

HERDING FOLKSONGS

Robert Young Walser

The James Madison Carpenter Project
Elphinstone Institute
University of Aberdeen
24 High Street
Aberdeen, AB24 3EB
seasons@spacestar.net

ABSTRACT

Cataloging a large, multi-media collection of traditional song and drama in preparation for online presentation highlights issues of song identity and access in the context of contemporary digitized archives. In the James Madison Carpenter collection a particular folksong sung by a particular individual may exist in multiple manifestations: typed song text, sound recording(s), and/or manuscript music notation. While controlled vocabulary references such as Child and Roud numbers provide a degree of identification, such narrative- and text-centric tools are only partly effective in differentiating folkloric materials. Additional means are needed for identifying and controlling folk materials which are distinguished by other aspects of the song such as melody or non-narrative text. The Carpenter project team's experience with Encoded Archival Description (EAD) illustrates the value of this platform-independent, widely recognized standard and suggests opportunities for further developments particularly suited to locating and retrieving folk music materials.

Keywords: Folksong, folklore, music, sound recordings, EAD, XML, James Madison Carpenter.

1 INTRODUCTION

James Madison Carpenter was an American folklorist who traveled through England, Scotland and Wales from 1929 to 1935 in search of folk materials. Initially focused on sea shanties and ballads, his collecting expanded to include mummer's plays, dance music, child lore and other folkloric genres. After his return to the United States in 1936 he continued to work with his collection in the hope of eventual publication. This dream was never realized and in 1972 the collection including approximately 13,000 manuscript and typed pages, 560 photographs, 179 Dictaphone cylinders, 220 acetate discs and various ephemera was sold to the Archive of Folk Song (now the Archive of Folk Culture) at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Detailed cataloging being beyond the means of the Archive, the collection was microfilmed and tape copies made of the

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disc recordings. Knowing the value of the materials in the collection, Archive staff directed a number of scholars to the collection who did find therein abundant riches of folkloric material, though in a frustrating state of disorganization. The lack of a comprehensive catalog prevented full use of the materials.

In 1999 Dr. Julia Bishop applied to the AHRB for a grant to begin cataloging the collection. The work was timed to coordinate with efforts at the Archive to digitize the collection for eventual online presentation as part of the 'American Memory' project at the Library of Congress project (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>). The first grant specified the use of Encoded Archival Description (EAD see <http://www.loc.gov/ead/>) an XML-based international standard for encoding and presenting archival finding aids – tools to assist researchers in finding specific content within archival collections.

A team of six scholars, experts in the various folkloric genres represented in the Carpenter collection, was formed to catalog the materials using XMetaL software and the EAD dtd (Document Type Definition). The product of the first grant is now online at The University of Sheffield's online publication www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter. Work continues both in the UK and at the Library of Congress to provide digital surrogates of Carpenter's collectanea online. The specific character of Carpenter's working methods and the resulting materials give rise to useful concepts for cataloging folkloric materials and simultaneously raise questions about the most appropriate means for accessing such materials.

2 THE RAW MATERIALS

Carpenter's was among the early users of sound recording technology for folksong collecting and the physical and financial limitations of the technology were important factors shaping both his working methods and results. Due to the cost of Dictaphone cylinders, Carpenter chose in many cases to record only one or two verses of a particular song and then had the singer dictate the rest of the song while Carpenter typed the words on a portable typewriter. For many of the songs Carpenter later transcribed the melody onto staff notation. After his return to the United States, he obtained a disc recording machine and acoustically copied many of his original cylinder recordings onto acetate discs. The result of this process is a gigantic collection of song fragments for which Carpenter himself never assembled an index. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this with two fragments of "Shallow Brown" a sea shanty sung by John Middleton.

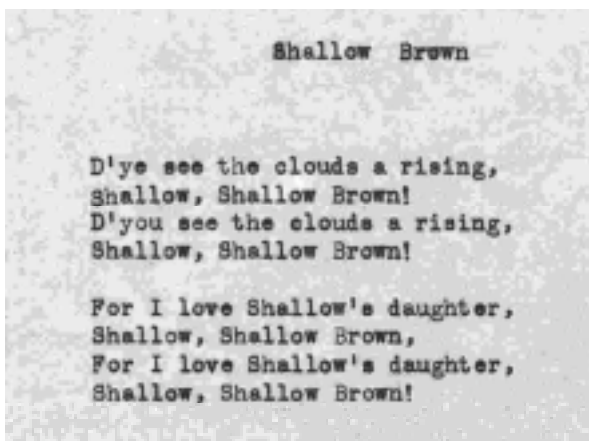


Figure 1. "Shallow Brown" song text.



Figure 2. "Shallow Brown" notation.

In general, scholars and singers are more interested in songs than fragments and thus an initial task for the Carpenter team was to create means for gaining intellectual control over this mass of material. As catalogers it became immediately apparent that the item fragments did not map directly to the physical items in the collection: one song text might extend to several pages or, conversely, one page might contain a number of different songs as in Figure 2. Further, in the case of the folk plays, a song might occur in the midst of a play text. To describe material in this state we first chose the term "intellectual item" to refer to a discrete chunk of folkloric material which, in the case of songs within plays, could be embedded within a larger intellectual item. Next, we decided to employ several elements in identifying these fragments comprising, a title and format description, typically including a personal name, and optionally a place name and/or date.

3 FOLK MATERIALS IN EAD

These decisions were facilitated by the use of EAD, an XML-based standard for encoding information about archival holdings. EAD provides named tags enclosed in angle brackets to surround text data in a hierarchy reflecting the typical organization of information within an archival collection. EAD documents are plain text and thus platform-independent and are editable using any text-editing software, though dedicated XML editors such as XMetaL facilitate the process by allowing users to validate their work, that is, to verify that it conforms to the standard and is thus recognizable to computers that comprehend EAD.

In EAD all components of an archival collection are placed within component tags. In the case of the Carpenter collection, <c01> is used for the collection, <c02> for the boxes in which the manuscripts were housed and so on. Intellectual items are contained within tags indicating their level as components of the collection as shown in Figure 3 and include page references within the item description.

```
<c01> [Original Collection materials]
  <c02> [box]
    <c03> [packet]
      <c04> [folder]
        <c05>[intellectual item]</c05>
        <c05>[intellectual item]</c05>
        [further intellectual items]
      </c04>
    </c03>
  </c02> [end of first box]
  <c02> [another box]
    [and so on, as above]
</c02>
</c01>
```

Figure 3. EAD hierarchy applied to Carpenter.

Each component of an EAD-encoded collection must include identifying information. Figure 4 illustrates one application of EAD tags to the identifying information selected by the Carpenter project team for describing an intellectual item.

```
<unittitle>
  <title>Shallow Brown</title>
  <genreform>song text</genreform>
  <persname role="contributor">
    John Middleton</persname>
  <geogname>Thorn Tree St, Leith</geogname>
</unittitle>
```

Figure 4. Identifying an intellectual item.

This example catalogs the typed text of the song "Shallow Brown" shown in Figure 1. In this case the identifying "unittitle" for this intellectual item includes the title, a <genreform> indicating what sort of fragment is being cataloged, the personal name (persname) of John Middleton who is identified as the contributor, that is, the person who contributed the song to Carpenter's collection, and a geographic name (geogname) associated with this performance. Similar unittitles have been made for over 17,000 intellectual items in the collection.

4 ONE LEVEL OF SUCCESS

The use of multiple elements within the identifying unittitle accomplishes two things. First, it allows catalog users to differentiate between the various manifestations of a single performance. Since John Middleton's singing of "Shallow Brown" appears as six discrete intellectual items in the collection, it is useful to know which is a sound recording and which is music notation. Similarly, this also helps users identify Middleton's version of this song as opposed to one of the other four versions (in their multiple manifestations) in the collection. Second, the web of information within the unittitle has helped the Carpenter Project team members to gather the fragments of many songs in order to, eventually, reconstruct

more complete representations for further study and even performance. This cross-referencing is done using unique identifiers assigned to each fragment which are then gathered in an XML supplement to the EAD catalog. The two documents are merged in response to queries and together rendered into the HTML display.

On this level, the EAD-encoding of information about the Carpenter Collection successfully aids both comprehending the collection and identifying and locating related materials within it. A further benefit derives from the widespread use of EAD (see www.archiveshub.ac.uk for example) which potentially allows for searching across the universe of EAD documents representing collections housed in various repositories. This brings us to the larger universe of folksong.

5 ELUSIVE FOLKSONGS

The terms “folklore” and “folksong” are often understood to invoke a notion of instability over time resulting from the “folk process”. This refers to variation in a song, story or other item of folk culture either by design or accident. James Francis Child’s monumental 5-volume work, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* [1] has become a standard reference in the study of Balladry in part because of Child’s grouping by storyline of various song texts from multiple sources. To each group he assigned a number which has become a standard means of identifying ballads. Thus “Child 278” refers to a story about a woman taken to hell who proves tougher than Old Nick himself. Whether sung as a jolly ditty or a dirge, “Child 278” identifies this song type. Indeed, Child numbers are given as standard information not only in print folksong and ballad collections, but even by some performers on stage and the term “Child Ballad” is often used to refer to traditional narrative songs. Other attempts at codifying and identifying English-language folksong have been undertaken by G. Malcolm Laws [2, 3] and, currently, Steve Roud. Additionally there are various online folksong indices.

These narrative and text centered systems can be helpful in identifying certain kinds of songs and references to them have thus been included in the Carpenter team’s catalog. At present the catalog is searchable by Child number and work is in process to add Roud numbers as well. Unfortunately, these tools are insufficient for not all the material in the Carpenter collection, or indeed in the realm of folklore and folk music, can be controlled with reference to song text or narrative.

6 THE TROUBLE WITH SEA SHANTIES

As Steve Roud points out in the documentation accompanying his Folk Song Index,

It must be noted that the system is not nearly so effective with material from other traditions, most notably Afro-American genres such as spirituals and blues. These are, in general, far more textually ‘fluid’, and although numbers are assigned to entered songs from these traditions, the user should be aware of the limitations of this approach. [4, manual.doc p.6]

The corpus of sea shanties or sailors’ worksongs provides a case in point. Carpenter wrote his PhD thesis on

“Forecastle Songs and Chanties”¹ [5] and there are hundreds of shanties in the collection. Considered part of their work by seamen, shanties were not regarded as music at all, yet their rhythm coordinated the efforts of tall ship sailors who claimed that “a good song was worth ten men on a rope” [6, p.30]. For many shipboard tasks rhythmic coordination was a shanty’s key function. This may account for the existence of a large number of couplets used interchangeably in many songs. In fact, some shanties seem to have no fixed verses at all. For example, two versions of “Ilo Man” in the collection with closely related melodies have texts that are related only vaguely. Other examples abound. For these songs additional factors must be considered to show their family relationships. The texts of choruses and/or refrains are one factor and melody is another.

Issues of description, identity and relationships among folk melodies are, as yet, unresolved despite the efforts of scholars such as Charles Seeger [7], Samuel Bayard [8], Anne Dhu Shapiro [9] and James Cowdery [10]. Here lie opportunities for those interested in Music Information and Retrieval.

7 NEXT STEPS

For many folksongs the text-based methods of Child, Laws and Roud provide sufficient control for scholars and singers to locate and identify related song materials. However, for some shanties, blues and other genres these tools are inadequate. Despite the problems of melodic description and identity, the study of these and other song genres requires some form of melodic description in order to locate and identify them for study and performance. Folk song presents a particular problem because of the lack of an original composer’s work. The unknown and likely unknowable provenance of folk material renders the search for melodic *urtexts* hopeless. In this context the development of tools for melodic description gains importance. However, the instability of folk melodies examined by the scholars listed above adds further challenge to this already daunting task. Folksong thus adds additional difficulties for those creating tools for mapping melodic similarity such as those being discussed at MIREX 2005 while at the same time underscoring the potential usefulness of such tools.

In cataloging the Carpenter Collection EAD proved a powerful and flexible tool. However, the completed EAD finding aid is, uncompressed, over 12 MB in size – too large to be served to end users over the internet. The experience of the Carpenter project team suggests that XML encoding of songs or song fragments offers a practical approach to presenting meta-data about folksong instances from various media: similar, comparable records have been created for sound recordings, notations, and simple song texts. This is a credit to EAD’s designers who created a flexible tool logically applicable to folk material.

The existence of various folk song indices both in print and on the web points to the ongoing interest in gathering and grouping such materials. At present this

¹ Various spellings are used for this term. While its etymology is disputed, its shipboard pronunciation is not. I thus prefer the “sh” spelling which represents the correct pronunciation.

is done with each cataloger using their own tools and data design. A flexible, shared, platform-independent XML data standard similar to (or derived from) EAD would offer this branch of scholarship a useful vehicle for data collection and use. Individual songs or song fragments cataloged in this way could be searchable across the web in the same way that the Archives Hub searches EAD instances in the UK. What's more, EAD was designed to be backwards compatible with print finding aids. A similar data standard for folk songs could be written so that harvesting data from existing databases would be relatively simple.

With EAD and other online tools a vast riches of folksong becomes ever more accessible. With expanded potential to gather such materials the need for identification and control grows. Perhaps from a cross-fertilization of folklore, ethnomusicology, library and archives research and music information technology, such tools may yet be created.

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