



10-1-1961

Special Feature

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Recommended Citation

Fife, Austin E. (1961) "Special Feature," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 3 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol3/iss3/15>

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Special Feature *

Professor Thomas E. Cheney
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah

Gentlemen:

We are somewhat surprised at the notoriety given to the Fife Mormon Folksong Collection (in the Library of Congress) in the Autumn, 1960 issue of *Brigham Young University Studies*. Little did we think sixteen years ago when we set out with an antiquated portable disc recording machine to collect folk songs in Utah that within a few years the results of our work would receive the acclaim of folklorists throughout the land, or be subjected to microscopic viewings of ballad scholars in our intermountain universities. Folklore is indeed made about folklorists just as it is collected by them!

We hasten to agree with you that the Fife Collection falls somewhat short of the ideal goal, which would be to assemble a corpus of recordings of sufficient breadth, scope, and quality that a definitive work could be prepared on Mormon folk music based thereon. It surprises us that you seem to have expected so much from our modest collection since we have never pretended that it was either exhaustive or "critical."

From the beginning of our collecting experience we have adhered to the principle of collecting almost everything offered us, since the ultimate determination of value of any particular item is exceedingly difficult to make while in the field. We have felt it a duty to let the repertoire be established

*This letter from Dr. Fife contains his comments on an article by Thomas E. Cheney, "Mormon Folk Song and the Fife Collection," which appeared in the Autumn 1960 issue of *Studies*. Professor Cheney's article, in turn, was a response to Dr. Fife's earlier article, "Folk Elements in the Formation of the Mormon Personality," which appeared in the Autumn, 1959 - Winter, 1960 number of *Studies*.

by the singers and not by the collector. We take no manuals of folk song with us. We do not ask whether or not the song in question is a folk song, and we do not encourage rehearsals prior to recording. If a person who seems to be of the folk has the song in his repertoire, we believe it is worthy of recordings.

We are also aware that Mexican folk songs collected in Southern California and a child of a Navajo Mormon convert singing "Jesus Loves Me" in Navajo are not in the Mormon folk song tradition. Our interest in folk song has never been limited to Mormon materials. When a field collector sends items for deposit in the Library of Congress, they are placed in the public domain, and any citizen may order copies as desired. We were given no opportunity to withdraw from the collection recorded, items which seemed not to fit. We are also aware that a song like "Come, Come Ye Saints" has had its tradition largely inside the walls of Mormon chapels. Yet are not the relationship of religious and secular music of some importance, and might it not be of interest to an ethnomusicologist to be able to compare singing styles of groups who render indiscriminately the hymns of the Church and the stark ballads of cowboys and outlaws?

We hasten also to advise you that the items which are in the Library of Congress do not represent our entire collection. Since about 1953 we have not deposited materials there, although our collection has continued to grow. The Library of Congress items may represent as much as half the total Mormon collection, but contains none of our manuscript materials and none of our items gleaned laboriously from esoteric published sources. Moreover, you have a serious misapprehension about the services which the Library of Congress is prepared to render for ballad scholars. The staff of the Folk Music Division of the Library of Congress has no ethnomusicologists and no professional folklorists. When an order is sent in for a collection, it is reproduced disc by disc from a field collection without editing. Since this material is in the public domain, the collectors, for obvious reasons, are not allowed to edit it. It might have been useful to have written us prior to ordering the entire collection. We could at least have sent you our

own catalogue so that you might have chosen the items you need for your particular interests. You could also have avoided the duplications of identical songs, although we feel that if the ethno-history of any given song is ever to be written, it will not be based on single appearances but on renditions from many different singers from widely separated areas. In our cowboy collection we have as many as two hundred different recordings of a single song. Obviously there is a great deal of duplication. The important point for the field collector, however, is that *at the moment of collecting* he is not in a position to decide which are the significant items and which are trivial.

May we venture now to reassess somewhat more objectively the stature of the Fife Collection and the role it may have played in the stimulation of interest in Mormon folk song. Of the collections made in Utah, we may dispense rather rapidly with the work of John Lomax, which represented less than a score of songs revealing none of the components of Mormon culture except polygamy, and this viewed through the eyes of non-Mormons. We may also dispense rapidly with the work of Levette J. Davidson of Denver University and of Mrs. Olive Burt of Salt Lake City whose collecting seems to be limited largely to journalistic sources. The collection of Lester Hubbard is undoubtedly of great consequence. It has not, however, been made available for study by other scholars. Some important field work was done by Hector Lee and his assistants in the active days of the Utah Humanities Foundation. The University of Arizona has important field recordings of Mormon folk songs. More recently we are aware that some younger people have been doing important work, though the results of their work have not been brought to the attention of the general public, or their recordings made available. Hence, with its limitations, the Fife Collection still seems to remain the most significant body of material available to the public for the study of the ethnic music of the Mormon people.

During the last decade, when there has been a surge of interest in folk song, the Fife resources have been the only ones available to professional folk singers and to the recording industry. Hence the few commercially available recordings

of Mormon folk songs have derived from or been notably influenced by our collection. These include a long playing record in the Encyclopedia Britannica's collection of Historical American Songs (sung by Burl Ives), the singing of L. M. Hilton for Ethnic Folkways, and the pressed recording of Mormon folk songs issued for the Fife collection by the Library of Congress.

Your critique of our collection leads to one obvious conclusion: that no *critical* collection of Mormon folk song has yet been made, unless it is the forthcoming work of Professor Hubbard of the University of Utah. The Fifes have never had any intention of preparing such a collection, since our efforts are engaged in a much broader field—the preparation of a critical and variorum edition of cowboy and western songs—in which the Mormon folk song tradition will play a small but meaningful role.

We wonder if you have not been a bit like the miner who came out of the shaft with a beautiful diamond which he threw away because it had not yet been cut and polished?

Cordially,

Austin E. Fife