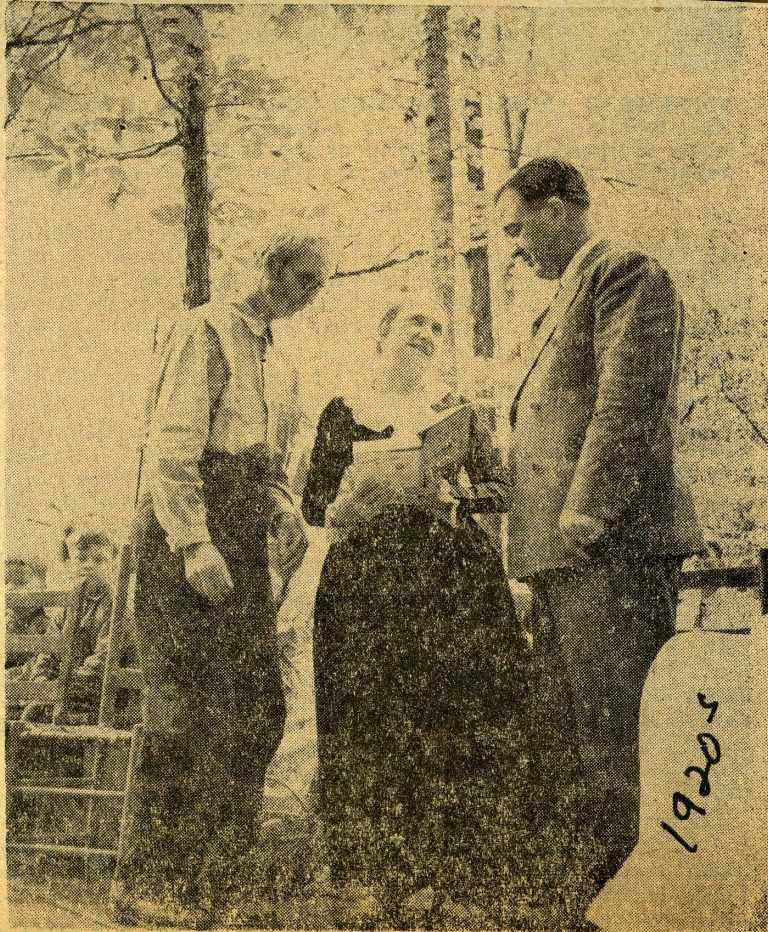




Denzel Foster and dog “Old Bounce”. Talent and musical abilities were plentiful in early Rowan County History



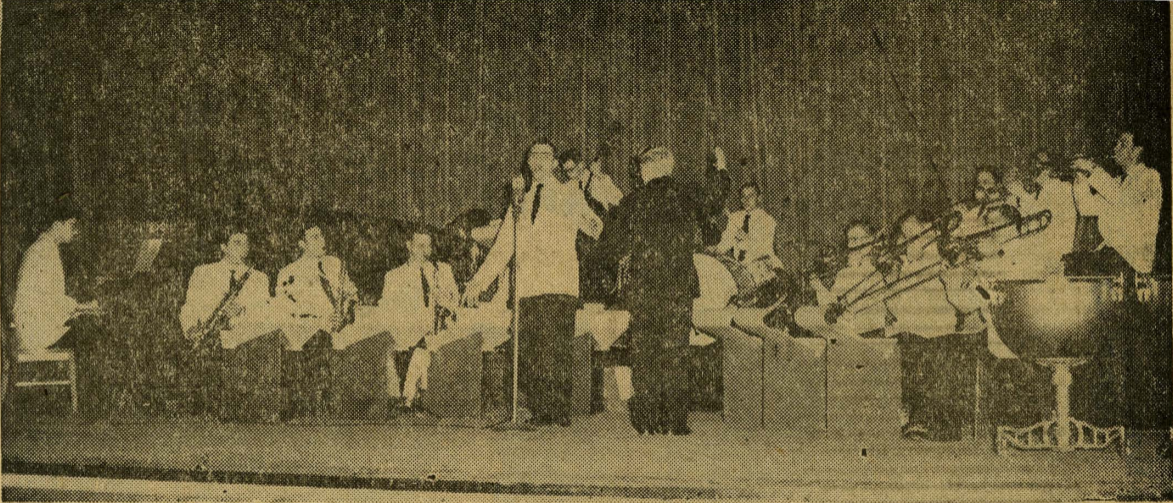
BEST KNOWN of all the folk song musicians in Eastern Kentucky was Jilson Setters, left, of Rowan County. This picture was taken at Jean Thomas' Folk Song Festival 20 years ago when Happy Chandler was serving his first term as Chief Executive. Jean Thomas is at center, Chandler at right.

located 40416



BEGINNING OF FOLK SONG FESTIVALS—Jean Thomas, 'The Traipsin' Woman' holds an annual folk song festival near Ashland each year which attracts national attention. However, few realize that the real beginning of her festivals was in Rowan County when the first was presented in 1938 at Little Perry School. Teachers were Lyda Messer Caudill and Ollie Tabor. Lead roles in that first festival were played by from left: Carl and Earl Messer, Junior Skaggs, Mrs. Lorenz Skaggs, Mrs. Jones and daughter who have appeared in all of Mrs. Thomas' festivals, Mrs. Lyda Caudill, in velvet costume she has worn in many festivals since, Nelle Davis, Ollie Tabor, Elmer Sparks and Mabel Sturgill. Pauline Sparks is one of the persons identified at rear right.

19205



THE MUSIC PROGRAM at Morehead has gained state recognition and has advanced more than any other department in recent years. This is the talented MSC orchestra.

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Morehead Memories (People and Places)

Morehead's blind Music Man' and the 'Birth of a ballad'

By Jack D. Ellis

(Editor's Note: This is one in series of articles about local history entitled Morehead Memories: People and Places. The articles deal with those business and professional people that helped Morehead grow and prosper.)

Musicians "play" an important part in the history of a nation, or the history of a community and Morehead's music man was Jilson Setters.

He was an internationally-known singer of ballads and folk songs. He was an important part of Morehead's history from the 1930 to the 1940s.

Blind "Jils" could be found on the courthouse lawn under an oak tree on court day singing and playing his unique style of music. He usually attracted a crowd that applauded his music.

It was rumored that he was a grandson of Johnny Day, one of the participants in the election day 1887 shooting that started

the Rowan County War.

Everyone lovingly called him "Blind Jils" because his eyesight was so poor he could not distinguish between the denominations of paper money, so he dealt in change only.

He was blind but he was a famous folk singer because Jean Thomas, a court reporter and famous collector of folk songs, heard him sing, wrote down many of his songs, and took him to New York City to perform in Carnegie Hall.

Later, she took him to Europe and he performed his beautiful Elizabethan music before the King and Queen of England.

Travelers treated to folk songs

The Greyhound Restaurant and Bus Station in Morehead in those days was a busy lunch and dinner stop for cross country travelers (now Main Street Music and Video). It was also the place where high school kids "hung out," drank cokes, ate burgers, and played the juke box

and danced the jitterbug.

When buses stopped at the Greyhound Restaurant on Main Street, and as the passengers left the bus they might see "Blind Jils" sitting on a low stool at the entrance to the restaurant. He would have his fiddle under his chin and there would be a large tin cup sitting on the ground in front of him.

He would begin by tapping his 1-2-3 and start playing his fiddle vigorously. Then he would begin singing one of the old folk songs or ballads of Eastern Kentucky. Such songs as "Barbara Allen," "Sourwood Mountain," "Dear, Dear, What Can the Matter Be," "I Wonder as I Wonder," and the "Round County Trouble," (a local ballad with 14 verses.)

He often made up a song or changed the words to fit the occasion. His songs praised his friends for their good deeds, and criticized his enemies for their actions.

I heard John Jacob Niles, the great singer and collector of folk songs, say many years ago at a concert at Vanderbilt University,

that he first heard the song "I Wonder as I Wonder" when it was sung by an old woman in Morgan County, as she sat rocking on her front porch. He wrote the words down and the song made him famous, and he made the song famous.

Blind Jils made the Round County War famous

"Blind Jils" would entertain the travelers as they got off the bus, and as they prepared to board. One song that he would sing was "The Round County Trouble." His metal cup would ring as the change clinked against the metal cup.

It was said Blind Jils could tell the amount of the gift by the "clink" or "clank" sound as it hit the bottom of the tin cup. He would always nod his head in thanks to those who gave, and never missed a note. He made a good living and enjoyed his music at the same time.

"Jils" would sometimes become a traveling troubadour, and buy a ticket, and board the bus heading for Lexington, Huntington, Ashland, or Cincinnati. There he would perform his music, receive a good offering, then return to Morehead, sleeping on the bus. It was on

these trips that he was able to share his beautiful ballads throughout this region.

Composer of the "Round" county war unknown

"Blind Jils" would often sing about the Rowan County War because he was a decedent of Johnny Day who many thought fired the first shot that started the bloody Rowan County feud.

According to the book "Folk Songs of the Southern United States," there are two versions of this song. One was called "The Round County Trouble," and the other was "The Tolliver Song."

Both songs warn of the terrible trouble that can be caused when whiskey, guns, and anger all come together. The authors were unknown. I cannot document it, but I believe Jils wrote one version of this song. I believe this because it was a song he made famous and it in turn made him famous.

I have had people from other areas of the country ask me about the Rowan County War because Blind Jils sang about it. Jil's song was from an account that I'm sure was told to him by his grandfather. This is how ballads are born.

Morehead's music man "Blind Jils" and the Greyhound Restaurant, (owned and operated by former MSU football coach and Haldeman High School coach Frank Laughlin) were the local high school students used to "hang out" at Morehead Memory.



About the author

Dr. Jack D. Ellis is a retired Morehead State University Library Director and a retired music teacher.

"Round" County Trouble

"Story of the Rowan County War"
Sang by Folk Singer 'Blind Jils' Setters

Come all you fathers and mothers
Sisters and brothers,
I will relate the history
Of the Round County Crew,
Concerning bloody Round
And many heinous deeds,
I Pray you pay attention,
Remember now it reads.

It was in the month of August,
On election day;
John Martin was shot and wounded,
They say by John Day.
Martin could not believe it,
He could not think it so.
He thought it was Floyd Toliver
Who shot the fatal blow.

They shot and killed Sol Bradley,
Pure, sober, innocent man,
He left his wife and loving children,
To do the best they can.
They wounded Ed Sizemore,
Although his life was saved,
He seemed to shun the grogshop,
Since he stood so near the grave.

Martin did recover -
Some months had come and passed,
It was in the town of Morehead,
The men both met at last;
Martin and a friend or two
About the streets did walk;
He seemed to be uneasy
And no one wished to talk.

He stepped into Judge Carey's grocery
And stepped up to the bar,
But little did he think, dear friend,
He'd met his fatal hour.
The sting of death was near him,
Martin rushed in at the door,
A few words passed between them
Concerning the row before.

The people all were frightened,
All rushed out of the room;
A ball from Martin's pistol
Laid Toliver in the tomb.
His friends soon gathered round him,
His wife to weep and wail;
Martin was arrested,
And soon confined in jail.

He was placed in jail at ~~Morehead~~ ^{Round}
There to remain awhile
In the hands of law and justice,
To bravely stand his trial.
Some people talked of lynching him,
At present though they failed,
Martin's friends removed him
To the Winchester jail.

Some person forged an order,
Their names I do not know;
This plan was soon agreed upon,
For Martin they did go.
Martin seemed to be uneasy,
He seemed to be in dread;
They have set a plan to kill me,
To the jailer Martin said.

They put the handcuffs on him,
His heart was in distress;
They hurried to the station,
Stepped aboard the night express.
Along the line she lumbered,
At her usual speed;
They were only two in number,
To commit the awful deed.

When they arrived at Farmer's
They had no time to lose,
A man approached the engineer
And told him not to move.
They stepped up to the prisoner,
With a pistol in their hands,
In death he soon was sinking,
He died in iron bands.

He was in the smoking car,
Accompanied by his wife;
They did not want her present
When they took her husband's life.
She heard the horrid sound,
She was in another car;
She cried: "Oh, Lord, they've killed him,"
When she heard the pistol fire.

The death of those two men
Has caused great trouble in our land,
Caused men to leave their families
And take the parting hand.
Relations still at war;
O, will it never cease?
O, God, I would like to see
This land once more in peace.

They shot the deputy sheriff,
Bumgardner was his name;
They shot him from the bushes
After taking deliberate aim.
The death of him was dreadful
May it never be forgot;
His body was pierced and torn
By thirty-three buckshot.

I composed this as a warning,
Beware young man, my friend;
Your pistol will cause you trouble,
On this you may depend.
In the bottom of a whiskey glass
The lurking devil dwells,
It burns the breath of those who drink it,
And sends their souls to hell.



The Greyhound Restaurant and Bus Station was once a busy bus terminal in the 1930s and 1940s. It was a place where local high school and college students met to hang out. Also Blind Jils, the folk singer, came here to entertain travelers.

