

# Perquimans People

## Louis Watson Chappell leaves folklore collection

**Special to the Perquimans Weekly**  
Louis W. Chappell seized the attention of folklorists in America and Europe decades ago with his book that established the factual basis of the John Henry legend.

Critics hailed "John Henry: A Folklore Study" as a brilliant piece of scholarship and a lesson in methodology. Even today the book remains one of the most analytical studies of a single ballad.

Yet despite publication of that book and a second critical work on "Folk Songs of Roanoke and the Albemarle," the efforts of the shy North Carolina folklorist remain virtually unknown.

But the fact is that during 30 years of teaching and research at West Virginia University, Chappell amassed an astonishingly comprehensive collection of West Virginia folklore.

"His collection on West Virginia folklore is simply the best there is," said George W. Parkinson, curator of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection.

"And it certainly is one of the best regional folklore collections of its kind in the United States."

What has excited WVU archivists most is a priceless collection of 646 aluminum disc recordings Chappell made of West Virginia folk musicians from 1937 to 1947. Chappell presented the records to the collection shortly before his death last November.

"The recordings of some 2,500 tunes represent a cross section of musical traditions dating from a time when central Appalachia was relatively isolated," Parkinson said.

"They are a rare opportunity to study an unexplored primary resource.

"While some of the contents are of recent origin, the emphasis is clearly upon the traditional," he added. "About four dozen different child ballads have been identified among the recordings."

"His work will help establish the authenticity of some ballads placed in the dubious category."

"The archive also provides a valuable record of traditional Appalachian instrumental music. Small amounts of banjo, guitar and fife-and-drum music complement a generous quantity of fiddle music."

Collection archivists also are sorting through the remainder of his

papers recently donated to WVU by his brothers, Sidney G. of Wilson, N. C. and Fernando R. Chappell of Elizabeth City, and a sister, Mrs. Essie C. Twine of Chesapeake, Va.

The gift, which comprises about a dozen linear feet of material, includes a book of unpublished songs and ballads of West Virginia that Chappell coauthored; hundreds of handwritten manuscripts on Beowulf, the old English poem; and numerous books.

"He set out to find every ballad then current in West Virginia that he could," Parkinson said. "He wanted everything, not just traditional Scottish ballads about maids and princesses."

Chappell, who was born in Belvidere, attended Belvidere Academy before working his way through Wake Forest University selling fruit trees and bibles.

He taught at North Carolina State A&M before joining WVU as an English instructor in 1922. He remained at WVU for 30 years with time off for research and graduate study at Columbia University, the university of Chicago and New York University.

His first major work, the book on John Henry, was published by a German press in 1933. He had begun work on the Albemarle book several years earlier and published it himself in 1939.

"In his boyhood, Albemarle was a very isolated area," Parkinson said. "His family primarily sustained itself by subsistence farming."

"For entertainment the Chappells and their neighbors sang ballads and told stories and he grew up savoring these. Unlike most folklorists, his interest was kindled and nurtured through his own family traditions."

"I'm fairly certain that he understood West Virginia's folk traditions and people in terms of his own heritage," Parkinson said. "The state had a direct link to his own folk origins."

Chappell did the bulk of his West Virginia research in the late 1930s and 1940s with occasional sorties into bordering states. He carried his bulky recording equipment literally to the electric outlet nearest where the person interviewed lived.

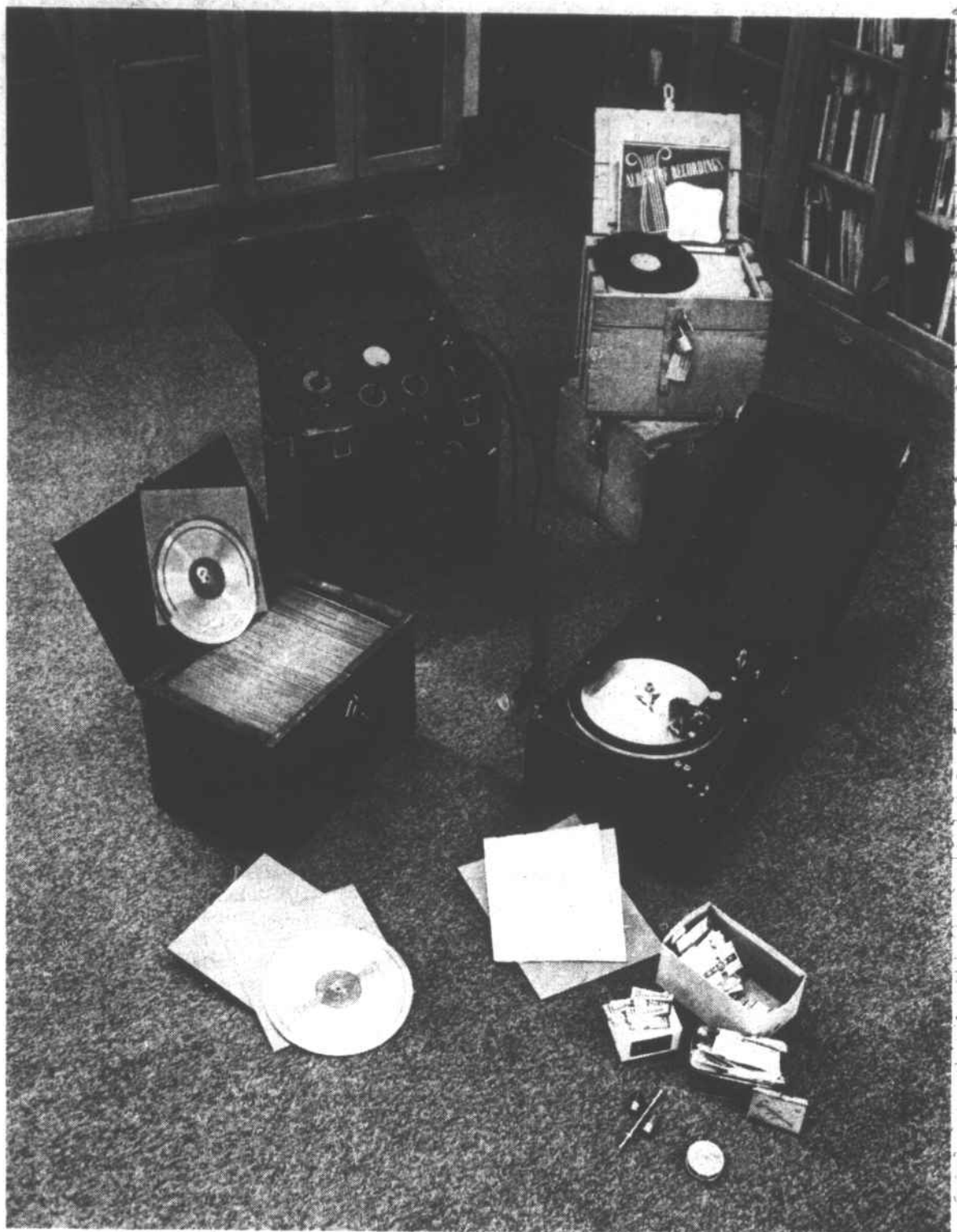
"You have to remember that roads in West Virginia weren't very good in those days and that many of the places he visited were inaccessible anyway," Parkinson said.

"Many times he would agree to pick someone up along side a road and take them to a motel for the interview."

"But the recordings he made on that bulky equipment are priceless today," he added.

"Chappell was a meticulous scholar, a determined and dedicated folklorist, much of whose work is yet to be discovered by others. He is a sleeper. But that was partly a personal choice."

An analytical listing of Chappell's work is contained in "West Virginia Folk Music," a 185-page guide edited by John A. Cuthbert, curator of the collection.



Perquimans native Louis Watson Chappell recorded over 600 ten-inch 78 rpm discs with the handmade recording machine above which he

purchased in 1937. The Virginia and Regional folklorist donated this History Collection at Western Virginia University. (Photo courtesy of Carl Fleischer)



Louis Watson Chappell was born in Belvidere and attended school at Belvidere Academy. He was the son of the late Mr. and Mrs. George A. Chappell. He was a folklorist best known for his

investigations into the "John Henry" legend, all written in his book, "John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study." (Photo courtesy of Chappell's sisters Clara Parker and Catherine Williams.)

### health hints

Many people would not rate acne as a serious health problem. The anxiety, embarrassment and alienation often associated with acne, however, are very real and serious problems to millions of young people.



Even when acne disappears on its own—as it usually does—it can leave behind unsightly blemishes that will not go away. For this reason, even mild cases of acne may warrant medical care.

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### ATTENTION STUDENTS:

If you're going away to school you've probably already packed a few special things that remind you of home.

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### County Property For Sale

The Board of Commissioners of Perquimans County hereby requests sealed bids for the purchased of the following property:

- One 1979 Plymouth Volare 4-dr. Sedan formerly used by the Perquimans County Sheriff's Dept.
- One Snapper riding lawn mower 30" ct 11 HP
- One Snapper riding lawn mower 30" cut 8-HP

All items will be sold in their present condition (as is) and may be seen by contacting the Clerk to the Board in the Perquimans County Courthouse. Separate bids must be submitted in writing to the undersigned Clerk on or before 8:00 P.M., August 15, 1983. The Board reserves the right to reject all bids.

Perquimans County Board of Commissioners  
By: Jeanne C. White, Clerk

### NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING TO CONSIDER

#### LEVY OF ½% SUPPLEMENTAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT SALES AND USE TAX

Notice is hereby given that the Board of Commissioners of Perquimans County will hold a public hearing to consider the levy of a one-half per cent (½%) supplemental local government sales and use tax, at the following time, date and place:

**MONDAY, AUGUST 15, 1983 at 7:00 P.M.**  
**PERQUIMANS COUNTY COURTHOUSE (Courtroom)**

All interested citizens have the right to be heard and are invited to attend and present their views to the Board of Commissioners as to whether the proposed tax is wise or unwise; whether the tax should or should not be levied; whether local conditions require the imposition of the tax; whether other means of taxation available to the county and municipalities within the county would be more equitable; and any other reasons for or against the levy of a one-half per cent (½%) supplemental local government sales and use tax as an added source of revenue for Perquimans County and the cities and towns within the county.

(Published by order of the Perquimans County Board of Commissioners.)

Jeanne C. White  
Clerk to the Board