

ALAN LOMAX ASSISTANT IN CHARGE

The Library of Congress Letters, 1935–1945

Edited by Ronald D. Cohen



Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge



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page ii: Alan Lomax and Jerome Weisner transcribing folk
songs and documenting records in the Library of Congress.
(Photo by Bernard Hoffman/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

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To Bess Lomax Hawes
(January 21, 1921–November 27, 2009)

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1935**FLORIDA**

1. Belle Glade
2. Chosen
3. Eatonville

GEORGIA

(with Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle)

4. Frederica

NEW YORK

5. New York City
Aunt Molly Jackson

1936**TEXAS**

(with John A. Lomax)

6. Austin — includes first recordings of the Soul Stirrers gospel group

1937**KENTUCKY**

(with Elizabeth Lyttleton Lomax)

7. Arjay
8. Big Creek
9. Billy's Branch
10. Cody
11. Dalesburg
12. Floress
13. Fort Thomas
14. Goose Rock
15. Hazard
16. Horse Creek
17. Hyden
18. Lakeville
19. Manchester
20. Martin's Creek
21. Middlefork
22. Middlesboro
23. Paintsville
24. Pine Mountain
25. Providence
26. Salyersville
27. Webb Branch
28. West Liberty
29. Wooten

MARYLAND

30. Chevy Chase

Songs played and sung by Alan Lomax, Bess Brown Lomax, Margaret Valiant, and the "Resettlement Folk Singers."
Recorded by Lomax.

NEW YORK

5. New York City
Jim Garland
Mr. and Mrs. Joe Gelder
Sarah Ogan Gunning
Aunt Molly Jackson

OHIO

31. Akron

WASHINGTON, D.C.

32. Library of Congress
Charles J. Finger
Myra E. Hull

1938**ILLINOIS**

33. Chicago

INDIANA

(with Elizabeth Lyttleton Lomax)

34. Bloomington
35. Brown County
36. Crawford County
37. Deuchars
38. Evansville
39. Goshen
40. New Harmony
41. Princeton
42. Vincennes

MICHIGAN

43. Beaver Island
44. Calumet
45. Champion
46. Charles
47. Detroit
48. Grandville
49. Greenland
50. Marinisco
51. Mt. Pleasant
52. Munising
53. Newberry
54. Ontonagon
55. St. Ignace
56. Traverse City

NEW JERSEY

60. (with Kay Dealy)
57. Gloucester

OHIO

(with Elizabeth Lyttleton Lomax)

31. Akron
58. Cincinnati
59. Hamilton

PENNSYLVANIA

60. Bryn Mawr

WASHINGTON, D.C.

32. Library of Congress
Barbara Bell
Ernest Bourne
Jelly Roll Morton
Judge Learned Hand
W. C. Handy
James P. Johnson
Pete Johnson
Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly)
Rindlisbacher Lumberjack Group
Johnnie Robertson
Gertrude Smartt
Blaine Stubblefield
Minnie Swearingen

WISCONSIN

61. Odonah

1939**NEW HAMPSHIRE**

(with Helen Hartness Flanders)

62. Orford
63. Walpole

NEW YORK

5. New York City
Albert Ammons
Aunt Molly Jackson
James P. Johnson
Pete Johnson
Meade Lux Lewis
Captain Richard Maitlin
Saunders Terrell (Sonny Terry)

VERMONT

(with Helen Hartness Flanders)

64. Bennington
65. Chelsea
66. East Calais
67. Quebec (*location unknown*)
68. Springfield

VIRGINIA

(with Pete Seeger)

69. Galax
70. Roanoke

WASHINGTON, D.C.

32. Library of Congress
Blaine Stubblefield

1940**WASHINGTON, D.C.**

32. Library of Congress
Woody Guthrie
Herbert Smoke

1941**MISSISSIPPI**

71. Lula
72. Clarksdale

73. Senatobia
74. Stovall Plantation
(first recordings of Muddy Waters)

NORTH CAROLINA

75. Asheville (with Jerome Wiesner and Robert Liss)
76. Swannanoa

VIRGINIA

77. Fort Myer, Arlington
69. Galax
78. Rugby
79. Salem
80. Winchester

WASHINGTON, D.C.

32. Library of Congress

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81. Birmingham (Sacred Harp Convention, with George Pullen Jackson)

ARKANSAS

82. Sadie Beck's plantation, near Robinsonville, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI

72. Clarksdale
83. Robinsonville
73. Senatobia

VIRGINIA

84. Saltville

1944**FLORIDA**

85. Tampa

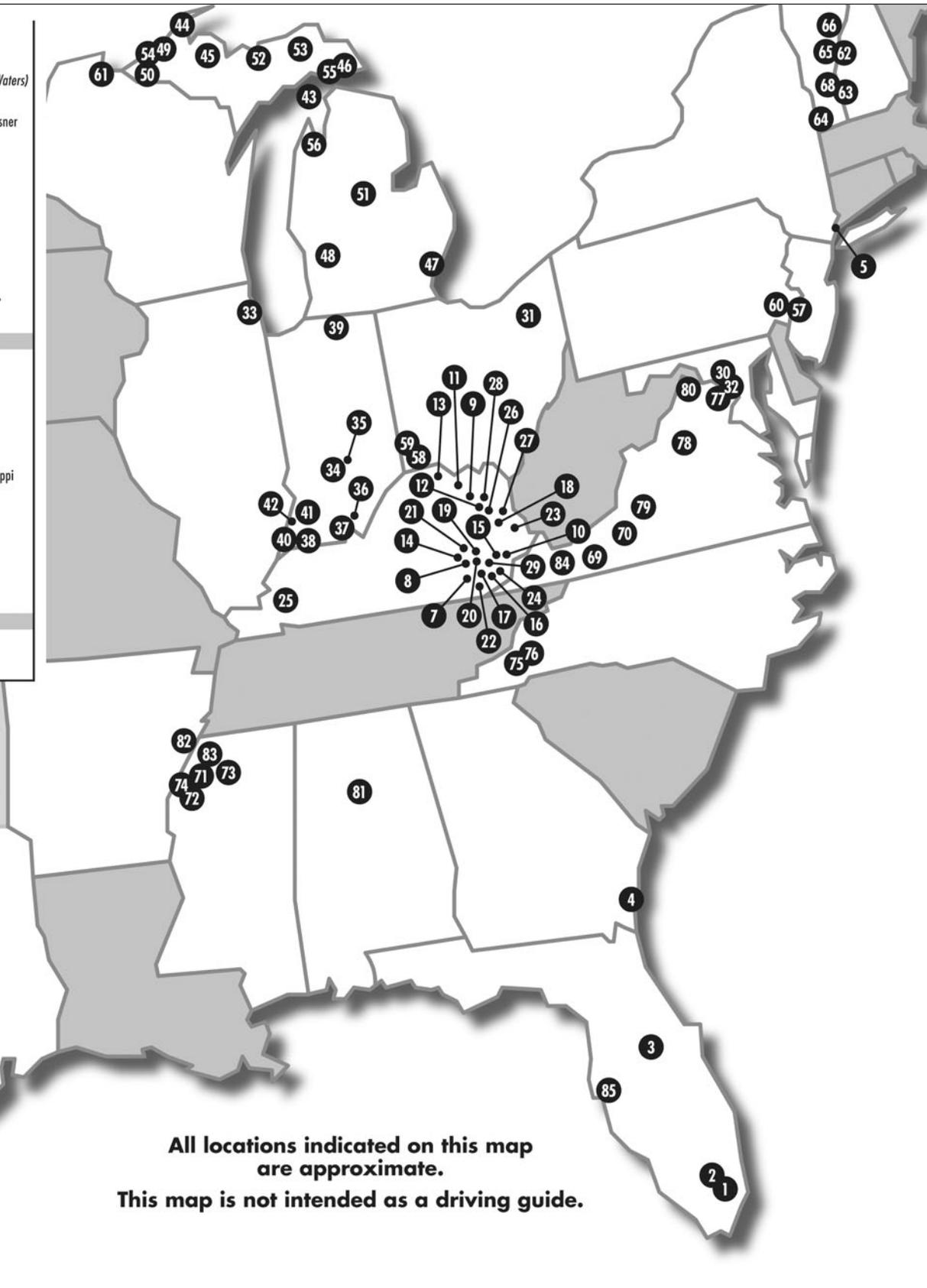
ALAN LOMAX RECORDING SESSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES 1935-1944

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map by Bill Pitts

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Thi



All locations indicated on this map
are approximate.
This map is not intended as a driving guide.



Alan Lomax and Jerome Weisner of the Archive of American Folk Songs (Photo by Bernard Hoffman/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Introduction

Alan Lomax's life spanned much of the twentieth century (1915–2002), and during most of this time he was an active folk song collector and scholar. He has been both praised and criticized. The Rounder Records Alan Lomax Collection, with at least 100 CDs, is only one example of his incredible musical output. He was not only active in making field recordings, he was also a prolific writer, as demonstrated in Ronald D. Cohen, ed., *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934–1997* (New York: Routledge, 2003), which also includes biographical information, analyses of his musical theories, and a complete bibliography. He was also a busy correspondent, particularly during his time with the Library of Congress, demonstrating a complex individual, far more interesting and expansive than the folklorist/ethnomusicologist, even radio personality, who has been written about and feted. Fortunately, John Szwed has now covered much of his amazing story in *Alan Lomax: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 2010).

A reading and examination of his letters reveals not only someone who led an extremely complex, fascinating, creative life. He also had great love for his family and extensive relationships with hundreds of friends and others. Most of the letters published here are located in various collections in the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress; others are from smaller, scattered repositories. Lomax was a prolific correspondent with his family, even when young, but I have had to begin in 1935, when he initiated his formal relationship with the Library of Congress. I have included all of the available letters that are in the public domain through 1945, when Lomax was mostly working for the government. I have also occasionally cited pertinent letters to Alan in the notes. There are certainly others that will eventually be indexed in the American Folklife Center correspondence files, both to and from Alan. I do not have permission to quote from those letters that are part of the Lomax Papers at the Center for American History at the University of Texas, which vividly indicate Alan's intimate, and occasionally feisty, relationship with his father. Some of these letters, including details missing from his professional letters, are referred to in the endnotes.

Lomax had a complex relationship with his elderly father, John. They shared many experiences and personal moments, but also disagreed about politics and music. He also

confided in his brother Johnny and younger sister Bess. He did field collecting with his father and particularly with Elizabeth, his wife. Lomax's life was full of triumphs, but also many hardships, criticisms, health problems, and financial difficulties. He was skilled at luring plain folks before his microphone, and continued to correspond with them in order to maintain contact. He was also involved with the mechanics of recording in the field, often with primitive, troublesome equipment. As an employee of the federal government he had to continually deal with bureaucratic hurdles and financial matters and constraints; during this period he was always short of personal funds. His radical politics surfaced in various ways, sometimes giving him trouble, but also meant the excitement of meeting and working with politically active musicians such as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lead Belly, Burl Ives, Josh White, and the Golden Gate Quartet.

He recorded extensively in the South, which is commonly known, but also in Haiti, the Bahamas, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, Washington, D.C., and Vermont during the years covered in these letters (and, of course, in Great Britain, Spain, and Italy in the 1950s, and other places in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s). He was an omnivorous reader and collector, always bubbling over with fresh ideas and projects, many of which never went much further than his fervent, creative imagination. He was as much at home behind a microphone in a dusty field as before it in a radio or recording studio.

Alan Lomax was born in Austin, Texas, January 31, 1915, the third child of John Avery and Bess Brown Lomax, after Shirley and then John Jr. Their fourth child, Bess, followed six years later. Following a year at the University of Texas (1930–1931), then a year at Harvard College (1931–1932), he returned to the University of Texas, and finally graduated in 1936. During 1933 he accompanied his father on a recording trip through the South, and he continued occasionally to travel with his father while at the University of Texas. He helped his father with the publication of *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934), and the same year published his first article, "'Sinful' Songs of the Southern Negro," in the winter 1934 issue of the *Southwest Review*. Father and son also worked together on *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936) and *Our Singing Country: A Second Volume of American Ballads & Folk Songs* (1941).

In mid-1935, accompanied by the folklorists Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, Lomax participated in a collecting trip through Georgia, Florida, and the Bahamas, having gotten some Library of Congress support. Alan began working for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress in 1936, first as a special and temporary assistant, then as the permanent Assistant in Charge starting in June 1937, until he left in late 1942 to work for the Office of War Information, where he stayed into mid-April 1943. He joined the army on April 4, 1944, and remained in the military into early 1946, continually stationed within the States. This means that his government letters wound down in 1943, although there were a few into 1945. While in the army he continued broadcasting a variety of radio shows.

Alan's interest in folk music and radical politics sprang from a combination of his father's aesthetic influences and his own experiences at Harvard during the nadir of the

Depression. While John remained a political conservative, Alan connected vernacular music with a strong populist sensibility, infused with a belief in racial justice, that would carry throughout his life. He was anxious to spread these messages through his numerous publications, radio shows, promotional activities, collecting trips, and so much more. While his health at times appeared rather fragile, he nonetheless kept up an amazing, and seemingly tireless, creative and physical agenda. He was prickly and sensitive, and his single-minded focus on his work sometimes made him appear ruthless and uncaring. However, despite occasional outbursts of temper or frustration, he focused not on the negative but on the tasks ahead.

There were some controversial issues, such as his collecting trips in Mississippi connected with John Work and other researchers from Fisk University in 1941–1942. Alan's letters help present his side of this rather complex story. He tried, more or less successfully, to document and present folk music in all sorts of formats and venues. His recording sessions with Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Jelly Roll Morton are major achievements. Through his early radio programs he presented Woody, Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, Josh White, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee to a broad public, and in the process was vital in shaping their commercial successes. He corresponded with most of the folk song and ballad collectors of the day, both major and minor, while cultivating grassroots informants throughout much of the country.

While Lomax is most noted for his field recordings, the letters make clear that he was also very interested in the commercial hillbilly, race, and even popular recordings of the 1920s and after. Indeed, Alan eagerly collected thousands for the Library of Congress, and he followed his father's reissue collection, *Smoky Mountain Ballads* (Victor, 1941) in compiling two Brunswick 78 rpm albums of early country songs, *Mountain Frolic* and *Listen to Our Story* (1947). Moreover, while his role in recording and promoting African American music has often been emphasized—partly stimulated by his late publication of *Land Where the Blues Began* (1993)—throughout his life his musical tastes were truly, even increasingly, eclectic.

During his last months in the army he was living in New York with his family. After his discharge in the spring of 1946, he plunged back into the worlds of folk music and radical politics, through his radio shows on the Mutual network, as well as through his work with People's Songs, an organization formed by Pete Seeger and others in late 1945 to promote a singing Left. Alan organized musical shows for Henry Wallace's Progressive Party presidential campaign in 1948, for example; but, feeling the heat of the growing Red Scare beginning to sweep the country, he moved to England in 1950. During much of the 1950s he promoted folk music through his BBC radio shows, while conducting collecting trips through the British Isles, Spain, and Italy. Lomax returned to the United States in 1958 and immediately began a recording trip to the South, while connecting with the developing folk music revival. His writings now took a more theoretical turn, first with *Cantometrics*, his ideas about singing styles based an international comparative perspective, resulting in *Folk Song Style and Culture* (1968), followed by *Choreometrics*, a similar study of the world's

dance and movement styles. He published his final songbook, *The Folk Songs of North America*, in 1960, followed by the award-winning *Land Where the Blues Began*. Up to his death in 2002, Alan continued to promote his ideas about cultural equality—the notion that all cultures were equally valuable and relevant—through various publications and activities.

Until a full biography of Alan Lomax appears, these letters will serve as a way of understanding his fascinating life, both public and private, at least through the end of World War II. Unfortunately, some topics are barely touched upon, if at all. For example, there is little overt discussion of his left-wing political views, his wife Elizabeth's role in their various collecting trips, or his radio shows. Alan Lomax was one of the most stimulating and influential cultural workers of the twentieth century, and it is time to allow him to speak for himself through his voluminous correspondence. His work for the Library of Congress was particularly important: he greatly expanded its collection of field and commercial recordings, and promoted the positive role and image of the federal government throughout the country. He quickly became recognized as perhaps the preeminent folklorist in the country.

I had a brief exchange of letters with Lomax in 1993 and have cherished his two responses; I believe I have taken all of his information and advice to heart. I feel privileged that he took the time to write, and I hope this volume is another step toward acknowledging his helping "a younger colleague."

Since Alan was a most prolific writer, and was often in a hurry, I have found it necessary to correct any obvious misspellings and punctuation errors in order to smooth things out (and avoid numerous uses of [sic]). I have attempted to retain his occasionally idiosyncratic style, and have tried to preserve his paragraph breaks as much as possible (while grouping together shorter paragraphs to enhance the flow). He was, fortunately, an excellent typist, but his handwriting could be problematic. He usually dated his official correspondence, but with undated letters I have made an educated guess, and I have omitted some for which the dating is too problematic. The letters are in basic chronological order, in a narrative format, allowing Alan to tell his story as it unfolded. I have included background information as headnotes to the letters, where appropriate, and also in the numerous endnotes; but until a full biography of Alan appears, it will be necessary to assume that the reader has some general knowledge about him, or at least access to the numerous secondary works I have cited. I have also tried to identify as many of the individuals mentioned as possible, along with supplying detailed information for many, but certainly not all. Moreover, I have not referred to Alan's detailed field notebooks and documentary films now available in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, which add significant information about his collecting trips.

I want to thank Nancy-Jean Ballard for the Helen Hartness Flanders letters; the Center for American History at the University of Texas for the Lomax and John Henry Faulk correspondence; the Woody Guthrie Archives for Alan's letters to Woody; Steve Weiss of the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina for his letters to Annabel Morris Buchanan; the Wisconsin Music Archives, Mills Music Library at the University of

Wisconsin–Madison for the Helene Stratman-Thomas letters; Matt Barton; and so many others. I have had the extraordinary assistance of Todd Harvey at the American Folklife Center, who is the keeper of the Lomax collection and so much else. Without Todd’s help there would be no book. I particularly want to thank David Evans for his exacting editorial skills and keen insights, Jim Leary of the University of Wisconsin for his assistance, as well as Anna Lomax Wood, Don Fleming, and Ellen Harold of the Association for Cultural Equity for their most helpful comments. Craig Gill of the University Press of Mississippi has been most supportive as this project has proceeded to publication.

Following are the manuscript collections I have drawn upon, with the abbreviations used in the text sources:

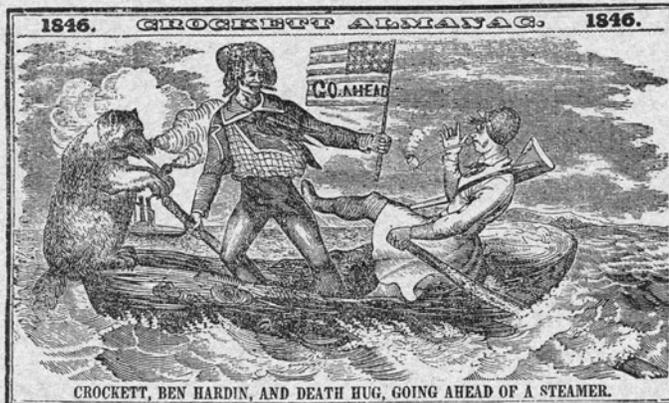
ALC:	The John A. and Alan Lomax Manuscript Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC 1933/001 and 2004/004)
AMB, SFC:	Annabel Morris Buchanan Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, North Carolina
CBS:	Alan Lomax CBS Radio Series Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC 1939/002)
F-LC:	The Library of Congress Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC 1941/002)
FVMF:	“Now What a Time’: Blues, Gospel, and the Fort Valley Music Festivals, 1938–1943” (online presentation), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress
HS-T:	Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection, Wisconsin Music Archives, Mills Music Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison
JHFP:	John Henry Faulk Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin
N-JB:	Nancy-Jean Ballard Collection, Bethesda, Maryland
LP:	Lomax Family Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin
Lomax FBI file:	Alan Lomax file, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.
RRP:	Radio Research Project Manuscript Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC 1941/005)
VFDB:	“Voices From the Dust Bowl: The Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection, 1940–1941” (online presentation), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress
WGA:	Woody Guthrie Archives, Mount Kisco, New York

- WGC: "Woody Guthrie and the Archive of American Folk Song
Correspondence, 1940–1950" (online presentation), American
Folklife Center, Library of Congress
- WMC: Willie McTell Correspondence File, Archive of Folk Culture
General Correspondence, American Folklife Center, Library
of Congress

Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge

A PROGRAM OF
AMERICAN SONGS
FOR
AMERICAN SOLDIERS

arranged entirely on
THE DAVY CROCKETT
OR
go ahead PRINCIPLE



The White House

Monday, February Seventeenth

Nine P. M.

Program cover to "A Program of American Songs for American Soldiers," a concert at the White House, 1941, produced by Alan Lomax. (Alan Lomax Recordings of Rehearsals for White House Program, AFC 1941/006, fol. 302, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress)

LETTERS, 1935–1938

1935

In May 1933, at the tender age of eighteen already a fast learner, Alan began traveling and collecting folk songs through the South with his father, John A. Lomax; this was also the start of his connection with the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress.¹ John Lomax would become Honorary Conservator of the Archive in September 1933. Alan assisted his father with the publication of their pathbreaking compilation *American Ballads and Folk Songs* in 1934, and the same year published his first article, “Sinful’ Songs of the Southern Negro,” in the winter 1934 issue of the *Southwest Review*.² In 1936 father and son would again collaborate with the publication of *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, whom they had met at the Angola State Prison Farm in Louisiana during their 1933 trip. In 1935, while still in college, accompanied by the somewhat older Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, Alan launched another collecting trip to Georgia and Florida; he then went with Barnicle on a similar journey to the Bahamas, after having obtained the loan of a recording machine from the Library of Congress. Hurston (1891–1960) was already an established folklorist and novelist of African American life, while Barnicle (1891–1978) taught English and folklore at New York University.³

During his trip with Hurston and Barnicle, he composed a lengthy letter from Miami, Florida, on July 1, 1935, to his father at the Library of Congress. The message demonstrates his sharp eye and ear for detail, fascination with and knowledge of vernacular music, and a felicitous writing style, but also evinces some of the racial stereotyping so common in that era:

I have just completed a count of our records. So far we have made seventy-five double-faced records consisting of the following types of recordings: Spirituals, chanteys, ring-shouts, folk-tales, jumping dances, work songs, ballads, guitar picking, minstrel songs, praying, sermons. The chanteys are of two sorts. 1) Chanteys sung by the longshoremen at Savannah and Brunswick