

Fragments of Yesteryear

Fragments of Yesteryear

By

Robert D. Morritt

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of production.

Roots of early rural recordings

The evolution of songs, the early origins of the Rural songs of Appalachia and the Old West and their influence on early Country music.

Obscure Victorian era ballads (found in *an old Civil War era ledger book*)

Transcriptions of lyrics from early recordings.

ALBERT SHEWMAKER – *Country Music Collector*

An American, who grew up in the great Depression in Indiana and in Kentucky. His observations on the advent and growth of early country music.

Excerpts from his correspondence to the Author, over a ten year period.

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FOREWORD

As a collector of rural ballads, I could hear the echoes of an earlier age within the lyrics of old records, archaic lyrics and word structures.

I decided *to investigate their origin* to see their influence on later versions of these songs.

The title “Fragments of Yesteryear” was chosen due to the many origins and variety of material presented here. Fitting these pieces together assists us to understand the period in which they were written and how the lyrics changed over time.

Songs from the Great Depression era are transcribed from original recordings.

I have indicated pseudonyms so the real singer may be identified.

We revisit old Railroad songs, Cowboy Songs, Appalachian ballads and their origin.

A few poignant ballads of home and hearth are included culled from very old newspaper clippings of the nineteenth century found pasted on pages of an old Civil War ledger.

I have taken the liberty of ‘*starting backwards*’ by quoting from a small article I wrote in 1978 ‘Early Country Music’ the affect of urban music on early rural recordings in North America this will form the introductory part and delve later into the roots and development of these ballads and songs.

PREFACE

As a youth, I liked what I thought *then* was ‘*early country music*’. I listened to recordings made by Lefty Frizzell, Ray Price, Webb Pierce, Roy Acuff, and others.

One day whilst in a record store, I saw a title that looked familiar. It brought to mind a song that I had heard many years earlier. It was one, my Father used to sing when I was very young, accompanied by his harmonica. Later, I discovered that it was “Golden Slippers”, recorded by Vernon Dalhart and Carson Robison, March 9.1927 in New York (Victor 20539). I recall my father once said “One day people will collect those old songs and write about them”. I found out many years later that he had been correct in his assumption.

It was the 1960’s the ‘Folk Music Era’. People suddenly re-discovered these old ballads and songs. Musicians would add a few chords and restructure the old ballads with a simple G D A7 D G pattern, or a F C F D7 G or use the odd D-minor or E –minor and A-minor chords to give it more depth. With those few chords if you were able to play almost any ‘Folk song’. If you added a Capo to the frets it was easier to sing the higher notes.

I returned to Britain for a Family bereavement, few years ago. A relative mentioned that they had found a few Reel-to Reel tape recordings, “underneath a staircase” that I had inadvertently left behind many years earlier when I moved back to North America. They were folk songs I had recorded.

Two years ago I found an old Reel to reel tape recorder and was finally able to listen to them with some amusement. Replaying these songs I noticed that back then I had a spurious Dylan type voice and my harmonica sounded tinny and screechy. I wonder what I thought I was doing at that time. I expect a lot of my contemporaries have similar recollections of that era.

Returning to that first old record I wondered if it would still play? I had no 78rpm records neither did my friends, but I did have a small RCA Victor portable electric record player. Fortunately my phonograph had 78rpm speed! *I was in luck.*

I placed the record on the turntable, suddenly scratchy barely audible voices sang out to me. It sounded like they were singing in the midst of a thunderstorm, crackling noises accompanied the following words,

“If I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly.” Amazingly the record played all the way through. *I was listening to sounds of a bygone age.* Some time later a Record Store owner told me how I could hear that recording much better and suggested that I rinse the record under warm water.

After doing this and letting it dry. I played the record, the difference was amazing. The sound was more audible, I could hear the voices perfectly. Some time later, I bought an old ‘wind-up’ Victrola and by using proper steel needles. That fitted the deep into the record grooves). The sound was louder, more audible, the thunderstorm background noise had disappeared! From that day on I was hooked, I became an ardent record collector.

I became inquisitive and wanted to know more about earlier songs and I started to search out old records also to collect obscure ballads.

Like many musicians at that time I also listened to both the Carter Family and Woody Guthrie and of course, Bob Dylan but more than that I wanted to know how and where the earlier songs had originated. I noticed that the structure old ballads betrayed an earlier provenance, some as far back as the Tudor period.

Many of these ballads re-appeared a century or two later in the hills of Appalachia. They often differed from the original lyrics. This was due to their rural habitation, inhibited by the remoteness of their homesteads in the hills. They were passed down orally from one generation to another. In many cases they were no longer the same words and had evolved into home grown American ballads. The origin of the ballad long forgotten.

After the dissolution of the French and Spanish colonies in North America, Settlers moved from the hills and traveled west into new territories. The ballads changed once more, being re- weaved, by ‘Cowboys’ on cattle

trails into the Cowboy ballads such as “The Old Chisholm Trail”. The combination of rural Appalachian music and that of the American West eventually resulted in the formation of what is called ‘Country Music.’

Many ballads started to appear on recordings in the 1920’s from ballad collectors who physically brought these down from the hills. An example was that of A.P.Carter (*before there was a ‘Carter Family’*). A.P was a fruit tree seller. He would wander up through the hills of Clinch Mountain in search of old ballads. His collection of old songs appeared later sung by the Carter Family. The song “This Land is Your Land” influenced Woody Guthrie, from the recording “When the World’s On Fire”,¹ by the Carter Family. He reworked this using the music note for note adding his own lyrics. This is an example of how rural songs where now reaching a wider audience, in mainstream America.

Many rural musicians started their careers in the mid-1920’s among the earliest was Ernest Stoneman and his Dixie Mountaineers. The term “Hillbillies” was coined to describe the singers by City people, a name much resented by rural singers.. One group was named “Hill Billies”

For those who enjoy old ballads they will find a varied selection of ballads and songs here. I present these in the hope that it will contribute more to the understanding of how and where, these ballads and songs originated and how they evolved.

¹ When The World’s On Fire – issued on Victor V-40293 (Matrice 59984-2 takes) recorded in Memphis, Tennessee, by the Carter Family, May 24.1930. *Woody Guthrie was eighteen when this record was issued so he would have been very familiar with the tune.*

EARLY COUNTRY MUSIC – ORIGINS

Folk Origins - Urban Recordings re-appearing as 'Rural Music'.

As I listened to older records, I was amazed at the amount of urban influence that migrated into songs of rural singers and fascinated by the amount of 'commercialized' Tin-Pan Alley' songs that resurfaced as rural recordings, a generation or so later. A form of reprocessing that forms a pattern of re-appearing to a new generation *once removed* in a 'Folk' form.

Some examples of the 'process' I witnessed were as follows:

On March 22, 1927 Kelly Harrell (Born in 1889) A Mill Worker from Fries, Virginia and *unable to play a musical instrument* was accompanied by a local String-band and sang 'Charles Guiteau'.

The song 'Charles Guiteau' was described the story of the assassination of President Garfield by Guiteau, yet it bore an older origin as it parodied an 18th. Century 'Penny-pamphlet' ballad , 'TheValiant Sailor'.

"Come all you wild young men and warning take by me and see you go no more into foreign countries, as I myself have done the very last day of May, I parted from my friends, for I no longer could stay"

With this example in mind I decided to explore other songs that had been knowingly or unwittingly influenced by older sources.

Commercial songs recurring later as Rural Songs

One example of a previously issued recording being re-worked was that entitled "I Once Loved a Sailor", written in 1904 by Honey Boy Evans, as 'Come Take a Trip in my Airship". This *re-appeared in the late 1920's* recorded by Roy Harvey (Vocal and guitar) and Posey Rorer (Fiddle) On Columbia 15385-D, recorded July 23.1928)

A rustic example was “When the Bees are in the Hive” by the North Carolinians, Roy Harvey and Posey Rorer on Columbia D-15155, recorded May 12.1927. This originated on a rare single-face blue colored shellac disc on the American-Odeon label, American-Odeon 031059 sung by Byron G.Harlan *in 1906*. Harlan also recorded it for Zon-O-Phone. (1906).

TRANSITION – FOLK BALLADS TO COMMERCIAL RECORDINGS

“The Louisville Burglar”, appeared on a record by ‘The Hickory Nuts’ recorded on Okeh 45169, (Sept.24,1927. it was a *reworking of the song* ‘The Boston Burglar’ written in 1888 by M.G.Fitzpatrick. The song also appeared with its correct title, ‘The Boston Burglar’ and was recorded by Fiddlin’ John Carson, (Okeh 40419, June 24, 1925) also by Vernon Dalhart (June 24, 1925 on Brunswick 2942) and by him on Vocalion, Supertone and Edison 51608 and Edison Blue Amberol Cylinder 5129, (August 3, 1925)

A version was recorded by Carl T.Sprague, Victor 20534 (June 23,1926) both Dalhart and Sprague. Both singers had worked rounding up cattle, incidentally the name Vernon and Dalhart were two towns between which ‘Vernon Dalhart’ (real name Marion Try Slaughter) had rounded up Cattle in the 1890’s.

Another non –rural song that originated in the City, and re-appeared in a ‘Country’ guise, was a reworking of, “Hello, Central Give Me Heaven” (A parody of a child, trying to speak over the telephone to the deceased Mother in heaven.) A song originally composed by Charles K. Harris, (Harris was well-known earlier as the composer of the popular song, “After the Ball” in 1892), “Hello, Central” was released originally on an Edison wax cylinder in July 1901 (Edison 7852) sung by Byron G.Harlan. (Well known later as part of the popular Comedy Team ‘Collins and Harlan’).

“Keep on the Sunny Side” now a well-known as a country’ Gospel song. was recorded by the Carter Family (May 9,1928) released on Victor 21434. When asked of its origin, A. P. Carter said he *could not remember where he first heard the song*. He said that he would *copyright it under his own name*. It was actually a 1906 composition by Jack Drislane and had been recorded and released in May 1906 on a two-minute, Edison wax

cylinder record (Edison 9271) sung by Byron G. Harlan, born in Paris, Kansas, August 29, 1861.

“The Letter That Never Came” written in 1886 by Paul Dresser this reappeared as a ‘Country’ recording by Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, recorded July 25, 1927 (Columbia D-15179-D), it was also recorded by ‘Pie Plant Pete’ (real name Claude W. Moye) on Gennett 6810 and released on Gennett’s subsidiary labels also (Champion 15752, Supertone 9363 and in Canada on the Crown and Melotone labels (same catalogue number for each Canadian label of 45003) (Recorded January 25, 1929)

A later recording of “The Letter That Never Came” was recorded in Atlanta, GA April 21, 1930, released on Columbia 15580-D. sung by the local Barrett Family identified on the label as Blue Ridge Mountain Singers’.

FIRST COUNTRY RECORDING

The first 'Country' recording to achieve wide-area sales was "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane". Written in the year 1871 by American balladeer Will Hays, recorded in Atlanta, Georgia, c. June 14.1923, by Fiddlin' John Carson. Released *locally* it was so popular that Okeh decided to issue it nationally on Okeh 4890.

Other than earlier instrumental Fiddle recordings (*Don Richardson in 1916 and A.C.'Eck' Robertson (Victor 19149 June 30.1922)*) the recording made by Fiddlin' John Carson would be if not the first record it would be classified as the first 'vocal' country music record ever made.

Earlier Instrumental Recordings

Don Richardson (Born 1878 Clinton, NC.)

Recorded the following 'Country' fiddle recordings in 1916

Columbia Mx# 46754 Mississippi Sawyer Columbia A-2018

Columbia Mx# 46755 Arkansas Traveler Columbia A-2140

(He recorded on Okeh 1169 Mississippi Sawyer also on Okeh 1255 Arkansas Traveler (both in July 1919)

Arkansas Traveler was also recorded later on Silvertone 1255.

Richardson a native of Clinton, North Carolina later went into a more formal music career. Therefore he is often overlooked by most 'dyed in the wool' Country Music collectors. Raised in North Carolina, he attended many rural Fiddle engagements in his youth, the only time he was away from North Carolina was for ten years when he was a conductor and gave violin lessons in New York. He later became a Professor in North Carolina for the rest of his life.

An earlier rural Maine musician Charles 'Ross' Taggart was more a vaudevillian act and from way down 'East' not from Appalachia.

A 'rustic' singer recorded "In the Shadow of the Pines" a haunting older style that is quite moving if not somber. This was sung by Kelly Harrell His version was recorded on Victor 29657, March 23, 1927. The song was recorded much earlier as a Parlor song. The singers were identified on the recording only as '*by Baritone & Tenor*'.¹

¹ Checking my old listings. I located the recording of "In the Shadow of the Pines", sung by Byron G. Harlan and A.D.Madeira , released on Edison cylinder record (Edison 7347)Feb.3.1900, also issued on a 5" brown wax cylinder. (Edison B-424).

EARLY BALLADS – ORIGINS

Early balladry appeared in North America, often from older British sources.

It should be recalled that most of the early ‘Americans’ did not always ‘emigrate’, some were brought to the shores in dire circumstances. Many were indentured servants, others, felons.

It was common in Britain for Magistrates to sentence felons in the 18th and 19th Centuries to ‘transportation’ a convenient term for a one-way ticket out of the Parish and it also fulfilled the need for labor in the ‘Colonies’.

Many of the skilled ‘Immigrants’ were ‘transported’ to Virginia some later settled in Cities as Cabinet makers, etc., or became ‘Housekeepers’. Many ballads came from Appalachia. As the Country opened up people headed westward and similar ballads were later found with local amendments in the newer ‘West Virginia’ and out into Kansas, Missouri and later in the West which evolved into Western ballads.

This subject has been covered by many an academic in the past. The purpose here is to go further back to a period not filled with a simple rehash of the ballads familiar to us, but those familiar to those who resided in Britain prior to the advent of the North-American immigrant.

Well-known in North America as the song, ‘Who is going to Shoe My Pretty Little Foot’ (or more rustically as, “Who’s Gonna Shoe My Purty Li’l Foot”)

Here is a *very old version* which brings us *closer to the source* and meaning of the original tale. *The original title is shown.*

*The Lass of Lochroyan*²

‘O wha will shoe my bonny foot?
And wha will glove my hand?
And wha will lace my middle jimp
Wi’ a lang, lang linen band?

O wha will kame my yellow hair,
With a new-made silver kame?
And wha will father my young son,
‘Till Lord Gregory come hame?

‘But I will get a bonny boat,
And I will sail the sea,
And I will gang to Lord Gregory,
Since he canna come hame to me

And when she saw the stately tower
Shining sae clear and bright,
Whilk stood aboon the jawing wave,
Built on a rock of height

She’s taen her young son in her arms,
And to the door she’s gane’
And long she knocked and sair she ca’d,
But answer got she nane.

O Open the door, Lord Gregory!
O Open and let me in!
For the wind blows through my yellow hair,
And the rain draps o’er my chin
Now open the door Lord Gregory!
Open the door, I pray,
For thy young son is in my arms,
And will be dead ere day.

When the cock had crawn and the day did dawn,
And the sun began to peep,

² Archaic Scottish dialect - *Author’s translation*. jimp is a bodice an upper garment. gowden = ‘golden’ crawn= crowed, draps = drops, gane = one, nane = none, sae = so, gang = to go, canna = cannot, hame = home, which, aboon = above, whilk = which, aboon = above, wha = who. Kame = comb, taen = taken, ca’d = called, sair = their, e’em = of them, wad na = wasn’t there, faem = foam, hae = had, nae = no.

Then up and raise him Lord Gregory,
And sair, sair he did weep.

Oh I hae dreamed a dream, mother,
I wish it may prove true,
That the bonny Lass o' Lochroyan,
was at the gate e'em now.

Gin it be for Annie of Lochroyan,
That ye make a this din,
She stood a last night at your door,
But I true she wad na in.

O wae betide ye, ill woman!
An ill deid may ye die!
That wadna open the door to her,
Nor yet wad waken me

O he's gane down to yon shore side
As fast as he could fare,
He saw fair Annie in the boat,
Bit the wind it tossed her sair.

The wind blew loud, the sea grew rough,
And dashed the boat on shore,
Fair Annie floated through the faem,
But the babie rose no more

Lord Gregory tore his yellow hair,
And made a heavy moan;
Fair Annie's corpse lay at his feet,
Her bonny young son was gone,

O cherry, cherry was her cheek,
And gowden was her hair,
But clay-cold were her rosy lips-,
Nae spark o' like was there

And first he kissed her cherry cheek,
And syne he kissed her rosy lips,
There was no breath within.

O wae betide my cruel mother,
An ill death may she die!
She turned fair Annie frae my door,
Wha died for love of me.

Source; ‘Popular Ballads’ c.1806, 1 -37) (Jamieson), Scott’s – Minstrelsy, 1802, 11, 49). Bells’s English Poets – ‘Ballads of the Peasantry’ – Charles Griffin and Co. 1870. (In America the ballad is mainly found mainly in West Virginia and Virginia. Lochroyan is in Galloway, Scotland probably one of many ancient ruins still to be seen along the rocky coastline of Ayrshire and Galloway.

EARLY RECORDINGS

George Collins

There are few recordings of this ballad by the following singers:

Henry Whitter

(New York, Oct.18,1926) (Mx# 80092-) Okeh 45081 also as Geo, Collins,
Mx# 2779-3, c. Aug.1926) Broadway 8024, Herwin 75536

Emry Arthur

Paramount 3222 (Grafton, Wisconsin c.Oct/Nov.1929) (Mx# L-106-2)

Roy Harvey and the North Carolina Ramblers

Brunswick 250 (Ashland, Ky. Feb.16.1928)

Riley Puckett

Bluebird B-5818 (March 29, 1934, San Antonio, Texas)

Source – Recordings. Own recorded sound collection and Discographies
1976-1990. Morritt, R.D. The Victor Master Bok – Vol.2- Brian Rust –
Walter C.Allen, Highland Park, NJ Country Music Records 1921-1942
Tony Russell and Bob Pinson – Oxford University Press

George Collins

George Collins rode home one cold rainy night,
George Collins rode home so fine,
George Collins rode home one cold rainy night,
And taken sick and died.

Little Hattie was sitting in her mother's room,
A-sewing on silk so fine,
When she heard poor George had died,
She laid her silk aside.

She followed him up, she followed him down,
She followed him to his grave;
And there upon her knees she fell,

She wept, she moaned, she prayed.

She sat down on the coffin; "Take off the lid,
Fold back the linen so fine,
That I may kiss his cold, pale lips,
For I know he'll never kiss mine."

"The happiest hours I ever spent,
Were by George Collins' side,
The saddest news I ever heard,
Was that George Collins had died."

"O, don't you see the turtle dove,
As he flies from pine to pine?
He weeps, he moans for his own true love,
Just as I wept for mine."

Source (this version only), Mr. R.C.Kelly, of Sutton, in Braxton County, WV in January 1917, said he obtained the song from Howard Dent and Lidel Evans who learned it in the lumber camps.

WHO WROTE THAT SONG? (*PUTTING ON THE STYLE*)

As a Teen, I heard this song in Britain. It appeared with revised lyrics it was sung by Lonnie Donegan. I had (then) not realized it came from an older tradition.

It was high up on the 'Top Ten' Radio charts and reminded me how almost at the same time that the Donegan 'Hit' appeared, a similar situation occurred in the U.S.A. on a Chart 'Hit' copyrighted 1957 by Buddy Knox of 'Hula Love'.

I have the original version (same tune and same lyrics (Lyrics - Percy Wenrich, music - Edward Madden). On recordings by Billy Murray and Ada Jones (Mx# B-10697-July 1911 on Victor) Also by The composer, Percy Wenrich's wife as Dolly Connolly, released on Columbia A1028 September 1911 also on Zonophone 5791 the same month..

The following version was gathered in May 1917 by Mr .G. O. Hall, Parkersburg, Wood County, West Virginia, who said that he obtained it from his Mother, "Who learned it when she was just a girl from a Miss Laura Smith, Middlebourne, Tyler County"

Putting on the Style (Original Ballad)

Eighteen hundred and seventy-one,
January the first,
Thought I'd write a poem,
If I could or durst;
Looking through the window,
Something made me smile,
'T is a fellow going in,
Putting on the style

Young man in his carriage,
Driving on like mad,
A pair of spanky horses,

Borrowed from his dad;
Cracks his whip supremely,
Makes a lady smile,
Isn't he going in,
Putting on the style.

Sweet sixteen at meeting,
Goes to see the boys;
Turns her head and giggles
At every little noise;
Simpers on this side,
Then on that awhile;
Isn't she going in,
Putting on the style?

Preacher in the pulpit,
Shouting with all his might,
"Glory Hallelujah!"
The people's in a fright;
Thinks Satan's coming
Up and down the aisle;
The preacher's only,
Putting on the style.

Country town coquettes,
Impudence and paint,
Finger rings and broaches,
Enough to annoy a saint;
Has for every fellow,
A winning-looking smile;
Isn't she a-going in,
Putting on the style.

This song has had a very 'popular' recording history. Recorded by Lonnie Donegan on PYE Records (different lyrics) at the London Palladium. May 9, 1957 it became a number one 'Hit' in Britain that year.

Other Recordings of 'Putting on the style':

Vernon Dalhary

Columbia 15082-D (Apr.5,1926), Victor 19919 (Dec.21,1925)

Edison 52118, (Oct.15,1927)

Edison Amberola Cylinder 5434 (Oct.15, 1927)

Gennett 3364 & Challenge 16476 (July 28, 1932)

The Skiffle Version

Lonnie Donegan³

Two Weeks Number One (June 28, 1957)

Nineteen weeks on the Hit Parade Chart in Britain

Sweet sixteen goes to church
Just to see the boys
Laughs and screams and giggles
At every little noise
Turns her face a little
And turns her head awhile
But everybody knows she's
Only putting on the style

She's putting on the agony
Putting on the style
That's what all the young folks
Are doing all the while
And as I look around me
I sometimes have to smile
Seeing all the young folks
Putting on the style

Well the young man in the hot rod car
Driving like he's mad
With a pair of yellow gloves
He's borrowed from his dad
He makes it roar so lively
Just to make his girlfriend smile
But she knows he's only
Putting on the style

He's putting on the agony
Putting on the style
That's what all the young folks
Are doing all the while
And as I look around me
I sometimes have to smile

³ Recorded by Lonnie Donegan on PYE Records (Different lyrics) at the London Palladium. May 9, 1957 a number one 'Hit' in Britain that year. Lyrics transcribed from Author's collection.

Seeing all the young folks
Putting on the style

Preacher in the pulpit
Roars with all his might
Sing Glory Halleluja
Puts the folks all in a fright
Now you might think it's satan
That's a-coming down the aisle
But it's only our poor preacher boys
That's putting on his style

Putting on the agony
Putting on the style
That's what all the young folks
Are doing all the while
And as I look around me
I sometimes have to smile
Seeing all the young folks
Putting on the style

Putting on the agony
Putting on the style
That's what all the young folks
Are doing all the while
And as I look around me
I sometimes have to smile
Seeing all the young folks
Putting on the style

Putting on the agony
Putting on the style
That's what all the young folks
Are doing all the while
And as I look around me
I sometimes have to smile
Seeing all the young folks
Putting on the style

BILLY BOY

“Where are you going, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Where are you going charming Billy?”
“I am going to seek me a wife,
For the joy of my life;
She’s a young thing and can’t leave her mammy.”

“Can she make a feather bed, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Can she make a feather bed, charming Billy?”
“Yes, she can make a feather bed,
And put the pillows at the head;
She’s a young thing and can’t leave her mammy.”

“Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Can she bake a cherry pie, charming Billy?”
“Yes, she can bake a cherry pie,
Quick as a cat can wink her eye;
She’s a young thing and can’t leave her mammy.”

“Is she fitted for your wife, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Is she fitted for your wife, charming Billy?”
“She’s as fitted for my wife
As my pocket for my knife;
She’s a young thing and can’t leave her mammy.”

“How old is she, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
How old is she, charming Billy?”
“She’s twice six, twice seven,
Twice forty and eleven;
She’s a young thing and can’t leave her mammy.”

A popular ballad found in Southern England (Dorset, Worcestershire) in Ontario, Canada, in the U.S.A. in Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia and West Virginia. *This version came from Mrs. Hilary G. Richardson, Clarksburg, Harrison County, WV. C.1916*

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