In 1930s America, a man named Frank Clyde Brown was traveling through the mountains of North Carolina hunting for, and collecting, folksongs. Brown, an English professor at Duke University, traveled throughout mountainous, isolated, and rural regions to record individuals singing their versions of songs passed down through the generations by both family and community members. In written correspondence from 1940, Brown describes the summer of 1939 during which he “travelled 2500 miles in the mountains of this state [North Carolina] and made some very interesting recordings.”

A few years prior to this correspondence, in August of 1936, Brown recorded an individual named Myra Barnett Miller. Brown’s field notes provide little information about Myra, other than her name and the songs which he recorded. This essay uses fragmentary sources such as vital and census records, newspaper articles, audio recordings, and manuscript materials from the Frank Clyde Brown Folklore Collection to reveal the broad outlines of Myra Barnett Miller’s life. Through a discussion of literacy, medicine, and music, this paper will outline Myra’s life, and in turn reveal patterns of life in early-twentieth century Appalachia.

It was December of 1910, when Myra Barnett and Dr. C. B. McNairy made a house call to the home of Myra’s future husband, Josiah Miller, and his current wife, Nancy Miller. Nancy was ailing and in need of medical services. McNairy, a prominent physician of the area, was

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1 Frank Clyde Brown to Sidney H. Robertson, April 25, 1940, Frank Clyde Brown Papers, Duke University, Durham, NC.
called upon for his assistance. Unfortunately, Mrs. Miller passed away on December 10, 1910, yet the visit did not conclude in futility. Within the year, Myra would be married to Nancy’s husband, Josiah J. Miller. This speculative anecdote begins this story of Myra Barnett Miller, a woman living in Appalachia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

With the lack of first-person accounts, this essay presents a contingent history of Myra Barnett Miller, an ordinary woman living in the Appalachian South of North Carolina. While not being a “famous” or prominent woman, Myra Barnett Miller can nonetheless teach us about the cultural history of Appalachia. This essay focuses upon Myra as a person, as a story, and as a woman with something to say. Yet, her musical connections should not go unnoticed. The collection and recording of Myra’s songs with both Frank Clyde Brown and Maude Minish Sutton can be analyzed to present two differing views of women during this time period.

Although Myra did not leave behind diaries or letters, through the use of vital and census records, newspaper articles, manuscript materials, and other non-personal records, it is possible to fit Myra into a reliable context that is relatable to other women and families of the era. Traversing through the timeline of her life, we can draw connections between events and cultural happenings of the region in an attempt to derive a historical context. Myra’s life may reveal itself to be quite different from other Appalachian women, yet the trials and tribulations she faced, along with the lessons she learned, may be realistically identifiable.

The Barnett family, at the time of Myra’s birth in January of 1870, appeared to be a modest farming household in the Appalachian South operating their “self-sufficient family farm”

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2 The story of the house call is one of informed speculation. The 1910 census for Lower Creek, Caldwell County, NC, shows that Myra lived with Dr. C.B. McNairy. The census also suggests that the McNairy household stood in proximity to Josiah Miller’s home, as he resided in Little River, Caldwell County, NC. According to her grave, as viewed on findagrave.com, Nancy Miller did indeed pass away in December of 1910. North Carolina marriage records indicate that Myra and Josiah wed in May of 1911. While the house call itself may not have occurred in the manner described, it is likely that Myra and Josiah met due to the geographical closeness.

3 Maude Minish Sutton was a folklorist working with Frank Clyde Brown in the early 1900s. Citations on her life and work will be provided with her more detailed discussion in concluding paragraphs.
in the style that “so dominate[d] the culture and social system.”

4 In 1870, Myra’s father, Thomas Barnett, ran the farm with his young farmhand, Benjamin Beich, while his wife Sarah took care of their three children with assistance from a domestic servant, Mira Beich. 6

5 Jack Temple Kirby, an American historian, attributes the large family sizes of the Appalachian South to two factors: the lack of information on, and access to, birth control among rural individuals and economic influences related to farming. As put by a Kentucky father in 1938, “The more children I have the more land I can tend, the more money I can make.”

7 With this need, or perhaps pressure, for a large family to contribute labor on self-sufficient farms, more children were in the future for the Barnett family.

Ten years later, 11-year-old “Elmirah” still resided in Kings Creek, North Carolina, with her parents, two older siblings, and now four younger siblings. 8 This growth in family size could be a testament to the productive utilization of many children on independent farms, as seen in the previous ideas put forth by Jack Temple Kirby. American sociologist, Rupert Vance, recognized that agrarian families valued many children when conducting research on cotton landlords and cotton production. Vance determined that “the most successful cotton farmer is the one who can command a large amount of human labor within his own household.”

The 1880 census shows that the three eldest Barnett children attended school. While 13-year-old Julius and 12-year old John were both able to read, but not write, the census taker noted

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4 While no record of Myra’s birth was obtainable via the Ancestry Library online database, her death certificate confirmed a birth date of January 22, 1870.


that 11-year-old Myra lacked proficiency in both reading and writing.\textsuperscript{10} To put their late nineteenth century education into context, one can observe aggregate census records detailing school attendance in the South. With 76.6% of white females, compared to 79.4% of white males, between the ages of 10 and 14 attending school in the South in 1890, Myra’s school attendance alongside her brothers is not necessarily surprising.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, in 1890, 20.64% of white male individuals and 25.64% of female individuals over the age of 10 were illiterate in North Carolina.\textsuperscript{12} Both sets of statistics make it clear that females had slightly higher rates of illiteracy in 1890.

Debates exist on views of education and literacy in rural Appalachia. Ron Rash, a professor in Appalachian cultural studies, attempts to dispel a common stereotype when emphasizing, “not everybody is illiterate.”\textsuperscript{13} Rash notes further that the idea of literacy is often coupled with a desire to escape the region. He states that, “education’s the way you get out. Any minority culture knows that.”\textsuperscript{14} However, the distinction between literate men and women must be addressed. Acquiring new literacies, “especially [for] Appalachian wom[e]n,” could cause an experience of “personal conflict” in which they may fear “getting above their raisings.”\textsuperscript{15} A woman gains personal freedom with the attainment of new literacies, yet this freedom challenges the cultural upbringing of individuals in rural Appalachia.

The Barnett children’s motivations for acquiring new literacies may have arisen for innumerable reasons. Perhaps school was a supplement to farm life, and the children attended

\textsuperscript{10} Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, “Elmirah J. Barnett.”
\textsuperscript{13} Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, “‘The Natural World Is the Most Universal of Languages’: An Interview with Ron Rash,” Appalachian Journal 34, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 221.
\textsuperscript{14} Bjerre, "The Natural," 220.
\textsuperscript{15} Erica Abrams Locklear, Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment: Appalachian Women's Literacies, Series in Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Appalachia (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 2-4.
only when their presence on the farm was not needed. Attitudes of “casual… attendance” also emerged in rural societies “in which formal schooling constituted only a small part of children’s education.”\textsuperscript{16} This could be the case in observing the Barnett children’s attainment of literacy around age 12. Schooling was only “one of many paths to adulthood, meant to provide only the basic knowledge of reading, writing, and ciphering necessary for survival.”\textsuperscript{17} Or perhaps Thomas and Sarah Barnett wanted to provide their children with the best possibilities for escaping their farming routine. “Parents who once would have jealously guarded the family labor supply showed a new willingness [largely between 1880 and 1920] to send their children – particularly their daughters – out on their own.”\textsuperscript{18} Myra’s parents may have shown this willingness when they sent Myra was sent off to school. Her schooling took place both in the formal sense of learning reading and writing and in the medical sense of her nursing training.

With a mysterious absence in the 1900 census, Myra once again appeared in the 1910 census. The census taker noted that Myra lived in the McNairy household in Lower Creek, Caldwell County, North Carolina, and was fully capable of reading and writing.\textsuperscript{19} Through these census records, we learn not only of her potentially illicit actions, but also of her probable medical training.\textsuperscript{20} On February 14, 1892, unwed Myra gave birth to a son.\textsuperscript{21} The “unknown” father drastically altered the course of both Myra’s and her son Charlie’s life.\textsuperscript{22} Without documents such as letters and diaries, it is impossible to determine the exact manner in which her

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Leloudis, \textit{Schooling the New South}, 96.
\textsuperscript{20} The 1910 census taker noted Myra’s marital status as ‘single’ and her number of living children as 1. This leads us to believe that Myra had her child out of wedlock. In addition, Myra’s occupation industry is noted as ‘hospital’.
\textsuperscript{22} North Carolina County Registers of Deeds, Microfilm, Record Group 048, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC, “C C Barnett” marriage license, Ancestrylibrary.com
family reacted, but fragmentary sources do enable us to speculate. Social historians of the “white American premarital pregnancy record,” note that the mid-to-late-nineteenth century fell as a trough in the cyclical pattern, where “about ten percent” of first births were premarital.23 There is little doubt that Thomas and Sarah were frustrated with their daughter, but decided to make the best of the situation in a fashion of tough love.24

Charlie lived with his grandparents, aunts, and uncles, who were Myra’s parents and siblings, while Myra began to work outside the family farm.25 In order to provide for her son, Myra left her parents’ household and delegated Charlie’s care to her immediate family. This development explains her presence in the McNairy household. The head of the household, Dr. Charles Banks McNairy, was a prominent physician who later helped establish and direct the Caswell Training School – a “school for the feebleminded.”26 Prior to his involvement with studies of mental handicaps, McNairy lived and worked in the Caldwell County area as a physician, while also training nurses.27 According to the 1910 census, Myra, alongside two other women, lived and worked in the McNairy household as wage-earning employees in the “hospital industry.”28

Entering a medical trade provided Myra with a departure from the farming routines that had characterized her childhood. The transformation occurring in the medical field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may have provided a unique outlet for Myra to explore.

24 The “tough love” characterized here was imagined via the analysis of census and personal accounts. Myra’s immediate family took care of her son (an act of love), yet Myra herself left the household to work (an act of toughness). Census records reveal Charlie Barnett living in the Barnett household without Myra (see footnote 20), while personal records of Maude Minish reveal the work Myra was performing as a nurse (see footnote 32).
27 In the 1910 census (footnote 15), Dr. McNairy listed his occupation as “Doctor.” The claim that he trained nurses was extrapolated from the three listed nurses living with the family.
Her geographical proximity to the McNairy household may have led her to seek a role as a nurse. Undoubtedly, her training was not extensive. As “the education… received before 1910 had little in common with the reformed curricula of elite schools,” she was likely briefly exposed to, but not trained extensively in, many common medical practices of the day.\(^29\) Yet, this position allowed Myra to provide for her son throughout his childhood, and it eventually resulted in the start of a new chapter of her life.

As Charlie came of age in his late-teens, he left North Carolina for West Virginia. At almost the same time Myra had a change of luck.\(^30,31\) Myra was a single mother living with and tending to the McNairy family in a household that was not her own. Based on her medical training, Myra potentially traveled with Dr. McNairy to the Miller household for a medical house call, as described in the opening narrative. Josiah J. Miller, the man of the house, was in his second marriage to a Nancy (Hulda) Miller, and it was here that Myra and Josiah may have met for the first time.\(^32\) Nancy passed away in December of 1910, leaving Josiah without a wife.\(^33\) Less than half a year later, Myra and Josiah established their marriage in May of 1911 – he at the age of 61 years old and she 40 years old.\(^34\)

Although Myra’s attendance on a medical call to Josiah’s home is calculated speculation, a mystery still arises when looking into Josiah’s first two marriages. While Nancy’s passing is quite clear, the disappearance of Josiah’s first wife, Ellen, has not yet been solved. No records

\(^31\) Based on his draft card stemming from Mingo County, WV, it was concluded that Charlie (Chas) Barnett left North Carolina for West Virginia sometime prior to 1917.
emerge on her death or vanishing. As Kirby describes, because “divorce… was a luxury few poor people could afford,” it did not occur often in rural Appalachia. Couples usually split “without the assistance of the legal profession,” thus resulting in “public documents [which] revealed virtually no divorces before World War II.” Perhaps Josiah and Ellen divorced, or perhaps the difficulty of record-keeping in rural areas prevented Ellen’s death from being discoverable. Regardless, these ideas must be kept in mind when contemplating the ultimate outcome of Josiah and Ellen’s marriage.

Considering Josiah’s numerous remarriages and his marriage to Myra at the age of 61, we should turn and closely observe the role of women in the rural Appalachian household. As a farmer, Josiah needed as much assistance as possible in running the farm to allow for the maximum output. His second marriage to Nancy ensured another set of hands, and especially a woman’s hands, contributed not only to farm production but also to general housework tasks. Jack Temple Kirby notes that women and children “marched off to chop and pick cotton and to weed and pull corn and tobacco.” Indeed, women were in charge of an extensive list of tasks, including childrearing, farming, “keeping the books,” housework, and boarders – among others – “often labor[ing] to exhaustion and despondency.” The essential role of women on the farm appeared evident to Josiah via his continuous streak of marriages – from Ellen, to Nancy, and finally to Myra.

The prominence of housework and domestic tendencies of women is primarily the viewpoint emphasized in research and historical texts, yet there are other stories to be spun.

Myra disappeared from census records between 1890 and 1910. This gap can be filled with the

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35 No death records were found for Ellen via ancestry.com. This search was further complicated with name differences between “Ellen” and “Ella.”
37 Ibid., 155.
38 Ibid., 157-159.
placement of Myra as a nurse in the Minish family household prior to her work with the McNair family and her marriage to Josiah Miller.\(^3^9\) One member of the Minish household, Maude, was a small girl at the time of Myra’s residence in the Minish home. In adulthood, Maude Minish Sutton became a renowned folklorist who worked on the collection of folksongs with Frank Clyde Brown and ultimately introduced Brown to Myra. Maude presents an entirely different role of women in Appalachia – namely one that highly values cultural preservation.

As explained by Maude Minish Sutton, Myra sang songs, often modified European ballads, which “fascinated every child in the neighborhood.”\(^4^0\) Through the aforementioned modifications, it is possible to see themes of domestic life that emerged. For example, Myra sang one song, entitled “The House Carpenter,” that had been adapted from Child ballad 243, “The Daemon Lover” or “James Harris.”\(^4^1\) Domestic themes emerge in Myra’s version, which details the longing and eventual departure of a homely woman from her child and husband. Straying from the more supernatural themes that existed within the original Scottish ballad, Myra’s version of “The House Carpenter” allowed her to express a more domiciliary subject matter. While Myra’s expressions potentially embodied the majority of women in Appalachia, Maude Minish Sutton (by working with folk music alongside Frank Clyde Brown) exemplified herself as a cultural outlier in the scheme of women’s work.

The 1920 census recorded Myra and Josiah as still residing in Caldwell County, North Carolina, although now they rented their home.\(^4^2\) Conceivably, the transition from ownership to


\(^{41}\) Francis James Child was an American folklorist who collected and categorized English and Scottish ballads. The song Myra sang, “The House Carpenter,” is an Americanized version of Child ballad 243, which is either titled “The Daemon Lover” or “James Harris.”

leasing could be attributed to the effects of WWI or simply regional or familial explanations.

Josiah passed away in August of 1924, leaving Myra a widow with no children of their own due to their late marriage. She lived to 79 years of age, passing away on Christmas Eve of 1949.

Myra’s death certificate reveals that her passing occurred at home from “falling on [the] floor” – a quiet, hidden ending.43

While historical events, via an overarching categorization of people and places, are often highly focused upon, individuals and their own unique histories must not be forgotten. In the example of Myra, topics of literacy, pregnancy, medicine, music, and social life in rural Appalachia can be observed to comprehend regional trends as a whole. In regard to the musical aspects that commenced the search for Myra’s personal history, the avenues through which she had access to a wide variety of familial and community-wide folk songs is quite evident. Societal and cultural norms of the time are examined via recordings of Myra done by Maude Minish Sutton and Frank Clyde Brown. Domestication, specifically regarding roles of women, can be viewed through specific song lyrics, though Maude’s life and work somewhat challenge these views. Myra’s expansive lifetime involvements, including living at home, as a nurse and servant with both the Minish and McNairy families, and finally with Josiah and beyond into her widowed years, provide a window into some of the social and cultural struggles of Appalachian women in the early 20th century. Myra’s attainment of literacy, coupled with medical training, emphasizes an experience many other women, originating from a farming lifestyle, may not have been able to enjoy. The everlasting effects Myra made upon Maude Minish Sutton, who became a folklorist, help define Myra’s important role as a folk song and tradition bearer.

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