

Katherine Pettit Records Kentucky Mountain Songs



View from Pine Mountain, Kentucky- Wikimedia Commons

by Kathy Warnes

Katherine Pettit traveled the Kentucky Mountains collecting ballads. She was one of the first musicians to transcribe centuries old ballads. She transcribed ballads that she heard from her pupils and friends, and one of her favorites, “The Daemon Lover,” has countless variations and is still sung.

Katherine Pettit often found herself riding horseback on the twisted trails and bridle paths in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky and she sang as she rode. One of her favorite ballads that she learned from her pupils at the Hindman Settlement School had many variations in title and words, but the story always moved her because it illustrated human temptations so well.

“Oh will you forsake your house carpenter, Oh, will you forsake him? cried he. Oh will you forsake your sweet little babe, And go along with me?” (Traditional).

Katherine Pettit Makes a Winding Journey to the Kentucky Mountains

As Katherine rode the trail singing her ballad, she probably reflected that her journey from Lexington to Harlan County, Kentucky had been just as winding as the trail and the song she sang. She was born in 1868, on a large and prosperous farm in Fayette County in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky. By the late 1890s, the Progressive movement which called for urban and social reform had swept the industrialized cities of the northern United States. The movement called for settlement houses and schools to help economically deprived families and Katherine believed in and became part of that movement.

In 1902, Katherine and her friend May Stone founded the Hindman Settlement School modeled on Hull House in Chicago and in 1913, she established the Pine Mountain Settlement School in

Harlan county. These schools became models for schools in other states and Katherine's work became widely known, including her work with the traditional music of the Kentucky mountain people.

"Ballads and Rhymes from Kentucky"

In 1907, when Katherine was still teaching at the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, she published "Ballads and Rhymes from Kentucky," in the Journal of American Folklore. This was the first real publication of some of the old songs that Kentuckians had been singing for over 100 years. The collection included 17 songs, all but five of them with British origins, and a handful of children's songs and rhymes. Katherine and her students had collected them from the hills of south eastern Kentucky.

By 1930, Katherine Pettit had worked at the settlement schools for thirty years, and she decided to retire as co-director of the Pine Mountain Settlement. For the next five years, she traveled alone through Harlan county offering instruction and advice in farming and acting as agent for craftsmen. She also continued her involvement with the mountain music and musicians.

John Jacob Niles Hears Katherine Sing

John Jacob Niles American composer, singer, and collector of traditional ballads, listened with delight to Katherine Pettit's singing. He liked her smile and laughing eyes and found her modest voice easy on his ears as she sang one of the ballads that she had learned from her students at the Pine Mountain School.

It was late summer of 1933, and Miss Pettit had traveled to Harrogate, Tennessee, to consult with him and give him some of the ballads that she and her colleague, May Stone had transcribed. One of the ballads she sang to him is known as "James Harris, "The Daemon Lover", "or The House Carpenter". Early Scots-Irish settlers in the hills of Appalachia brought the ballad with them from England and passed it down from generation to generation.

"The Daemon Lover", "James Harris", "The House Carpenter"

The former lover tempts the lady to come with him, enticing her with many ships loaded with treasure. She goes with him and they board one of his ships. In many versions she discovers that he does not have a crew, but they put out to sea anyway. In some versions of the ballad, she doesn't discover that her former lover is really the Devil until they are on the ship together.

Soon she bitterly regrets leaving her child behind, but her spirits lift when she sees a bright hill in the distance. Her lover tells her that the hill is heaven and that is not their destination. Then he breaks the ship in half with his bare hands and feet and they both drown. In other versions of the ballad, a storm at sea wrecks the ship.

"The Daemon Lover" is Found in Several Folk Song Collections

Although Katherine Pettit and her students were the first to transcribe "The Daemon Lover," or "James Harris," it can be found in countless variations in the folk song collections of John Jacob Niles and Francis James Child. Some of the ballads Katherine transcribed, including The

Daemon Lover” can be found in the collections of Olive Dame Campbell. “The Daemon Lover” has been recorded by famous folk singers, including Bob Dylan, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger.

Katherine Pettit died of cancer in 1936, and was buried in Lexington, Kentucky. The two schools she founded continued to enhance the lives of the people of southeastern Kentucky and the ballads she transcribed are still sung. They can be found in Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky by Charles K. Wolfe.