

Frank Buckley Walker

Columbia Records Old-Time Music Talent Scout

Frank Buckley Walker (1889 – 1963) was the Artist and Repertoire (A & R) talent scout for Columbia Records' Country Music Division during the 1920s and 1930s. Along with **Ralph Peer** of Victor Records, Walker mastered the technique of field recordings. Specializing in southern roots music, Walker set up remote recording studios in cities such as Atlanta, New Orleans, Memphis, Dallas, Little Rock and Johnson City searching for amateur musical talent.

The fascinating interview below with **Frank Buckley Walker** was done by **Mike Seeger** on June 19, 1962. The interview provides insight into the early era of recorded music as well as the evolution of country music as a market segment.



Frank Buckley Walker

June 19, 1962 The Seeger-Walker Interview

MS (Mike Seeger): I was noticing this Jaw's Harp, or Jew's Harp on your desk here.....

FW (Frank Walker): Jew's Harp is what they call it. It's an old one.

And you were telling me it dates back to your early days, where was it, Fly...?

Fly Summit, New York on a farm. Fly Summit was a metropolis. It had about four or five houses, a church, a baling machine, and one little store. We lived on a farm about a mile away from there. And the Jew's Harp - that played an important part because it was the only thing I could play other than the

harmonica. But it did get me a few pennies here and there for playing for some sorts of entertainment we had amongst the farmers.

Did you ever play for anyone in and up through there?

Yes, we had a little group of our own that eventually used to play for dances. We were rather lucky if we had an engagement. There were four of us, and we did get up into the big money. We got as much as five dollars a night and we had to go to work at eight o'clock and play through to morning, then get home in time to do the milking, of course. The big problem was how do you divide five dollars among four men so we appointed one of us the leader for a particular engagement. He got two dollars and the other three got a dollar apiece.

How 'bout that. What were the other instruments that you had in the group?

Well we had a violin and a guitar, and I did the mouth organ mostly, and there were seven of us in the family, and the farm was not able to support us, so I had to go out and start working for a living with a farmer. I stayed pretty much with him until I was eighteen years old.

What would you say it was that led you to leave the farming life?

Dislike of the long hours. Waking up the cows at three-thirty in the morning and going to bed after everything had been taken care of. The long hours, seven days a week.....

Did you go into business then?

No, I came to Albany and got two or three side jobs and went to a business college and studied shorthand, stenography. I got a job with a bank. I was secretary to the president, I am glad to say. I had a very fine salary of eight dollars a week, work on Saturdays until eleven P.M. and it was a long week of sixty to seventy hours. But it was excellent pay for those days.

Did you stay there for some time?

I stayed there for five years and eventually became assistant treasurer of the bank and became an expert in what they call bond buying. I had an offer after that to come to New York with **Bert S. Kohler**, the very famous politician and writer and head of the banking concern. I gave up my \$300 a month job at Albany to come with him at a hundred dollars a month on one condition – that I could be trained in his office. So I got a little desk and he put it in his office. I got in on all the political and financial matters that took place in Wall Street

in those days. I was put out on the road buying securities and railroads and did a fairly good job, because on the first of January that year I was made a partner in the concern.

When was that?

That was in 1913, quite a while ago. I was there from 1913 through 1916 when, being a member of the National Guard, I was called to active service. I stayed in the Navy until February 1, 1919 and then I came out. Now I imagine you are going to ask me “how did I land in the record business?” I knew nothing about it, nothing...

I'm intrigued.

Well, it so happened when you got out of the service in those days there was very little happening in that line of work. My concern was liquidated. There were no jobs available. Soldiers and sailors were selling apples on the streets of New York and all over the country. There were no such things as jobs. I had offered my services for as low as fifteen dollars a week. I couldn't find a job.

So finally one day I happened to run into a man on the street whose name was **Francis S. Whiten**. He was a Commander in the Navy in a position above mine, and I had done something that he had admired very much that had gotten him written up in the Congressional Record. He asked where I was working and I said, “I wish I were.”

“Well,” he said, “I am the nephew of the Duponts and we own **Columbia Phonograph and Dictaphone Corporation** and you're coming over and work for me.” I said, “I don't know anything about a phonograph record? And he said “Neither do I so you can be my assistant.”

So that's how it happened. After two months, I decided to learn how they make phonograph records, so I went to the plant in Bridgeport and hired out as a training employee working from seven in the morning to six at night, and knew all the intricacies and mechanics of making a phonograph record. Then I came back to New York and I felt I wanted to know something of the artist's end of it so I borrowed \$60,000 from Mr. Whiten to buy the controlling interest in the Central Concert Company of Detroit.

I went out to Detroit and went into the concert business – people like Caruso, Ruffo Toscanini, people of that sort. We booked concerts in Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Hamilton, and Toronto, Canada. I stayed there eventually until 1921 and then sold out with a profit.

I went back to working for the Columbia Phonograph Company as an artist and repertoire man. I felt I knew something about it at that time. **I drifted along until I had a yen to start something in the line that I knew best, country music.**

It was my first love, so I took an engineer and some wax and went down into the South. That was in 1922. That was the beginning. When I came back with some of the results of the trip nobody understood what it was.

Who were the first people you ever recorded?

Well they were more or less unknowns because at that time **there weren't any knowns.**

Do you remember the first artists you ever recorded?

No, at the moment, I'm sorry, I can't remember, but he was a fiddler that I found in a school house down in Georgia.....

*You have probably heard of **Fiddling John Carson**?*

He didn't record for me, but I knew him very well.

Was he similar to the man you recorded in 1922?

Yes, yes, they all sound alike, one a little better than the other or a little more versatile. He could play more different tunes, as we call them, but the quality and the type of playing was the same. Some a little better than the others but they were all good. But the music was not understood by my own people and they said under no circumstances could we put anything of that sort on the market. After due pleading on my part they agreed to let me do it, providing we not make mention of it in any way. I created a special series number at Columbia as I remember – **the 15,000 Series.**

We would make a record, manufacture and release it, and offer it quietly by a little letter to our distributors in the South, and it slowly caught on. Then, as they began to sell we began to look for people better known.

You'd go to an area and you'd talk to everybody around – who did they know who could play guitar, could fiddle, could sing, who went around offering his services? Mostly in little school houses for little dances and things. That's how we ran into **Gid Tanner** and, about the same time, **Clayton McMichen**. A year or two after that time he won the national championship as fiddler. And

Riley Puckett who was a blind guitar player, one of the best I had ever known, and a great singer. Another one we had was **Bert Lane**, and from that we made the **Skillet Lickers**.

Who wrote all those skits that they did like The Fiddler's Convention?

Well, the *Fiddler's Convention*. I had a young man who was with a radio station in Atlanta, **Dan Hornsby**. He is now dead. He became quite popular, one of my very best friends. Dan worked for me for years and years and years. Dan and I would sit down when we were doing nothing else and would gather material for these skits. Then we would rehearse as best we could with the boys. Much of it was done naturally, with only just an outline for them to do.

What was the musician's part in making up these skits would you say?

Not to any great extent. The skits were made up from things they let drop. Then we would sit, Dan and I, and read it to them, and if we got a laugh here or a laugh there, we knew that it was pretty good. From that we worked on it and they got the general feeling of it. In Riley's case, he couldn't see, so he couldn't read. He only learned from the hearing of our voices. At times we had people who couldn't read even though they had excellent eyesight. So it became a going over and over until they became familiar with it, almost a party to them without an audience, because of course we didn't allow any audience.

Did these records sell fairly well?

Tremendously. In the hundreds of thousands.

Did they outsell the musical records?

Yes, yes, because they looked for them. They were just waiting until you could bring them out another one of those and we didn't issue them out too often. And of course, that was just one thought in the so-called country field. **Remember, in those days we never used the word "hillbilly" because "hillbilly" was not a favorable term.** Generally we know what it means. Would you like to know the definition of "hillbilly" - what it really means? Well it's a sort of a billy goat that climbs up and down the side of a mountain, and that's true of the people who lived in that area. I mean they were people who climbed up and down the sides of mountains, and they were hill people folks, so they became "hillbillies," but it is not a favorable or complimentary term at all.

Well, in those days we called them "old familiar tunes" and that's the way they were issued. We did not call them country tunes. That came afterwards.

Then I coined another phrase that seems to have caught on for awhile. I called them "songs of the hills and the plains." That meant not only the hillbilly type of song as we know it today, but also the cowboy songs because they have so much in common.

Going back to the first man you recorded, this fiddler – you recorded him down South somewhere?

That's correct, and as business grew, we made periodic trips to the South and at least two trips a year. We had a rather bad time of it if we recorded less than two hundred masters on each trip. Now, not all of these found the market. It's not like today, with the taping and so forth. In those days, the recording was done on solid wax and you had to bring containers of the waxes you used. So you were very careful and very choosy.

We would decide, for instance, to record down in Johnson City, Tennessee, and write down to various people that you heard about and you would let that be known. It would be mentioned in the paper and the word would get around in churches and schoolhouses that somebody was going to come down there for a *recording*. Not for a session, but for a *recording*. And we would be very glad to listen to people, and they would come in from all over. A regular party. We would sit up all night long and listen to them and weed out the things we wanted and those that we didn't want, because they only had a few things that they were able to do and do well.

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Johnson City Staff News: October 1928

Did you judge them yourself or did someone else?

No that was my job - that was *my job*. It was sort of a twenty-four hour deal. You sat and you listened to them and you talked with them and decided on this and you timed it. You rehearsed them the next morning, and recorded them in the afternoon and evening. It was a twenty-four hour deal, seven days a week.

You helped the people how to understand and record songs?

I think so. I hope so, because in many cases they hadn't the slightest idea of what it all was about. So you had to give them an atmosphere that it was home, so you didn't pick a fancy place to record in. You usually took the upstairs of some old building where it looked pretty terrible. You hung some drapes and curtains and you also made it look and act a bit like home. You brought in a little of the mountain dew to take care of colds or any hoarseness that might happen, and also to remove a little of their fears of strangers doing this sort of work. You try to make them feel at home, and we felt the only way we could ever get that was in their own native habitat. You couldn't have done this in New York.



Marshall Brothers Lumber Co.
Site of the 1928 *Johnson City Sessions*

That's why you recorded down there?

Always. We recorded in dozens and dozens of different places, all the way from San Antonio to Houston and Dallas and Johnson City, Tennessee and Memphis and Little Rock and New Orleans and Atlanta and everywhere. But

that's the way we built it up in advance – getting the word around that a certain time of the year we were going to be there. And these people would show up sometimes from eight or nine hundred miles away.

How they got there I'll never know, and how they got back I'll never know. They never asked you for money. They didn't question anything at all. They just were happy to sing and play, and we were happy to have them. Most of them we saw had something to go back with.

I was interested in what kind of music, what kind of songs you were interested in?

Four kinds. There were only four kinds of country music. One is your *gospel songs*, your religious songs. The others were your *jigs and reels*, like we spoke of a while ago at fiddler's conventions. Your third were your *heart songs*, sentimental songs that came from the heart, and the fourth, which has passed out to a degree today and was terrific in those days, were the *event songs*.

Now would you like to ask me what I mean by an event song? An event song is something that had happened, not today, but maybe years ago, but hadn't permeated through the South because of a lack of newspapers and no radio and no television in those days, but they had heard of it. For instance, some of the biggest sellers were able to bring out was things like *Sinking of the Titanic*.

Bring out a record years after it happened and tell a story with a moral. *The Sinking of the Titanic* was a big seller, but there was a little bit of a moral that people shouldn't believe that they could build a ship that couldn't be sunk. That's the way they talked about it; of thinking God took it upon Himself to show them that they couldn't build anything greater than He could.

Everything had a moral in the events songs. Well, for instance, things that have been made into a motion picture since – do you remember the story of the famous **Scopes Trial**? (Note: later a movie with Spencer Tracy, *Inherit the Wind*). Well who would think of making a phonograph record about that? He said man descended from the ape. Maybe he did. Lots of people think so, but the country person didn't believe that at all.

So we made a record. We sold 60,000 of them on the steps of the courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee – just during that tremendous trial. That shows the interest of the people in hearing somebody else recount an event, because remember there were thousands of buyers of phonograph records that had no other means of communication.

You had sad ones, the stories of Jesse James and all kinds of bandits and

convicts and everything you could think of. Yes, and a murder here and there. *Naomi Wise* is a story of a little girl who lived. *Marion Parker* was married unfortunately, in Atlanta. But there was always a moral so what was done wrong should not be done by the person who was listening. It did a tremendous amount of good; I can't emphasize that too much.

Down through the Southwest, there was the story of **Kenny Wagner** (Note: also known as **Kinnie Wagner**). Kenny was a bandit but he was a clever bandit. He had the habit of committing a crime, getting caught, being put in jail, and getting out. He seemed to be able to master every jail that he was ever in. Well, it was all very good for us from the record standpoint. We could have a record telling of the capture of Kenny Wagner, and then a record of the escape of Kenny Wagner.

We went on through his life through a series of escapes, and then came the time that Kenny was finally caught and shot, not accidentally but on purpose and that was the end of it. So how were we to end up this series of the wonderful selling records we had? We brought out the finale. We called it *The Fate of Kenny Wagner*. And again there was a moral at the end of it.

Who recorded this series on Kenny Wagner?

No one in particular. However I must give credit, tremendous credit to a man named **Carson Robinson**.

He wrote most of them, did he?

Well, no, not to a great degree, but we did have some very odd situations that happened. Carson was a natural writer, and if I were down South and found some tale of a local nature down there, I'd sit down and write Carson to tell him the story of it. Then twenty-four hours later, in New York, Carson would be in, and say here is the story of whatever it happened to be. It would be done. We might make a few changes to make it a little more authentic....

I happened to be up in Leake County, Mississippi. I think it is one of the most – one of the poorest counties in the United States of America. The people are removed from education and from all sorts of social contacts. I found a little group that had been playing together – four people – they interested me so I gave them a name. I called them the **Leake County Revelers**, pretty good sounding group, but they just played things that didn't have any sense to them at all. They played in schoolhouses for practically nothing. So you would have to figure out something that would give some sort of quality to what they were doing – a name....

We had *Courtin' Waltz* on one side of their first record and on the other side we had *Wednesday Night Waltz*. It became one of the biggest selling records of all time. The Leake County Revelers.

Afterwards, a gentleman in the South by the name of **Huey Long** was running for Governor. I was instrumental in getting him to hire the Leake County Revelers to go up through North Louisiana and so forth to play for him at schoolhouses. They would attract the crowd, and when they had the crowd there, Huey used to speak to them about how wonderful a governor he'd make and he was elected hands down. But it was really the Leake County Revelers that won the election. Then after that, the same pattern was adopted by others. I think his name was Daniels from Texas who took up guitar playing himself and used country music to get elected.....

We recorded in a little hotel in Atlanta, and we used to put the singers up and pay a dollar a day for their food and a place to sleep in another little old hotel. And then we would spend all night going from one room to another, and they kept the place hopping all night in all the different rooms that they were in. You would have to go from room to another and keep your pen working and decide we won't use this and pick out the different songs that they knew, because you couldn't bring songs to them because they couldn't learn them. Their repertoire would consist of eight or ten things that they did well and that was all they knew.

So, when you picked out the three or four that were best in a man's so-called repertoire you were through with that man as an artist. It was all. He was finished. It was a culling job, taking the best that they had. You might come out with two selections or you might come out with six or eight, but you did it at that time. You said goodbye. They went back home. **They had made a phonograph record, and that was the next thing to being President of the United States in their mind.**



Byrd Moore's Hot Shots

Byrd Moore, Clarence Greene and Clarence "Tom" Ashley
(Recorded by Frank Walker in Johnson City, TN October 1929)

Then, out of it, there were a very few who could learn or could adopt something that somebody else might be able to do but not record. So you put those two together, so that one might be able to teach the other and you came up with a saleable or recordable article.....

In the early days, they seemed to record a lot of the English kind of ballads.

That is right. That's where so many of those things came. And yet, it's a strange thing that you could take an English ballad of some sort and it got its way to this country and it settled at the foot of a mountain in North Carolina, and it had words put to it by the people in that area down through the years. And then you go to the other side of the mountain, and you find the same tune, the same melody but with a different set of words, to fit their likes or their particular location. Originally much of that came from England and Wales.

Did you record many of these old songs?

Yes, we recorded quite a number of them. Again the melody would remain the same. That was something they all played, and they remembered it but they fit the words the way they wanted it. You see, what is generally not understood, Mike, is that a song writer in the South or in the hills is different than a song writer in the North or in the cities.

Primarily, he's a poet. Up here, a man may be a musician. Down there they write the words first. Up here, you have collaborators, one is a lyric writer and the other is a musician. But down there essentially speaking, it is all done by

one person. So essentially in his heart he is a poet. He writes something. He writes and it rhymes. Let's call him a rhymester, not a poet.

So he writes this rhyme. And then he picks up the guitar and repeats this over and over to himself while he picks away certain notes that seem to fit, that give him the mood of inflecting when he wanted to. When he ends up he has a song. That is why every song written in the South by a so-called "hillbilly" is full of meaning. It tells a story, doesn't it?

Almost always. I'm curious if you ran across people who sang without instruments?

No, no, no.

I was wondering why?

The instrument comes first as far as melody is concerned, you see. It's a natural thing for them to take a banjo and guitar and pick out things, but they have to have a reason for doing it. They just don't sit and do it. That's where the rhyme comes in. They'll take this rhyme and then sit down.

Like **Hank Williams**. That's the way he wrote all of his things. He would write words as they happened to come to him, to fit a certain situation like *Cold Cold Heart*. Maybe you would not like a word or two, but he didn't know no other one to fit in its place. So he'd pick up his guitar, worked around it until that word he didn't like or didn't properly fit (perhaps in the rhyme) nevertheless, made sense when music was put to it. He made it fit.

Did you necessarily run across more instrumentalists rather than singers?...

Yes, yes, yes. Instrumentalists came first, because that is where the noise came from. They got little jobs playing at schoolhouses; playing at square dances. The singer didn't count so much, you see, because there was nobody there that was interested in listening to him. They wanted to dance, whoop it up and have a good time.....

Well, did the people who sang the old English ballads, did they just come in and sing by themselves ever?

No. no. When you got the singer, he was a rarity, and generally speaking, you hung onto him. A chap like that was capable of doing a song written by somebody else – a **Riley Puckett**. He would sit there and listen when someone would tell him a story – the words. He'd get the words pretty much settled in his mind and then he'd maybe have an idea of a melody which they would try

to hum to him, and from it he built it. He was a creator without vision, you see, but tremendous “vision!”

There was a little thing up in my neck of the woods called the Mohawk Valley. There was a little thing that I remember we used to play called *Bright Mohawk Valley*. It was a lovely tune. I loved it. I taught it to Riley, and Riley learned to play it and sing it and we made a record called *Bright Mohawk Valley*.

I don't think we ever sold fewer records but I was hardly disappointed because it meant so much to me, the Mohawk River. That is a story I can repeat because it was published once without my permission. I thought it all over and maybe it was because the Mohawk River wasn't well known enough, and I knew of one in Arkansas called the Red River. So why couldn't I take my Mohawk River and make it into a Red River? Which we did, and it became a little tune called *Red River Valley*.

Riley recorded it all over again, and it became one of the biggest selling country records ever made. Why? **Because there was not one Red River in the United States but probably eight or ten.** So everybody had adopted it. It was their special song, for their special Red River. There is only one Mohawk River. So hereafter, if I ever have anything to do with picking songs again, I've gotta pick one that's in every town.

Can't miss that way. I was wondering if you ran across just a singer without an instrument. Did they ever come in at all?

No. You see you could take a singer, if there was such a one, and you couldn't train him to play, but you could train a fellow who plays music to sing.

Well, I was thinking of the possibility of him singing by himself without music at all.

No, I don't recall. It just isn't natural. Any kind of singing in the South is with an instrument. There is one slight change in that and that is sometimes family groups or even religious groups where there may be only one instrument, but now we're getting over to the more gospel training.

Would you like a little bit of a story as to how you sold hillbilly records to hillbillies? This was in the early days, back in the middle twenties. I had a couple of new artists and I happened to be travelling down there and I landed in a little town called Corbin, Kentucky. It was a sort of a railroad town, as I recall because this was an awful lot of years ago.

I got hold of an idea. I went over to the general store. He sold some

phonograph records and he had a machine in there, an old-type machine. So I went in and talked to him. I said, "You know, let's try something out if you don't get enough people coming into your store. Maybe if one fellow wants to buy a phonograph record, he may want to buy something else in the store, like sugar. He may buy a phonograph record but you got to let him know about it."

"Well how do you go about doing that?" he said. "Well let's put up some seats in the back. It won't take much. We got some plank, some soft board, and we make little rising seats like they do at ball games. We put the phonograph up in the front and we make some signs in the window and we invite the folks to come in on Saturday afternoon to listen to new phonograph records."

He said, "I like the idea." We made the sign in our handwriting. We put up the seats and we had room for about sixty people. I think we had a hundred and sixty show up. We filled the seats and they all stood around and we had the appropriate little box with sawdust, so we didn't get too much tobacco juice on the floor.

I started it and played two or three records that I am sure they knew about already. And then I put on this new record and played it all the way through.

By new, what do you mean?

Oh, that nobody had ever heard before, a new release. It was comin' out but I just wanted to try it out. So I played it and asked, "How many of you people would like to own this record, have it for yourselves?" Everybody held up their hands. "How many of you would like to buy this record, seventy-five cents you know?" I would say that out of the people there maybe twenty or twenty-five held their hand up. I said, "What's the matter with the rest of you people, don't you like it?" They said: "Yes, but we got no money."

Which was the story. They all wanted it you see, but they didn't have the money. The result is you'd be nice about it and give them one because you found exactly what you wanted to know. You were going to sell it to the extent that people had money to spend.

So you played over and over again these different country records and it got late in the afternoon, and the proprietor was getting annoyed. He wanted to clear out the place so he could go home. But how were you going to get rid of these people? They had been so nice. They had sat right there and were ready to be entertained for the next week. So I had a brand new idea. I put it on the machine. I had with me a Red Seal record of Caruso. I put it on the machine, and this was no reflection on Caruso or the aria he sang, but it was a race before the store was empty, showing that they didn't particularly care for

operatic arias.

Oh my. Did you do that kind of unusual practice very often?

Yes, very often, very often. Like with one of the most famous that has ever been made, *Two Black Crows*. When we put that record out, we got such small sales that we were ready to throw it on the discard until I started going around the country and gathering people off the street by giving them a slip of paper telling them we wanted their opinion on a certain phonograph record, if they would be at such a place at a certain time in the afternoon. We would bring all the people up – from the bank president to the street cleaner. You watched the expression on their face. We were able to judge then because you were playing to America.

Were the records recorded on electrical or acoustic equipment?

Well, the very first ones were acoustic because, you see, the so-called electrical recordings didn't come out until 1926, and I was with Columbia at the time, and we were the first ones that brought them out. About 1927 was the first time we went out on the road with the new equipment. We had perfected the equipment in conjunction with Western Electric and we were the only company in the business that had it.

It was down in New Orleans, and we were recording a little religious thing, a little group of three sisters from up in the woods and their name was the **Wisdom Sisters**, of all things. They were the loveliest country people, and they sang nothing but religious songs. We had all the equipment set up and they were the first to record for us that afternoon. We had an electrician with us from New York plus a recording engineer. We tested and tested and everything seemed to be fine. They did this wonderful job on a beautiful religious thing.

We played it back so they could hear it and make sure everything's working all right. We put it on, and, "The score is three to two." It's some ball game in Houston, Texas. It was just being broadcast and we were picking that up, but not the voices in front of the microphone at all. We had some wire contact with the outside air that was crazy so we had a lovely piece of the ball game well-recorded. So that was the beginning of electrical recording....

Chris Bouchillon from down in South Carolina who made that tremendously famous *Talking Blues* – he was down out of a little bit of a town outside Columbia, South Carolina.

How did you ever find him?

Well, he came to see me down in Atlanta. I listened to him and I thought it was pretty awful. I thought the singing was the worst thing I had heard, but I didn't want to tell him that so we kept on talking.

We kept on talking, but I liked the voices. I liked the way he talked to me. I said: "Can you play guitar and banjo while you're talking?" He said: "Yes." So I said: "Let's do it, let's fool around with something like that." He had a little thing called a "blues thing" and he tried to sing it. I said "Don't sing it, just talk it." So we ended up with talking the blues. That's all, except we dropped the "the" out and called it *Talking Blues*.....

Out of North Carolina, probably the biggest thing for the dance field was Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers. That's the name I gave them. Charlie became the motto of North Carolina practically.

Was he very popular down through there?

Tremendously so, but also the biggest record seller everywhere.

*What would you say it was that made **Charlie Poole** so well-liked?*

Perhaps the only thing was that he was just the best singer that they had up there in that area, and that he seemed to blossom out as he got to be known a little bit. He seemed to take a know-it-all attitude which showed up in the music and it was really good. He was the North Carolina big boy, I'll tell you.

Were they songs he had known all his life?

A great many of them were. North Carolina and Tennessee had a different type than Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama and so forth. Your North Carolina and through Virginia were based on the English folk songs, most of them.

Where down below in Florida and in Georgia throughout the South they get a little of Negroid, you know. It gets to be a mixture and there is a very good reason for it because in those days in the outskirts of a city like Atlanta, you had your colored section full of colored people and you had your white, I am sorry to use the word but they used to call them "white trash," but they were very close to each other.

They would pass each other every day. And a little of the spiritualistic singing of the colored people worked over into the white hillbilly and a little of the white hillbilly worked over into what the colored people did, so you got a little combination of the two things there. But they were very easily distinguished, you could tell them.

Would you say they became easier to distinguish as time goes on or?

No, no. They were easier in those days because they were more natural in those days.

More natural?

More natural. They did as they felt. They played and they sang as they felt. They adopted little things... But today they leave that area quickly when they get into the city. So you can say if they take on anything, they take on city ways. They lose their own.

Did you ever record a colored or Negro string band?

Yes.

That played country music?

Well, to a degree. This is a moot question. I got to be very careful about it. The answer is yes. But you had to be very careful about it, you see because there were many laws in the Southern states, which for instance, if I recorded a colored group and yet it was of a hillbilly nature, I couldn't put that on my little folders that I got out on hillbilly music or vice versa.

As a matter of fact, I can give you a concrete instance in the State of Tennessee. We were sued for a quarter of a million dollars because I had recorded two white country boys by the name of the **Allen Brothers**, and I had made them record the one thing that they had made famous. It was a colored song called the *Salty Dog Blues*, and they sang it in colored style. They used to sing it around in Negro pubs.

Did they sing in Negro pubs?

Yes, they used to go in and sing there, so I didn't see anything wrong when I brought it out and put it on the colored list, I thought that's where it belonged, but according to the laws in Tennessee, they didn't belong there.

Who in Tennessee sued for that kind of thing?

They had a lawyer who sued for them.

Oh the Allen Brothers?

But they didn't do it. Somebody sold them on the idea, but we straightened it out. I had to prove a point because in those days I had colored artists like **Ethel Waters** and **Bessie Smith**, and I used to put them on the regular list. Or **Ted Lewis**, if he did some kind of blues, I put him over on the colored list because it was their type of music done by him. What difference does it make? I felt that it's a little integration of music that is done naturally, not legally.

It's interesting to hear you talk of the Allen Brothers because they were the most distinct cross-over. Do you know where they came from?

They came from in and around Chattanooga. They were an example of what I was mentioning to you a few moments ago of how proximity brings about that sort of thing. You hear something that the other fellow is doing that you like. You take it and see if you can work it into your own. That's a natural thing. *Were there Negro bands that played fiddle, banjo and guitar?*

Yes, to a degree, but not too much, for they had to do it for themselves. They weren't able to circulate and do it for those people who would understand that music very well. Just as the Allen Brothers had to go where people understood Salty Dog Blues, they had to go where people understood, and the interchange wasn't very much.

You see there was a lot who didn't last as long as the **Skillet Lickers** and the **North Carolina Ramblers**. They were in there.

The Skillet Lickers, around the early thirties, their popularity began going down.

Yeah, most of it did at that time. The Depression did it. The fall-off in the sale of hillbilly music was due to one thing that was the Depression because remember who was affected most by the Depression in the thirties was your country people. They didn't have the money to buy. You give them the money to buy and they'll buy then.

Your story about Corbin, Kentucky shows that.

Yep, they'll buy them.

You were telling me about the same time, you started the 15,000 Series in country music.....

That's right. At the same time, we became much interested in what we called in those days "race music", music for colored people.

How did it come to be called that?

Well, it was a name that I supposed that I created in order to have a differentiation between that and normal phonograph records. As I said we had our list of “old familiar tunes” and we had our “race music”. Of course they both came from the same area and with the same general ideas.

Did they both come to the same studios?

Same studios, as I said, at different times. We finished up our work with the country people at the end of the week and the next day we started with the other ones. It worked together and it worked beautifully.

At the same time, we used to throw in little extra things. We were recording in New Orleans. We were recording some country music – not too much in New Orleans as strict country. We did record a good deal of so-called jazz – **New Orleans Owls** and different Chicago musicians like that, which sold to the regular trades all over the country.

And in addition to that, we would do some of our “race music”, but we added a third classification at that time from down there that no one ever heard of, a little thing that maybe you heard – the word “Cajun?”

Ahh.....

So I went up to Lafayette for a weekend. I happened to know something of the story of the Cajuns and was astounded at the interest that there was in their little Saturday night dances. A single singer would have a little concertina-type instrument and a one-string fiddle and a triangle, those were the instruments, but they would always have a singer and of course they sang in Cajun.

And to me it had a funny sound. So I brought down a little group. I think his name was **Joe Falcon**. I brought him down to New Orleans, and we recorded just to have something different. We put it on the market, and it had tremendous sales.

Just local sales or all over?

No, definitely local sales extending all over the state of Louisiana and some of Texas, because there is a great many of the Cajuns living over in Texas. It was amazing that you could sell fifty or sixty thousand records in a locality of that size. And yet, that was just a little extra that turned out okay.

Did you record more of the Cajuns after that?

Oh yes, we made a regular business out of that.

*How 'bout the **Bently Boys**? Do you remember anything about them?*

Not very much – no great shakes.

Do you remember where they came from?

No, I'm going to pass up on that. I don't remember, I really don't Mike... I used to have all this on my finger tips, but other things come up, and you forget them. You go on and forget them.

Would you have any way of finding the records, or the name of the first man you recorded way back then?

I had all of those things. I had them in a big chest with everything packed. I had it over at 707 Seventh Avenue when my office was over there, and I had them in the cellar and I never was able to find any. **They disappeared. Everything disappeared.**



*Roll On Buddy Charlie Bowman and His Brothers
Bluegrass Standard from the Johnson City Sessions*

Frank Walker's Later Career

Mike Seeger's interview focuses on Frank B. Walker's early career with Columbia Records. Walker later worked for the Victor and M-G-M Record companies following his long tenure with Columbia. At M-G-M Walker is credited with being a huge factor in the success of Hank Williams in tandem with the legendary music publishing executive **Fred Rose**. Spanning a time frame from the early 1920s through the late 1950s, Frank Walker was a giant figure in establishing the country music recording industry.

Always the promoter and opportunist, following the death of Hank Williams in 1953, M-G-M company President Frank Walker issued the order, **"Take records by all other artists off the presses, lay on an extra shift, and press only Hank Williams records; this is the opportunity of your lifetime."**¹ Talent scout Frank Walker finally found his country music superstar in Hank Williams.

A huge debt of gratitude and recognition is in order to Mike Seeger as Mike's interview with Frank Buckley Walker was conducted only 15 months prior to Walker's death in 1963. Mike Seeger is a noted folk artist, both as an entertainer and folklorist/historian. The extremely talented Seeger family also includes Mike's half-brother, **Pete**, and his sister, **Peggy**.



Frank Walker with Hank Williams, 1949

¹ Escott, Colin. *Hank Williams, The Biography*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1994.