 1937–1946* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015, and Joyce E. Hakala, *The Rowan Tree: The Life and Work of Marjorie Edgar, Girl Scout Pioneer and Folklorist, with Her Finnish Folk Song Collection "Songs from Metsola"* (St. Paul: Pikebone Press, 2007); Alan Lomax and Ronald D. Cohen, *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935–1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 91. Lomax's correspondence with Edgar indicates some reluctance on her part to share her consultants. Though Lomax never made the trip, his other Midwest collecting is documented in Leary, *Folksongs of Another America*. Thanks to Ron Cohen for drawing my attention to this correspondence.

3. "The Biennial Report of the President, 1938–40," University of Minnesota, 1940, 117; "Senate Minutes," University of Minnesota, 1940, 7; "The Biennial Report of the President, 1942–44," University of Minnesota, 1942, 38; "Senate Minutes," University of Minnesota, 1944, 6; "September Press Releases," University of Minnesota, 1947; University of Minnesota News Service, Sept. 29, 1947, 188; University of Minnesota News Service, "Folk Singer at 'U' Convocation," 1956; press release, University of Minnesota, Oct. 26, 1956; "Folk Music Concert Set for Tonight," *Minnesota Daily*, July 16, 1957, 1; press release, University of Minnesota, Mar. 26, 1965.

4. Press release, University of Minnesota, June 20, 1949; "Ballad Authority Addresses Convo," *The Carletonian*, Feb. 24, 1951; "Senate Docket," University of Minnesota, 1940, 5; University of Minnesota News Service, "Folk Singer to Appear at 'U' Thursday," Mar. 1, 1963; "Concerts and

Lectures," University of Minnesota, 1951; *Minnesota Daily*, Nov. 22, 1960; "Alan Lomax Sings, Talks Folk Music," *Minnesota Daily*, Mar. 8, 1963, 7; press release, University of Minnesota, July 2, 1947; press release, University of Minnesota, May 24, 1948.

5. Anne R. Kaplan, "The Folk Arts Foundation of America: A History," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* [Indiana University] 17, no. 1 (Jan.–Apr. 1980): 62, 66; press releases, University of Minnesota, June 24, 1948.

6. Curt Brown, "Timber Strike 80 Years Ago Had an Unlikely Voice Behind It," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Feb. 4, 2017; R. L. Cartwright, "Timber Worker Strikes, 1937," MNopedia, <http://www.mnopedia.org/>. A condolence letter from Seeger is included among Irene Paull's papers at the Minnesota Historical Society: <http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00701.xml>. Telephone interview with Ellie Bluestein, Fresno, CA, Dec. 11, 2014; Lyle Lofgren, interview, Minneapolis, December 10, 2011; Kevin Avery, *Everything Is an Afterthought: The Life and Writings of Paul Nelson* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2011), 6.

7. Lead Belly, *Lead Belly Private Party Minneapolis Minnesota '48*, Document Records, DOCD 5664, 2000, CD. He performed at the University of Minnesota in both the Twin Cities and Duluth, at Grand Rapids High School, St. John's, Carleton, and Macalester, at the then-named Superior State College in Wisconsin, and at in-house concerts such as that preserved in the 1948 recording: "'Lead Belly' to Sing Today," *Minnesota Daily*, Nov. 18, 1948; "'Lead Belly' Sings at Convo," *Mac Weekly*, Nov. 19, 1948; "Mr. Huddie Ledbetter, 'Leadbelly,' Presented a Program of Folk Singing in Great Hall Tuesday, November 23," *The Carletonian*, Dec. 4, 1948, 8; *The Carletonian*, Feb. 12, 1949, 1; Tyehimba Jess, *Lead Belly: A Life in Pictures* (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007), 47; Eisha Prather and Jude Corina, "Guide to the Sean F. Killeen Lead Belly Research Collection, 1885–2002," finding aid, Collection 6789, 2010, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Britt Aamodt's excellent radio documentaries for the KFAI MinneCulture series on the "Minneapolis Folk Quake" include a piece on the Lead Belly tape, which gives further detail about its genesis and local devotees: Britt Aamodt, producer, "Lead Belly Private Party Tape," Radio Documentary KFAI (Minneapolis) MinneCulture, Feb. 2015. Lead Belly reflected on the tour in a letter written on University of Minnesota stationery during the visit: "Huddie 'Lead Belly' Ledbetter Handwritten and Signed Letter," Dec. 1, 1948, Lot 1276, Goldin Auctions, https://goldinauctions.com/1948_Huddie_Lead_Belly_Ledbetter_Handwritten_and-lot28414.aspx.

8. For an overview of the West Bank music scene of the era, see Cyn Collins, *West Bank Boogie* (St. Paul: Triangle Park Creative, 2006).



Gene Bluestein with his handmade, five-string banjo inlaid with mother of pearl and finely carved.

In 1958, the state budgeted generously to mark Minnesota's statehood centennial, and multiple committees planned celebrations of Minnesota's history, industries, arts, food, and other traditions. Bluestein received a \$3,000 grant from the Louis W. and Maud Hill Family Foundation to "preserve Minnesota's heritage," enabling him to spend spring and summer traveling around the state, collecting songs in preparation for a book, October concert, and 1958–59 radio program. The book instead became a record album, the Bluestein-produced Minnesota Statehood Centennial Album, *Songs of the North Star State*, issued by Folkways Records, samples of which are still available on the Folkways website.¹⁴

The album is a distinct picture of the state in the context of the centennial. At a time when most folk music interest was confined to Anglo-Celtic traditions, Bluestein included Ojibwe (Chippewa), French voyageur, Norwegian, Finnish, Danish, and Swedish songs. Bluestein performed all 10 songs; only three are entirely in English. Some of the songs mixed English lyrics with those in other languages. This structure allows the songs to translate themselves and appeal to a multigenerational audience, with occasional verses or refrains

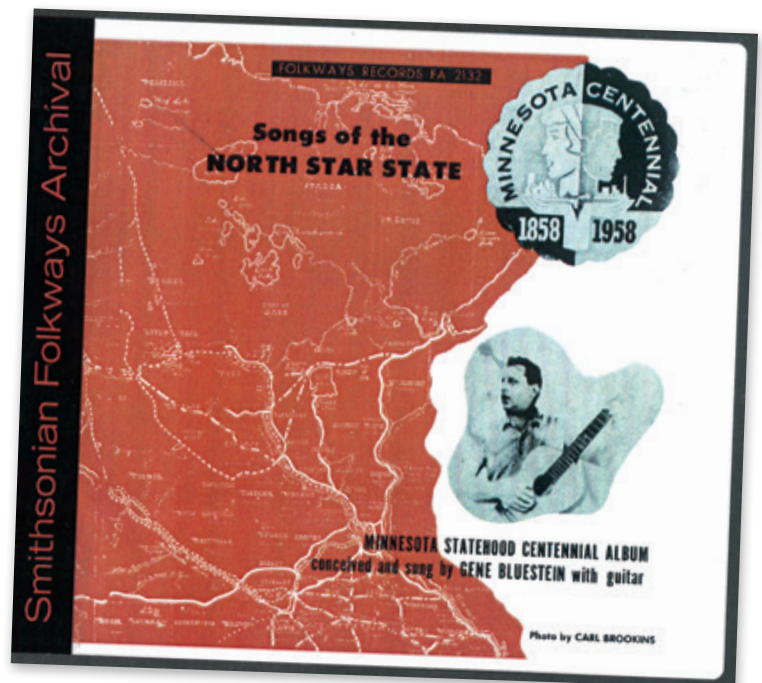
Songs of the North Star State, Minnesota Statehood Centennial Album on Folkways Records, 1958.

in English. In a voice reminiscent of Seeger's, but softer and higher, Bluestein accompanies himself on banjo throughout, save for the a cappella Finnish "Toiler's Serenade" and "Chippewa Lullaby" collected by Red Wing native Frances Densmore, played on flute.

The LP begins with the French Canadian folksong "Ah, Si Mon Moine . . .," attributed to voyageurs. "Nu Ha Vee Yuligen," translated from Danish as "We Have Christmas Every Year," is lilting and easily followed; "Skada at America" expresses hope for America through reuse of a Swedish hymn tune; and "Oleanna"—with verses by Seeger—tells the story of Ole Bull's failed utopia. Midwestern politics is represented by "The Farmer is the Man," a populist ballad found in the 1890s *Farmers Alliance Songbook*:¹⁵

The Farmer is the Man, the farmer is the man
Lives on credit til the fall
Then they take him by the hand and they lead him
from the land
And the middleman's the man that gets it all

When the preacher and the crook go a strollin' by
the brook
The farmer is the man who feeds them all
And the lawyer hangs around while the butcher
cuts a pound
The farmer is the man who feeds them all



Songs of the North Star State was reviewed favorably by Robert Shelton in the *New York Times* and by John K. Sherman in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*. Bluestein also created a series of related radio programs for KUOM, sponsored jointly by the university radio station and the Minnesota State Centennial Commission, broadcast weekly from October 7, 1958, to March 17, 1959.¹⁶

A concert held at Highland Park Junior High in St. Paul on October 22, 1958, gave the public the chance to hear many of the musicians Bluestein had found in his Minnesota fieldwork and whose music he alone sang on the LP. Serving as emcee, Bluestein bookended the concert with his own songs. Performances of Lakota and Ojibwe music and of Swedish, Finnish, and gospel music paint a picture of a multicultural Minnesota. Following a rousing version of "Oleanna," a Pete Seeger favorite, in which the audience participated enthusiastically, Bluestein and local gospel musician Thelma Buckner closed the concert with "Down by the Riverside (Study War No More)." Bluestein gave an extended introduction that emphasized Minnesota's diversity:

I want to do one last song that I think will, in a way, characterize much of what we've tried to present tonight. The variety and the wonderful kind of individuality which you saw tonight is something that is in a very, very unique way, American. We're really very lucky, for all of us, to have as our cultural heritage all the wide diversity of things that you've heard tonight. I think probably nothing would sum it up quite so well as this last song, which Mrs. Buckner and I are going to do

Any State Folk Songs You May Know Might Prove of Value to U Researcher

Know any good folk songs? Or have you written any? If they have a historical theme about anything pertaining to Minnesota, there was a visitor in Duluth yesterday who would like to hear them.

He's not prepared to pay money for them but if he finds them interesting, your reward will be credit for a contribution to a historical collection of Minnesota folk tunes.

The visitor compiling the musical collection is Gene Bluestein, Minneapolis, an English instructor at the University of Minnesota, presently working on a grant from the Hill Family foundation, St. Paul, in collaboration with the university's Minnesota School of the Air and the Minnesota Statehood Centennial commission.

He was in Duluth yesterday on a tour of the state in search of material for two projects supported by the grant. One will result in a series of 13 radio programs for in-school listening over the university's radio network. The other will be a book on folk songs of Minnesota. Bluestein, who also is a folk singer, will bring most of the songs for the radio series and will write the book.

His prime objective, in this area, he said, was to acquire folk songs sung by lumberjacks in the early days of the timber industry. He also was hoping to collect some of the rabble-rousing songs of a radical labor movement that once had a large following in this area—the Industrial Workers of the World. Bluestein said the songs do not

have to be in English. There are many songs in Finnish, German, Swedish and other languages that have important significance to Minnesota as folk tunes, he said.

Bluestein said he would appreciate knowing about members of any vocal group that has access to historical folk songs they would like to sing.

He asked that anyone who has anything of possible value to his projects write to him in care of the Minnesota School of the Air, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

Most of his work so far, he reported, has been concentrated on research. He has uncovered many songs in which considerable profanity is used.

"They are interesting," he commented, "but I don't know what I will ever do with them."

Supported by a grant from the Hill Family Foundation, Bluestein traveled the state collecting folk songs, part of Minnesota statehood centennial celebrations, as reported by the Duluth News-Tribune, Aug. 14, 1958.

together, which is a spiritual, that comes from the words of Isaiah in the Old Testament, comes through a whole tradition of beautiful imagery. It's the thing that everybody talks about, that people have dreamed about for centuries and centuries, which was expressed so beautifully in Isaiah, the time we all talk about, when nations shall not raise sword against nation. And it comes out this way . . ."¹⁷

Bluestein starts off in a moderate tempo, with a very simple accompaniment. He and Buckner trade harmonies; the product is simple and lovely. Vamping (repeating a short, simple passage of music) after the first verse and chorus, he gently says, "I think we can get . . . there must be a lot of you who know that, we can all sing this together," and the audience responds, "I ain't gonna study war no more," its voice rising. Bluestein and Buckner continue, more boisterously, with additional verses, and the audience joins in readily and loudly on each chorus. The applause afterward is sustained, and Bluestein can be heard saying "Thelma," presumably urging Buckner to bow. Notably, this celebration of interracial harmony occurs on a school stage some years before Minnesota school systems would begin to seriously address integration. These performances were not released as a commercial LP, but



Directing camp and folk songs for young teen girls, Hallie Q. Brown camp, St. Paul.



MINNESOTA STATEHOOD CENTENNIAL COMMISSION

1958 UNIVERSITY AVENUE, ST. PAUL 4, MINNESOTA, MIDWAY 6.8875

To: County Centennial Chairman
From: Gerard Samuel, Chairman
Centennial Music Committee
Subject: Heritage of Folk Songs in Minnesota

The above project, sponsored jointly by the Music Committee of the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission and Radio Station KUOM, University of Minnesota, will enable the collection and recording of folk music in Minnesota.

With a grant from the Hill Foundation, Mr. Gene Bluestein, folk singer and English instructor, will travel throughout Minnesota this summer, collecting material. He is eager to receive names of people who are in possession of - or can perform - old folk songs such as nationality and immigrant songs or old hymns.

If you know of such people in your county, please send this information immediately to:

Mr. Eugene Bluestein
200 Westbrook Hall
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis 14, Minnesota

Mr. Bluestein's findings will be used:

- 1) As the basis of thirteen, 15-minute radio broadcasts over KUOM's Minnesota School of the Air next fall.
- 2) Some of the performers he hopes to discover and some of the material he will record will be used for a Centennial Folk Music Concert to be held October 21 in St. Paul. KUOM will record and broadcast this concert.
- 3) A Centennial record album will be made of the song tapes.
- 4) Material for a book will be prepared, the tentative title being "Heritage of Folk Songs in Minnesota".

Your help with this project will be greatly appreciated.

MINNESOTA CENTENNIAL MUSIC FESTIVAL

October 16 through November 8

presented by the
Music Committee, Gerard Samuel, Chairman
a section of the
Centennial Committee on the Arts,
James S. Lombard, Chairman

Wednesday, October 22, 1958 Highland Park Junior High School
8:30 P.M. St. Paul, Minn.

CENTENNIAL FOLK MUSIC CONCERT

I. SONGS OF THE NORTH STAR STATE..... Sung by Gene Bluestein

Through the generosity of the Hill Family Foundation and the cooperation of the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission and the Minnesota School of the Air, Gene Bluestein has been studying the many diverse folk song traditions which have flourished here.

II. AMERICAN INDIAN SONGS AND DANCES...Performed by Ojibway (Chippewa) and Sioux Indians from Minnesota

As the accompanying narration will show, the songs and dances range from religious ritual to social activity. Despite the dislocation of much of Indian culture, the old traditions in music and dance still persist. In recent times Minnesota tribes have assimilated into their music occurrences and themes which reflect the modern world—but still retain their traditional styles and their own languages.

III. SWEDISH FOLK SONGS.....Sung by Mrs. Marie Rice

Some of the richest folk song traditions stem from Sweden's musical heritage. The impact of these on America's music has been direct (through emigrants like Mrs. Rice, who brought their songs with them) and also indirect (as a result of the influence of Swedish song on the English folk tradition, the latter having been brought here by early settlers). Mrs. Rice will sing a selection of typical Swedish songs—love songs, riddle songs and children's songs.

IV. FINNISH FOLK SONGS.....Sung by Mrs. Tyne Aakula

Mrs. Aakula was born in America but she learned to sing the traditional songs of her ancestors, spending much of her life in the Finnish communities in and around Duluth. From the love songs to the songs which reflect the social strife of early labor history in the state, the materials reveal the fierce pride which Finns show for their culture in the old world as well as in America. Many of these songs are still known and sung in many parts of Minnesota.

INTERMISSION

V. NEGRO FOLK SONGS.....Sung by Mrs. Thelma Buckner Piano accompaniment by Ralph Primm

The music of the Negro in America has been the most pervasive influence in the development of our music in all its phases from jazz to the classics. Mrs. Buckner's style and songs are a remarkably authentic reflection of this tradition. Most of her songs are religious in content, that is, spiritual or gospel songs.

VI. MORE SONGS OF THE NORTH STAR STATE..... Sung by Gene Bluestein

We wish to express our appreciation to the Hill Family Foundation and the St. Paul Public Schools for their cooperation in presenting this concert.
PLEASE NOTE: NO SMOKING IS ALLOWED IN ANY PART OF THIS BUILDING.

Bluestein collected, recorded, broadcast, and performed folk music as part of the Minnesota Statehood Centennial, 1958.

Bluestein's recording of the concert (complete except for some of his own parts) is included in his papers at the University of North Carolina's Southern Folklife Collection and can be heard on its website.¹⁸

Bluestein's second 1958 Folkways album, *Songs of the Holidays and Other Songs*, performed with children of the Mount Zion Hebrew Congregation in St. Paul, also reflects his commitment to the concept of brotherhood and clearly springs from his experience teaching. Confronting an instructional problem for Jewish youth—that neither Yiddish nor Hebrew were sufficiently widespread to “[transmit] material to children in Jewish schools”—the album offered a series of accessible songs mostly in English. The songs teach children about Adam and Eve and Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, and Sukkot. Audiences would be acquainted with aspects of Jewish tradition in conjunction with American folk songs by Woody Guthrie (“This Land Is Your Land”) and Malvina Reynolds (“I Live in the City”), whose lyrics include:

Black hands, white hands, yellow and brown,
All together built this town,
Black hands, white hands, yellow and brown,
All together makes the world go 'round.

Bluestein writes about this song in the liner notes: “Perhaps the most significant aspect of American culture is the great diversity of peoples who have settled here and contributed their skills and labor to make possible the things we have. As a way of describing brotherhood in immediate and concrete terms I prefer this to any other brotherhood song I’ve heard.”¹⁹

“Trog Es Gezunt-Erhait” (“Wear It in the Best of Health”), the album’s first track, is a fine example of Bluestein’s approach. In it, he guides children through taking turns singing about a new thing each has—a sweater, a dress—and the entire group joins in (sometimes a bit prematurely, in their excitement) to sing/shout “trog es gezunterhait!” Bluestein is relaxed and encouraging, providing a clear and steady backup banjo part as children



Bluestein produced and sang on this 1958 Folkways album, focused on teaching children about Jewish holidays.

take their turns singing. Putting himself in the background to let the children's voices shine, Bluestein vamps as needed on the banjo to accommodate their entrances, and the well-rehearsed children sing with exuberance and skill. It is easy to see why Joci Tilsen, who, as a child, knew the Bluesteins in this period, says of him, "I associate him with warmth and comfort." It is also easy to imagine that, in addition to engaging Jewish children in their own heritage, such songs helped to connect Jewish traditions to American ones, a wish Bluestein expresses in the liner notes. In this album and in similar work in the community, Bluestein's focus is on cultural translation and pluralism. Bluestein gently made the point that Jewish (and Native, African American, and northern European) traditions are American traditions.²⁰

Bluestein performed around the state in 1958, presenting music of the Christmas season and from his centennial collection, including concerts at the Unitarian Society auditorium and University of Minnesota convocation in Northrop Auditorium. Bluestein traveled back to New York City in December with *Minneapolis Tribune* columnist Will Jones, who had chosen him for a performance on the Peter Lind Hayes television show. Hayes, a former vaudevillian who hosted the daytime variety show, had sent out a call to journalists for local talent, and Jones, an affable

Bluestein performing on the Peter Lind Hayes television program in New York, accompanied by Minneapolis Tribune columnist Will Jones, December 1958.

chronicler of Twin Cities nightlife, nominated Bluestein, realizing only after Bluestein won that he'd "never met the guy. I picked him solely from watching him on various Channel 2 programs." Accompanied by Jones, Bluestein dragged his long-neck banjo in its custom-made, extended case, his steel pan, and his mandolin, all for a segment that ended up being under three minutes. Jones wrote a column about their adventure, which included briefly leaving behind the steel pan in a cab ("Is that a bingo game?" asked the driver).²¹

By 1959, Bluestein's last year and Dylan's first in Minneapolis, interest in several kinds of folk music was becoming institutionalized. The Scholar coffeehouse in Dinkytown—"a little Village, untypical from the rest of the conventional Minneapolis," as Dylan later described it—was in its heyday as a venue for folk music. The seminal Minneapolis-based folk music fanzine *The Little Sandy Review*, founded by Paul Nelson and Jon Pankake (both of whom went on to nationally significant writing careers), was gestating. Aficionados and players of blues, old-time music, and even flamenco such as Lyle Lofgren, Dave Williams, Liz Williams (later Lofgren), and Bud Claeson hosted parties in their Dinkytown apartments, where they would play guitar and banjo and listen to Harry Smith's



By 1959, Bluestein's last year and Dylan's first in Minneapolis, interest in several kinds of folk music was becoming institutionalized.

Anthology of American Folk Music—ownership of and familiarity with which was a badge of honor in these circles. These Dinkytown aficionados brought folk musicians to town and went on to found the Minnesota Folk Song Society in 1961.²²

When in 1959 “at last [he] was in Minneapolis, where [he] felt liberated and gone,” Bob Dylan found the downtown public library stocked with Folkways records, learned from new friends about Odetta and a host of other folk-singers he’d not previously heard of, and substantially grew his folk repertoire. Dylan soon realized the electric guitar he’d brought from home “would have been useless to me,” as he recounted in his 2004 memoir, *Chronicles: Volume One*. He made an even trade of his electric guitar for a Martin folk acoustic model and prepared to reinvent himself in a “Bohemia (with) . . . beatniks, thinkers, rebels, artists, dropouts, and dreamers.”²³

Bluestein earned his PhD from the university in 1959, ending his time in Minnesota. He and his family left for

Michigan State University, where he taught for a few years. In 1963, he began what became his lifelong faculty position at Fresno State University, later California State University at Fresno. Bluestein continued his novel combinations of music-making and academic study, such as teaching musical topics in the English department. This enterprise was not without its detractors, as his son Evo Bluestein remembers: “When he did, people in the music department protested, saying, ‘Why is Bluestein using music? That’s our job.’ Gene said, ‘Sue me,’ and kept doing it.” He also designed a multiyear program in which a stellar roster of traditional folk musicians (Bessie Jones, Lydia Mendoza, Dewey Balfa, and Jean Ritchie, among others) came to campus for extended residencies.²⁴

In California, Bluestein produced his mature scholarship, including a host of wide-ranging and provocative articles and three books. The first book applied literary theory to folk traditions; the second introduced his idea of “poplore,” a concept of enduring importance in which



Dinkytown in the early 1970s still retained vestiges of the bohemian character of the 1950s, when it was the epicenter of the local folk music boom.

Bluestein argues that purist notions of “folklore” fail to acknowledge the manifold popular and commercial influences of American culture on traditional music. *Anglish/Yinglish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature*, his final book, offered a lexicon of words that combined Yiddish and English, such as “schmoozing.” The Bluesteins formed a family band for a time, and lived in Finland while Gene had a Fulbright scholarship. He also expanded his work in social justice.²⁵

Bluestein died on August 21, 2002, in Fresno. He was 74 years old. His old friend and colleague Jules Chametzky wrote to Ellie in condolence: “What I remember best about Gene, as classmates at Brooklyn, and later at Minnesota, is his irrepressible vitality, the eagerness for life, and his humor.” In 1960s and ’70s California, as in 1950s Minnesota, Bluestein worked within and beyond academic settings to educate Americans about the musical and cultural diversity of their past and present.²⁶ □

Notes

The author wishes to thank Carleton College for funding numerous aspects of this work, including digitization of Bluestein’s recordings; Ellie Bluestein, Evo Bluestein, Gretel Pelto, Joci Tilsen, Britt Aamodt, Ann Pflaum, and Bill Hood for sharing their work and/or memories; Erin George, University of Minnesota Archives; student research assistants Canaan West, Joe Lowry, Kaylee Shiao, Anne Guttridge, and Russell Star-Lack; and Ron Cohen, Andy Flory, and peer reviewers for their suggestions.

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2. Robert Shelton, Elizabeth Thomson, and Patrick Humphries, eds., *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (Milwaukee, WI: Backbeat Books, 2011), 66.

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7. William Hood, email message to author, Sept. 17, 2014. Hood was the host of *The Blueberry Bill Hour*, KDWB, 1974–79.

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17. Buckner has recently published a memoir: Thelma Battle-Buckner, *The Battle of a Daytime Nightmare* (Los Angeles: Gumbo for the Soul, 2013). “Centennial Folk Music Concert, 22 October 1958,” Gene Bluestein Collection #20379-z, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, FT-20379/11516, 11517, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/sfc/id/41846/rec/1>. The section discussed is at 41:30.

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19. Gene Bluestein, liner notes, Gene Bluestein and Children of the Mount Zion Hebrew Congregation, *Songs of the Holiday and Other Songs*, Folkways, FW 07554, 1958; press release, University of Minnesota, Nov. 24, 1958.



Not long before the end of his Minnesota sojourn, Bluestein entertains at an outdoor sing in the courtyard of the Walker Art Center, August 1959.

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21. "Gene Bluestein to Have a Concert Saturday at First Unitarian Society Auditorium," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1958, 7; "Music Calendar," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 30, 1958; Will Jones, "TV Viewer Picks Talent," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 31, 1958, 36; Gene Bluestein, University of Minnesota Biographical File, 1950–59.

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23. Bud Claeson and Lyle Lofgren interview, Northfield, MN, Dec. 8, 2011; Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*, 237, 246; Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 78; Shelton, Thomson, and Humphries, eds., *No Direction Home*, 66. Music librarian Mary Alice Walker was responsible for the library purchases: Lyle and Liz Lofgren, "The Legend of Uncle Willie & the Brandy Snifters; or How to Enjoy Playing Old-Time Music without the Pitfalls of Worldly Success," *Old Time Herald* 8, no. 6 (Winter 2002–03).

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of some of these family songs are in the Southern Folklife Collection; further details on Evo Bluestein's site.

26. "Ex-Fresno State Professor Gene Bluestein Dead at 74"; Evo Bluestein, email message to author, April 19, 2017.

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