Kentucky WPA Workers Will Take Part in Sixth Annual American Folk Song Festival at Ashland, June 14, 1936.

Kentucky mountain minstrels employed on a Works Progress Administration Federal Music Project will present the sixth annual American Folk Song Festival at Ashland, Kentucky, June 14.

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Governor and Mrs. A. B. Chandler, and Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, director of the Federal Music Project are invited guests. Guy Maier, concert pianist, and Dr. Thaddeus Rich, former concert master and assistant conductor of the Philadelphia Symphony orchestra, assistants to the Director of the Federal Music Project, have visited Ashland to hear the mountain singers and to examine the transcriptions of their native music which is being preserved on a WPA music project and will be placed in the Library of Congress.

The Kentucky minstrels have an established custom of meeting every second Sunday in June in a "singin' gatherin'.'"

"We take delight in making music on the Lord's Day, it puts us in right good heart," a venerable minstrel said.
Arrangements have been made to accommodate several thousand visitors, among whom will be distinguished students of folklore.

Miss Jean Thomas, formerly a court stenographer who was raised in the Kentucky foothills, began her ballad-hunting several years ago. Through her efforts, now in cooperation with the Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration, the work of preservation has been forwarded. Thirty-one persons were assigned to the project, most of them from the relief rolls.

More than a hundred songs and a large number of fiddle, banjo and dulcimer tunes have been copied. In Louisville a WPA copyist project headed by a composer of proved taste and talent has been making the transcriptions. Recently a composition for orchestra, "A Suite Based on Kentucky Hill Fiddle Tunes" was played by a Federal symphony orchestra in Michigan.

Much of the music at the Ashland Festival is a heritage from the sturdy, restless pioneers—"the horizon seekers", who captured and tamed the wilderness of the Cumberlands, the Blue and the Pine Mountains, and the Great Smokies. They took with them over the Wilderness Trail the dance tunes and the ballads that once had been heard in the taverns and on the greens of Old England from which they or their forebearers came.

Jilson Setters, the "Singin' Fiddler of Lost Hope Hollow", who has been of continuous help to Miss Thomas in collecting the indigenous music, and who comes of a long line of mountain musicians, was taken to an English Folk Song celebration in London four years ago to represent the Kentucky mountaineers. He made that trip, too, into a song after he appeared before the musicians and the musical scholars in England, with the same simplicity and dignity that mark his performances among his admiring neighbors.
The minstrels from the mountains will gather from a hundred-mile radius for the festival, but they will come principally from Boyd, Floyd and Rowan Counties, where the Music Project has been carried on.

Miss Fanny Brandeis, state supervisor for Kentucky for the Federal Music Project, whose interest in preserving these songs and tunes has been unfailing, tells how three minstrel generations come together in the home of Miss Thomas on winter nights.

"They all sing together," she said, "a ballad, 'Lord Lovell's Daughter,' or a fervent hymn, 'Lord, Lord, You Have Been so Good to Me,' which wrings the heart of the listener from 'outside,' contemplating the gratitude of these people who have so little. Then there is a fiddle tune, 'General Jackson's March,' but whether it is Andrew or Stonewall, no one seems to remember, and 'The Eighth of January' - a meaningless date but a dandy tune, which is accompanied by a boy 'knocking' on the banjo."

In recent years some of these vernacular songs of the Kentucky Hills have been taken over by modern music writers. They have a lilt and a meaning, some even the air and step from old English contra-dances, that lend them to modern transcriptions. A popular song of a few years ago, "It Ain't Goin' Rain," a Kentucky ditty, dates to the seventies, but it was also sung and danced to by the pioneers in Nebraska and Iowa, whence it was carried from the mountains sixty years before it became a nightly performance over the radio from great city broadcasting studios.