**Aunt Molly Jackson: The Perfect Miner’s Voice (Romalis, 3)**

**Darcy Martin**

The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement, and the one statement that cannot be destroyed. You can burn books, buy newspapers, you can guard against handbills and pamphlets, but you cannot prevent singing.

For some reason it has always been lightly thought that singing people are happy people. Nothing could be more untrue. The greatest and most enduring songs are wrung from unhappy people—the spirituals of the slaves which say in effect—“It is hopeless here, maybe in heaven it will be better.”

Songs are the statement of a people. You can learn more about people by listening to their songs than any other way, for into the songs go all the hopes and hurts, the angers, fears, the wants and aspirations.

—John Steinbeck (Greenway, vii)

**Introduction**

For years, writers, musicians, and scholars of every discipline have attempted to understand and explain the region and its peoples known as Appalachia, particularly the region defined as southern Appalachia. Those attempts have often referred to the “image” of Appalachia and/or the “voice” of Appalachia as if there was a single defining image or voice that is Appalachia. As Loyal Jones notes in the foreword to *Appalachian Images*, a collection of essays about the region edited by W. K. McNeil, “Books and articles keep appearing that are shaped by narrow interest, popular ideology, prejudice, or else, and sometimes worse, by romantic nonsense.” Jones observes that “one truth is that this region (land and people) is complex and varied” and is not, as McNeil’s study points out, “a monolithic place with the same kind of people from one end to the other, or that Appalachia means poverty, or that it is like no other part of the country” (xi-xiii).

Insiders and outsiders alike have battled, often unsuccessfully, to dispel the vice-like grip that these kinds of denigrating and prejudicial stereotypes have held on Appalachia. The purpose of my article is to examine the life of one of the many Appalachian women who defied, in her own way, some of these crippling stereotypes—Mary Magdalene Garland, better known as “Aunt Molly Jackson.”

In her book, *Hillbilly Women*, Kathy Kahn points out that Appalachian women are often depicted as “mournful creatures, covered with dust and grime, their thin mouths hardened into a grim expression. Typically, the women are seen as hopeless, helpless, and passive” (17). Although a few women may fit this image, Aunt Molly Jackson did not. In 1931, writing for the *New York Tribune*, reporter Ben Robertson described Aunt Molly Jackson as “tall and thin... pleasant and friendly, and still knows how to laugh,” despite the unspeakable horrors that she had known and witnessed in the region of southern Appalachia of Harlan County, Kentucky, often referred to as “Bloody Harlan,” a reference to the horrific civil war that took place between the coal miners and the coal operators in the 1930s (133-39). Aunt Molly Jackson epitomizes Kahn’s own description of “hillbilly women”: those who “…organized unions and led long and determined strikes...sheltered union organizers from company thugs...nursed starving children back to health...marched to statehouses and to Washington, D.C., who have told their elected representatives of the agonies of mountain people, only to have their words met by hollow promises” (17-18).

Aunt Molly Jackson knew Appalachia. She understood the importance of place. First and foremost, however, she understood who she was. George Ellen Lyon, in her essay, “VoicePlace,” included in *Bloodroot*, a collection of essays written by Appalachian women writers on the importance of place, writes about the “vital connection between voice and place” as exemplified in her own life and work. She, too, grew up in Harlan County, Kentucky, years after Aunt Molly Jackson left. Although Aunt Molly Jackson would not have articulated her thoughts in
the manner of George Ellen Lyon, she essentially said the same thing throughout her 80 years. Lyon says, "Where you’re from is not who you are, but it’s an important ingredient. I believe you must trust your first voice—the one tuned by the people and place that made you—before you can speak your deepest truths.” Expanding upon her theme, Lyon says that “place is not just location, geography; place is history, family, the shape and context of daily life” (169-71). Aunt Molly Jackson not only understood these words; she lived them. For 80 years, Aunt Molly Jackson, coal miner’s daughter and coal miner’s wife, spoke with a voice grounded in traditional Appalachian culture and womanhood, a voice that remained authentic to her vision of a world in which hungry children were fed, and working men and women were treated with dignity and respect and fairly compensated for their labors. This complicated woman of truths and half-truths, fact and fiction, reality and fantasy could not do less.

I am from Kentucky. Borne and raised in the Kentucky coal fields. I know all about just the coal miners and their families have ben treated by coal operators from the time I was old enuf to remember till this date. (Labor Defender)

Aunt Molly Jackson

The basic facts of Aunt Molly Jackson’s life are well known to scholars of the Harlan County troubles of the 1930s and are often cited in writings about coal mining songs or Appalachian folk music. She was “…well known to folklorists, journalists, and novelists. Margaret Larkin, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, John and Alan Lomax, Charles Haywood, Pete Seeger, John Greenway, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and Alvin Harlow are some of the collectors, singers, and writers who preserved her songs or described her in articles and books that ranged from casual reporting to erudite criticism” (Green 133). John Greenway wrote perhaps one of the better brief summaries of her life. In his book, American Folk-songs of Protest, he describes, in one sentence, Aunt Molly Jackson’s family losses including her mother dying of tuberculosis when she was six, her father and brother blinded in coal mining accidents, another brother, husband, and stepson killed in the mines, the death from starvation of her sister’s child, and her own crippling injury from a bus accident (252-75). The lasting effects of these tragedies that occurred throughout Jackson’s life and the lives of her fellow Appalachians are reflected in her stories and music. In her recently published book, Pistol Packin’ Mama, about the life of Aunt Molly Jackson, Shelly Romalis observes, “Her songs, fusing life experience with rich Appalachian musical tradition, conveyed a deep awareness of social injustice. They became her weapons of struggle—narratives of resistance” (2). Although these protest songs are only a portion of her recorded repertoire at the Library of Congress and in the Barnicle-Cadle Collection in the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University, they are the songs that ring out with the greatest conviction.

Aunt Molly Jackson was not alone in her losses; miners’ wives lived in fear every day of their lives that the mine whistle would sound signaling another in the endless litany of mine accidents. With the dreaded sound of the whistle, the miners’ wives and families gathered to see whose loved one (or ones) would be carried out of the mine. According to Ben A. Franklin, “In the 100 years that partial records of fatal mine have been kept (the early figures are incomplete) more than 120,000 men have died violently in coal mines, an average of 100 every month for a century.” It would be erroneous and ahistorical to conclude that coal mining provided no benefit to the residents of the southern Appalachian region, however the relative prosperity of the Harlan miners of the 1920s in the transition from a predominantly agrarian community to a “semiurban, industrial society” lays heavy when juxtaposed against the seemingly endless violence, extensive loss of life, and near annihilation of this once pristine region of Southern Appalachia. Placed in the context of the Great Depression, few regions of America suffered more than Harlan County, Kentucky. The coal mining regions of Southern Appalachia reflected the worst of conditions confronting Americans during this terrible time in American domestic history, a period of unparalleled violence in the coal fields. In her interviews with Alan Lomax in the late 1930s, Aunt Molly Jackson explained her views on the violence from the coal miners’ perspective. She says:

I used to think that it was the devil in people and that the devil ruled the people and that they was corrupt minded and that they never did have nothing in their minds that was pure and right. But now I see it since I have been forced through misery and depression. And through seein’ so much misery among the mountain people, that through experience I’ve learnt that it’s just simply they go beyond control. They’re aggravated so much from the horrible misery and sufferin’ that they have to do, have such a hard life in everything like that, that the people are simply not themselves.
One of the things that set Aunt Molly Jackson apart was her lifelong activism. Aunt Molly credits her father with instilling in her the importance of helping her neighbors. She told Alan Lomax that her “father was a coal miner and a union man… and I was raised to help out in everything and in every strikes…” (AFS #2335A). Her father was also a preacher. “From the age of five she accompanied her father to union meetings, led picket lines, carried messages, and helped ‘teach uniting’ to the miners.” She told Greenway that before her father died he asked her to “carry on after he was gone,” which she said she would do if she lived “to be one hundred” (254).

“Since I was a little girl I have composed songs and sung them to pass my sorrows away.”

Mary Magdalene Garland was born in 1880 in Clay County, Kentucky, the first child of Oliver Perry Garland and Deborah Robinson Garland. The Garland and Robinson family roots went deep into Clay County soil; they farmed there for over seven generations, the first Garland arriving in 1637. Molly proudly described for John Greenway her grandmother’s farm:

They cut down trees and built their own log cabins; they cleared their own land…they built their own fences…they owned the stuff that they all worked and raised—I still say them were the good old days. (253)

Oliver Garland, like so many of his generation, sold his farm (Molly was three) to work in the coal industry which began Molly’s odyssey that led her far from her Clay County beginnings. Molly was six when her mother died; she was the oldest of four children. Molly’s youngest sister and mother died within six weeks of one another and in her autobiographical notes, Aunt Molly says that, “The death of my little sister and the death of my mother is the first sorrow I ever knew, since then God only knows all the sadness and sorrow that I have lived to go through” (Romalis 63). Her father remarried within a year of his first wife’s death and had eleven more children. Molly became nursemaid to the first two babies and remarked to Greenway, “Now I had two babies to nurse and I had to chop wood and carry water from Farmer Nelson’s well” (Molly was all of nine at the time). Despite the fact that she expressed resentment for having to help raise her stepbrothers and stepsisters, it is probably safe to conclude that her lifelong interest in the welfare of children and years of working as a midwife stem from her childhood experiences as helpmate to her stepmother (Romalis 252-59).

Little more than a child herself, Molly married Jim Stewart, a teen aged coal miner, when she was thirteen and a half. She had two sons, both of which probably died in childbirth, although she did raise two of Jim Stewart’s children and four of her second husband’s, Bill Jackson’s (Greenway 252-75). Molly and Jim traveled from coal camp to coal camp with Jim working in the mines and Molly practicing nursing and midwifery. They both took advantage of educational opportunities, attending the Clay County moonlight school established by a group of northern women (Romalis 73). Yurchenco also mentions Molly’s interest in education and says that she “went to school for three months after [her] mother died and…learned to read and write” (Yurchenco 213). Molly’s notes contain references to the children, as well as her husband, Jim, who benefitted from her considerable nursing skills. Jim and Molly even spent a year in Florida in an attempt to improve Jim’s health. No matter where Molly was nor who was in need, Molly was there to defend the sick, the weak, the marginalized members of society. She fought to enroll Jim Stewart’s youngest sister in school and stepped in when a young black man was being beaten by a white man (Romalis 72-79). Aunt Molly’s actions seem consistent with her expressed views on justice and fairness.

“…this gave me such a desire to become a nurse and by the time. I was eighteen, I was able to make a first-class diploma as midwife and nurse.” (Romalis 72)

In his interview with Fred Brown, Tillman Cadle describes Aunt Molly Jackson as a “midwife, organizer, singer and songwriter” (Brown 26). Aunt Molly Jackson was definitely these and so much more. Most importantly, she was a woman who cared deeply, despite personal risk, for the people of her community, her family, and her friends. Never a stranger to hard times, Molly describes herself as a woman who has endured “more troubles than any other poor woman who has ever been born” (Greenway 252).

She began working as a midwife when she herself was still a child (around age 12). She worked hard at her profession, became a certified midwife at age 18 and, according to Aunt Molly, attended at more than 5,000 births. According to Ehrenreich and English, in 1910 about fifty percent of all babies born in America were delivered by midwives, particularly to black and poor working-class white women (93). Jeanne
Achterberg, in her book on women healers, notes that “Midwifery in all countries drew overwhelmingly from women at the margins of society: old women, women disenfranchised from their families, women whose tolerance allowed them to be present at the ‘unclean’ and torturous event of birth (119). By the early 1900s, many states were beginning to outlaw midwifery, but mountain women, like so many other women throughout history have done, continued to turn to competent midwives to tend them during delivery. Her brother, Jim Garland, said that Aunt Molly had delivered more babies during the years 1910-32 than all the doctors in the area put together. Her own children probably died in infancy as Romalis says the only reference she found to them were in handwritten notes in the Barnicle collection of papers. Her brother, who expressed disdain over some of Aunt Molly’s claims, never questioned her skill as a midwife (Garland 74). He said that “she was highly thought of as a midwife” and preferred by many women to deliver their children instead of a doctor. Her medical philosophy was to “treat every human being just as I would have them treat me.”6 Molly was deeply aware of the irony of her efforts to bring new life into this world only to watch those same lives wither away in the harshness of the coal fields.7

“Poor orphaned children, thrown out on the street
Ragged and hungry, with nothing to eat.” (“Poor Miner’s Farewell”)

Numerous writers, including Aunt Molly herself, recite time and again her lifelong, deep-felt concern for the innocent children. Invariably, when asked why she wrote a particular song, especially during the worst years of the 1930s, Aunt Molly notes that her songs sprang from the stark, harsh reality of the living conditions in the hell holes known as the mining camps. Her stories are ones of action. She was not a woman to sit idly by or to expect others to do the things that needed doing. Archie Green says that her stories and songs are strong indicators “that she could not stand to be a passive tradition-bearer” (Green 83).

In the liner notes to his recording of Aunt Molly Jackson’s stories and his singing of her songs, John Greenway quotes the first song Aunt Molly Jackson supposedly wrote (at the age of four) which contains the following lines:

If you love your neighbor, he will love you;
Do unto others what you want them to do to you. (11)

Even at the age of four, Aunt Molly Jackson’s genuine concern and compassion for others is evident. In later years, this caring manifests itself in the many songs that highlight the plight of the children, for example, “Hungry Ragged Blues” and “Poor Miner’s Farewell.” The verses echo in Dickensian images of “poor orphaned children…ragged and hungry…left a-crying for bread” (phrases from “Hungry Ragged Blues”) and

“This mining town I live in is a dead and lonely place;
Where pity and starvation are pictured on every face” (“Poor Miner’s Farewell”)

She describes in passionate detail on John Greenway’s recording how she held up the commissary clerk for five dollars and ninety cents’ worth of groceries to feed the starving children of two families. She had heard children crying for several days and decided if the parents were unable to do something to relieve their suffering, she would, which in this case meant going to the coal operator’s commissary and obtaining food for these families. Her passion and strength ring out in her own words when she says, “So I said if I lost my life that I would do anything in this world that I could in order to keep the children from suffering.” Aunt Molly Jackson tucked her 38 special (she had a permit to carry a gun because of her travels throughout the area as the local midwife) under her arm, and off she went with her son Henry Jackson to get the groceries. She first ordered a bag of flour which she gave to Henry to carry outside and asked him to wait for her by the coal tipple. She then asked Mr. Martin, the commissary clerk, for other items needed to feed the children. When she asked the clerk for credit for 90 days until she could “collect by nickels and dimes” the $5.90 to pay her bill, the clerk said she could not have the groceries. Aunt Molly replied, “I reached under my arm and I pulled my pistol and I walked out backwards, and I said, ‘Martin, if you try to take this grub away from me,’ I said, ‘God knows if they electrocute me for it tomorrow I’ll shoot you six times in a minute,’ and I walked out.” Upon returning home she found the deputy sheriff waiting to arrest her. When he asked her if she was a robber, Aunt Molly indignantly stated, “Oh no, Frank… I’m no robber, but I said, hit [sic] was the last chance; I have heard these little hungry children cry for something to eat ’til I’m desperate; I’m almost out of my mind…you know I am as honest as the day is long…” To which the deputy sheriff said that the coal operator had ordered him to arrest her but, upon hearing her story, told Aunt Molly, “if you have the
heart to do that much...for other's people's children that not's got one drap [sic] of your blood in their bodies, I will pay that bill myself and...if they fire me for not arresting you, I will be damned glad of it.' And he walked out and he didn't arrest me” (“Stories and Songs”).

Aunt Molly Jackson as folksinger did not view her music as a means to fame and fortune. As a preface to John Greenway’s rendition of her famous song, “I am a Union Woman,” Aunt Molly said that she was sharing her stories and songs with Greenway because “… hit [sic] is my desire for younger people and younger generations to know how that I was interested [in] the little children having something to eat…” (“Stories and Songs”). Archie Green says that whether or not her songs became folksongs was unimportant to her, what Aunt Molly Jackson sought “passionately” was for her songs to be “useful to working people.” In this sense, he continues, “She equated bread and justice” (84). If Greenway is correct in saying that songs and ballads of protest proliferate during those periods when there is conflict, then Aunt Molly Jackson led a deeply conflicted life since these kinds of songs and stories were part of who she was until the day she died (11).

Q1 What is your name?
A Aunt Molly Jackson
Q2 What do you do?
A I am a nurse.
Q3 A graduate nurse?
A Yes. (Dos Passos 279).

Aunt Molly Jackson was one of the persons interviewed by members of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. The Committee was formed “to aid workers to organize and to defend themselves against terror and suppression, whether extra-legal or carried on in the frame-work of the legal system, either through alien deportation, criminal syndicalism, sedition, anti-labor laws, or through perversion of murder, vagrancy or other laws” (Dreiser ix). In late fall of 1931, a committee of 12 men and women, all distinguished writers, went to Harlan County to discover for themselves the truth of the “charges of abuses and crimes inflicted on the striking miners” as presented in a 32 page indictment against the coal operators prepared by the International Labor Defense (Dreiser 3-16). One of the witnesses interviewed by the committee was Aunt Molly Jackson. On November 7, 1931, in Straight Creek, Kentucky, writer John Dos Passos questioned Jackson. In response to his question about the condition of the people in Straight Creek, Aunt Molly Jackson replied: “The people in this country are destitute of anything that is really nourishing to the body. That is the truth. Even the babies have lost their lives, and we have buried from four to seven a week all along during warm weather.” Her testimony continues in which she indicts the American Red Cross for refusing aid to members of the National Miners Union. She states, “I always thought they [the Red Cross] was selfish; they didn’t have the right kind of heart.” Aunt Molly describes the unspeakable condition of the houses, the lack of food, and accuses the coal operators of having less sympathy for the miners than the people have for their mules. Later John Dos Passos provides narratives of some of the speakers at a town gathering and mentions that following a speech by Mistress “Sudy” Gates (in which she praises the National Miners Union for including women in the struggle), Aunt Molly Jackson sang “Hungry Miner’s Wife’s Blues” (Dos Passos 281-93).

Interestingly, a Johnson City, Tennessee, playwright, Jo Carson, wrote a play, *A Preacher with a Horse to Ride*, about Dreiser and his visit to Harlan County. One of her characters in the play is Aunt Molly Jackson. The following dialogue between Dreiser and Aunt Molly are Jo Carson’s words that seem to uncannily depict both Dreiser’s and Jackson’s struggles to make sense of their worlds. Dreiser and Jackson are having a private conversation following her testimony and singing of one of her songs regarding the conditions in the coal fields and her resounding indictment of the coal operators for creating these inhumane conditions:

DREISER: How can you say what you do? They don’t mark down your name.
MOLLY JACKSON: They already know me.
DREISER: They don’t harass you.
MOLLY JACKSON: Yes, they do. My family’s everyone somewhere else already or dead. The time will come for me. I might end up your neighbor in New York City, Mr. Dreiser.
DREISER: I can’t imagine such a displaced person.
MOLLY JACKSON: I can. What do you figure you’d think of me then?
DREISER: They don’t shoot you, they don’t put you in jail.
MOLLY JACKSON: They can’t afford to. See, I do the things they don’t want to do. I catch babies and I tend the dying. There ain’t one among them wants that job. And because I do it, I get to talk out loud.
DREISER: I don’t know how you find the courage.
MOLLY JACKSON: It’s easy. I got a natural flapping tongue and I’ve come onto faith.
DREISER: Faith? Faith in what?
MOLLY JACKSON: In myself, in these people, in God.
DREISER: The coal operators run God, too. Billy Sunday was paid to say God doesn’t like communism.
MOLLY JACKSON: My faith is not in Billy Sunday’s God.
DREISER: My mother’s faith was not in my father’s god. I envy you. I swear; I wish I had your strength. I wish what I do made as much difference as what you do.
MOLLY JACKSON: You don’t want to do what I do.
DREISER: I might.
MOLLY JACKSON: Then catch babies, Mr. Dreiser. Feed the living what you can, and tend the dying. That’s all there is to it.
DREISER: I didn’t get your name.
MOLLY JACKSON: I am Molly Jackson, called Aunt Molly Jackson by folks I’ve borned or their parents. Mark it down, Hershel Lilly. Write it on your list, Hoit Bessman. I want everybody to get it straight who I am and which side I’m on. (Carson 305-06)

At the invitation of Theodore Dreiser and his writers’ committee, Aunt Molly Jackson migrated to New York in 1931 (actually, she, along with blacklisted miners, was exiled from the state of Kentucky). Her first public appeal for support for the miners’ cause was before 21,000 people in New York Coliseum. She introduced herself to her audience with the following song:

I was born and raised in old Kentucky;
Molly Jackson is my name.
I came up here to New York City,
And I’m truly glad I came.
I am soliciting for the poor Kentucky miners,
For their children and their wives,
Because the miners are all blacklisted
I am compelled to save their lives.
The miners in Bell and Harlan counties organized a union;
This is all the poor coal miners done,
Because the coal operators cut down their wages
To 33 cents and less a ton.
All this summer we have had to listen
To our hungry children’s cries
Through the hot part of the summer
Our little babies died like flies.
While the coal operators and their wives
All went dressed in jewels and silk,
The poor coal miners’ babies
Starved to death for bread and milk.
Now I appeal to you in tender mercy
To give us all you have to give,
Because I love my people dearly
And I want them all to live. (Carson 259-60)

Romalis says that “Molly Jackson and Jim Garland, plucked from Appalachia in 1931 to become miners’ missionaries, formed the core of transplanted mountain folk in the urban north” (Romalis 2). During her years in New York, Aunt Molly Jackson was friends with and sang with such folksinger luminaries as Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter) and Woody Guthrie. In fact, Leadbelly wrote a song about Aunt Molly that accurately, with affection, depicts her feisty nature:

Aunt Molly Jackson
It gives me great satisfaction
To work with Aunt Molly Jackson.
She walks, she talks, she fights;
She unites the working class.

Bless her old soul,
She’s worth millions of gold,
Bless her old soul,
She’s worth millions of gold.

She’s brave and bold,
And if you fool her,
She’ll knock you cold.8

One of the labels applied to Aunt Molly Jackson and her friends was that of socialist or worse, communist. As Tillman Cadle puts it, “What we were trying to do was to feed the hungry, to keep children from starving to death and to bring some democracy to the United Mine Workers of America. If that was Communism, then we were Communist” (Brown 26). John Greenway says that Aunt Molly Jackson’s emphatic response to being labeled communist was:

I’ve been framed up and accused of being a Red when I did not understand what they meant. I never heard tell of a Communist until I left Kentucky—then I had passed fifty—but they called me a Red. I got all of my progressive ideas from my hard tough struggles, and nowhere else. (Romalis 261-62)

“I woke up this morning with the worst blues I ever had in my life;
Not a bite to cook for breakfast, a poor coal miner’s wife”
(“Hungry Ragged Blues”)

Much has been written about the invisibility of women’s history which becomes more visible every day as historians, male and female, explore the
unwritten stories of women’s lives. Contributions of women beyond the private sphere of home have often been overlooked or, at best, minimalized. If one then adds poverty to the script, the story remains largely untold except, perhaps, in fiction, for example, Harriet Arnow’s classic story of poor Appalachian women, *The Dollmaker*. As Henrietta Yurchenco so succinctly states in her article about Appalachian women songwriters and coal mining,

Until the advent of the feminist movement, historians, when they wrote about women at all, documented the lives of the rich and noble and the women of extraordinary gifts. Few bothered to write about the accomplishments of the unglamorous poor, of the disadvantaged women with no public image, living out their lives in the seclusion of their homes. (Yurchenco 209)

In his article, “Workers’ Wives,” written for the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, David Corbin adds, “Nowhere were the importance and influence of workers’ wives more vividly revealed than in the southern coalfields” (1566). Corbin discusses the role of women in the coal industry during the period 1880 to 1920 in greater detail in his book, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*. The fall 1990 issue of *Now and Then* featured a story by Marat Moore in which she presents women’s stories from the Pittston strike of the 1980s. Moore says that “miners’ wives, daughters, mothers and sisters formed UMWA auxiliaries, set up picket lines, got arrested, fed thousands of supporters, conducted jail vigils, fielded constant media pressures and staged an occupation at the company’s Virginia headquarters” (7). The common thread running through these 100 years of southern Appalachia coal mining, is one of active involvement by many courageous women, young and old, single, married, and widowed. They stood side by side with the men of the region and did whatever was necessary to support the workers’ struggle for humane treatment and justice and a better life for themselves and their children. Following in the footsteps of the inimitable Mother Jones, whose words and songs inspired many a generation of coal miners, the history of these women dispels the myth of a people hopelessly entrenched in ignorance and slovenliness. Jeanne Rasmussen, in an essay summarizing her study of Appalachian activism says,

If I have learned anything from these experiences, it is that the stereotyped image of poverty and ignorance cannot be accurately or honestly applied to a culture so endowed with inner courage, spirit and strength. It is easy to emphasize the tragedy (and there is much of it here); to quote only the angry and rebellious; to storm the citadels of the unjust; to portray only the harshness of life. Yet I would caution the sensitive writer or photographer to probe deeper beneath the surface, for here lies not only the mineral wealth of the nation…but also the spirit and freedom of its people. Here, there is indeed a fierce pride that exists: pride in the heritage, the land, the labor; respect for God and for fellow-human beings. Here, there is a communication with the land, a pioneer kind of durability.9

Throughout American history, oppressed people have expressed their discontent in song. A review of John Greenway’s book, *American Folksongs of Protest*, quickly reveals the variety of issues about which songs were written early in American history including labor issues, slavery, miners, migratory workers, and farming. The pain expressed in these songs is deep and heartfelt. Often held in low esteem by scholars, (Greenway 21) these songs were honest, and they were real. Early mining protest songs like, “Ludlow Massacre” and “The Wilder Blues” paint vivid words pictures of the pain and suffering of those individuals on the lowest rung of the American economic and social ladder.10 Protest songs can also provide an excellent historical account of American social protest. Greenway says that protest songs are “…the struggle songs of the people. They are outbursts of bitterness, of hatred for the oppressor, of determination to endure hardships together and to fight for a better life. Whether they are ballads composed on the picket line, they are imbued with the feeling of communality, or togetherness” (10). Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann contend that “women were the primary folklorists for early rural music, memorizing the tunes and lyrics that provided the basic entertainment for the family and community” (5). Women musicians did more than entertain; they were sources of information about important issues affecting their community and the lives of its people. Henrietta Yurchenco asserts that,

Many bold, stirring songs and stories about political and social issues have been written by men. But no body of American folk song so poignantly describes the human condition as those written by women. In their songs are heard the anguished cries of the sick, of starving children, and of women grieving for their husbands dead in the mines. They describe the endless burdens of a miner’s wife—carrying buckets of water from a well, washing clothes at a creek, and fighting endlessly against the coal dust that filtered through every crack and pore. Moreover, the songs cry out for justice and freedom for all human
beings, regardless of color, nationality, or religious belief. (Yurchenco 216)

For Aunt Molly Jackson, folksongs were “what the folks composes out of their daily lives, out of their sorrows, and out of their happiness and all” (Wilgus 172).

One of the more popular singers of the 1960s from the Bristol, Tennessee region was Tennessee Ernie Ford whose mellow voice was more like putting on a pair of warm fuzzy slippers than protest about conditions that no human should endure. Many of those old enough to remember him can sing, verse for verse, one of his most popular songs, “Sixteen Tons,” written by Merle Travis:

You load sixteen tons and what do you get?  
Another day older and deeper in debt.  
Saint Peter, don’t you call me ‘cause I can’t go,  
I owe my soul to the company store. (Green 295)

On the other hand, Sarah Ogan Gunning’s song, “Come All You Coal Miners,” (words at the beginning of this section) and Aunt Molly Jackson’s “Poor Miner’s Farewell” are known regionally but not considered standards outside the somewhat narrow sphere of folk music. The messages may be the same, but there is nothing warm and fuzzy about their songs—just harsh, cold reality about hunger, shame, humiliation, and defeat. These singers, typically performing without accompaniment, had only their words and music to convey the depths of emotion and reality of their message.11 Yurchenco says that, “There is a rich lode of American industrial folklore composed by women in the Southern Appalachian mountains. It can be attributed in part to a combination of cultural, economic, historical, and psychological factors: a rich musical tradition, an economic disaster of mammoth proportions, a history of radical unionism, and the independent, pioneer spirit of the people” (209-10). In a similar vein, Romalis says, “Songs integral to people’s lives in Southern Appalachia, became, during hard times and strikes, organic vehicles for telling new stories…women tended to highlight domestic concerns, family, and children’s welfare” (187).

Continuing to the present day, there is an unbroken history of Appalachian women who shared their joys and their pain, especially their pain, in story and song. Aunt Molly Jackson shares with Mother Jones, Ella May Wiggins, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Hazel Dickens, and Jean Ritchie, all Appalachian women, singers and songwriters, a collective experience that is more than 100 years old.

They say in Harlan County  
There are no neutrals there  
You’ll either be a union man  
Or a thug for J.H. Blair  
Which side are you on…

In Voices from the Mountains, Florence Reece tells the story of how she came to write the words to “Which Side Are You On?” The families of union leaders were constantly harassed by mine owners’ hired thugs (known to the locals as “gun thugs”) and local officials in the pocket of the mine owners. One night the local sheriff and his men came to her house while she was alone with her seven children and ransacked the house. That night, after they left, she sat down and penned new words to an old Baptist hymn, “Lay the Lily Low.” Reece comments on the nature of her songs and echoes the sentiments of Aunt Molly Jackson in that she says, “My songs always goes to the underdog—to the worker. I’m one of them and I feel like I’ve got to be with them. There’s no such thing as neutral. You have to be on one side or the other… In Harlan County there wasn’t no neutral. If you wasn’t a gun thug, you was a union man. You had to be” (119).

Dreadful memories, how they linger,  
How they ever flood my soul,  
How the workers and their children  
Died from hunger and from cold.  
Oh, those memories, how they haunt me  
Makes me want to organize  
Makes me want to help the workers  
Make them open up their eyes.  

Sarah Ogan Gunning, half-sister to Aunt Molly Jackson and a highly regarded songwriter and performer in her own right, wrote the above poignant words to an old hymn, “Precious Memories.”12 Gunning explains that she was a coal miner’s daughter and a coal miner’s wife and spent the better portion of her life in southeastern Kentucky. She knew her share of hardship and then some. One of her babies literally starved to death in the 1930s; her child was one of many to do so. Aunt Molly Jackson is reported to have held 29 children in her arms as they died (Brown 28). The hardships of life in the Kentucky coal mines are the substance of Gunning’s songs. She says, “That, and other things in my life, is what I composed the songs about. These hardships I went through in the Kentucky mountains—and not
just me, but a lot of other people too.’’ She defends her life, and her neighbors’ too, saying that she was ‘‘never ashamed’’ of being poor. ‘‘I done the very best I could with what little I had to do with’’ (Gunning 114-15). John Steinbeck’s words, ‘‘The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement and the one statement that cannot be destroyed’’ (vii), ring with authenticity against the backdrop of the Appalachian women’s songs about the struggle to survive. Written in 1975, Ruthie Gordon’s song, ‘‘Voices from the Mountains,’’ admonishes her listeners in the best Aunt Molly Jackson tradition:

You’d better listen to the voices from the mountains
Tryin’ to tell you what you just might need to know (206)

The collective voice of these strong and courageous women still echo through the valleys of southern Appalachia.

I am a union woman,
As brave as I can be;
I do not like the bosses,
And the bosses don’t like me. (Greenway 269)

Conclusion

Alan Lomax, in his tribute to Jackson written for the 1961 Aunt Molly Jackson memorial edition of the Kentucky Folklore Record, counted her among the ‘‘finest traditional singers I met in the United States,’’ but lamented her lack of training to be able to write because ‘‘…her talent, which amounted to genius in the field of story-telling, was far greater than that of many successful writers.’’ Lomax was in awe of her wealth of knowledge of traditional songs. He called her a ‘‘tigress, a great talker and a great bard’’ and observed that ‘‘her songs of protest can only be matched by those of Woody Guthrie, but they were more passionate than his, and they cut deeper.’’ He concluded his tribute, saying, ‘‘She was folklore itself, at its best, and its best is that it won’t stop growing and it can’t be beaten. We won’t see her like again ever …’’ (132-33). There are many who agree that Aunt Molly Jackson was in a class all her own, loved and despised, ridiculed and praised, ‘‘many in her community considered her a troublesome, domineering woman who frequently ’stretched her blanket’ (exaggerated or lied)’’ (Romalis 181). She ended her days in ‘‘poverty and relative obscurity’’ (Yurchenco 222) far from the Appalachia she loved and defended, but she never quit in her lifelong fight to improve the lives of her people in the hills.

Her brother, Jim Garland, lamented about the strangers who performed her funeral service in California. He says, ‘‘One good thing about the coal mining camps—there were always enough friends to dig one’s grave and arrange for one’s burial’’ (129). In her obituary for The Spectator, Joaune Grant quoted Pete Seeger who said of her: ‘‘Her contribution was more than her songs. The tremendous force of her personality showed us what those songs really meant. They were not cute and quaint, meant for a museum; they were full of terrible reality’’ (17 Oct 1960). One writer for the Sacramento Bee, a newspaper in the California community where Aunt Molly resided until her death in 1961, said that,

Today [1959] Aunt Molly opens her heart in song only when occasional students of the folk ballad come to record some of her melodies. The woman who gave so generously of her voice and her earnings on behalf of the coal miners, lives on a small old age pension—but she says: ‘I have some glorious memories, and if I had it all to do over again, I wouldn’t change my tune.’ (19 Apr 1959)

It is doubtful that anyone could write a better epitaph for the life of Aunt Molly Jackson than her own words. In the finest tradition of ‘‘disorderly women,’’ Aunt Molly Jackson ‘‘spoke her mind’’ in story and song—always in support of justice for the working class and food for the hungry children.

Dreadful memories! How they haunt me
As the lonely moments fly;
Oh, how them little babies suffered!
I saw them starve to death and die. (‘‘Dreadful Memories’’)

Notes

1. Defining the boundaries of the region is as complex an issue as any. My regional reference draws from that of John C. Campbell in which he refers to a 112,000 square mile mountain region that encompasses all of West Virginia, parts of western Maryland, western Virginia and North Carolina, eastern Tennessee and Kentucky, northwestern South Carolina, northern Georgia, and northeastern Alabama. John C. Campbell, The Southern Highlander & his Homeland (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), 10.

2. See Archie Green, John Greenway, David Corbin, Henrietta Yurchenco, and others.

3. Ben A. Franklin, Voices from the Mountain, 129. These figures do not include deaths from ‘‘natural causes.’’ Franklin reports that the ‘‘natural death rate’’ for miners is eight times that of workers in any other industrial occupation.’’


6. Romalis, *Pistol Packin’* ... , 72-74. Romalis references Mary Elizabeth Barnicle-Cadle, “Notes on Aunt Molly Jackson: Dictation taken December 1 and 2nd, pp. 1-35 (1935?),” typescript 6, BCP. The reference to the medical philosophy is also from those notes, p. 3.

7. Romalis and Greenway and others explore these ironies in their writings about Aunt Molly Jackson.


10. In his chapter entitled “Songs of the Miners,” John Greenway says, “It is shameful to say that our folk music is immeasurably the richer for this terrible strife suffered by the miners, but this is a fact...Hundreds of strikes have marked the path of the union’s march through the coal fields, and each of these conceivably produced from one to perhaps a dozen songs, depending on its length and bitterness.” Greenway, *American Folk-songs...*, 147-172.

11. In his discussion of laboratory analyses of voice qualities and styles undertaken by Alan Lomax and Charles Seeger, John Cohen, says “He [Seeger] has compared the graph of a trained, classical voice with that of Molly Jackson’s, who represented the untrained ballad style of the Kentucky mountains. As might be expected, the trained singer produced a nice, even, and predictable graph, while Aunt Molly’s was thoroughly rough and jagged. Each singer had style.” John Cohen, “Introduction to Styles of Old-Time Music,” *The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book*, ed. John Cohen and Mike Seeger (New York: Oak Publications, 1964), 21.

12. There is question about the authorship, although most sources credit Sarah Ogan Gunning rather than Aunt Molly Jackson with penning these words. It is possible that both rendered their own versions or that they, as half-sisters, sang each other’s material so often that lines of authorship became blurred. Archie Green’s book, *Only a Miner*, explores several coal mining songs that expressed similar sentiments and repeated lines heard in other versions. Aunt Molly Jackson, in an interview with Zonweise Stein about the origins of coal mining songs, says, “...them old Kentucky mountaineers, they composed this song [“John Brown’s Coal Mine”] One fella, I don’t know which one it was—you never know who composes these songs...how many verses belong to one person or how many verses belong to another...” Zonweise Stein, “John Brown’s Coal Mine,” *Kentucky Folklife Record* (October-December 1961), 148.


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