

CDSS Sings: On the Banks of Coldbrook

by Anthony G. Barrand, Ph.D.

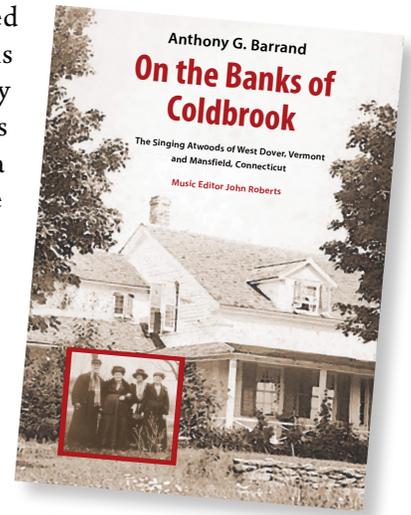
Edith Barnes, oldest daughter of a wealthy outdoorsman, married Warren Sturgis, Latin teacher at the Groton School, in Groton, Massachusetts, in 1899. As a wedding present her father gave them 350 acres of land in the Wilmington “Handle,” so-called because the township is shaped like a square cast-iron skillet with its handle extending to the north. This became West Dover, Vermont, now better known for the Mount Snow ski area. Shortly after the wedding, they began spending their summers living in an old house known as “Coldbrook” on the Handle Road. The house and property were named after a prolific local trout fishing stream. For repairs on the chimney they hired a local mason, James King Polk Atwood. When not working, he would lean a chair against the wall and sing or recite ballads and other poems and songs. Mrs. Sturgis, a published author of short stories, with James’ help wrote down the lyrics to forty-four of these songs. A colleague of Warren’s at the Groton School, Harvard graduate Robert Wells Hughes, later noted the tunes and arranged thirteen of them for piano following the contemporary fashion. These were published in 1919 by G. Schirmer as *Songs from the Hills of Vermont*, #10 in a series on American folk songs.

In the preface to *Songs from the Hills of Vermont*, Sturgis reported that James said of himself: “I’m not what you’d call a regular singer, you know, for I never learned by book nor saw nothin’ writ down. But I’ve allus sung just cause I can’t help it. My father was the same and my grandfather too.” In addition to James’ songs and ballads, Hughes noted more from the singing of James’ second wife, Mary Atwood, and what Sturgis called an “intimate friend”, ‘Aunt’ Jenny Pierce Knapp. Since James, Mary and Mrs. Knapp were both from Bennington, VT, I’m guessing that ‘Aunt’ Jenny was a caregiver for Mary’s or for James’ children by his first wife. A surprise to me was that some of the tunes were noted from someone



The Atwoods with Edith and Aunt Jenny, 1918

Hughes identified by the initials “EBS,” presumably Edith Barnes Sturgis herself. I call this a “surprise” because I interviewed a few of Edith’s living granddaughters and they didn’t think their grandmother was a singer.



In 1980, Margaret MacArthur of Marlboro, VT, showed me a copy of the book and a bundle of typed pages containing several more songs collected by Edith Sturgis from James Atwood. Margaret also discovered that the “Hills” mentioned in the title were not from Vermont’s “Northeast Kingdom,” as she had assumed, but were from West Dover that she could see from her kitchen window. James Atwood was deceased, but she tracked his son Fred Almond Atwood down to Mansfield, CT. Margaret wrote to Fred, asking him if he knew any of his father’s songs. In 1964, she invited him to visit her in Vermont and included a bus ticket. Fred took a Greyhound bus to Brattleboro where he met Margaret; she recognized him because he told her in a letter that he would be wearing a white carnation. He visited her for three days in 1964, singing nearly fifty songs into her reel-to-reel tape recorder. Fred was able both to supply many of the tunes to his father’s repertoire and to songs he had acquired on his own. Of this latter set, Margaret obtained no specific information on their source though many were widely circulated in the 19th century as printed broadsheets.

Fred Atwood had left West Dover in 1910 and, two years later, married Lillian Roswell in Mansfield, Connecticut. They had one son, Ernest Almond Atwood. Margaret later, in 1974, recorded Ernest singing at his mother’s nursing home in Mansfield. Her search for “more songs from the hills of Vermont” has yielded close to 100 songs and, with John Roberts as music editor, the Country

Dance and Song Society has published the family's whole oeuvre in *On the Banks of Coldbrook: The Singing Atwoods of West Dover, VT and Mansfield, CT*.

Many of the ballads and songs in the book are common to American and British traditional singers but include some unusual versions and a few gems not previously recorded or published anywhere. They are not even in the index Steve Roud recently made by systematically numbering all English language songs found in the collection of books in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and archive at Cecil Sharp House, the headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. In 2010, Keith Murphy and I began preparing for the 2012 West Dover Bicentennial to celebrate the incorporation of the Wilmington Handle into the West Dover Township. Our collaboration yielded a CD based on the Atwoods (*On the Banks of Coldbrook: Atwoods Family Songs from the*

Hills of Vermont, Black Isle Music, 2012). This led us to return to Margaret MacArthur's papers, and since then to complete the book of all of the songs of James, Fred, and Ernest Atwood, and other friends and family.

On hearing of the Coldbrook project, the staff at the Vermont Folklife Center sent me a copy of Margaret's field recordings, including those made during the visits she made to Fred and Ernest Atwood. These can be heard on the Vermont Folklife Center - Digital Archive: explore.vermontfolklifecenter.org/digital-archive/collections/items/browse?search=fred+atwood&submit_search=Search

On the Banks of Coldbrook: The Singing Atwoods of West Dover, Vermont, and Mansfield, Connecticut, and the accompany CD are both available in the CDSS online store—store.cdss.org.

BONNIE BLACK BESS (1)

Performers: James, Fred and Ernest Atwood Transcriptions: Lyrics - Edith Sturgis from James Atwood;
Tune - Robert Hughes from James Atwood; John Roberts from Fred and Ernest Atwood See also: Bonnie Black Bess (2) Section 4
Laws L9; Roud 620



When blind - ness did guide me I left my— a - bode. When friends proved un -
grate - ful I took to the___ road For to plun - der the wealth - y and re -
lieve___ the dis - tressed, I___ bought you to aid me, my bon - nie___ Black Bess.

1. When blindness did guide me I left my abode.
When friends proved ungrateful I took to the road
For to plunder the wealthy and relieve the distressed,
I bought you to aid me, my bonnie Black Bess.
2. Oh, how noble you stood, when a carriage I stopped,
The gold and the jewels from its inmates I took.
No poor man did I plunder or ever yet oppress,
No widows or orphans, my bonnie Black Bess.
3. O'er hills and o'er valleys, through glens I rode you,
From London to Yorkshire like lightning you flew.
No toll bars could stop you and rivers you did breast,
In twelve hours you reached it, my bonnie Black Bess.
4. Hark! The blood-hounds are howling and the bugles loud sound,
And the likes of your noble they never can crown.
But to part with you now, it does me so oppress,
Yet farewell forever, my bonnie Black Bess.
5. As ages roll downward, and I'm dead and gone,
This tale shall be told from the father to the son.
And some they will pity while others will confess
'Twas through friendship I shot you, my bonnie Black Bess.
6. And no-one dare say that ingratitude dwelt
In the breast of Dick Turpin, 'twas a vice he never felt.
But I die like a man and soon be at rest
So farewell forever, my bonnie Black Bess.