NOTES ON THE PLAYERS

The few statements that can be made about the folk musicians who played this music admittedly do justice neither to their personalities nor their talents. All of them were genial and helpful to the collector, and, as genuine lovers of the old music, were glad to see an attempt made to preserve it by notation. Thus, they fully shared the collector's anxiety to get the tunes recorded accurately, and did not spare time, effort or information to that end. As collaborators, therefore, they deserve equal recognition with the collector, for their own sakes and for that of the tradition they preserve — on which, it is hoped, these notes may throw a little more light.

Mrs. Sarah (Gray) Armstrong

Mrs. Armstrong, the principal contributor to this collection, was born and brought up in the region of Derry, Westmoreland County, and has lived there all her life. The Grays were a family of Scottish descent. This does not mean, however, that they necessarily know a repertory of Scottish tunes: they absorbed and preserved the local tradition in which they grew up; and the same could be said, very probably, for any other musical family in western Pennsylvania. In the previous generation of the family were five brothers: Charley (Mrs. Armstrong's father), Laney, Dan, Joss (Joshua) and Abe, all skillful on some instrument, and accustomed to playing together for dances. No. 14 in this collection was known as "The Gray Boys' Piece," as they so often played it in concert. All of these men are now gone, and Mrs. Armstrong, who began playing at the age of five, is the sole legatee of their melodic treasure. As a young girl she used to listen by the hour to her uncle Laney — the most expert fiddler of the group, and the one possessing the largest repertory of tunes — absorbing his music and learning to play it herself. She also used to play the 'cello, on which she would help the group

out when they were playing in the pavilion at "Kist's Grove" (a dancing ground on the outskirts of Derry), and elsewhere in the neighborhood. About thirty-five years ago, her uncle Laney went to live in the Far West. The "Gray Boys'" ensemble broke up, although its remaining members continued to play individually for dances; and Mrs. Armstrong, with the assistance of her daughter at the piano and her son on the guitar or banjo, has likewise continued playing the old music, either for dances, or on an occasional radio or theater program. The children, however, do not pick up her repertory, and she is left its only preserver. Yet an interesting feature of the Armstrong home is a recording apparatus, with which many of the Gray family's old airs have been taken down on discs from Mrs. Armstrong's playing. She realizes that the old-time music is passing away, and is anxious to have her repertory insured against complete loss.

Several of the Gray brothers were railroad workers, and from musical fellow-railroadmen — some of them Irish fiddlers — they picked up a good number of their tunes. One of these is No. 48 in the present collection.

Robert Crow

Mr. Crow, a man in his sixties, lives in "South Pittsburgh," on the edge of Claysville, Washington County. He is a farmer; was born and reared about five miles from Claysville, and has learned all his repertory in the region about that town. As a player he is in considerable demand at local dances. His performance is energetic and clear-cut, and abounds in simple harmonies: intervals of thirds and sixths. For most of his tunes he recalls no titles, having never cared to learn them; but he assured me that there was a name for every tune he played.

John Kubina

Born in Slovakia, Mr. Kubina was brought to this country by his parents when he was seven months old. When he was four years of age, his family moved to the region of Connellsville, where he was brought up. He has travelled and worked in Pennsylvania,

Ohio, and West Virginia, but most of his active life was spent in the mines and machine shops of the Pittsburgh district. In 1932 an injury forced him to cease working. He now plays regularly for dances at the mining community of Bobtown and other places.

Although his repertory includes a few *czardás* tunes to use at Hungarian dances, and some Polish and Slovak airs, it mainly testifies to his exposure to a rich Irish musical tradition. Apparently most of his tunes were picked up in and about Pittsburgh. He is more expert than most traditional players, has a clean, precise fingering, can play "all over the fiddle," and knows how to use *vibrato* — which he picked up by hearing concert players do it. He used to go to concerts — sometimes more than once to the same performance — and try to learn special effects and playing manners by listening closely to the performance of the musicians. In this way he also learned a few pieces of art music by ear (for he cannot read music, despite his technical attainments). A couple of his sons also play the violin, and remember some pieces of his repertory. Mr. Kubina plays with very good tone, and can render slow pieces of music effectively — which many traditional players are unable to do, as they seem not to have learned how to use the bow on sustained notes.

THE DUNBAR TRADITION

Now and then the collector searching through southwestern Pennsylvania comes into a community where — judging from what he sees and hears — the love of traditional music and song seems to have been more intense among the people, and the cultivation of those arts more active, than in surrounding neighborhoods. In such places, musical families are found in unusual number, memories of bygone singers and players are more vivid, and a large store of song and melody remains in the memories of surviving folk musicians. It is hard to decide, in these late times, whether a region like this was really inhabited by an especially numerous assemblage of musical souls, or whether here more than elsewhere linger the remains of the old-time folk spirit and practices, giving us a fleeting glimpse of what must have prevailed in most western Pennsylvania communi-

ties fifty to a hundred years since, when the tradition was in its full vigor.

Such a community is Dunbar, and the region about it, in Fayette County, and here the memories of the old folk musicians go back fifty years at the least, comprehending a time before western Fayette was dotted with mining communities, flooded with mine workers from outside, and given over to industrialism. Along with the memories, the remnants of the older agrarian culture survive in folk songs and music. Dunbar lies north of Uniontown at the western foot of the Appalachian ranges which cross the county; and about it, in the mountains and along them, are villages which used to possess the same spirit and tradition: Peachen, Mount Braddock, Mount Independence, Shady Grove, and others. In former days this section had more than its share of fiddlers, singers and fifers; and musical families, in which several members played or sang, shared and cultivated the inherited folk art, eagerly picking up songs and instrumental airs from each other, and often getting together for informal concerts and dances. These musical families — some of whom are the Lowrys, Hugheses, Martins, Devans, Smitleys, Provances, Yaughers, Bryners, Wingroves, Gilpins, McClains and Ahrenburgs — still have their members who recall the old music and song, although they may not continue to live in their native neighborhoods. And the rest of the players who have contributed music to this collection all come from this local group.

John Wesley Devan

Mr. Devan, eighty-seven years of age, is one of the few surviving fife-players whose music enlivened holidays and put the spirit into parades in old-time Dunbar. He is also a folk singer, and can give out songs even now, although he is no longer able to play the fife. But his playing and parading are vividly recalled by

Fillmore P. Provance

"Pete," or "Fil," as he is variously called, is seventy years old. Reared largely in Dunbar, he has worked in mines and shops in

Fayette County most of his life, and has suffered injuries from a number of industrial accidents. One of these accidents disabled his left hand and stopped his playing on the fiddle; before that, he used to play often at dances. But he can whistle and sing his old instrumental tunes, and has not forgotten them. Likewise he is an accomplished singer of folk songs, possessing a large and varied repertory. In his boyhood he hung about old players and singers, or gathered with boys of his own age along the railroad tracks, and learned and sang and played the old music continually. Other tunes were learned while he worked in lumber camps or trapped in the mountains behind Dunbar — for he is an experienced fur-trapper, and full of woods lore. His love of the old music was simply characteristic of the Dunbar community when he was young, as one incident of his boyhood days demonstrates. He was descending a hill above Dunbar one day when he was stopped by a couple of girls who had just lighted upon a nest of rotten eggs. They threatened to pelt him with the eggs unless he stopped and sang them a song at once. He could not beg off, so had to sit on a fence and sing for them until they let him depart.

Emery Martin

Mr. Martin (in his late sixties) is not the only surviving member of his notably musical family at Dunbar; he has a brother Bill and a cousin Ellis, both fiddlers, in the same town. His father, James O. Martin, and his uncle Jasper Martin were both famous in that region for their fiddling and their knowledge of the old tunes. Emery spent a number of years working in Oklahoma, but throughout that time his father made his home with him, and played the fiddle regularly in the evenings; so that it was easy to absorb the old gentleman's repertory. Along with the airs he got from father and uncle, Mr. Martin, like most folk musicians of this region, listened avidly to the playing of various other local fiddlers, learning many of their tunes also. One of these older players was Link Smitley, noted as a fiddler in his day, and father of a family of sons who carry on his music at the present time. From him Mr. Martin

learned a fairly large store of tunes. In recent years he has made a partial list of his repertory — some eighty-five melodies — and this list includes many airs gotten from the Smitley tradition. As he had not learned the names of some of them, Mr. Martin, following a general practice, named them after the player from whom he picked them up; so that his list contains the entries "Link Smitley, numbers one, two, three and four," "Link Smitley Coarse" (low-pitched), and "Link Smitley Fine" (high-pitched).

Mr. Martin still occasionally plays for dances. He has worked in Fayette County mines, in the woods (cutting mine-props), and now and then on farms.

David P. Gilpin

Dave Gilpin, born and reared in Dunbar, was also the son of a notable fiddler of that community. He is about sixty, and has worked most of his life in the mines. He has an unusually fine violin, of which he is extremely fond, and a large stock of tunes, for most of which he has not cared to remember titles. In some respects he is the most remarkable player encountered thus far in southwestern Pennsylvania. An accident deprived him of the ring-finger of his left hand, and left the little finger doubled inward over the palm. Such a calamity would ordinarily cause a player to abandon his music; but Dave set to work to re-learn the performance of his repertory with *two fingers only*. Now he plays his tunes swiftly, smoothly and cleanly with just the two remaining fingers of his left hand, and despite his deprivation he can play "all over the fiddle," with true tone and excellent rhythm. Furthermore, he seems to be able to harmonize his tunes with all the facility of a fully-equipped player. His repertory is derived from his father and members of some of the other local musical families named above.

Irvin Yaugher Jr.

"Bub" Yaugher, a man in his sixties, lives on the mountainside above Mount Independence, a short distance south of Dunbar. He was born and brought up in "The Yaugher Holler," a mountain

valley near by, in which his family had long been settled. Although he grew up as an "air-player," he learned something later in life about reading music, and is acquainted with some of the commercial publications of dance tunes; but for the collector he was careful to play only those he had picked up locally by ear. The bulk of his repertory came from a great-uncle of Irish extraction, whose playing was noted throughout the community. Apparently Mr. Yaugher spent much time with him, committing to memory as many of his airs as possible. Other tunes he learned from various local fiddlers, including some of the Lowrys and McClains already mentioned. He has played for dances a good deal, but has given this practice up in recent years. He is a good gunsmith, and — like most of the mountain men — fond of hunting. Brought up on a farm, he has worked in mines for many years.

Denune Provance

"Nooney" Provance is younger than the other informants — he is in his forties — and presents a living example of the changes which are overtaking folk music in Fayette County and other parts of western Pennsylvania. Brought up to play the fiddle by ear, he learned much traditional music from local players. Then he became interested in playing for dances of a different sort, with more modern music. He abandoned the violin for the saxophone, learned to read music, became the leader of a small dance band, learned modern music to play with it, and made arrangements of pieces especially for his group to perform. In this process, most of his old music — learned from "fiddlers up in the mountain" — was crowded out of his mind. One piece, or series of pieces and medleys which he arranged for his group of players, consisted of versions of some of the fiddle tunes he had learned earlier. These arrangements, written out in a music notebook at his home, were the sources of the tunes obtained from him: the collector copied them out of his MS, with his permission. Denune Provance is a second cousin of F. P. Provance (see above). He has worked in the mines most of his life, and is a skilled maker of mechanical contrivances, toys, and electrically-run devices. He is a modern, where the other folk musicians,

in respect to their music and playing, are in a sense living in the past; and he personifies the intrusion of modern interests on the old agricultural and pastoral life that needed and fostered the folk arts.

All the players of this "Dunbar group" are acquainted with, or know of, the others — several of them were brought up together. Before concluding our remarks about them and their tradition, we should devote some space to one of their number who has long since passed away, but whom most of them yet remember vividly, and whose music still lives in their minds: Sam Waggle, one of the principal fifers of Dunbar fifty to sixty years ago.

Sam Waggle was a gunsmith by calling, and had been a fifer in the Civil War, where he had lost one of his legs. A wooden leg, however, did not prevent his marching in all the parades and other demonstrations where the music of his old rosewood fife might be required. He and S. W. Devan (see above) often marched and played together in parades, but Waggle, easily tired because of his age and disability, would have to fall out and sit by the roadside to recover breath. Pete Provance used to haunt his gunsmith's shop in Dunbar, in order to hear the old man play; and certain of his tunes have been preserved because of this circumstance (see tunes No. 44, 87.) Pete would beg him to play, and Waggle, highly flattered, would become excited and fussy. He would drop his stone-bowled, wooden-stemmed pipe, spit fine, and say, "All right, now, me boy — all right, now, you jest wait till I get me fife and me leg. Damn, jest wait till I get me fife! — Damn, where's me leg? Sally, where's me leg? Damn, Sally, where in Hell is me fife?" — and so forth. When fully equipped, he would go out to the main street of Dunbar and there march up and down playing continually until he had "blowed hisself clean out." There were many other fifers like him in southwestern Pennsylvania once, and nearly all of them are just memories today. But we can rejoice in the knowledge that some of their music, at least, has been rescued from oblivion.[1]

[1] One of the days on which the old fifers in Greene County and elsewhere in southwestern Pennsylvania had a chance to play military music to their hearts' content was the eighth of January. This day, the anniversary of Jackson's victory at New Orleans in 1815, was regularly and religiously celebrated by the old-time Democrats with martial band music, the firing of cannons, etc. See Ford, p. 63, for a southern tune called "Eighth of January," and p. 192 for a note concerning similar celebrations in the South.