

UNPREPARED TO DIE



AMERICA'S GREATEST
MURDER BALLADS
AND THE TRUE CRIME STORIES
THAT INSPIRED THEM



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3 - Knoxville Girl

*“Thus I deluded her again,
Into a private place,
Then took a stick out of the hedge,
And struck her in the face,*

*But she fell on her bended knee,
And did for mercy cry,
‘For heaven’s sake, don’t murder me,
I am not fit to die.’”*

“The Berkshire Tragedy” – (1744).

It's the fragility of Charlie Louvin's voice that does it. He was 79 years old when he entered a Nashville studio to re-record “Knoxville Girl” for his self-titled 2007 album and he sounds like a breath of Tennessee wind could blow him away. There's a palpable sadness in his voice as Louvin's character confesses his old crime, but absolutely no attempt to excuse what he's done. The result is one of the most exquisite readings the song's received in its 90-year history on disc.

Like almost every other version, Louvin's sticks closely to the template set by Arthur Tanner on the song's first commercial release in 1927. “Knoxville Girl” was already well-known in the South by the time Tanner's record came out, but it was his Columbia Records 78 which froze it in its enduring form. The version of events Tanner gave us has been adhered to by almost every singer who followed him and it goes like this:

The narrator meets a girl in Knoxville and spends every Sunday evening at her home. One evening, they go for walk and he begins beating her with a sturdy stick. She begs for her life, but he ignores her

KNOXVILLE GIRL

pleas, continues the beating even more viciously and doesn't stop till the ground is awash with her blood. He dumps her dead body in the river, then returns home, fending off his mother's queries about his stained clothes by insisting he's had a nosebleed. After a tortured night, he's thrown in jail for life. His last words before the music fades out are to assure us that he really did love her.

Louvin first tackled this grim little tale with his brother Ira in 1956, when they worked as a bluegrass duo called The Louvin Brothers. Ira was long dead by the time Charlie revisited the song, and the partner he chose for 2007's session was Will Oldham, better known as Bonny "Prince" Billy. Oldham, who wasn't even born when the Louvins first cut "Knoxville Girl", wisely avoids trying to mimic the brothers' blood-born harmonies, contenting himself instead with some restrained background singing and few lines of the lead vocal when Charlie takes a breather.

Despite the 43-year difference in their ages, the two men clearly see the song through very similar eyes, and that's one clue to why it's survived so long. Like a shark, "Knoxville Girl" seems to have reached a peak of evolution many generations ago, finding an unchanging form which suits each new decade as well as the last. Young singers find the song just as irresistible as their grandfathers did, and show just as little inclination to meddle with its established form. You have only to check iTunes to see that new recordings of "Knoxville Girl" appear there almost daily, as do freshly-packaged compilations exploiting the song's long back catalogue.

Fifteen years into the 21st century, it's clear that everyone still wants a piece of this unfortunate lass. Even now, though, when you play the song to someone who hasn't heard it before, they all ask the same question: why did he kill her?

The song certainly doesn't spell out any motive, moving from an innocent country walk to the start of the beating in two consecutive lines. The Louvin Brothers' 1956 lyric – which I'm going to use as my model throughout this chapter – puts it like this:

*We went to take an evening walk,
About a mile from town,
I picked a stick up off the ground,
And knocked that fair girl down. ¹*

UNPREPARED TO DIE

It's as simple and as brutal as that: one minute they're walking quietly along, the next he's bludgeoning her with a makeshift club. To see why he's doing this, we have to consider some clues from the rest of the song. Take this couplet from the opening verse:

*And every Sunday evening,
Out in her home I'd dwell.*

Then there's the victim's words as she begs for mercy:

*Oh Willard dear, don't kill me here,
I'm unprepared to die. ²*

And finally, this verse:

*Go down, go down, you Knoxville Girl,
With the dark and roving eye,
Go down, go down, you Knoxville Girl,
You can never be my bride.*

Put these three fragments together and things begin to get a little clearer. The killer didn't just visit this girl's home on Sunday evenings, he dwelt there, which carries a definite suggestion that he stayed the night. Faced with imminent death, the girl says she's "unprepared to die", which tells us she's not yet had a chance to make her peace with God about some recent sin that's troubling her mind. Her "dark and roving eye" hints that – in the killer's mind at least – she's a bit of a temptress. Although she can now never be his bride, that possibility's evidently been raised, or why else would he mention it?

So, we've got a young man who's slept with his girlfriend, come under some pressure to marry her and then kills her instead. To understand why, we need to rewind the clock to 17th century Shropshire and two of that century's English diarists.



KNOXVILLE GIRL

Philip Henry was a non-conformist clergyman living about 25 miles from the Shropshire town of Shrewsbury. The town was also known as Salop in those days and, on 20 February 1683, Henry wrote this in his diary:

I heard of a murther in Salop on Sabb. Day ye 10. instant, a woman fathering a conception on a Milner was Kild by him in a feild, her Body laye there many dayes by reason of ye Coroner's absence. ³

Henry, like everyone else in England, then used the Julian calendar, which ran ten days "behind" the modern Gregorian calendar adopted in 1752. Making this adjustment confirms that his 10 February 1683 really was a Sunday. He's a contemporary witness describing a recent event, so there's good reason to take his account seriously.

The next piece of the puzzle comes from the third volume of Samuel Pepys' collected ballads. Pepys was a keen collector of the printed ballad sheets which were then sold on every London street corner and amassed over 1,800 examples in his personal archive. At some point between 1666 and 1688, he added one called "The Bloody Miller", which came complete with this introduction:

A true and just Account of one Francis Cooper of Hocstow near Shrewsbury, who was a Miller's Servant and kept company with one Anne Nichols for the space of two years, who then proved to be with Child by him and being urged by her Father to marry her he most wickedly and barbarously murdered her. ⁴

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Hocstow, is a 17th century spelling of Hogstow, a village about 12 miles south-west of Shrewsbury, so the place, the killer's profession, the date and the deed itself all match Henry's account. It's fair to conclude that both documents are describing the same crime, and now we can put a name to each of the main players. The murderer was called Francis Cooper, his victim was Anne Nichols and he killed her because he'd knocked her up and didn't want to marry her.

Checking the Shropshire burial records, I discovered a good deal of evidence to support this account. With the help of county archivist Jean Evans, I found a woman called Anne Nicholas who had been buried in

UNPREPARED TO DIE

Westbury on 1 March 1683. Given the vagaries of 17th century spelling, "Nichols" and "Nicholas" are a good match, and Westbury lies just five miles from Hogstow itself.

Not only that, but the parish register shows a note of "*truculenter occisa*" against Anne's burial, indicating that she met a violent death. The handwritten register's official print transcript renders this simply as "murdered". Three weeks after her burial, on 24 March, a boy named Ichabod was baptised in the parish, his parents being listed as "Francis Cooper, homicide, and Anne". I was delighted at these details – particularly as I seemed to be the first person who'd dug them out of the archives.

There could hardly be a more appropriate name than Ichabod for Francis and Anne's son. It means "no glory" and comes from the *First Book Of Samuel*, where the wife of Phinehas delivers a son just after hearing its father has been killed in battle and her people defeated. She calls the child Ichabod to reflect the grim circumstances of its birth and then promptly dies herself.

Our records of UK executions don't go back far enough to confirm the ballad's claim that Francis was hanged, but that seems his most likely fate. It would certainly explain why I was unable to find any burial record for him. Like all executed murderers, he'd have been refused burial on sacred ground and hence never entered in the register. I've since visited the Westbury parish church of St Mary's where Anne was probably buried, but its earliest surviving gravestones date back only to about 1800, so there's nothing further to be learned there.

One thing I can't explain is how young Ichabod managed to survive long enough to be baptised. Did Francis wait till just after his son's birth to kill Anne, then abandon the baby to die of starvation or exposure in that Shropshire field? Was the pregnancy so far advanced that someone managed to cut a living child from the dead mother's womb? Whatever the truth of the matter, I suspect he ended up in the care of the church, and that's how he came to be given such a Biblically-appropriate name.

The match of names, places, crimes and dates given in our three documents is too close to dismiss as mere coincidence. The details in Westbury's parish register provide documentary proof there really was a Shropshire murderer called Francis Cooper in 1683, that the ballad sheet identifies his victim correctly, and that Francis really did impregnate

KNOXVILLE GIRL

her. The delay between Anne's 10 February murder and her burial on 1 March can be explained by the "many dayes" she was left waiting for the coroner and then the inquest conducted when he finally arrived.

Neither Francis nor Anne are given names in "The Bloody Miller"'s verses, which call them simply "I" and "she" throughout. The young miller who narrates the tale spots an attractive girl in his home village and, despite her virtuous nature, persuades her to sleep with him. She discovers she's pregnant and her father sends her round to the miller's cottage to demand he marries her. The miller suggests they find a quiet country spot where they can discuss the matter in private. He then murders her horribly and is eventually hanged for the crime.

The similarities with "Knoxville Girl"'s plot are striking enough, but it's the wording and scansion of the two songs that really establishes "The Bloody Miller" as "Knoxville Girl"'s earliest ancestor. Before we come on to that aspect, though, we need to look at another old English ballad too.

Gallows ballads like "The Bloody Miller" were a popular form in Pepys' day, and often claimed to be an authentic record of the killer's last confession or his dying words on the scaffold. These were composed by workers in every large town's print shops, run off the presses the night before the execution and sold at the base of the gallows itself while the hanged man's body was still swinging. The goriest ballads, which tended to sell particularly well, would be endlessly rewritten and adapted to extend their shelf life, often incorporating local details or adapting themselves to new atrocities as time passed and the sellers travelled from town to town.

"The Bloody Miller" spawned other ballads very quickly and the most significant of these is "The Berkshire Tragedy". The National Library of Australia has an Edinburgh copy printed in 1744, but it's probably a good deal older than that. The ballad tells the same basic story as "The Bloody Miller", but sets its tale in Wytham, just across the border from Berkshire in the next-door county of Oxfordshire. Although the 1744 sheet sticks closely to "The Bloody Miller"'s template, it claims to be the last confession of a Wytham man called John Mauge, who'd just killed his sweetheart Anne Knite and was about to hang for it. If so, then even this very early version of the printed ballad is an amalgam of two quite separate crimes.

"The Berkshire Tragedy" adds several new elements to the tale which are not present in "The Bloody Miller", but which crop up again a century

UNPREPARED TO DIE

later in the first versions of "Knoxville Girl". Most significantly of all, its narrator describes his victim as "an Oxford lass" – Oxford's about four miles from Wytham – and that's a development which would steer much of the song's later history. It's not clear why it's called "The Berkshire Tragedy" when neither of the main characters lived there, but perhaps "The Oxfordshire Tragedy" was simply thought too unwieldy a title.

Let's recap for a moment. We've got "The Bloody Miller", collected by Pepys in around 1685, complete with an introduction identifying both killer and his victim, plus an independent contemporary account of the crime itself and documents confirming Francis and Anne's names. By 1744, this ballad had produced an alternative version called "The Berkshire Tragedy", which adds many of the details we're familiar with in "Knoxville Girl" today, but which may also draw on a second crime quite separate from the one Pepys' sheet describes.

The ballad scholar George Laws draws precisely this family tree for "Knoxville Girl" in his 1957 book *American Balladry From British Broad-sides*, linking the song directly back to 17th century England. "The ballad in all its forms preserves the same stanzic pattern, the same basic sequence of events, many of the same descriptive and narrative details and even the same phrases and rhyming words," he points out.⁵

The clearest way to illustrate this point is to assemble a composite version of "The Bloody Miller" and "The Berkshire Tragedy", using the two English ballads' original wording, but setting each verse against its equivalent in the American song. You can see the result and just how closely it fits "Knoxville Girl", on the page opposite.

The English ballads are a lot more long-winded than their American cousins and tend to go in for a lot more moralising. But cutting all this out, as I've done in my composite version, still leaves all the key elements of "Knoxville Girl" in place. The private walk's there and so's the stick, the plea for mercy and the fact that she's not yet made her peace with God. The sadism of the killing itself is present too, as are the hair, the river, the forestalled wedding, the return home, the nosebleed, the candle, the restless night, the trip to jail and the bad end.

One element which was lost when the English ballads started to be shortened was an unambiguous statement of what caused all the trouble. "The Bloody Miller" has:

KNOXVILLE GIRL

"The Bloody Miller" (c. 1685) /
"The Berkshire Tragedy" (1744)

By chance upon an Oxford lass,
I cast a wanton eye,
And promis'd I would marry her,
If she would with me would lie,

This I deluded her again,
Into a private place,
Then took a stick out of the hedge,
And struck her in the face,

But she fell on her bended knee,
And did for mercy cry,
"For heaven's sake, don't murder me,
I am not fit to die".

From ear to ear I slit her mouth,
And stabbed her in the head,
Till she poor soule did breathless lie,
Before her Butcher bled,

And then I took her by the hair,
To cover this foul sin,
And dragg'd her to the river side,
Then threw her body in,

Thus in the blood of innocence,
My hands were deeply dy'd,
And shined in her purple gore,
That should have been my bride,

Then home unto my mill I ran,
But sorely was amaz'd,
My man thought I had mischief done,
And strangely on me gaz'd,

"How come you by that blood upon,
Your trembling hands and clothes?"
I presently to him reply'd,
"By bleeding at the nose",

I wishfully upon him look'd,
But little to him said,
But snatch'd the candle from his hand,
And went unto my bed,

Where I lay trembling all the night,
For I could take no rest,
And perfect flames of Hell did flash,
Like lightning in my face,

The justice too perceiv'd the guilt,
Nor longer would take bail,
But the next morning I was sent,
Away to Reading gaol,

So like a wretch my dayes I end,
Upon the Gallows Tree,
And I do hope my punishment,
Will such a warning be,
That none may ever after this,
Commit such villany.

"Knoxville Girl", The Louvin Brothers (1956).
Lyrics: Trad / Public Domain.

I met a little girl in Knoxville,
A town we all know well,
And every Sunday evening,
Out in her home I'd dwell,

We went to take an evening walk,
About a mile from town,
I picked a stick up off the ground,
And knocked that fair girl down,

She fell down on her bended knees,
For mercy she did cry,
"Oh, Willard dear, don't kill me here,
I'm unprepared to die".

She never spoke another word,
I only beat her more,
Until the ground around me,
Within her blood did flow,

I took her by her golden curls,
And I drug her round and round,
Throwing her into the river,
That flows through Knoxville town,

Go down, go down, you Knoxville girl,
With the dark and roving eyes,
Go down, go down, you Knoxville girl,
You can never be my bride,

I started back to Knoxville,
Got there about midnight,
My mother she was worried,
And woke up in a fright,

Saying, "Dear son, what have you done,
To bloody your clothes so?"
I told my anxious mother,
I was bleeding at my nose,

I called for me a candle,
To light myself to bed,
I called for me a handkerchief,
To bind my aching head,

Rolled and tumbled the whole night through,
As troubles was for me,
Like flames of hell around my bed,
And in my eyes could see,

They carried me down to Knoxville,
And put me in a cell,
My friends all tried to get me out,
But none could go my bail,

I'm here to waste my life away,
Down in this dirty old jail,
Because I murdered that Knoxville girl,
The girl I loved so well.

UNPREPARED TO DIE

*She did believe my flattering tongue,
Till I got her with Child. ⁶*

And "The Berkshire Tragedy" has:

*For the damsel came to me and said,
"By you I am with child,
I hope, dear John, you'll marry me,
For you have me defil'd." ⁷*

Whoever put the earliest versions of "Knoxville Girl" together retained the source ballads' scansion and that means my composite version can be sung to "Knoxville Girl"'s modern tune. In this form, "The Berkshire Tragedy" looks much more significant than "The Bloody Miller", accounting for 40 of the composite's 44 lines. But remember that, without "The Bloody Miller", we'd never have had "The Berkshire Tragedy" in the first place. It's also "The Bloody Miller" which is most directly connected to the real Anne Nichols' death and which first coined this whole family of songs' most distinctive and enduring image:

*But when I saw this for my fact,
Just judgement on me passed,
The blood in Court ran from my nose,
Yea, ran exceeding fast.*

Every later version, starting with "The Berkshire Tragedy", shifts this scene to the killer's return home, where he uses the nosebleed excuse to fob off questions about his bloodstained clothes. "The Berkshire Tragedy" has him holding this conversation with a servant, but that would hardly have been a credible circumstance for the early Scottish and Irish settlers who first brought this song across the Atlantic. "Knoxville Girl" sets the conversation in simple family surroundings instead, having the killer confronted by his worried mother:

*Saying "Dear son, what have you done,
To bloody your clothes so?",
I told my anxious mother,
I was bleeding at my nose.*

KNOXVILLE GIRL

This nosebleed recurs in almost every version of “Knoxville Girl” and it’s the single most reliable DNA “signature” establishing that all the branches of this song’s family tree lead back to “The Bloody Miller”’s trunk. In its first usage, it may have been intended as an omen of the killer’s ill fortune – in this case, his imminent execution.

This is a belief from English folklore which goes back at least as far as 1180, when Nigel de Longchamps’ *Mirror For Fools* has a character interpreting his nosebleed as a sign of bad luck to come. The same idea appears again in John Webster’s *Duchess Of Malfi* from 1614 and in Samuel Pepys’ 1667 diary. On 6 July that year, Pepys writes: “It was an ominous thing, methought, just as he was bidding me his last Adieu, his nose fell a-bleeding, which run in my mind a pretty while after.”^{8, 9, 10}

We know this notion was still current when “The Bloody Miller” was written, because 1684 produced *The Island Queens*, a play by the restoration dramatist John Banks, with this exchange:

DOWGLAS: “No sooner was I laid to rest, but just three drops of blood fell from my nose and stain’d my pillow.”

QUEEN MARY: “That rather does betoken some mischief to thyself.”

DOWGLAS: “Perhaps to cowards, who prize their own base lives. But to the brave, ‘tis always fatal to the friend they love.”¹¹

Anyone who beats a woman to death while she’s carrying his child would certainly count as a coward rather than a brave man, so perhaps that’s the idea “The Bloody Miller”’s original composer was trying to convey. Equally, it could be simple foreshadowing, creating tension in the audience’s mind just as the ominous chords of a horror movie’s soundtrack do for us. Either way, the nosebleed is now cemented deep into “Knoxville Girl”’s foundations and it’s still the surest sign of every variation’s parentage.



Once “The Berkshire Tragedy” had got the process underway, “The Bloody Miller” quickly spawned a dozen competing versions of its basic story. These had titles like “The Cruel Miller”, “Hanged I Shall Be”, “The Wittham Miller” or “Ekefield Town”, and all reported the killer’s nosebleed when he returned home. The strength of the core

UNPREPARED TO DIE

story ensured these songs remained in the ballad sellers' stock for many years and continued to sell well. "The Berkshire Tragedy" itself was still being hawked around London as late as 1825, when a print copy was cheekily retitled to claim the crime had happened just a few months before.

Recycling like this was part and parcel of the ballad seller's trade. "The ballad printers of America and Britain apparently ransacked the old ballad sheets for anything that was usable," Laws says. "Frequently, an archaic ballad could be given local application, or could be redesigned to fit a predetermined amount of space."

It's not clear which version of the song reached America first, but the strand I'm going to follow is the one which starts with "The Berkshire Tragedy"'s description of its victim as "an Oxford lass". We don't know exactly when a version called "The Oxford Tragedy" first appeared. But, given "The Berkshire Tragedy"'s unambiguous setting in Oxfordshire and the fact that the two counties are right next door to each other, the transposition must have suggested itself almost immediately.

Laws suggests that "The Oxford Girl" appeared full-blown in the US, perhaps as a variation of Ireland's similarly-named "Wexford Girl", which again derives from "The Bloody Miller". To me, it makes much more sense to imagine an English version of the song called "The Oxford Tragedy" morphing into "The Wexford Murder" for Irish consumption and then both songs crossing the Atlantic to establish a foothold there. Singers in the New World would presumably have been imagining Oxford, Mississippi, rather than Inspector Morse's dreaming spires, but the song was none the worse for that.

The first proven American original we have is "The Lexington Miller", printed as an early 19th century broadsheet in Boston and currently held by the Harvard College Library. This describes a miller in Lexington, Kentucky, who promises to marry a local girl if she'll sleep with him. We all know what happens next and events here unfold just as they did in "The Berkshire Tragedy" a century before.

Unlike later American versions, "The Lexington Miller" retains many of "The Berkshire Tragedy"'s less important details, such as the Devil tempting our narrator to commit murder, the victim's sister accusing him and the killer's final execution. Once again, though, it's got exactly

KNOXVILLE GIRL

the same metre we know today from "Knoxville Girl", as a couple of sample verses will demonstrate:

*Now she upon her knees did fall,
And most heartily did cry,
Saying "Kind Sir, don't murder me,
I am not fit to die",*

*I would not harken unto her cries,
But laid it on the more,
Till I had taken her life away,
Which I could not restore.¹²*

"Berkshire" is pronounced "Barxshire" in Britain, and my own theory is that the various places where the song touches down – Oxford, Wexford, Lexington, Knoxville – are determined more by that "X" sound in their names than by any more subtle consideration. Once "The BarXshire Tragedy"'s OXford lass found her way into the title and lyrics, any place name lacking that distinctive consonant simply sounded wrong, and that's a tradition the song's offspring have obeyed ever since.

Whatever the reason for its precise setting, by 1831 America's singers had a bloody miller of their own. All they needed now was a home-grown murder they could tie into the song and, by the end of the century, they'd found one.



Mary Lula Noel lived with her parents in Pineville, Missouri, about eight miles from the town which bore her family's name. On Wednesday, 7 December 1892, she was staying with her sister, Mrs Sydney Holly, at the Holly family's nearby home, when a Joplin man named William Simmons arrived to visit her. Simmons was still there on Saturday, 10 December, when Mr and Mrs Holly left to collect Mary's parents for a trip to the town of Noel itself. That meant spending the night away, and the Hollys suggested that Simmons might like to accompany them part of the way and then return to Joplin alone. Perhaps they feared what the two young people would get up to if left alone in the house overnight.

UNPREPARED TO DIE

Simmons said he'd rather walk as far as Lanagan and then take a train home from there. Mary said she'd stay with him at the Hollys' Mann Farm home until he left and then follow the Hollys on to her father's house if the Elk River was not running too high. If the crossing was impossible, she'd stay on that side of the river with one of the many relatives the Noels had scattered about there.

Judge J. A. Sturges, who relates this story in his 1897 *History of McDonald County*, tells us the river's ford was then too flooded for vehicles, but could be negotiated on horseback. "About 8 o'clock in the morning Holly and his wife started away, leaving Simmons and Miss Noel together at their house," he adds. "This was the last ever seen of her alive."¹³

Instead of returning home on the Sunday, as they'd originally planned, Mr and Mrs Holly stayed with Mary's parents for the next few days. There was no sign of Mary, but everyone assumed she was safe with one of the family's relatives across the river. On the Monday, they began asking around, but could find no trace of her. They sent a letter to one of Mary's uncles in Webb City, about 40 miles away, because they knew she sometimes stayed with him. When he replied that he hadn't seen her, the horrible truth began to dawn. "Their beautiful daughter and sister was gone, lost," Sturges says. "No-one knew where and only those who have experienced the feeling can realise the agony which clung to them day and night."

Mary's father and Mr Holly went to Joplin on the Friday of that week to make enquiries. Holly later testified that he'd seen Simmons there and confronted him with the words: "Will, your girl's gone".

"Simmons trembled violently a few seconds and replied, 'Is that so?'" Sturges reports. "He asked no questions concerning her and appeared to be desirous of avoiding the conversation. When asked if she came away with him he replied that she did not. They stood in silence for a few moments when Simmons remarked: 'You don't suppose the fool girl jumped in the river and drowned herself, do you?'"

Noel and Holly returned to Pineville and, on the morning of Saturday 17 December, began a systematic search. The Noels were a prominent family in McDonald County and hundreds of volunteers joined the effort, most now assuming that Mary had been deliberately killed. Soon, the search gravitated towards the river, where the deepest stretches were dragged and every spot searched. Here's Sturges again:

KNOXVILLE GIRL

The deep holes were dragged, giant powder exploded and every spot examined for some distance up and down the stream. Finally, about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, in a narrow, swift place in the river at the lower end of a large, deep hole of water, the body was found where some of the clothing had caught in a willow that projected into the water. It was but little more than quarter of a mile below her father's house and within a few feet of the road along which her parents had passed that fateful Saturday afternoon, unconscious of the great tragedy that had been enacted.

On examination afterwards conclusive evidence of a violent death were found. A bruise on one temple, one spot on one cheek and three or four on the other, as though a hand had been placed over her mouth to stifle her screams, finger prints on the throat, were all plainly visible. Besides a bruise the size of the palm of one's hand on the back of her head and her neck broken. The lungs were perfectly dry and all evidences of drowning were absent.

The searchers also found recent tracks made by a man and a woman between the Hollys' house, where Simmons and Mary had last been seen together, to the river's edge, near the deep area where the body was found. Their conclusion was that the couple must have walked down there together to see if the nearby ford was usable.

Simmons was arrested in Joplin, just as he was getting ready to leave town, but it was feared he'd be lynched if sent back to Pineville, so he went to the jail in Neosho instead. He was tried for first-degree murder in May 1893, but the hotly contested case produced a split jury and a retrial had to be arranged. That came in November, when the prosecutor indicated that he'd accept second-degree murder, on the grounds that the killing could have been done without the deliberate forethought and intent needed for a first-degree charge. The new jury accepted this, returned a guilty verdict and Simmons was sentenced to ten years.

In 1927, the folklorist Vance Randolph collected a "Knoxville Girl" variant from a Mrs Lee Stevens in Missouri. She called this song "The Noel Girl", and it begins:

*'Twas in the city of Pineville,
I owned a floury mill,
'Twas in the city of Pineville,
I used to live and dwell.* ¹⁴

UNPREPARED TO DIE

The rest of the song canters through the familiar tale, mentioning every important milestone along the way. There's the false promise of marriage, the private walk, the sudden attack, the plea for mercy, the river, the candle, the nosebleed – everything. The Pineville reference and the song's title aside, it's a straightforward reading of "Knoxville Girl" as everyone came to know it from Arthur Tanner's 1927 recording, with exactly the same details of "The Bloody Miller" and "The Berkshire Tragedy" left intact.

It's obviously nonsense to suggest, as some people do, that Mary Noel's death is the prime source for "Knoxville Girl". Even so, you can see why her case got drawn into the song's mythology. The real facts of this killing form an almost uncanny echo of the one described half a world away and 200 years earlier.

Just as in "The Berkshire Tragedy", Simmons really did take his unsuspecting victim "from her sister's door", beat her viciously round the head "and dragged her to the river side then threw her body in". Holly, encountering the killer in Joplin, may well have asked himself "what makes you shake and tremble so," just as "The Berkshire Tragedy"'s servant asked of his master. And Mary's body really was found "floating before her father's door". Sturges tells us Mary was "young (and) extremely handsome", with "lady like manners", while "The Bloody Miller" calls its own victim "a fair and comely maid, thought modest, grave and wise".

It's almost as though William Simmons arrived at Mann Farm with a copy of "The Berkshire Tragedy" stuffed into his pocket and set out to re-enact it as closely as he could. There's no suggestion in the 1897 account that he killed Mary because he'd made her pregnant, but it's possible that Judge Sturges avoided this issue for the sake of delicacy. He was writing at a time when Mary's father was still alive, and may have wished to avoid embarrassing one of the county's leading families. He offers no alternative motive for Simmons' deed, however, so we certainly can't rule out an unwanted pregnancy as the cause of it all.



In 1917, the English song collector Cecil Sharp visited another Pineville, this one in Kentucky, where he persuaded two women named Wilson and Townsley to sing a song they called "Flora Dean".

KNOXVILLE GIRL

What emerged was a missing link between the British and American versions of the song, retaining the servant/master relationship of the English original, but setting its tale firmly in America. The miller becomes a miller's apprentice here, and is confronted about the blood by his boss rather than by his mother. There's no doubt where it's all taking place, though, as these lines show:

*I fell in love with a Knoxville Girl,
Her name was Flora Dean.*¹⁵

The rest of the story plays out in its familiar way, with the sudden unprovoked attack, Flora begging for her life, the disposal of her body in the river and the killer's nosebleed. When Flora's body is eventually found, it's:

*A-floating down by her father's house,
Who lived in Knoxville town.*

Ten years later, with Tanner's record, Knoxville became the accepted setting for this tale and all the other locations sank to footnote status. Once a song's been committed to disc and widely heard on the radio, that rapidly becomes the official version and any deviations from its line are seen not merely as variations, but mistakes.

Tanner's record might never have reached the market at all if it hadn't been for an earlier 1925 hit by Vernon Dalhart called "The Death Of Floyd Collins". This told the tale of a young man who got himself trapped in Kentucky's Sand Cave in February 1925 and whose plight was avidly followed by newspaper readers and radio listeners throughout America. Collins died of exposure before he could be rescued and Columbia scored a big hit with the Dalhart record that followed in May.¹⁶

Henry Sapoznik, writing in the sleeve notes for Tompkins Square's *People Take Warning* compilation, says Dalhart's record "set in motion a rage for country-tinged exploitation event songs which made 78s and sheet music the broadside ballads of the post-Industrial Age". Looking for more of the same, Columbia had Tanner re-record the same version of "Knoxville Girl" they'd scrapped from his session three weeks earlier,

and that's when the song took off. Sixteen years later, when The Louvin Brothers started their radio career, "Knoxville Girl" quickly became the most requested song in their set. Two decades after that, it proved just as popular for Ralph and Carter Stanley, who included it on their classic 1969 live album *The Legendary Stanley Brothers*.

Even in old age, Charlie Louvin was keen to see audiences take the song in the sombre mood he intended, and to give full attention to the story it told. The country singer Ruth Gerson – who included "Knoxville Girl" on her 2011 album *Deceived* – has seen him perform it twice at New York gigs, and never forgotten the experience.

"I saw Charlie Louvin play it at the Rodeo Bar," she told me. "He was upset at a group of young men at a table laughing, and he shook his finger at them. I saw him again in New York at his 80th birthday album release party, where he took time to explain why the woman in the song dies. It was serious to him. He instructed the audience to listen carefully to the words – she dies because she had dark and roving eyes." ¹⁷

Ralph Stanley, who first heard "Knoxville Girl" as a small boy in the early 1930s, was just two days short of his 88th birthday when I spoke to him about the song on the phone from his home in Virginia. Like Louvin, he believes it's the girl's "dark and roving eye" which reveals her killer's motive: "He probably got jealous of her, I guess," Stanley told me. "It could have happened that way and they just wrote about it. A lot of [murder ballads] are true songs. Back then, if something happened, they wrote songs about it." ¹⁸

Did the song get a good reaction when he and Carter played it live? "Oh, yeah," he replied. "It's been a good seller all down through the line for years. It's a good song, it's about a good subject. I don't know if it was the words or the melody or what: it was just a good song and a good seller."

Stanley's son, Ralph II, is now a songwriter and a recording artist in his own right, stepping into his late Uncle Carter's shoes to sing alongside his father in The Clinch Mountain Boys on their late 90s tours. "Knoxville Girl" wasn't a regular part of the set in those years, but every now and again someone in the audience would request it and Ralph II stepped up to oblige. "I just tried to put it across," he told me. "I tried to do it in the same manner my Uncle Carter did when I was singing it with Dad there, trying to fill the void. I always loved that song."

KNOXVILLE GIRL

His own first taste of “Knoxville Girl” had come just as early as his father’s, in this case from listening to that Stanley Brothers live album as his mother played it in the family car. “I was probably four or five years old,” Ralph II said. “I thought it was kind of spooky when I was a kid, but I enjoyed it. Later on, I heard The Louvin Brothers do it, but I was really fond of Dad and Carter’s version. It’s an eerie song, you know? Gives you a cold chill when it’s sung right like they sung it.”

The Stanley Brothers were great champions of murder ballads throughout their career, recording not only “Knoxville Girl” but also “Pretty Polly”, “Poor Ellen Smith”, “Death Of The Lawson Family” and “Banks Of The Ohio”. Ralph II was hearing those songs as a toddler too and he’s continued their tradition by covering Stonewall Jackson’s “Bluefield” on his 2012 album *Born To Be A Drifter*. This tells the story of a real incident in West Virginia, when a deputy sheriff who also happened to be the area’s biggest moonshiner took a shot at one of the lawmen raiding his still. The man he killed turned out to be his best friend, the sheriff himself.

Ralph II believes it’s this grounding in real events and everyday tragedy which makes country and bluegrass such a natural home for murder ballads. “Bluegrass is real, it speaks of real life and it tells the story of life,” he said. “The story of the Lawson family was a big to-do that happened in North Carolina that Dad and Carter had heard about. I don’t know who wrote the song, but they had heard about it and they sung it. It’s a true story. ‘Knoxville Girl’? They’re great, great lyrics and the bands that sung it put a real good melody to it. It’s just dead-on, keeps you into the song all the way through.”

Those strengths make it all the more surprising that – unlike many of the other songs in this book – “Knoxville Girl” has never managed to conquer the pop charts. The closest it’s come is with Olivia Newton-John’s “Banks Of The Ohio”, which reached number 6 in the British charts in October 1971 and remained in the Top 50 for 17 weeks. The link with “Knoxville Girl” lies in “Banks Of The Ohio”’s almost identical plot.

A couple go for a private walk by the river, one of them produces a knife and ignores the other’s protest about being unprepared for eternity. After the stabbing, the victim’s body is dragged into the river and the killer returns home protesting true love. But there are differences too. This time, it’s the murderer who wants to get married and the victim

UNPREPARED TO DIE

who refuses. When the knife appears, the victim seems almost eager to die, pushing on to the blade as it pierces flesh.

The fact that "Banks Of The Ohio" is so often sung by a woman produces some twists too. Newton-John casts herself as the murderer ("I killed the only man I love / He would not take me for his bride"), but Kristin Hersh plays the victim ("He drew his knife across my breast / And in his arms I gently pressed"). Snakefarm's Anna Domino seems to be singing as a male killer ("I asked your mother for you dear / And she said you were too young"), but the more I listen to her carefully ambiguous lyrics, the less certain I am. Couldn't that "lily hand" she mentions equally belong to a young man killed by a besotted older woman?

Song scholars trace "Banks Of The Ohio" back to an older song with an identical plot called "The Banks Of The Old Pee Dee", first collected in 1915. The best-known river of that name originates in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina, a region where we know "Knoxville Girl"'s source songs had been adapted for American use since the early 1800s. Somewhere along the way, "Banks Of The Ohio" discarded its tell-tale nosebleed, but the family resemblance remains unmistakable.



For all its debt to the old English ballads, there's no doubt that "Knoxville Girl" is a much better song than any of its predecessors. It's much sharper and more concise than the English originals, and gains all the more punch from that. The 12 verses of "Knoxville Girl" in its classic form are far easier for a singer to memorise than the 44 verses he'd have to contend with in "The Berkshire Tragedy"'s original text and present far less of a challenge to the modern audience's patience.

Where the flavour of the English songs is one of cheerful tabloid vulgarity, "Knoxville Girl" replaces this with a stoic fatalism that quietly acknowledges the Devil lurks inside us all. The line describing Knoxville as "a town we all know well", suggests the song is an intimate confession to the singer's close neighbours, and that's a feeling missing from the earlier versions too. If he prefers not to spell out his tale's sexual content in graphic detail, then that just hints at a thwarted small-town decency which makes it all the more heartbreaking.

KNOXVILLE GIRL

Death was an everyday reality for the subsistence farmers who first brought “Knoxville Girl” to America’s southern states, and their harsh Calvinist religion offered no illusions about the rewards sin would bring. The few pleasures they could hope for – sex, moonshine and fiddle tunes – seemed only to promise eternal damnation. The folk tradition has written these qualities into every note of “Knoxville Girl” and it’s that which accounts for its extraordinary power.

If you doubt me on this point, just ask Gerson. “*Deceived* is a collection of songs about the bad things that happen to ‘bad girls,’” she told me. “‘Knoxville Girl’ was one of the first songs that inspired the album. The first time I heard it was a Nick Cave version, then I listened to The Louvin Brothers – and threw up from being so disturbed. We think the murder of those weaker and unable to defend themselves is wrong, but we accept it. We do not scream out against it. We sing and dance to it. ‘Knoxville Girl’ is an incredible song, but it shakes me down everytime I sing it.”

Loved so well: 10 Knoxville knockouts

“Knoxville Girl”, by Arthur Tanner & His Corn Shuckers (1927). The first commercial recording and the one which set the lyrics in stone for everyone that’s followed. Tanner’s vocals are surprisingly clear for such an old record and the fiddle and guitar accompaniment keeps everything moving along nicely.

“Knoxville Girl”, by The Louvin Brothers (1956). Bearing a clear influence from The Blue Sky Boys’ 1937 version, the Louvins add a shuffling beat and produce the song’s single most essential version. The Everly Brothers idolised Charlie and Ira Louvin and this record tells you why.

“Knoxville Girl”, by Charlie Feathers (1973). The former Sun Studios session musician and self-styled “King of Rockabilly” brings a touch of Elvis to this hillbilly rap version. There’s a stop/start beat, a knowing melodrama to his spoken-word vocals and some enjoyably twangy guitar. It should be a mess, but actually it works rather well.

“Knoxville Girl”, by Kevin Williams & Friends (1997). Each musician takes the lead for a verse or two in this rather lovely instrumental version. Williams’ mandolin and Craig Duncan’s hammered dulcimer describe the slaughter, while Glen Duncan’s fiddle is left to mourn the results.

“Knoxville Girl”, by Mark Jungers (2003). A busy acoustic guitar lurches us into this flat-out rockabilly treatment. Jungers and his band take the course at 90 MPH, conjuring up a picture of sweaty quiffs, heavily-tattooed arms and a drummer who stands up to play. Splendid stuff.

“The Oxford Girl”, by Waterson:Carthy (2004). That’s Norma Waterson and Martin Carthy, of course, who give us this rare recording of “Knoxville Girl”’s ancestor. Tim van Eyken’s melodeon sets an appropriately mournful tone as Norma sings her way to the gallows.

KNOXVILLE GIRL

“Knoxville Girl (Parting Gift)”, by Jennie Stearns (2005). Not a version of the original song, but Stearns’ meditation on the “Knoxville Girl”’s fate and the baffling cruelty of men. The gift, it turns out, is Stearns’ song itself, placed like a gentle flower on the victim’s grave. It’s every bit as sweet as it sounds.

“Knoxville Girl”, by Sheila Kay Adams (2005). Sheila learned this song as a child in the evocatively-named town of Sodom, North Carolina and her a cappella version is one of the loveliest I’ve heard. Clear, steady and tuneful, it’s a little gem.

“Knoxville Girl”, by Charlie Louvin & Will Oldham (2007). Young bands often revel in the brutality of “Knoxville Girl”, but Louvin’s sombre solo reading is a chastening reminder of what violence really means. Make way for a grown-up, children.

“Knoxville Girl”, by Rachel Brooke (2009). Brooke coats this recording with surface noise to mimic the 78s she so obviously loves, which creates a pleasing old-time feel. She gives a clever twist to the lyrics too, turning the story into one about a girl murdering the woman her true love prefers. “Tom Dooley”’s Ann Melton would have sympathised.