

The Real-Life Inspiration for the characters Susannah and Pearl:

John Lomax and Huddie Ledbetter



Musicologist John Lomax was an American teacher and folklorist who did much for the preservation of American folk songs. Lomax grew up in central Texas. As a nine-year-old, Lomax met and became close friends with one of his father's hired farmhands, Nat Blythe, a former slave. Lomax credits this friendship as the pivotal moment in his life. In exchange for teaching Blythe to read and write, he taught Lomax songs and dance steps. While studying American folklore at Harvard University's graduate school, Lomax's life was further influenced when a professor advised that collectors go out into the countryside to collect ballads firsthand.

Lomax met Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter in the summer of 1933 while touring Texas prisons in search of material for his latest work, an anthology of African-American ballads and folksongs. Lomax used Lead Belly's contribution to preservation of this music to sway the Louisiana Governor to release Lead Belly on parole. The partnership between Lomax and Lead Belly changed their lives forever.



Huddie Ledbetter was born on a plantation in northwest Louisiana. When he was five years old his uncle gave him his first instrument, an accordion. Ledbetter learned the guitar at age 15 and swiftly gained popularity for his talents. He played for audiences from Shreveport, Louisiana to Dallas, Texas. His career was cut short after suffering from a serious illness.

By 1912 Ledbetter was back in Dallas and playing with Blind Lemon Jefferson, a blind singer/guitarist who would become the most commercially successful bluesman of his time. Known for his temper, Ledbetter had numerous run-ins

with the law between 1915 and 1930. In 1915, Ledbetter was sentenced to a chain gang for carrying a pistol. He escaped before his sentence was completed. He was arrested again in 1918 for killing a relative in a fight over a woman. Lead Belly was pardoned after writing a song to the Governor asking for his freedom. Ledbetter was finally sent to the notorious State Penitentiary of Louisiana - Angola Prison - for attempted homicide after he knifed a man in a fight.



Ledbetter continued to play his guitar, gaining a reputation that earned him an audience with folklorist John A. Lomax when he arrived in search of "Negro work songs." Lomax was able to prove Ledbetter's national significance to the Louisiana Governor and swing Ledbetter's parole. In December 1934, Ledbetter famously performed at the national Modern Language Association (MLA) meeting in Philadelphia. Ledbetter went onto a fifteen-year career as an independent artist, championed and assisted by John Lomax's son, Alan.

CONTEXT: *The character of Susannah in Black Pearl Sings! is based on real-life folklorist John Avery Lomax, and Pearl is based on real-life musician, Huddie Ledbetter. Like Pearl, Ledbetter contributed heavily to the preservation of African-American folk music.*

Women in Prison

"We say that a [female prisoner] is worse, but we judge her so by comparison with the ideal of woman, not with a common ideal." - Estelle B. Freedman, author of *Their Sisters' Keepers*



Gender studies have been conducted, questioning whether a woman can commit the same crimes as a man. In general, these studies have concluded that members of both sexes would commit the same crimes. Instead, class is more important than sex in the making of a criminal. For example, in workhouses, women and men "come from similar environments, possess the same moral standards, and the life of both sexes within the group is upon the same plane" (*Their Sisters' Keepers*).

The women's reformatory movement did much to improve the way female prisoners were treated. Before the 1930s, female convicts were housed with men and under the supervision of male guards. Female prisoners were often relegated to the attics and basement of prisons. Prison health systems were not even properly equipped to handle women's health issues such as pregnancy or gynecological exams.

Following the Civil War, racism continued to influence prisoner populations powerfully. The proportions of African American prisoners rose in the Northeast and Midwest. The previously white dominated prisons in the South became overrun with newly freed slaves post Emancipation. This discrimination was particularly hard on female African American prisoners. Whereas white female prisoners were beginning to see an improvement in their treatment during the 1930s, African American women were still viewed as "masculine" due to their race and therefore treated like male convicts.

CONTEXT: *In Black Pearl Sings! Susannah meets Pearl in a women's prison in Texas.*

Women Music Collectors

Women were among the earliest collectors of ethnographic materials in the United States and around the world. Women collectors at the beginning of the twentieth century were pioneers in the field of ethnographic documentation

and traveled independently to places such as Mexico, American Samoa, and the Arctic Circle. By conducting research in the field, these women were venturing into scholarly territory previously occupied almost exclusively by men.

Ethnomusicologist **Laura Boulton** participated in more than twenty expeditions in her effort to document the music of various world cultures. Between 1930 and 1950, Boulton recorded on five continents. She assembled a collection rich in the traditional vocal music of Canada, Africa, Southeast Asia, American Indians, and Eskimos.

In 1935, folklorist and writer **Zora Neale Hurston** and New York University professor Mary Elizabeth Barnicle joined forces with Alan Lomax (John Lomax's son) to document African American song traditions in Georgia, Florida, and the Bahamas. Their field research explored the relationship between the music they recorded and antecedents from Africa and pre-emancipation America.

The California Folk Music Project was created by **Sidney Robertson Cowell**. She was a folk song collector, who described herself as a woman who "traveled 300,000 miles alone with her dog and recording machine." The government paid her to travel to regions where folklore was least explored. Cowell made several thousand recordings, which are housed in the Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress.

CONTEXT: *In Black Pearl Sings! Susannah travels the United States, collecting folk songs. In 1930s America, many women were traveling the country collecting folklore.*