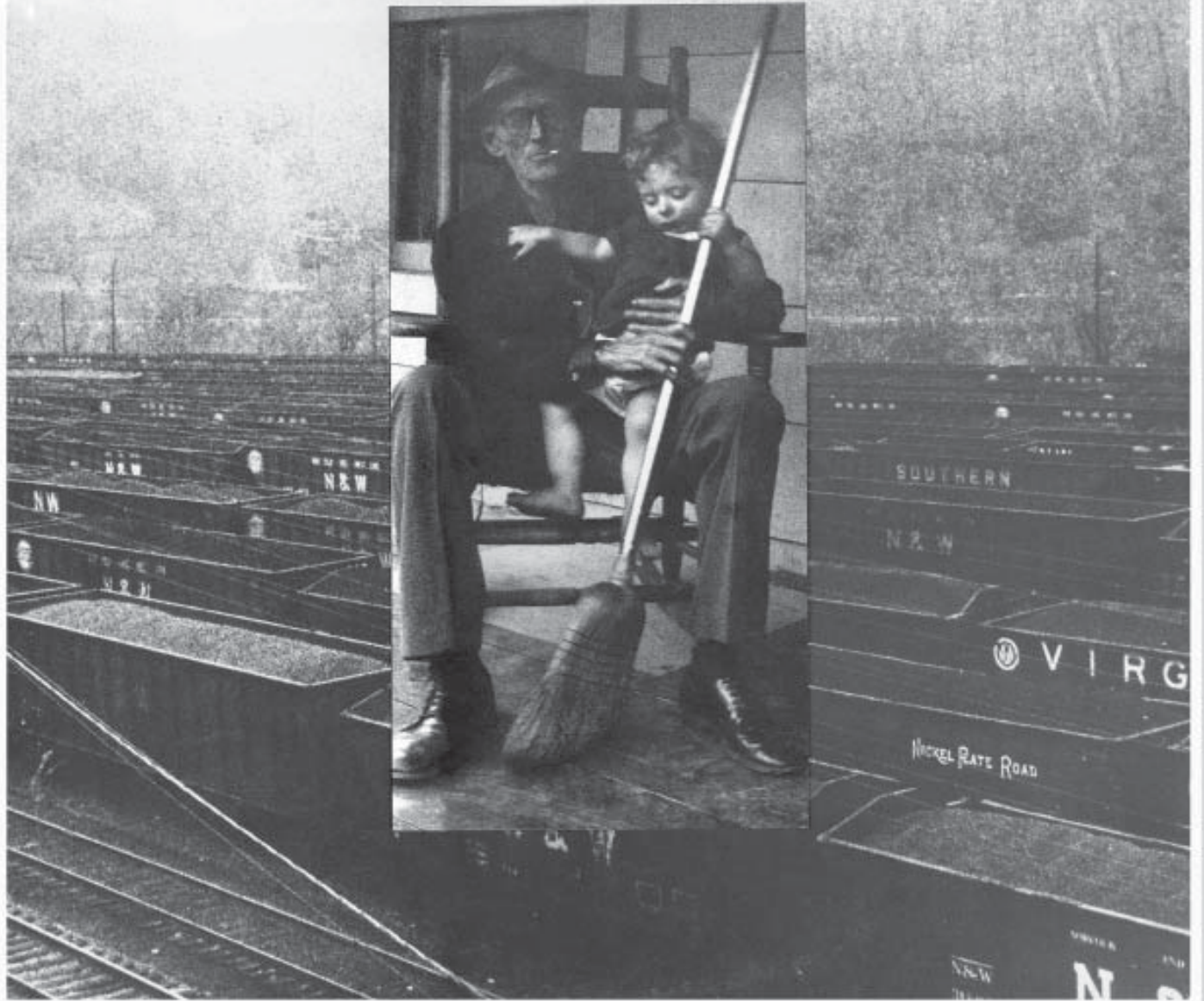


NIMROD WORKMAN · MOTHER JONES' WILL



Rounder 0076



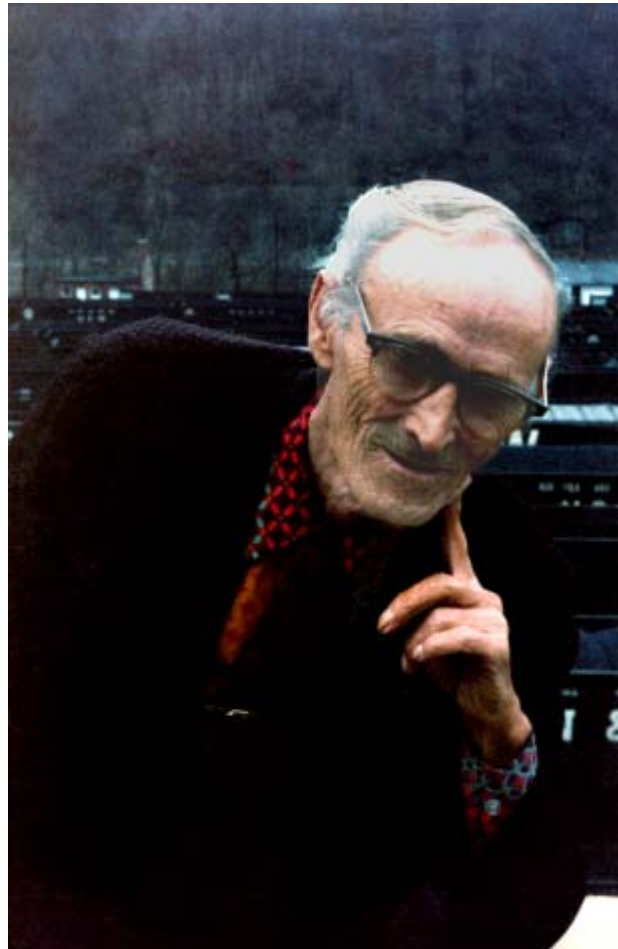
North American Traditions Series

Autobiographical remarks:

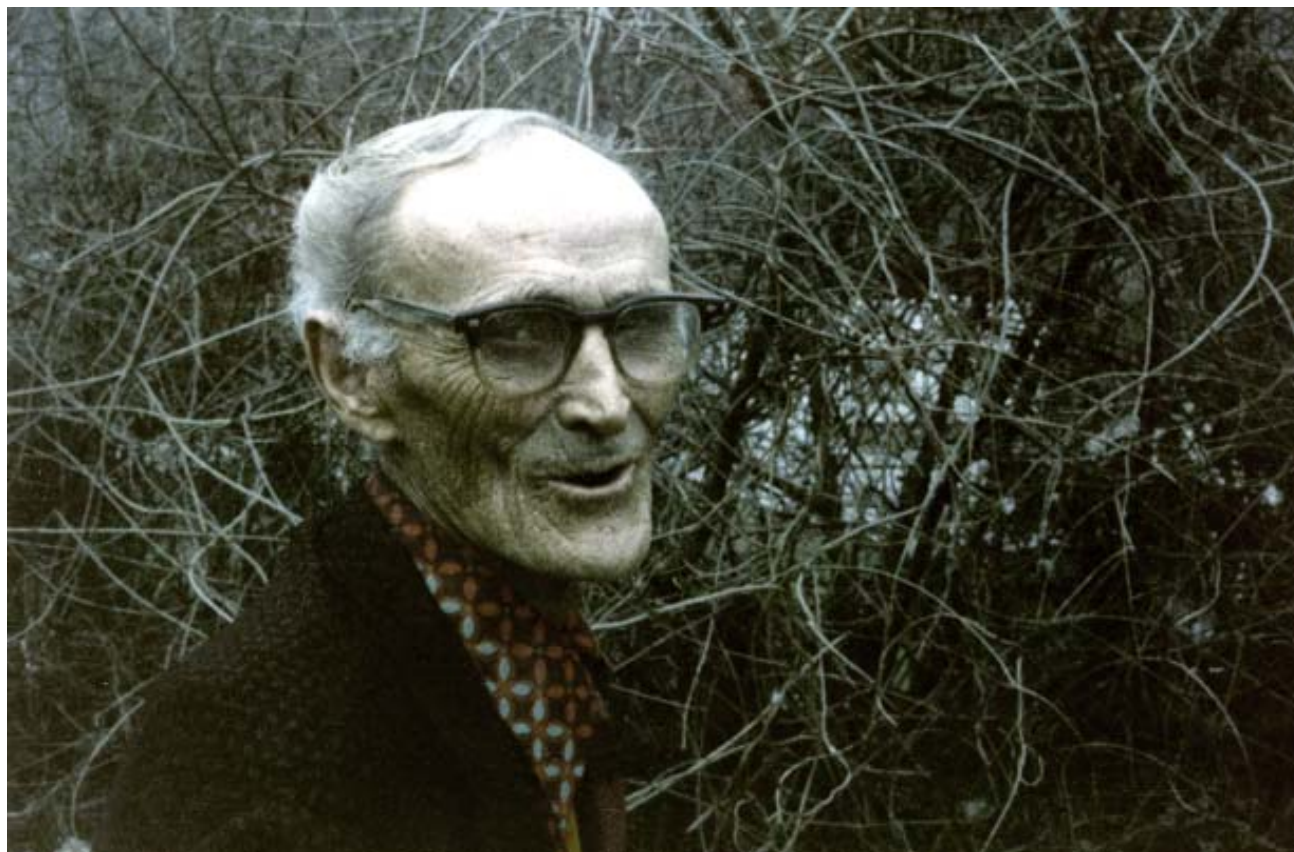
My people came up into Kentucky to settle when there were no houses in the place at all – just hundreds of acres of ground in the wilderness. Maybe your nearest neighbor'd be twenty-five or thirty miles away. Those were hard times back then – and dangerous times too. Back there in Martin County is a place they call Panther Lick. My grandfather was living there when he heard this hollering and screaming and he peeked out of the cracks and saw a big black panther coming out of that lick across a big high log. And just then a big bear had come in at the other end and they met plumb in the middle of the log, each trying to make the other back up. They locked into it and that panther ripped that bear's belly open until his guts fell out, but that old bear kept a-hugging on him until they fell off that log. They both died right there in that lick: the panther hugged up in the bear's clutches. And that's where my people settled in Kentucky.

One night my grandmother was sitting in the cabin all alone and she heard this panther a-hollering out around the house. There was a hole into that log house right near the chimney and this old panther started to run his paw up through there to get at her while she's knitting. Well, my grandmother just grabbed his leg behind his paw, and set her broom up against it and rolled her yarn all around that broom and the panther's claw. The old panther, he worked all the rest of the night to get his leg out and when my grandpa came back the next morning, he killed it.

My grandfather Workman had come from England and fought back in that Old Rebel and Yankee war. He drew a pension of fifteen dollars from whichever side he was on. He'd gotten one of his eyes put out fighting around a tree with a tomahawk or something like that. I was named after him and he'd always take my part in any kind of argument. When he was real old and any of the kids tried to gang up and



were getting too hot for me, I'd run up to him and he'd whop them with his cane. I had a lot of brothers and sisters and we had happy times back then and there was no aggravation like there is now. Of course we had to work hard all the time, but when we did get time to play, we'd really enjoy it. We'd play right out through the woodland, stuff like "All Around the Mulberry Bush," "Dog Chews the Bone," and all sorts of funny games like that. And we'd cut big grapevines loose and swing way out over the hillsides on them.



I started humming these songs off when I was about twelve years old. Most of my old-time singing I got from my people on both sides. Maybe I'd take some of one song and some of another and put them together – just cut and dry them myself you know, and that way I'd make a pretty good song out of them. And I used to attend those real old-timey churches when I was a boy and I learned a lot of these Christian songs too. I used to play a French harp but these old-timey Baptists didn't believe in music in church and, if you mentioned it to them, they'd say that 'way back music was hung up on the willows and done away with. The only thing they believed in was music and prayer.

When I got a little older and was working in the mines, me and lots of the single fellers would buy a half gallon of moonshine with our scrip and go sit on the railroad tracks or just somewhere in the mouth of the holler. And they'd give me a

nick of liquor to sing some. I had a good clear voice back then and I could pitch her out there. I'd sing these old love songs and they'd get me to sing Christian songs too. Just sitting out there singing until maybe one or two o'clock of the night.

Those were the days of that Hatfield and McCoy war. I remember old Devil Ance Hatfield himself – boy, if something roused him up, the bugger man got right into him and he didn't care for nothing. If a bunch of them met out somewhere, they'd ask, "What's your name?" – "I'm a McCoy" – "Well, I'm a Hatfield. Roll up your sleeves, we're going into it." You had to be careful yourself when you were over in their country. If you'd be leaving out of a night, they might think you were over there to see a girl and they'd rock you. Buddy, the rocks would just hail down like walnuts a-falling!



When these old-timers would fight, they'd fight like mules until the blood would fly. They'd stand up and knock her out and they knew how to knock her too! One night I got my nose broken seventeen ways in a fight with the Evans boys. I was into it with one of them and I ducked him and his arm went plumb through a Number Two zinc washtub hanging on the wall. My daddy got mixed up in it and he knocked two of these boys out, but another of them pitched a big rock right on top of my daddy and we thought he was killed. My uncle Mack grabbed a wellpole and just about killed us all – he was so mad he didn't know one of us from the other. He'd just holler, "You've killed Harve" and that old wellpole was a-singing "zup," "zup," "zup." We took my daddy home and that was one rough, tough night. We didn't think he'd ever come to. And so I got so I didn't fool with that fighting stuff.

I went into the mines when I was fourteen years old. I was working as a back-hand, cleaning up for old Jesse Winchester in a place which was running eight and nine cars of coal. I was doing all that for fifty cents and a supper of cornbread and

sweet milk, so I says to myself, "Why should you be loading eight and nine cars of coal for him, with him getting three dollars out of it and you only getting fifty cents?" Finally I buckled up to the mine foreman and explained the thing to him.

He says to me, "But, you're too young to work in the mines; I can't give you any checks."

I answered right back, "Well, I'm not too young to work as a backhand and if that top'll fall on me working with my own checks, it'd still fall on me working for fifty cents a day." So we got my parents to sign a minor's release and the next day I told old Jesse, "Buddy, I've got checks of my own – this is my place now." Well, he got awful mad over that, because that caused him to lose out.

I worked there at Brockton for several years. I was laying track, driving mules and hauling coal. And we made our own shots back then, too. You'd roll your paper, tuck it in, and pour it full of powder. You'd run this copper needle to the back of the coal where you'd drill in with a breast auger. They used a squib in those days with a little thing like a fire cracker at the end of it. You'd light that and it'd burn blue like sulphur and run that hole back into your powder and shoot your coal.

That was back in the time of old Woodrow Wilson's War. I had been exempted because I was taking care of my dad and family, but I was ready to go up in the next call. Well, I was working in the cornfield one day with my daddy when I heard all the whistles a-blowing up at the mines and on all these freight trains running up and down the river. And the people out on their farms over on the Kentucky side started ringing on their plows. "There's peace," they said. "We've run old King Kaiser in the vault." And that was the last I ever heard about him.

It was just about that time that Mother Jones came around. Me and my uncle George were working at Ajax, up on this side of Lenore, when a feller by the name of York came in the mines and called us out. "We're on strike and taking applications for union members. If you want to take the risk of being a scab—why, that's up to you." So my uncle and I stacked our tools and came out. I got a five dollar check a month from Mother Jones and a single man, who wasn't looking after nobody, got three dollars.

Yeah, I was right up into the Mother Jones' time. I used to roll out these big old buggies for her to get up on to make her speeches. She'd talk to us men just like a sergeant in the army. She'd tell us all to be careful and that if anytime a yellow dog was shooting into a bunch of us, we should try to get his eyeball. "Try your best to get his eyeball," she'd say. Buddy, she was a tough woman. Before she'd went to leading, she went into the mines and drove mules. Her husband was a union man from somewheres and when he died, she hauled coal so that she could be called a union member. She told a bunch of gun thugs once, "I've sat on a bumper inhaling mule farts and it smelled better than you son of a bitches, a-carrying guns and shoot-

ing people." Brother, she didn't care what she'd say. Her hair hung way down, just as grey as it could be, with those big high cheekbones – there wasn't a man any tougher than she. She didn't worry about the thugs and the guns. She used to tell them, "You won't shoot me. I won't turn my back to you and let you shoot me in no back of the head."

There were a lot of people killed back then. They'd bar a union man from going to the store and a lot of times we wouldn't have anything to eat. The thugs killed one union man, tied his neck to the back of a truck and drug him up and down Tug River. One time when the men were out fighting in the hills, the thugs came into the miners' tents and slapped all the women around and poured kerosene in the milk for the babies. Those poor little babies, just crying out for hunger. That's why I put that in my song about Mother Jones.

I was over in the Blair Mountain Strike when they killed the High Sheriff John Gore. I sat up in a tower on the top of the gap, looking and a-watching and that day I left my initials in it, cut out with an old barrow knife. Another time they were having it out at Matewan and my cousin and I were on the top of a point in Hatfield Hollow on the Kentucky side. I told him, "Daniel, sit down because the scabs are down in there and they're liable to spy out and get you." But he climbed up on top of that rock anyway and pretty soon I heard a high powered rifle crack and he pitched off that rock cliff and rolled down the hill. Someone wrote up a report telling that he was out hunting and fell off the cliff by accident.

They killed the sheriff, Sid Hatfield, for siding with the union. The company brought charges against him and told him to come unarmed to Welch, West Virginia; they didn't want to try him in his hometown of Williamson. Well, they had it all cut and dried: those thugs were planted around that courthouse when Sid came up there unarmed. Sid's wife fell on one of the thugs and jabbed big holes in his arm with the staves of her parasol, just trying to keep him from shooting at Sid. But they got him anyway. Boy, that teared it; we started sending them scabs down the road, Buddy, just as fast as they'd gather. We were cleaning them out. At Merrimac, there wasn't a sound glass in the son of a bitch; the window glasses were all knocked out.

But the coal companies got ahold of the federal government someway and Uncle Sam sent the soldiers down here. They marched up the river and ordered a ceasefire. The miners didn't know that they'd take sides like they did. Finally. Mother Jones said, "We've got to surrender." The companies were paying all these scabs about thirty dollars a day, when the miners used to get a buck and a half. So Mother Jones told the bosses, "We'll be back – the union'll come back. And when she comes back, you'll send for it."

Well, we didn't get her back until 1933. Until then, times were pretty rough. Maybe you'd work about three days of the week in the mines. They paid you \$2.80 a day for sixteen to eighteen hours of work with no overtime. And you'd get paid in a



Nimrod and Mollie Workman

brass scrip dollar, if you were lucky enough to get that far ahead. Me and Mollie had a couple of children by then and rent was three dollars for two weeks, your coal was a dollar and so was your doctor bill. If you loaded coal, you had to buy your own powder and supplies. Your wife would go to the store to ask for a dollar scrip and the bookkeeper would ring up to the top of the hill where the coal dump was to ask, "How many cars has so-and-so dumped?" Maybe the word was, "He ain't got it in here yet. He can't get no scrip until we get the rent and stuff first." And when it rained, the water leaked into the house and you'd have to set pans on the floor to catch it with. The company wouldn't fix the roof and you couldn't buy any paper to do it yourself because you never drew any money to buy it with – just traded all your scrip right there at the company store.

When you couldn't make enough to eat on account of the mines not working enough, you'd have to walk all the way to Williamson to get some Red Cross flour and old yellow pieces of hog jowl and rice that the rats had been into. That flour read "Not to be Sold" all over it, but they'd sure work you all day for it, building a park or some amusement to get it. Old Doc Ingram'd walk up and down with a big long pole making you stand in line for the Red Cross stuff.

About then I asked the old man for a raise. "Mr. Morrison, you're working us sixteen and eighteen hours a day," I said. "But eight hours constitutes a day's work."

He told me, "We don't count no eight hours up here. You'll work until the cars

are dumped and fixed up for the night shift, regardless of what time it is." And then he said, "Workman, do you see that road down yonder?"

"Sure. I'm not blind, I guess I can see it."

"Well, there's a miner walking up and down that road wearing pawpaw galluses and living on a cracker a day, just waiting for your job if you're not satisfied with it."

And it was like that all through those Hoover days.

I had stayed by the union through the Mother Jones time and we had failed to get organized. So when John Lewis came out in 1933, I was the second man in Chattahoochee Holler to sign up. I met John Lewis in Charleston in the ball park and went everywhere until we got the union organized and on its feet. I helped get the first local started down here in Buffalo Creek. Over in Kentucky, there were several places that didn't have out with us, so we went and picketed and brought them out. We went into the mines where they were cutting and made them leave their machines slumped up against the face. We stopped their scabbing against the locals and put the union in good shape so we could handle it. We ruled it the way it was supposed to be and according to the way we took our obligation. Not like today where they treat an old or disabled miner like me was only a half-brother in the union.

We were on strike back in through the head of Pigeon Creek when the coal companies tried to get the government to come back in again. Well, Governor M. M. Neely came in alright, but he didn't go against the union. And we saw that we finally had backing and that he didn't aim to do anything against us. Then when we got into the big war, the money men didn't want to give us a raise or anything else we asked for, so they contacted the Federal government. Old Roosevelt said, "Boys, we're in a war and need the coal, so go back to work and I'll see that you get the raise. If you don't, I'll set an embargo against the mines and the Federal government'll run her."

When we went back to work, the superintendent said all friendly-like, "I'm going to give you all a raise, being's how you've decided to come back to work."

I said, "Yeah, you're going to give us our raise because President Roosevelt said he'd run it himself if we didn't get that raise!" Well, that superintendent looked like a dog that had killed a sheep; he didn't know what to say.

But then they set up a law which I'll never forget. Old Taft and Hartley said, "Roosevelt, drive these men back in the mines. Make them go back to work."



But Roosevelt said, "You can lead a horse to water, boys, but you can't make him drink. I can drive the men back in the mines but I can't set right there beside them and make them load the coal. So leave it to me, boys. I'll get them back." And that's how we got our raise.

After the war, my health went bad. I was crawling around in twenty-two inch coal and it cut my hands up so bad, I had to go to the hospital to have them worked on. After that I went on the roll for the Crystal Block people and worked there for two years, but in 1948 I got hurt pulling a pan. I got a slipped disc in my back – it's there yet – and I couldn't even stoop over to go in the mines. I went to the hospital but the doctor was bought off and said he couldn't find any mine-related injuries. I'd been in the mines for forty-two years but the board said I had to have five years after 1946 to be eligible for a miner's pension.

And there was no Social Security then either. Well, the board has been ordered to pay it, but they said I should be drawing state compensation for being hurt in the mines. Well, how can you draw state compensation if the company didn't ever sign you up and send it over to the state? I don't think the young coal miners of today know how hard it was to bring this union to them and to get their wages up so high. I think if they did, they'd hold up better for the old people and break that welfare board all to pieces. Miller's not done it. He said, "When I get in there, fellers like Nimrod are going to get their miner's welfare," but I haven't got my pension yet – forty-two years in the mine and eighty-three years old.



–Nimrod Workman

Original LP Selections:

1. *Lord Baseman*
2. *My Pretty Little Pink*
3. *The City Four Square*
4. *Sweet Rosie*
5. *Lord Daniel*
6. *Remember What You Told Me, Love*
7. *Rock the Cradle and Cry*
8. *Coal Black Mining Blues* (Nimrod Workman/Happy Valley Music, BMI)
9. *Mother Jones' Will* (Nimrod Workman/Happy Valley Music, BMI)
10. *The Drunkard's Lone Child*
11. *What Is That Blood on Your Shirt Sleeve?*
12. *Working on This Old Railroad*
13. *Black Lung Song* (Nimrod Workman/Happy Valley Music, BMI)
14. *I Want To Go Where Things Are Beautiful*
15. *Biler and the Boar*
16. *The Devil and the Farmer*
17. *Loving Henry*
18. *Darling Cory*

**Additions to CD:**

19. *If Tug River Run Whiskey*
20. *Little Bessie* (with Mollie Workman)
21. *In the Pines*
22. *Young Edward*
23. *Jimmy Ramble*
24. *Forty-Two Years* (Nimrod Workman/Happy Valley Music, BMI)
25. *Little David, Play on Your Harp* (with Mollie Workman)
26. *Newsy Women*
27. *Brother Preacher*
28. *Oh, Death*

A Note on these Downloadable North American Traditions Series LP Reissues:

Previously, I have attempted to provide fuller notes to our old LP projects, but have fallen way behind schedule in doing so. Furthermore, it has become increasingly unclear that anybody reads such notes anyway, given the truly pitiful sales that such projects now enjoy. Accordingly, it seems a better use of my limited time if we simply make the old projects available on a downloadable basis more or less verbatim, with only passing errors corrected. I have endeavored, where available, to release some additional tracks that could not be fit on the old LP.

--Mark Wilson

Editor, the North American Traditions Series

Credits:

Produced by Mark Wilson.

Recorded in Chattaroy, West Virginia, March, 1976, by Mark Wilson and Ken Irwin.

Original LP design by Susan Marsh.

Photography by Mark Wilson.

Special thanks to Phyllis Boyens. Tom Screvens and the staff of Golden Seal Magazine.

*This CD belongs to the North American Traditions Series,
Mark Wilson, general editor*

Visit our website at www.rounder.com/rounder/nat

Other recordings by Nimrod Workman can be heard on
Rounder 11661-4026-2 [Harlan County USA: Songs of the
Coal Miner's Struggle](#)

Rounder 11661-8141-2 [The Land of Yahoe: Children's
Entertainments from the Days before Television](#)

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