

Robert Sonkin Alabama and New Jersey Collection

AFC 1941/018

Prepared by Amy Palmer and Judy Ng



American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

Washington, D.C.

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Finding aid URL: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.afc/eadafc.af005004>

Collection Summary

Collection Number: AFC 1941/018

Title: Robert Sonkin Alabama and New Jersey Collection

Bulk Dates: 1941

Repository: Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Extent (original): 7 manuscript folders; 59 12-inch acetate-coated aluminum discs

Creator: Sonkin, Robert, 1911-1980

Language: English

Abstract: Correspondence, field notes, reports, recording logs, transcripts of song texts, and sound recordings of African American music traditions and folkways.

Scope and Content

The collection consists of documentation from Robert Sonkin's field recording trip to Shell Pile, near Port Norris, New Jersey, and from there to Gee's Bend and other locations in Alabama in June-July 1941. Sonkin recorded two discs of African American quartets performing gospel music in Shell Pile, June 25, 1941. His field notes also describe the African American community of Shell Pile, named for the oyster shucking industry established there near Port Norris, N.J. Forty-nine of the sixty-three discs were made in various locations in Gee's Bend and include prayer meetings, sermons, gospel music, spirituals, hymns, jubilee quartet singing, blues, children's songs, recitations and conversations. These discussions cover health and home remedies, the Gee's Bend school, and the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) Gee's Bend study. Sonkin also recorded ten discs in other areas in Alabama, including gospel quartet music in Bessemer, Alabama; interviews in Camden and Palmyra, Alabama; and gospel music in Rehoboth and Greensboro, Alabama. Narratives by two former slaves, Isom Moseley and Alice Gaston, were recorded on July 22, 1941. Four sound discs were lost or used for test cuttings; therefore, there is a discrepancy in the number of recordings in the recording index and the number of sound discs in the catalog record for the collection.

In addition to the recordings, there are typescript copies of research materials about Gee's Bend, Alabama dating from 1937-1939, including a paper, "An exploratory study of the customs, attitudes and folkways of the people in the community of Gee's Bend," by Nathaniel S. Colley of the Tuskegee Institute. Other reports on farm production, construction of new housing and barns, home economics, and community health, which were issued by government agencies, are included in the collection.

Biographical History

Born in the Bronx, New York in 1911, Robert Sonkin was an educator, ethnographic researcher, and author. A graduate of the City College of New York and Columbia University, Sonkin taught at the Department of Public Speaking at City College from 1929 to 1976. In the late 1930s, he worked with Charles L. Todd, his colleague at the Department of Public Speaking, to document the experience of residents of the FSA migrant worker camps in California in 1940 and 1941. In the summer of 1941, using money granted by City College of New York to document Americana, Sonkin traveled to Shell Pile, New Jersey, and Gee's Bend, Alabama to record the religious music and personal reflections of African Americans living in those communities. In Gee's Bend, Sonkin also recorded conversations about the FSA projects that were being undertaken there. During World War II, he worked with the Archive of American Folk Song to document popular reactions to America's involvement in the war, and served in the Army Signal Corps. In the late 1970s, he again collaborated with Todd to produce the book *Alexander Bryan Johnson: Philosophical Banker*. He is also the author of *The Voice and Speech Handbook*. He died in New York in 1980.

Subjects

Locations

Bessemer (Ala.)

Camden (Ala.)

Gee's Bend (Ala.)

Greensboro (Ala.)

Palmerdale (Ala.)
Rehoboth (Ala.)
Port Norris (N.J.)
Shell Pile (N.J.)

Subjects

African American farmers
African American gospel singers
African American musicians
African American school children
African Americans-Folklore
African Americans-Music
African Americans-Religion
African Americans-Social life and customs
African Americans-Songs and music
Folk songs
Gospel music
Hymns, English
Jubilee singers
Sharecropping
Slave narratives
Spirituals (Songs)
Storytelling
Traditional medicine

Administrative Information

Arrangement

The collection is divided into two series, manuscripts and sound recordings. The manuscripts are broken down by sub-series and arranged alphabetically. These include the administrative file, correspondence, notes, recording logs, reports, and transcriptions of songs. The sound recordings are arranged and numbered chronologically by the date recorded, beginning with the first recordings made and ending with the last. Original disc dust jackets are housed separate from the collection.

Access

Access to the collection is available through the Folklife Reading Room of the American Folklife Center. Recordings in the collection are available on reference tapes in the Reading Room. Duplication of collection materials may be governed by copyright and other restrictions. Please refer to the AFC web site for information on ordering copies of unpublished recordings (<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/recording.html>). For specific questions, researchers should consult with the American Folklife Center reference staff.

Two interviews with Alice Gaston and Isom Mosely recorded in Gee's Bend on July 22, 1941 can also be found on the American Memory website *Voices from the Days of Slavery*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/index.html>.

Acquisition

Robert Sonkin donated the collection to the Archive of American Folk Song in 1941, which later became the Archive of Folk Culture at the American Folklife Center. The collection was formerly referred to as the "Gee's Bend Collection" until it was fully processed and a bibliographic record was added to the Library of Congress Online Catalog in 2005.

Preferred Citation

Robert Sonkin Alabama and New Jersey Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Related Materials

Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection , AFC 1985/001

Ethnographic field collection consisting of audio recordings, photographs, manuscript materials, publications, and ephemera, documenting the everyday life of residents of the FSA migrant worker camps in 1940 and 1941. See the American Memory website, *Voices From the Dustbowl: The Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection 1940-1941*: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshhtml/tshome.html>.

Collection Concordance by Format

| Quantity | Physical Extent (original) | Location | Item Numbers |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Manuscript Materials | | | |
| 7 | folders | AFC | Box 1 |
| Sound Recordings | | | |
| 59 | 12-inch acetate-coated aluminum discs | M/B/RS | AFS 5035-AFS 5098 |

Description of Series

Container

Series

Series I: Manuscripts

Series II: Sound Recordings

Discs

Container List

| <i>Container</i> | <i>Contents</i> |
|------------------------------|---|
| Series I: Manuscripts | |
| BOX-FOLDER 1-1 | Administrative Folder list, AFC Collections Database and LC Catalog record printouts |
| BOX-FOLDER 1-2 | Correspondence (1938) 2 letters |
| BOX-FOLDER 1-3 | Notes (1931-1941) Field notes covering AFS 5035 to AFS 5098 (October 1937 to July 3, 1941); Field notes (1931-1941); Superstitions (no date); "Taken from Charles L. Todd / California Migrant Labor Collection" |
| BOX-FOLDER 1-4 | Recording Logs (June 25 - July 25, 1941) 3 copies (AFS 5040 to AFS 5098) |
| BOX-FOLDER 1-5 | Reports (1937-1939) "Big World At Last Reaches Gee's Bend," transcript of article from <i>NY Times Magazine</i> (August 22, 1937); "Exploratory Study of the Customs, Attitudes and Folkways of the People in the Community of Gee's Bend," by Nathaniel S. Colley (n.d.); "Gee's Bend," by U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Farm Security Administration, 2 copies (Sept. 16, 1939; revised Jan. 17, 1941); "Gee's Bend Annual Health Report 1938-1939," by Annie E. Shamburg, Project Nurse (n.d.); "Gee's Bend Farms, Farm Security Administration Report of S. T. Haynes, Farm Supervisor" (n.d.); "Gee's Bend Farms Report of W.K. Idlett, Home Economist," 2 copies (n.d.); "Gee's Bend-Report," no author (n.d.); "Gee's Bend: Report on Visit Made April 17-21, 1939," by Constance E. H. Daniel; "Narrative Report Covering the Economic, Educational, Social and Community Progress for the Gee's Bend Project for the Year, 1938"; "Report on Gee's Bend," no author (n.d.). |
| BOX-FOLDER 1-6 | Transcriptions (June 25 - July 25, 1941) Texts of songs, summary of interviews (AFS 5040 to AFS 5073) |
| BOX-FOLDER 1-7 | Transcriptions (June 25 - July 25, 1941) Texts of songs, summary of interviews (AFS 5074 to AFS 5098) |

Series II: Sound Recordings

Discs

AFS 5035-5098

59 disc recordings recorded in Port Norris, New Jersey and Alabama. Specific locations in Alabama include Gee's Bend, Palmerdale, Birmingham, Bessemer, Camden, Greensboro, and Rehoboth.