



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/public-scholar-program> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Sidney Robertson and the Documentation of American Folk Music in the New Deal Era

Institution: None (Unaffiliated)

Project Director: Sheryl Kaskowitz

Grant Program: Public Scholar Program

Narrative

*Adventures of a Government Song Woman: How Sidney Robertson and the
Special Skills Division Discovered American Folk Music*
by Sheryl Kaskowitz

Significance and contribution

Many Americans are familiar with the iconic work of Farm Security Administration photographers – including Dorothea Lang, Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, and many others – in documenting American life during the Great Depression. What is less well-known is that this work began with the Resettlement Administration (RA), an experimental New Deal agency that resettled thousands of people hardest hit by the Depression on newly created homesteads in rural and suburban areas across the country. And almost completely lost to history is the RA’s similar work to document the folk music of Depression-era America; the RA’s Special Skills Division collected nearly 160 disc recordings, nearly all of them recorded by a woman named Sidney Robertson,¹ who worked under the Music Unit’s director Charles Seeger. Sidney was there when Charles’ son Pete first discovered folk music and procured his first five-string banjo at a folk festival in Asheville, North Carolina; she connected Alan Lomax with singers she knew in Wisconsin and Minnesota; she was the first to record folk songs from ethnic immigrants and call them “American.” Sidney’s work, virtually unknown today, seeded the folk revival and was, as Special Skills Division Director Adrian Dornbush later recalled, “the one tangible thing that we did in the Special Skills which has really lasted and boomed.”²

Drawing on correspondence, reports, printed song sheets, oral histories, and field recordings, this book tells the lost story of Sidney Robertson’s folk-music collecting for the Special Skills Division during the New Deal. It belongs among a growing number of recent books (such as *Hidden Figures* and *The Glass Universe*) describing women who did work behind the scenes for which they did not receive credit. It uncovers a treasure trove of unknown recordings, including labor protest songs so controversial that they were omitted in Sidney’s official field reports, and fills in important information about the roots of the folk revival. This story also demonstrates that many New Deal leaders held a sincere belief in the power of folk music to effect change, describing how the Special Skills Division had a clear mission to put this music to work “as an integrating social force”³ on the new RA homesteads.

The story begins in 1935, when Sidney left her comfortable life in a bohemian enclave in Monterey, California, driving with a friend to New York City. There, she led social music programs at the Henry Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side, experience that would prove good preparation for her work in the RA’s Special Skills Division, which she joined in the summer of 1936. The book gives background on the mission and activities of the Special Skills Music Unit, which sent music leaders and newly-printed song sheets to rural homesteads with a specific aim to “bind the homesteaders into harmonious social units.”⁴ We then follow Sidney through her time as a “government song woman”⁵ (as she later called herself) with the Special Skills Division, beginning with her trip as an apprentice to John

¹ Although she became known as Sidney Robertson Cowell after she married the composer Henry Cowell in 1941, I am using the last name Robertson because it was her name during the period discussed in this book; to avoid confusion I refer to her by her first name throughout.

² Adrian Dornbush, Oral history interview conducted by Richard K. Doud, 13 June 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

³ “Suggested Memorandum from C. Seeger to A.J. Dornbush: Integration of Work on Song Sheets and Recorder with an Annual Music Program,” 20 August 1936, in Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection, Box 6, Folder 16, Music Division, Library of Congress.

⁴ Katherine Kellock to Adrian Dornbush, 3 October 1935, in Charles Seeger FSA Records (microfilm), Music Division, Library of Congress.

⁵ Sidney Robertson Cowell to Mr. Klein, [n.d.], Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection of Writings and Reminiscences, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Lomax and Professor Frank Brown, then following her solo collecting trips in 1936 and 1937, always guided by her own witty field reports and correspondence, filled with evocative details and humorous asides.

The story is populated with many musicians and local folk collectors who Sidney met on her travels, perhaps most importantly Vance Randolph, a collector of Ozarks folklore with whom Sidney developed a close relationship. The other important characters in this story are her coworkers at the Special Skills Division: Director Adrian J. Dornbush (a painter), Music Unit Director Charles Seeger (a composer and musicologist), and Margaret Valiant, a former opera singer who led a successful music program at an RA homestead in Florida. And of course, there are the songs, most of which have remained well-preserved in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and which themselves tell important stories about American life during the Great Depression.

While telling this engaging story, the book also fills in important gaps in scholarship about American folk music, about the history of ethnomusicology in the United States, and about the lost musical legacy of the Resettlement Administration. It also underscores the complexities and problems that emerged from the Special Skills Division’s attempts to define a shared American identity through the romanticized authenticity of rural American folk song, and highlights cultural divisions—of race, ethnicity, class, and an urban-rural divide—that have continued to hamper efforts to forge a national identity in the United States.

Work plan

This Public Scholars award will support the last phase of research and the bulk of the writing for the book. With support from a Kluge Fellowship last year, I completed research at the Library of Congress, and I have also conducted research at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and the National Archives. Here is a monthly work plan for a full-time, twelve-month award period:

September 2017:	Research visit to Hyde Park, New York (Roosevelt Library and Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site)
October 2017	Research visits to Mississippi State University Library and University of North Carolina Library
November 2017	Synthesize research to create full chronology and outline
December 2017	Write first draft of Chapter 1
January 2018	Write first draft of Chapter 2
February 2018	Write book proposal and polish first two chapters as samples Contact literary agents and trade nonfiction editors
March 2018	Write first draft of Chapter 3
April 2018	Write first draft of Chapter 4
May 2018	Return visit to the Library of Congress to select listening examples and photographs for the book
June 2018	Write first draft of Chapter 5
July 2018	Write first draft of Chapter 6
August 2018	Write first draft of Chapter 7

Chapter outline

Chapter 1. Sidney heads east

Provides background on Sidney Robertson and her decision to move from Monterey, CA to work at Henry Street Settlement House in New York City in the summer of 1935, and describes how the settlement house's social music program put Sidney on her path to the Special Skills Division.

Chapter 2. "Special Skilllets"

Explains how the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration was created in 1935 and provides background on three major players in the story of the Music Unit before Sidney arrived: Division Director Adrian J. Dornbush, Music Unit Director Charles Seeger, and Margaret Valiant, a former opera singer who led a successful music program at a settlement in Florida.

Chapter 3. Music to unite the people

Describes the activities of the Special Skills Division's music unit, including the musicians who were sent to live in and lead musical activities on six rural resettlement homesteads, as well as Charles Seeger's sheet music project meant to provide musical material to be used on the homesteads.

Chapter 4. Driving Mr. Lomax and Dr. Brown

Chronicles Sidney's road trip with John Lomax and Dr. Frank Brown on a folk music collecting trip in North Carolina during the summer of 1936, which was meant to provide her with training in music collecting methods in preparation for her own field trips.

Chapter 5. Sidney in the field

Follows Sidney's first solo collecting trip at the end of 1936, describing the people and music she encountered in Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Missouri, ending with an extended stay in the Ozarks with folk collector Vance Randolph.

Chapter 6. Travels in the Upper Midwest

Describes how Sidney was transferred to work as a Special Skills Regional Representative at a homestead in Austin, Minnesota, after the Music Unit was effectively shuttered at the beginning of 1937, and shows how her music collecting (no longer federally funded) shifted to include the music of ethnic immigrants.

Conclusion. Musical and Historical Legacies

Looks at Sidney's (and the Special Skills Division's) neglected contributions to the folk revival and to the field of public folk-music collecting, as well as the implications of the government's past interest in the power of music.

Competencies, skills, and access

My book *God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song* (2013) was published within the trade nonfiction arm of Oxford University Press. Adapted from my Harvard doctoral dissertation, the book received positive reviews in mainstream publications such as the *Washington Post* and the *Christian Science Monitor* and was the subject of interviews on NPR's "All Things Considered" and WNYC's "The Takeaway." Excerpts from the book appeared in *Slate* and *Bloomberg View* in 2013, and the book received an ASCAP/Deems Taylor award for excellence in music writing in 2014.

I am very familiar with the main period under consideration in this new book project—the mid- to late-1930s—as it coincides with the years when "God Bless America" made its radio debut and reached its first peak in popularity. In addition, my training in ethnomusicology and experience conducting archival research puts me in a unique position to undertake this historically-focused project revolving around a key period in the history of American ethnomusicology. While my 2013 book focused on one popular song

and this story examines the people and institutions behind the collection of hundreds of folk songs, both projects seek to illuminate the role of songs in shaping a shared understanding of American identity.

This study draws on a mix of primary source material (correspondence, government reports, song sheets, unpublished reminiscences, and oral histories) and books and articles on New Deal history, folk music collecting, and biographies of relevant figures. Sidney Robertson—who later married the composer Henry Cowell and is best known in musicological circles as his writing partner and protector of his legacy—left her papers to the Library of Congress, and they are now divided between several collections in the Music Division and the American Folklife Center. Other relevant government reports and correspondence are spread throughout many other collections at the Library of Congress, as well as the National Archives, the Margaret Valiant Collection at the Mississippi State University Special Collections library, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. Further background on Sidney can also be found within correspondence in the Henry Cowell Papers at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and the Mike Seeger Collection at the University of North Carolina. Finally, the papers of scholar Janelle Warren-Findley, which reside at the Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site in Hyde Park, New York, include copies of correspondence and notes from her research on the Special Skills Division. All of these collections are catalogued and open to the public except for the Warren-Findley papers, and I have been in touch with someone at the Roosevelt-Vanderbilt house to gain access to those materials.

Final product and dissemination

I am beginning this project with a public-focused frame, rather than adapting an academic-centered work. I am writing the book as a narrative—rather than an argument—in which larger ideas are developed along the way, rather than centering it around an academic analysis. The story flows in chronological order, and the characters have individual voices, drawn from their own correspondence and oral histories. The story has an almost Hollywood-like arc, from Sidney’s first road trip across the country, her bemused reactions to a wide range of characters, the hints of a love affair in the Ozarks, to her near-exile in rural Minnesota, where she found her own methodology as a collector.

This book will be of interest to general readers with a wide range of interests, touching on the history of the New Deal, folk music collecting, the folk revival, and women’s history, as well as to academic and public scholars of ethnomusicology, musicology, folklore, history, American studies, and gender studies. This project also has great potential for companion public humanities projects. For example, I would like to partner with organizations in the regions where Sidney worked to present exhibits of the musicians and songs of that area, creating a snapshot of the musical geography of the 1930s, as seen through the Special Skills Division’s folk-music collection. Sidney’s lively and varied field recordings would also lend themselves to a fascinating audio or film documentary as a companion to the book.

As outlined in the work plan above, I plan to begin contacting literary agents and trade nonfiction editors in early 2018, and to complete the first draft of a manuscript by September 2018; depending on the publisher’s timeline, I would expect the book to appear by late 2019 or early 2020. In selecting a publisher, I will make it a priority that an ambitious marketing plan be in place for the book, including newspaper reviews, book excerpts, online and radio interviews, and in-person readings and talks. I would like to see a marketing strategy built around the specific regions represented in Sidney’s collecting, as well as areas and venues that would attract a general audience interested in folk music and/or women’s history.

Bibliography: *Adventures of a Government Song Woman: How Sidney Robertson and the Special Skills Division Discovered American Folk Music*

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Henry Cowell Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY
Margaret Valiant Collection, Mississippi State University Library Special Collections, MS
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