

*The Old 97, a Southern Railway train en route to Spencer, N.C., derailed at Stillhouse Trestle near Danville, Virginia, on September 27, 1903, killing 11.*

**The Origins of a  
Modern Traditional Ballad**

**Alfred P. Scott**

# **Wreck of the Old 97**



*This photograph was taken from the original glass negative and was copyrighted by the Williams Studio of Danville in 1960.*

# Preface

I wrote this paper in 1965 in my senior year at the University of Virginia, for a course I took on folksong and the ballad from Professor A. K. Davis, Jr., a recognized authority on the subject. In his youth, he had scoured the mountains of Virginia with a wire-recorder and collected many folksongs. I still have wonderful memories of taking his course.

Reading this now, with the benefit of 35 years of writing experience, I find this just a wee bit embarrassing at times. I'm tempted to go back and smooth it out, but we're all young once so let's just let the poor thing alone and remember that there *are* some benefits to getting older.

Many of the transcriptions of the songs contain spelling and punctuation errors. These are all carefully copied, errors and all, from the originals, and I've made no attempt to correct these.

I still remember the sense of discovery and delight in climbing through the law school library and pulling this history of music out of legal records. I hope those of you who read this share some of the same feelings. And what a pleasure it is to share this with others through our web page for Talkeetna Records.

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March 28, 2002  
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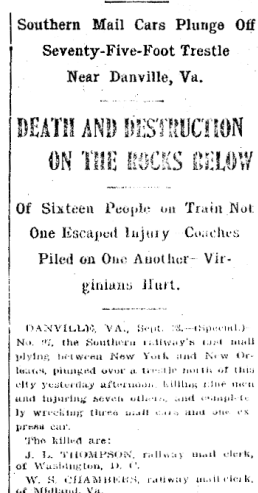
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## NINE ARE KILLED BY TRAIN'S WILD LEAP



On September 27, 1903, the Southern Railway's fast mail train, number 97, plunged off a 75-foot trestle north of Danville, Virginia, killing nine of the 16 men on board.<sup>1</sup> The newspapers reporting the horror of the tragic accident dwelled on morbid and dramatic details.

The skin and hair of the engineer and fireman were torn off by the impact of the steam engine.<sup>2</sup>

Ladies who drove out to the wreck from Danville fainted at the sight of the bodies.<sup>3</sup>

A woman in a delicate condition of health witnessed the wreck from her chamber window. She fell to the floor unconscious, and it is not believed she will live.<sup>4</sup>

Among the express consignments were a number of crates containing canary birds. The birds were not hurt and were singing when taken from the wreck.<sup>5</sup>

The event also served as an inspiration to songwriters and balladeers. Several songs were written to commemorate the wreck, one by a Mr. Fred Lewey, and another by a Mr. Charles Noell.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, Noell's song is the origin of the present-day ballad, "The Wreck of the Old 97". In 1927, David Graves George, of Gretna, Virginia, claimed authorship of the song and sued the Victor Talking Machine Company for royalties. The case twice reached the Supreme Court, leaving in its wake a maze of legal technicalities. George never collected the royalties and, as we shall see, he never had any valid claim to the song.

The song was adopted by the mountain singers of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, and Kentucky. In this environment of oral transmission, the song has begun to show signs of change by the folk process. While this song does not demonstrate the development of a folk ballad in its mature stages, such as the Child ballads in the southern Appalachians, it will provide insights into the nature of the origin of a song, the initial changes, both intentional and unconscious, the adoption by the folk, and its subsequent development. We must bear in mind that there are many factors which enter into this process in a modern world of increased communication and printing, phonograph records, and a more highly literate population, all of which complicate the use of this song to illustrate ballad origins as they have occurred in the past.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

### **Early Non-Traditional Versions**

#### *The Noell Ballad*

The first song to be written about the wreck seems to have been that of Mr. Charles Noell, of Greensboro, North Carolina, who wrote it soon after the wreck and sent it to the *Mill News* of Charlotte, North Carolina, in which it was published.<sup>7</sup>

The following is a copy of Noell's song:

- 1 Come all of you fellows and gather around me and a sad sad story to hear,  
All about the wreck of Old Ninety Seven. And the death of the brave engineer.
- 2 At the Washington Station that Bright Sabbath morning, just at the rising of the sun.  
He kissed his dear wife and says my children God bless you. Your father must go on his run.
- 3 Steve Brodie was the engineer and a brave, brave man was he.  
But a many poor man has lost his life for the Railroad Company.
- 4 Ninety Seven was the fastest mail that was ever on the Southern line,  
All the freight trains and passenger took the hold for Ninety Seven For she was compelled to be  
at station on time.
- 5 Ninety seven was the fastest train that was ever on the Southern line  
But when she pulled in at Munro Virginia, she was Forty Seven minutes behind.
- 6 At Monro Virginia he received his orders, saying Steve you are away behind  
This is not Thirty Eight but its Ninety seven. You must put her in to Danville on time.
- 7 He climbed in his engine at Monro, Virginia, saying fireman its do or die  
I will reverse the lever throw the throttle wide open and we will watch old Ninety Seven fly.
- 8 Steve Brodie was the engineer on that fatal Sunday eve, and his fireman leaned far out at Lynchburg just  
waiting for the signal to leave.
- 9 When they gave him the board he pulled open the throttle although his air brakes was bad.  
And the people all said when he passed Franklin junction it seems like the engineer was mad.
- 10 The conductor said to the engineer and fireman. Don't neglect that whistle or bell.  
For we must put this train on time in to Danville. Or we will drop her right in to Hell.
- 11 Steve Brodie said to his faithful old fireman, Just throw in a little more coal.  
And when I blow for the Henry Street crossing. You just watch my drivers roll.
- 12 Now its a awful bad road from Lynchburg to Danville and from Lima its a four mile grade.  
It was on this grade that his air brakes failed him. And look what a jump she made.
- 13 Falling down this hill at seventy miles an hour his whistle began to scream  
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle he had scalded to death from the steam.
- 14 When the news come flashing over the telegraph wire. And this is the way it read.  
That brave engineer that pulls ninety seven is lying in North Danville dead.
- 15 Did he ever pull in no he never pulled in at one forty five he was due  
It was hours and hours dispatchers was waiting but that fast mail never come through.
- 16 Now she never pulled in no she never pulled in you could hear it in silent breath,  
For his dear little wife fell back and fainted when the news came home of his death.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

In writing this song, Noell obviously used as a model, "Casey Jones," which at that time was a very popular railroad ballad celebrating the heroism of a colored engineer who died in a wreck only three years before the Danville disaster. The first stanza is similar to "Casey Jones," which began:

Come all you rounders, if you want to hear  
A story 'bout a brave engineer.<sup>9</sup>

There are other phrases which are echoed in Noell's song, such as: "Kissed his wife at the station door,"<sup>10</sup> "watch them drivers roll,"<sup>11</sup> as well as such similar motifs as the engineer being given his orders,<sup>12</sup> the train behind schedule,<sup>13</sup> the engineer urging the fireman,<sup>14</sup> the whistle blowing,<sup>15</sup> the wreck, the death of the engineer by steam,<sup>16</sup> and the news of his death coming home to his wife.<sup>17</sup>

There is a possibility that part of the third stanza, "But a many poor man has lost his life for the Railroad Company has been borrowed from "The Wreck of the C and O," which has a line that reads, "Many a man has lost his life,"<sup>18</sup> and the refrain is similar, "Many a man's been murdered by the railroad."<sup>19</sup>

Noell's song is also closely related with the song called "The Ship That Never Returned," which was written by Henry C. Work in 1865.<sup>20</sup> The popular appeal of this song and its tune is evident in the number of parodies which arose from it, such as "The Train That Never Returned,"<sup>21</sup> "The Parted Lovers,"<sup>22</sup> "The M.T.A. Song,"<sup>23</sup> "The Prisoner's Song,"<sup>24</sup> and our ballad. The last two stanzas of Noell's song clearly have their origins in the refrain of "The Ship That Never Returned" which reads as follows:

Did she ever return? She never returned,  
And her fate is yet unlearned,  
Though for years and years there were fond ones waiting  
For the ship that never returned.<sup>25</sup>

Although I can find no specific mention of Noell ever having sung his ballad to a particular tune, there are several valid reasons why we may assume that he used the tune of "The Ship That Never Returned." Primarily, Noell's ballad was written as a song, not as poetry. The patterning of the stanza form to that of "The Ship That Never Returned", the use of its refrain as a stanza, and the radical variations of meter, which could only be properly resolved in a tune, all lead to the conclusion that the words were sung to this tune from their conception. I point this out because a musician who helped to modify, and popularize the song, Henry Whitter, is often incorrectly given credit for the authorship of the song and the initial utilization of the tune with it.

Despite the fact that Noell lived near the scene of the wreck and wrote his song soon after it, his song is not historically accurate at all times. It is understandable that he should exaggerate certain details and, at the same time, ignore others. A brief review of the distortion of fact will serve to show this inaccuracy. The engineer's name was spelled Broadey, not "Brodie," and his bravery was dismissed by railroad officials as inexperience, as he had only begun to work for the Southern Railway a month before.<sup>26</sup> This would seem to vindicate the air brakes. His name, incidentally, was Joseph A. Broadey, and he was nicknamed "Steve" from the "much-publicized Steve Brodie, who had won a bet by reportedly jumping off Brooklyn Bridge ... several years before."<sup>27</sup> This may explain both Noell's mistaken spelling, and the foolish bravado of the engineer. Number 97 was a newly formed crack mail train working on a lavish commission from the Post Office Department; consequently, the name of "Old 97" is only an endearment.<sup>28</sup>

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

Freeman Hubbard reports that the train's average speed on the run between Washington and Atlanta was thirty-seven and a half miles an hour, including stops.<sup>29</sup> The account of the wreck in the *Richmond News Leader* contains two reports of eyewitnesses who quote a speed of fifty to sixty miles an hour in one case,<sup>30</sup> and thirty to thirty-five in another.<sup>31</sup> The first and higher speed is the most credible in view of the average speed of the train, the fact that this report came from Danville, and the fact that the slower speed is reported from Washington by a railroad spokesman. In this case the "seventy miles an hour" of Noell's song could only be slight exaggeration. The train was reported to have been an hour behind schedule,<sup>32</sup> and Noell's 47 minutes is probably only an effort to be specific. There are many facts in the song which prove to be accurate, such as Broadey's boarding the train in Washington, his receiving the orders at Munroe to speed up, and his not stopping at Franklin Junction, a normal stop-over.<sup>33</sup> Finally, it was reported that

The engineer was found some little distance from his cab, horribly mangled and dead.<sup>34</sup>

We must conclude that he did not die "with his hand on the throttle," nor was he "scalded to death from the steam." We should note that these exaggerations, inaccuracies, and dramatics may well be the result of the oral transmission of the account, whose effects we know so well.

### ***The Lewey Ballad***

Mr. Fred Lewey of Danville was one of the first on the scene of the accident, and he wrote a song about the wreck within two or three months of the event, which he sang in Danville, Lynchburg, and Fries.<sup>35</sup> The importance of this text has proved to be an evasive matter. Robert W. Gordon, who did extensive research on all of the songs written about the accident, learned of the authorship of Lewey and Noell.<sup>36</sup> On his word, the Victor Talking Machine Company paid royalties to both men for its use.<sup>37</sup> I have been unable to find any text of his ballad, and its importance has been neglected in the court reports as well as in folk song head-notes. I have found no mention that Noell or Lewey knew each other; however, the fact that Lewey sang his song in Fries, Virginia, is particularly important, for it was there that Henry Whitter kept the Noell ballad alive, while it drifted into disuse elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> It is very probable that the two songs met and were merged. The Lewey ballad presents two possibilities, either it was a re-writing of Noell's song, which could not have escaped notice in Danville, the scene of the wreck, or it was a completely new song. In either case we cannot escape the conclusion that it may have contributed to some of the changes we find in Whitter's version.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

### ***The Whitter Version***

The ballads of Noell and Lewey (or their combined form) remained in popularity in Fries, Virginia, largely through the singing of Henry Whitter, "an accomplished musician, who played a double accompaniment of the guitar and harmonica."<sup>39</sup>

With the dramatic instinct of a real musician, Whitter shortened Noell's song and made it more "peppy" by changing a few words and quickening the time of the music of the song known as "The Ship That Never Returned," to which he sang it. He added the concluding stanza from the song of "The Parted Lovers."<sup>40</sup>

This final moralizing stanza bears no relationship in meaning to the rest of the song as it did in "The Parted Lovers," which was also a parody on "The Ship That Never Returned." Whitter's version is as follows:

- 1 They gave him up his order at Monroe, Virginia,  
Saying, Steve you're way behind time,  
This is not thirty-eight but its old ninety-seven,  
You must put her in Spencer on time.
- 2 Steve Brooklyn said to his black greasy fireman,  
Just shovel on a little more coal,  
And when we cross the White Oak Mountain,  
You can watch old ninety-seven roll.
- 3 It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville,  
And a line on a three mile grade,  
It was on this grade when he lost his air-brakes  
And you see what a jump he made.
- 4 He was going down grade making ninety miles an hour  
When his whistle began to scream,  
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle  
And was scalded to death by steam.
- 5 So come on you ladies you must take warning  
From this time, now and on,  
Never speak harsh words to your true loving husband,  
He may leave you and never return.<sup>41</sup>

The last stanza differs slightly from that of "The Parted Lovers" which read,

Now, young men and maids, from my song take warning  
Or your hearts will break with pain.  
Never speak harsh words to a faithful lover  
Or he'll leave you to never return.<sup>42</sup>

Lewey's influence may have been present in the change of the engineer's name to "Steve Brooklyn," the speed of the train to ninety miles an hour, and phrasal changes such as "black greasy fireman" (actually, a white man) and "put her in Spencer."

This version was taken from a Whitter record; consequently, we may assume he had other verses which he normally sang, but which were cut by the record company. This may account for some additional stanzas which later appear.



## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

### ***The Dalhart Recordings***

Vernon Dalhart of Marmoneck, New York, a popular singer in the 1920's, was given a record containing Whitter's song. Dalhart copied the words as he heard them and recorded this song for the Edison Talking Machine Company. In August 1924, he began to work for the Victor Talking Machine Company, and he recorded the song again. The record was immensely popular, selling a million copies.<sup>43</sup> The Victor recording goes as follows:

- 1 They gave him his orders at Monroe, Virginia,  
Saying, "Pete, you're way behind time.  
This is not 38, but it's old 97.  
You must put her in Center on time."
- 2 He looked round then to his black, greasy fireman  
"Just shove on in a little more coal,  
And when we cross that White Oak Mountain,  
You can watch old 97 roll."
- 3 It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville,  
And a line on a three-mile grade.  
It was on that grade that he lost his average  
And you see what a jump he made.
- 4 He was going down grade making ninety miles an hour  
When his whistle broke into a scream.  
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle,  
And a-scalded to death with the steam.
- 5 Now ladies, you must take warning,  
From this time now and on  
Never speak harsh words to your true love and husband,  
He may leave you and never return.<sup>44</sup>

Dalhart has obviously re-phrased much of the song, probably to suit his taste, not to mention copyright considerations. Dalhart testified later that he could not understand all of Whitter's song. There are two mistakes in particular which later proved to be highly instrumental in refuting Mr. George's claims to authorship of the song. Dalhart mistakenly calls the engineer "Pete," and he replaces Whitter's "Lost his air-brakes" with "lost his average." He also mistakes "Spencer" for "Center."

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

### **The Legal Battles**

In a question-and-answer column of the *Richmond News Leader* of March 1, 1927, the following inquiry and reply appeared:

When did the wreck of the Old 97 happen and how many were killed? If we could locate an answer to this question, we could win enough money to retire in peace.<sup>45</sup>

On the following day, the editor's reply appeared, giving a somewhat inaccurate account of the accident and said that

The song called "The Wreck of the Old 97" is one whose authorship is unknown. Offers of money by the Victor Company, as royalty on the record, are said to have met with no takers.<sup>46</sup>

On March 7, 1927, a letter from David Graves George appeared which stated that "I with others composed the poetry of 97."<sup>47</sup> George later requested the return of the letter, and when it was demanded at the trial the words "with others" had been erased and replaced by "alone."<sup>48</sup>

The Victor Company refused to pay George any royalties, and he took the case to court in 1930. The mountaineer was awarded royalties of \$65,295.56 with interest in the District Court of New Jersey.<sup>49</sup> The Victor Company appealed to the Circuit Court which reversed the decision. George then appealed to the Supreme Court on a legal technicality of a belated appeal in the previous trial. He was awarded this concession, and the case returned to the District and Circuit Courts which upheld their previous decisions. A final appeal by George was denied by the Supreme Court, leaving George with nine years of legal battles and not a cent the richer.

George's version, which he claimed he wrote within a week or ten days after the wreck, reads as follows:

- 1 On a cold frosty morning in the month of September  
When the clouds were hanging low  
97 pulled out from the Washington station  
Like an arrow shot from a bow.
- 2 They gave him his orders at Monroe, Va.  
Saying Peat you are way behind time  
It's not 38 but it's old 97  
You must put her in Spencer on time.
- 3 He looked at his black greasy fireman  
And said shovel in a little more coal  
For when we cross that White Oak mountain  
You can see old 97 roal.
- 4 It's amighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville  
And Lima its a three mile grade  
It was on this grade that he lost his average  
And you see what a jump he made.
- 5 (Th)ey was going down grade making 90 miles an hour  
Who when the whistle whistle broke in to a scream  
He was found in a reck with his han on the throttle  
And sca(l)ded to deth with the s-----
- 6 Now ladies you must take warning

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

From this time on  
Never speak harsh words to your true loving husbands  
For they may leave you and never r-----

- 7 Did she ever pull in no she never pulled in  
For hours and hours ----- as watching  
For the train that never pulled (in?).<sup>50</sup>

I can find no explanation for the omissions.

George repeats the two mistakes which Dalhart originated in his transcription of the Whitter recording. The fact that the mistakes had appeared in none of the earlier versions and the testimony of Dalhart presented strong case against George. Also Whitter originated the phrases "black, greasy fireman" and "mighty rough road" which were subsequently used by Dalhart and George. After much questioning, George admitted having inserted the words "whistle, whistle" into his text after listening to the Victor recording for the purpose of "comparison."<sup>51</sup> The court decision reports plentiful evidence that the mountaineer's testimony was suspect. The Victor Company also produced an analytical chemist, who was also a handwriting expert, who testified that the copy of the song, which George had claimed to be the original of 1903, was written with a type of pencil which was unavailable at that time and that the handwriting characteristics of the copy were unquestionably those of 1927 or thereabouts.<sup>52</sup>

Despite this mass of evidence against George, there is another side of the case which has been universally ignored by those who refute George's claim. I have found that those who support George, particularly Hubbard, have a romantic sympathy for the under-dog and a remarkable ability to unearth favorable evidence from a mass of undeniable facts to the contrary.

A careful study of George's song will reveal that there is much evidence to prove that he was familiar with a version of the ballad before the question of authorship arose, and the possibility exists that he may have indeed contributed changes as his original letter to the *News Leader* implied. George's first stanza was not included in any of the versions I have found, and it may well have been added by him or Lewey. The stanza is reminiscent of "The Ship That Never Returned" which began:

On a summer day, as the waves were rippling  
By the soft, gentle breeze  
Did a ship set sail with her cargo laden  
For a port beyond the seas.<sup>53</sup>

The train's rapid departure from Washington seems to be confirmed by a report that a railroad employee "boarded the train Sunday, which started off so suddenly that he was unable to get off."<sup>54</sup> George corrects Dalhart's mistake of "Center" for "Spencer" and he uses the phrase "and Lima its a three mile grade," as well as the final stanza, "Did she ever pull in," both of which existed in the Noell ballad but not in any of the later versions. He also has the train's speed as "90 miles an hour" which was introduced by Whitter. In short, we can find traces of the early ballads as well as that of Dalhart. It may well be that George's version is a corrupted form of an early traditional version; however, the issue will always be clouded by George's insistent claim to authorship.

## The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"

### Traditional Versions

Even in the relatively short period of time that has elapsed from the creation of the ballad to the present day, we are able to see the effects of oral transmission at work. In some cases we are able to conclude that a traditional ballad has been developed from a single version or record, but more often the songs reflect a mixture of several versions. Naturally, we may expect the variations to be of a more subtle nature than in an older song.

A few verses, notably Noell's climatic line, "He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle, he had scalded to death from the steam," has remained in the song virtually unaltered. There are other phrases which have proved particularly awkward and have resulted in a variety of mutations. We have already noted Dalhart's confusion over the engineer's name and in understanding "air-brakes" and "Spencer." Noell's verse, "and from Lima its a four mile grade," was changed in Whitter's rendition to "and a line on a three mile grade." George's "and Lima its a three mile grade," reverts to Noell's basic form. In later traditional versions the following variations occurs:

The limits was a three-mile grade.<sup>55</sup>

And it lies on a three mile grade.<sup>56</sup>

And it's down a three-mile grade.<sup>57</sup>

And the line's on a three mile grade.<sup>58</sup>

An' from Lemar on a three mile grade.<sup>59</sup>

Noell's verse "and look what a jump she made" becomes "and see what a jump he made" in Whitter. In traditional versions it becomes "So you see what a journey he made"<sup>60</sup> and "To see what a jam he had made."<sup>61</sup> The final stanza which Whitter added contained the phrase "true loving husband," which Dalhart changed to "true love and husband." In traditional versions it becomes "to a loving husband,"<sup>62</sup> "your kind lovin' husband,"<sup>63</sup> "your true-living husband,"<sup>64</sup> "your true and loving husband,"<sup>65</sup> and "true love or husband."<sup>66</sup> There are many other variations of a more subtle nature, but these examples are the most dramatic evidence of the type of change the ballad has undergone.

The influence of Noell's ballad is best exemplified in a Missouri version reported by Randolph, which in part as follows:

1 On a bright Sabbath mornin' at Washington station,  
Just at the rise of the sun,  
Steve Brodie kissed his wife, sayin' children, God bless you,  
Your daddy must go on his run.  
...

3 Well he grabbed them an' he mounted to the cabin  
An' he says fireman, it's do or die,  
He released his lever, threwed the throttle wide open  
An' watched old 97 fly.

4 Well he told the flagman, he told the conductor,  
Never mind the whistle or the bell,  
I'll run 97 into Spencer on time  
Or I'll drop her right square into hell.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

- 5 Well then he told his faithful old flagman  
To shovel in a little more coal,  
For when we reach old White Oak Mountain  
You can watch these old drivers roll.  
...
- 8 Then the message come a-trippin' on the telegraph wire,  
An' this is what it read:  
That bold engineer that pulled 97  
Is a-layin' in Danville dead.
- 9 Did she ever pull through, no she never did make it,  
She was due fifteen till two,  
It was hours an' hours that the switchman lay a-waitin'  
On the fast mail that never pulled through.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the colloquialisms, the relationship to the Noell version is obvious. It is particularly telling that the singer did not use the popular moralizing stanza which Whitter added.

The Whitter influence is clearly seen in ballads which retain his shortened form, even though it may be through Dalhart or George that the song was learned. One version (*Brown A*) is almost identical to Whitter's song, and another (*Brown C*) is very similar with the only notable variation of "Stevenson"<sup>68</sup> for the engineer's name.

The popularity of the Dalhart record accounts for the great influence it has had on traditional versions. Even in cases in which it appears that the song was learned directly from his record there appear noticeable changes, such as

And when we cross that wide-open mountain,  
You're gonna see old 97 roll.<sup>69</sup>

Very few of the ballads which display marked variations from the early ballads can be categorized as the products of one of their predecessors. Each song displays the effects of the early influences in a unique manner. For this reason a brief survey of some of these traditional ballads will help explain these forces.

The following North Carolina version (*Brown D*) shows the influence of both Noell and George.

- 1 I was watching on the mountain one frosty morning  
Just watching the smoke from below.  
It was truly from a long smokestack  
Way down on Southern Railroad.
- 2 It was Old Ninety Seven, the fastest mail train  
That runs on the Southern line.  
And when she pulled into Monroe, Virginia,  
She was forty-seven minutes behind.
- 3 They gave him his orders at Monroe, Virginia.  
Says Steve you're way behind.  
This is not Thirty-Eight but old Ninety-Seven  
And she's bound to be in Spencer on time.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

- 4 He mounted to his cabin and he said to his brave young fireman  
This we'll do or die.  
He reversed his engine and he pulled open the throttle,  
Says watch old Ninety-Seven fly.
- 5 He turned to his black and greasy fireman,  
Says shove in a little more coal,  
And when we cross over those White Oaks Mountains  
You can watch the drivers roll.
- 6 They was falling down grade at ninety miles an hour,  
When the whistle began to scream;  
He was found in a wreck with his hand on the throttle  
And was scalded to death by the steam.
- 7 The message came in on a telegram wire,  
And this is what is said,  
There's a brave engineer lying over Danville,  
But he's lying over Danville dead.
- 8 Did she ever pull thru, no she never pulled thru,  
And I'm sure she was due at two,  
But for hours and hours the switchman stood watching,  
For the fast mail train that never pulled through.<sup>70</sup>

The first stanza is one which repeatedly appears in the traditional versions and not in any of the early ballads. The first line is similar to the George text which I have related to "The Ship That Never Returned" and possibly Lewey. This stanza seems to bear a closer relationship to a parody of Work's ballad which began:

I was goin' 'round the mountain one cold winter day,  
A-watchin' the steam boil up high,  
Hit was from a fast train on the C and O railroad  
And the engineer waved me goodbye!<sup>71</sup>

There is a possible influence of the Lewey song here, although the stanza may well have been added by some anonymous singer who knew the parody. The first two verses of the second stanza and the whole of the fourth and seventh stanzas relate to Noell's ballad. Two popular stanzas ("mighty rough road" and "ladies take warning") are not used. The final stanza is similar to the Noell and George texts as well as the chorus to "The Ship That Never Returned,"

Another North Carolina version (*Brown E*) has essentially the same first stanza, but the second stanza ends in a new way.

It was Old Ninety-Seven, the fastest mail train  
The South had ever seen,  
And it ran so fast that fatal Sunday  
That death met fourteen.<sup>72</sup>

The only other version which is similar to this (*Brown F*) reads

But she ran too fast on that fatal Sunday evening,  
And the death list was numbered fourteen.<sup>73</sup>

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, “Wreck of the Old 97”**

The ballad (*Brown E*) also contains a phrase, “Now he looked around the bin”<sup>74</sup> which appears to be unique. The singer repeats George’s and Dalhart’s error of “average,” but corrects the engineer’s name to “Steve.”

The *Brown F* text uses a chorus similar to that of “The Train That Never Returned” and the final stanzas of Noell and George. It is likely that the separate musical phrase was used with the chorus as in *Work’s* ballad and its parodies. The older phrase of Noell, “a mighty bad road” is used, and “Lima” replaces “Lynchburg.”<sup>75</sup> The third and fourth stanzas, which follow, are variations of stanzas in the Noell Ballad which are not used in any of the other texts, traditional or non-traditional.

- 3 The engineer was a fast, brave driver  
On that fatal Sunday eve,  
And his fireman leaned far out in Lynchburg  
Waiting for the signal to leave.
- 4 When they got the board, well, he threw back his throttle,  
And although his air was bad  
The people all said, as he passed Franklin junction,  
But they couldn’t see the man in the cab.<sup>76</sup>

The *Brown B* version is based on the Dalhart record, but it shows signs of oral transmission and colloquial language.

So he turned to his black and greasy fireman,  
Yelling “Hay - shovel on more coal;  
'Cause when we hit the other side of the mountains  
Old 97’s gonna roll.”<sup>77</sup>

A Virginia version, collected in Campbell County, by Miss Juliet Fauntleroy, shows both the effects of oral transmission as well as a mixture of influences. The singer uses the basic form of Dalhart and repeats his mistake “average,” but she corrects the engineer’s name to “Steve” and “Center” to “Spencer.”<sup>78</sup> The fireman is called a “black-faced fireman,” a unique, though subtle variation.

In *East Tennessee and Western Virginia Mountain Ballads*, Cambiaire reports a version in which changes of a similar nature. The Dalhart form and mistakes (“Pete,” “Center,” and “average”) are followed. The singer replaces “Lynchburg” with “Pittsburg” and “Jump” with “journey.”<sup>79</sup>

Mellinger Henry records the following version:

- 1 On the twenty-second day as I stood on the platform,  
Watching the smoke from below,  
It was coming from a small smoke stack  
'Way down on the Southern Railroad.
- 2 It was Old Ninety-Seven, the fastest mail train  
That the South had ever seen;  
It didn’t run so fast on one Sunday morning  
Till the test was number fourteen.
- 3 In Munroe, Virginia, he received his orders:  
Said Stevens, “You are away behind

## The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"

- This is not thirty-eight, but only ninety-seven;  
You must put old spin in on time."
- 4 Stevens gladly turned to his black greasy fireman;  
Says, "Throw in a little more coal,  
For when we reach these white oak mountains,  
You may hear my Breevers (?) roll."
- 5 It was mighty bad roads from Lynchburg to Danville;  
The limits was a three-mile grade;  
It was there where he lost control of his airbrakes—  
To see what a jam he had made.
- 6 He was coming down the grade at ninety miles an hour,  
When the whistle began to scream;  
He was found in the wreck with his hands on the throttle;  
He was scalded to death by the steam,
- 7 When the news came in on the telegraph wires,  
And this is what it said:  
"Our brave engineer left Monroe, Virginia,  
He was lying in North Danville dead."
- 8 "Just one more trip said the old conductor,"  
as he kissed his darling wife,  
"Just one more trip to old Spencer, North Carolina,  
I'm done with the railroad for life."<sup>80</sup>

Of all the traditional versions that I have found, this ballad is the most unusual in its diverse influences. While the language is obviously not colloquial, it does show signs of oral transmissions. The song was contributed by Dr. D. S. Gage from Fulton, Missouri, who got it from a professor in Tennessee, "Breevers" and "put old spin in" are obvious corruptions of "Drivers" (the driving wheels of a locomotive) and "put her in Spencer," The changes may well have occurred in normal oral transmission, though it is likely the professor did not properly understand the Tennessee singer. The "twenty-second day" in the first stanza is a unique variation of a stanza we have already noted in three other texts (*Brown D, E, and F*). The second stanza is also similar to these ballads, but "That death met fourteen" of *Brown E* and "the death list numbered fourteen" of *Brown F* has oddly and nonsensically been changed to "Till the test was number fourteen." The engineer's name has become "Stevens," and "jump" has been changed to "jam." The description of the fireman reverts to Whitter's "black greasy" while *Brown D* and *E* have "black and greasy," The seventh stanza appeared in Randolph's version and in *Brown D*, but neither says "North Danville" as do Noell's ballad and the Henry text. This would seem to relate the version through separate channels to Noell's song. Whitter's final moralizing stanza is not used, but rather a new stanza appears which seems to have been taken from "The Ship That Never Returned" which reads as follows:

"Only one more trip," said a gallant seaman  
As he kissed his weeping wife,  
"Only one more bag of golden treasure  
And it will last us all through life.  
Then we'll spend our days in our cozy cottage  
And enjoy the sweet rest we earned."  
But alas, poor man, who sailed commander  
On the ship that never returned.<sup>81</sup>



## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

I have found three more versions which I have included in the list of texts, but which cannot be fully endorsed as traditional without extensive examination. The possibility does exist, however, that they may in some way represent or reflect traditional versions. In *Railroad Avenue*, Freeman Hubbard cites a version which he credits to George.<sup>82</sup> It is significant that "Peat," "Center," and "average" are changed to "Steve," "Spencer," and "air brake," that the wording is slightly altered, and that the "Did she ever pull in" stanza is missing. It is possible that this is George's version before he changed it to comply with Dalhart's record; however, my hopes are not aroused. I have already noted Hubbard's ability to find favorable evidence amidst a mass of the unfavorable. Now it seems he may even be willing to alter evidence.

Another version is given in *A Treasury of American Song* by Olin Downes and Elie Siegmeister; however, a scholarly approach does not appear evident.<sup>83</sup> The version follows the Whitter form and changes "Steve Brooklyn" to "Steve Rooklyn," "Thirty-Eight" to "thirty-six," "White Oak Mountain" to "old White Mountain," "true loving husband" to "true and loving husband," and adds a 'toot-toot' imitation of the whistle.

The great dust-bowl balladeer, Woody Guthrie, recorded a version of "The Wreck of the Old 97."<sup>84</sup> His song is very similar to Dalhart's record, containing the erroneous "Pete" and "Center." He corrects "average" to "air-brakes", however, and his language is colloquial. Guthrie's song-writing instinct may be responsible for the expansion of two stanzas into three. Note the change of "Lynchburg" to "Lakesburg."

- 3 Well, it's a mighty rough road from Lakesburg to Danville,  
And a line on a three mile grade;  
It is on this grade that he lost his air-brakes  
And you see what a jump he made
- 4 He was a-goin' down the grade, makin' ninety miles an hour,  
And his whistle broke out in a scream;  
It was on that grade that he lost his air-brakes  
And you see what a jump he made,
- 5 He was a-goin' down the grade, makin' ninety miles an hour  
And his whistle began to scream;  
And we found him in the wreck with his hand on his throttle  
And scalded to death by the steam.<sup>85</sup>

The elements of traditional balladry and conscious re-writing are probably both present in this version; however, this sort of deliberate alteration is considerably more palatable than the Hubbard possibility.

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### **The Ballad Tune**

As I have already noted, the tune which Whitter used, and seemingly Noell, was that of the tune of "The Ship That Never Returned," written by Henry C. Work in 1865. A parody, "The Train That Never Returned" was written to this same tune. Richardson notes that this tune "is merely a combination of several traditional mountain strains."<sup>86</sup> The fact that the stanza and chorus are sung to different melodies would seem to support this statement. In all except one version, (*Brown F*) of "The Wreck of the Old 97" a chorus is not used; consequently, its musical phrase is not used, except possibly in *Brown F*.

The scarcity of printed tunes for this ballad can be explained in several ways. Primarily, the melody Work adopted or wrote in 1865 is a fine tune as it is, and it has changed very little in our ballad. For this reason many collectors may have thought it useless to transcribe a tune similar to an abundance of tunes to "The Ship That Never Returned." Many collectors simply note that the ballad is sung to this tune. Also, the possibility of copyright claims has caused a tune to be omitted from *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*.<sup>87</sup>

The tunes that I have played or heard are all very similar, all in a major key (the Ionian mode), all in common time (4/4), and all authentic, that is, the melody begins and ends on the tonic note.

The tune in this ballad has served an auxiliary function in the development of the variations. It is notable that the words which have changed the least are those on which the heaviest accent falls, and, conversely, the unaccented words have changed the most. This is best demonstrated by a version which arose directly from another, as the ballad has changed so dramatically since its original composition. Compare, for instance, the Whitter text with *Brown C*. With the heavily accented words underscored, Whitter reads as follows:

They gave him up his order at Monroe, Virginia,  
Saying Steve you're way behind time,  
This is not "Thirty-Eight" but it's "Old Ninety-Seven,"  
You must put her in Spencer on time.<sup>88</sup>

In a similar manner with *Brown C*:

He gave in his orders in old Monroe, Virginia,  
Saying Stevenson your way behind time,  
This is not thirty-eight, but is old ninety-seven,  
You must throw her in Spencer on time.<sup>89</sup>

The *Brown* stanza has changed eight unaccented words and only one that is accented. This phenomenon can be pursued *ad nauseam*; however, I think this one example suffices to demonstrate the effect.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

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### **Conclusion**

My purpose has been from the beginning to illustrate the complex processes that have shaped this ballad from the lengthy, ungainly doggerel of Noell's original ballad to the later, more refined traditional versions. It has also been my hope that the reader might gain further insights into the process of the origin of a ballad. The circumstances that surrounded the creation of this ballad are far removed from those of older folksongs, and these forces naturally played different roles in the creation of the ballads contemporary to "The Wreck of the Old 97." If the traditional ballad is to survive in modern society, these forces, and their effects, must be known to the folksong scholar if his understanding is to grow, change, and exist with the ballad.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

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### **Footnotes**

- 1 Richmond *News Leader*, September 28, 1903, 1.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Victor Talking Machine Co. v. George," *Federal Reporter*, LXIX (April-May, 1934), 872.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 874.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 873-874.
- 9 Albert B. Friedman, *The Viking Book of Folk Ballads of the English Speaking World* (New York, 1964), 310.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, 311.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 310.
- 15 Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (New York, 1960), 565.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Norman I. White, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore Vol. II* (Durham 1952-64), 511.
- 18 Gordon H. Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (New York, 1957), 280.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Malcolm Laws, *Native American Balladry* (Philadelphia, 1950), 174.
- 21 Ethel P. Richardson, *American Mountain Songs* (1927), 42.
- 22 White, 508.
- 23 Irwin Sibley, ed., *Reprints from Sing Out*, Vol. I (New York, 1962), 38.
- 24 Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York, 1927), 146.
- 25 White, 508.
- 26 Freeman H. Hubbard, *Railroad Avenue* (New York, 1945), 253,
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, 252.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

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29 *Ibid.*, 251.

30 *Richmond News Leader*, 1.

31 *Ibid.*, 10.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*, September 29, 1903, 1.

34 *Ibid.*, September 28, 1903, 10,

35 *Federal Reporter*, 874.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Hubbard, 259.

38 *Federal Reporter*, 872.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

42 White, 509.

43 "Old 97," *Time*, January 15, 1934.

44 *Federal Reporter*, 872-873.

45 *Richmond News Leader*, March 1, 1927, 19.

46 *Federal Reporter*, 874.

47 *Ibid.*, 875.

49 *Ibid.*, CV, 698.

50 *Ibid.*, CX IX, 874.

51 *Ibid.*, 876.

52 *Ibid.*, 877.

53 White, 508.

54 *Richmond News Leader*, September 29, 1903, 1.

55 Mellinger E. Henry, *Songs Sung in the Southern Appalachians* (London, 1934), 80.

56 Celestin P. Cambiaire, *East Tennessee and Western Virginia Mountain Ballads* (London, 1934), 97.

57 Olin Downes and Elie Siegmeister, *A Treasury of American Songs* (New York, 1940), 245.

58 "The Wreck of the Old 97," as sung by Elizabeth P. Scott of North Garden, Virginia, collected by Alfred Scott.

## **The Origins of a Modern Traditional Ballad, "Wreck of the Old 97"**

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- 59 Vance Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs*, IV (Columbia, Missouri, 1946-50), 133.
- 60 Cambiaire, 97.
- 61 Henry, 80.
- 62 White, 517.
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 *Ibid.*, 520.
- 65 Downes, 245.
- 66 Cambiaire, 97.
- 67 Randolph, 132-133.
- 68 White, 518. 69
- 69 Scott, *loc. cit.* (see footnote 58)
- 70 White, 518-519,
- 71 Richardson, 42.
- 72 White, 519.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 520.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 519.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 520.
- 76 *Ibid.*
- 77 *Ibid.*, 517.
- 78 "The Wreck of the Old Ninety-Seven," Archives of Virginia Folklore Society, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. (see Davis, A. K., Jr., *Folksongs of Virginia: A Descriptive Index and Classification*. (Durham, 1949), 293.)
- 79 Cambiaire, 97.
- 80 Henry, 79-80.
- 81 White, 508.
- 82 Hubbard, 257-8.
- 83 Downes, 244-5.
- 84 Woodrow W. Guthrie, "The Wreck of the Old 97," *Woody Guthrie Sings Folksongs*, Folkways Records, New York.
- 85 *Ibid.*
- 86 Richardson, 108.

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87 White, IV, 272.

88 *Federal Reporter*, 872.

89 White, II, 518.

### **List of Text and Tunes**

1. [unnamed]. Charles Noell, *Federal Reporter*, LXIX, 1903. —no tune.
2. [unnamed]. Fred Lewey, (no text available), c. 1904. —no tune.
3. "The Wreck on the Southern Old 97." Henry Whitter, *Federal Reporter*, LXIX, before 1924. —to the tune of "The Ship That Never Returned."
4. "The Wreck of the Old 97." Vernon Dalhart, *Federal Reporter*, LXIX, 1924. —no tune.
5. "The Wreck of Old 97." David Graves George, *Federal Reporter*, LXIX, 1924. —no tune.
6. [unnamed]. *Brown A.* —no tune.
7. "The Wreck of the Old Ninety-Seven." *Brown B.* —to the tune of "The Ship That Never Returned."
8. "The Wreck of No. 97." *Brown C.* —no tune.
9. "Old Ninety Seven." *Brown D*, 1922. —no tune.
10. "The Wreck of the Old Ninety-Seven." *Brown E*, 1941. —no tune.
11. "Wreck of the Old 97." *Brown F.* —no tune.
12. "The Wreck of Old Ninety-Seven." Cambiaire, *East Tennessee and Western Virginia Mountain Ballads*, before 1934. —no tune.
13. "The Wreck of Old Ninety-Seven." Archives of the Virginia Folklore Society, 1931. —to the tune of "The Ship That Never Returned."
14. "The Wreck of Old 97." Hubbard, *Railroad Avenue*. —to the tune of "The Ship That Never Returned.'
15. "The Wreck of the Southern Old 97." Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs*, IV, 1927. —the tune is notated.
16. "Old Ninety-Seven." Henry, *Songs Sung in the Southern Appalachians*, 1934. —no tune.
17. "The Wreck of the Old '97." Guthrie, *Folkways Record Co.* —the tune is not notated.
18. "The Wreck of the Old 97." Elizabeth P. Scott, learned about 1925-28, collected 1965. —to the tune of "The Ship that Never Returned."
19. "The Wreck of the Old 97." Downes and Siegmester, *A Treasury of American Song*. —the tune is notated.
20. (The Wreck of the Old 97). *Brown IV*. Text and tune are not printed, but are in the archives.

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"Wreck of the Old 97." *Richmond News Leader*, March 1, 1927.



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