

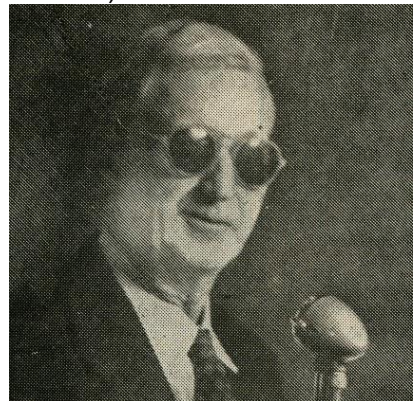
COUNTRY MUSIC

FLOYD COLLINS BALLADS

SONG BACKGROUND for Jenkins Ballad No. 1:

In April 1925 Andrew Jenkins received a telegram from Polk Brockman, the Okeh distributor and A & R (Artists & Repertoire) man in Atlanta, asking him to "Get song on Floyd Collins in Sand Cave." Throughout the duration of the Collins' rescue effort from Jan. 31 to Feb. 17, 1925 people in the Atlanta, Georgia area (the Jenkins family included) would have been able to get the latest news either through the three newspapers or their radio stations – *The Atlanta Constitution* and its station WGM; *The Atlanta Journal* and its station WSB; or *The Atlanta Georgian* stations. Jenkins was a blind revivalist preacher who also ran a newspaper stand in Atlanta.

Andrew Jenkins and his family were probably the first country music family to be recorded when country music recording started in the early 1920s. All told Jenkins recorded 13 sides performing alone, 30 songs with other musicians, and with his own family 75 sides (mostly sacred music) that were all released on 78 records from 1924 to 1930. (Russell & Pinson 2004)



Prof. D. K. Wilgus gave the following account to G. Malcolm Laws transmitted to him by Andrew Jenkins himself –

"In April, 1925, Mr. P. C. Brockman, a dealer and 'scout' for Okeh records... while seated on the piazza of a Florida hotel [Aragon Hotel; Jacksonville, FL] first conceived of the idea of the song on the tragedy in Sand Cave. He immediately wired me, "Get song on Floyd Collins in Sand Cave." Immediately upon receiving the wire I went to the piano and in three hours the song was completed and on its way to Florida. Mrs. Irene Spain, my eldest stepdaughter, who assisted me in making the song, began the musical arrangement at once, and in less than forty-eight hours the song was on its way to Washington for copyright." (Laws 1964)

Jenkins told a very similar story in 1934 to Willard Neal a writer for *The Atlanta Journal Magazine* – "Immediately a perfect line ran through my mind, 'His body now lies sleeping alone in the sandstone cave.' I sat down at the piano and picked out a tune to swing with the words as they came to me. My daughter, Mrs. Irene Spain, sat beside me and copied the words and notes as I sang and played them." (Neal 1934 & Daniel 1990)

Irene Spain Futrelle has written or told the story of the ballad's origin many times. First in 1965 when she wrote to Judith McCulloch - "We made ['The Death of Floyd Collins'] with 12 verses with music and all in forty-five minutes and had it in the mails." (Spain 1965) However, Archie Green wrote that she told him "Within four hours she scored the music and sent the text and tune on to Brockman. She now recalls, wistfully, that if she had known it was destined to be a million seller and an American folksong as well, she would have added a few grace notes to color its melodic simplicity." (Green 1965)



Then in 1973 she wrote to Dorothy Horstman “This song was made after receiving a telegram from Mr. Polk Brockman of the James K. Polk Company in Atlanta to make one. He was in Florida. After listening to the radio so much, we knew the entire tragic horror of it, so, after getting the telegram, Daddy took his guitar out to the front steps and went to singing. I went to him, wrote it all down, made the musical score, and had it finished and in the mail in a very short time. The music was finished but with pure simplicity. Mr. Brockman received it in a few hours from the time he sent the telegram. He then rushed to New York, where Vernon Dalhart recorded it. [n.b. Actually Fiddlin’ John Carson made the first recording in Atlanta] We were told while in New York that this song had made several of the performers plus Mr. Brockman an awful lot of money. Well, as Daddy said many times, he wanted the people to sing them and to love them, that was enough pay for him.” (Spain 1973)

In an interview in 1977 she still remembered that, “We had listened to every bit of it on the radio. We were living it with the crowd that was trying to get Floyd out. When Mr. Brockman wired and said he believed it would make a good song, Daddy got his old faithful guitar and went and sat down on top of the porch. Pretty soon he called me, and I went out there with my tablet and pencil. In a little while we had the song in the mail.” (Spain 1977)

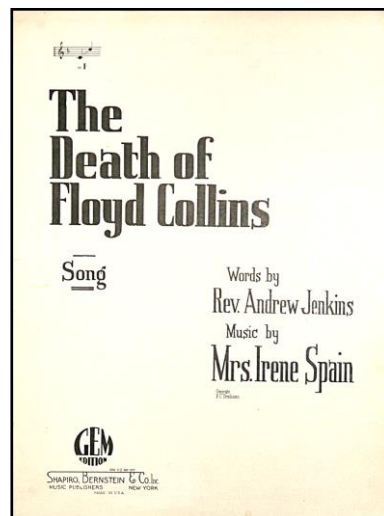
According to Wiggins, Andy Jenkins was “paid only for his recording [of the ballad] – the common twenty five-dollar fee – and never received anything as composer” (Wiggins 1987) in the way of payment or royalties. However, G. M. Laws says otherwise – “The composer was paid twenty-five dollars for the song and another twenty-five dollars for the recording he later made of it.” (Laws 1964)

D.K. Wilgus did a considerable amount of research on Andrew Jenkins and much additional information on Jenkins could be obtained by consulting physically (not digitally) the D.K. Wilgus papers, folders, and audiotapes at the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, 200 South Road, Chapel Hill, NC (see D.K. Wilgus Papers 1883-1996 at unc.dedu). These papers were unfortunately not consulted for this case study, but no doubt the answer to several thorny questions could be found there: the original title of the ballad; the missing three stanzas of the original manuscript; and the exact date of the recording session for Jenkins’ rendition of the ballad. (Brison 1984)

THE BALLAD

Inspired by the recent news of the tragic entrapment of Floyd Collins in Sand Cave, this type of topical song is called an “event ballad”. (For more information about the event see Murray & Brucker 1982 & [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org)) For many centuries broadside ballads were composed following important events as a way of broadcasting the news or commemorating an event, be it a military victory or a hanging. The music and lyrics of this one borrow much from the folk songs of the 19th Century. According to Bascom Lamar Lunsford (see below), the tune was borrowed from, “Charles Guiteau” (ca. 1882), a ballad about the assassination of US President James Garfield while the latter in turn was based on another earlier ballad, “James A. Rogers” (1858). (Waltz n.d.)

The opening verses are “in the classic form of the old British ballad broadside.” (Wolfex 1998) Of the original 12 stanzas as composed only 9 were published by Shapiro, Bernstein & Co. in New York and of these only 6 stanzas were usually recorded given the limited space on a



78rpm record. The initial stanzas of the narrative ballad build sympathy for Floyd before telling of the tragic event of his entrapment in Sand Cave and the song closes with a “final warning” stanza, which was to become a trademark in later ballads by Jenkins. (For complete lyrics including missing stanzas see [LY-CY-FC1](#).)

The eminent folklorist A. L. Lloyd wrote about this ballad – “The composition was given to a country musician, Fiddlin’ John Carson, who made the first recording. Later the song was recorded by a more generally popular singer, Vernon Dalhart, and through him it achieved wide distribution, so that, says Wilgus [D. K. Wilgus], though ‘there are local variants and adoptions... “The Death of Floyd Collins” as now recovered is generally the Dalhart rendition.’ The dissemination of the song is by a process similar to that of broadside ballads, with the gramophone record replacing the printed leaflet. The crucial question is whether Andrew Jenkins may be considered as a folk composer. (Wilgus 1964 & Lloyd 1967) D.K. Wilgus tries to answer that question – “...in 1923 he [Jenkins] was caught up by the recording industry as performer and composer. In his lifetime of preaching and faith-healing, he composed over 800 songs, about 550 sacred and the rest secular. Was he a folk composer? In terms of his sources, his forms, and the acceptance of his material, I don’t think we can deny him the title. He sold his tragedy songs to Brockman, but he was certainly not a professional songwriter – and the professional or amateur status of the folk composer is a matter for determination, not a criterion of judgment. He was of the folk, he wrote for the folk, and he used traditional forms.” (Wilgus 1964)

VARIOUS VERSIONS

From the first recording of the ballad in April 1925 right up to 2005 over 28 different versions were released on record. Most of these were by Vernon Dalhart (8 different versions) and most appeared before 1928. Three versions were recorded non-commercially in the 1930s and collected by the Archive of American Folk Song. Then in 1944 one sole version was cut. It wasn’t until the late 50s during the folk song revival that other versions started to get recorded and then on a fairly regular basis several were made right up until 1986. For the most part it was kept alive by performers, born before the event who personally heard the ballad on the radio or on phonograph records during the impressionable period of their youth. The ballad lived on with those generations and sometimes due to the efforts of a few folk music revivalists, but in the long run it will probably drop out of traditional repertoires. After 1986 only one version was cut in 2005.

During the late 20s there were at least 11 different versions recorded on piano rolls to be played on player pianos either at home or for public entertainment (listed here under “Floyd Collins Piano Rolls). At that time there were also six different additional ballads composed by either Andrew Jenkins or by other song writers (discussed under the section “Other Floyd Collins Ballads”).

THE UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF THE BALLAD

More than anything else that was written about the Floyd Collins tragedy; this ballad touched the hearts of average Americans. The emphasis here is on commemorating the sad death of an extraordinary person. The lyrics serve as a kind of musical editorial having little to do with retelling the grisly details surrounding Floyd’s ordeal. People who felt trapped in their personal lives could relate to Floyd who had been trapped in a far worse predicament than they.

Consolation is one of the most powerful functions of the folk song (Lloyd 1967), healing solace in times of sorrow and loss. Andrew Jenkins and the other ballad writers discussed in other sections here were not cavers, but they were clearly inspired by the courage, endurance, and sheer greatness of Floyd and were thus moved to console their listening public on the loss of a remarkable man.

Music not only heals but can also be an effective liberating force. Among the many ways that the American caving community honors one of its finest is a simple bumper sticker reading, “Free Floyd Collins.” In the late 1920s those who heard this ballad and were moved by it could

allow Floyd's spirit to run free and live on in their memory. He was freed from the rock that pinned him in that cave.

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