

## Proffitt, Frank Noah <sup>[1]</sup>

### Proffitt, Frank Noah

by Anne Warner, 1994

**1 June 1913–24 Nov. 1965**

Frank Noah Proffitt, farmer, craftsman, and singer of traditional songs, was born in Laurel Bloomery, Tenn., the son of Wiley and Rebecca Alice Creed Proffitt. His paternal grandparents, John and Adeline Perdue Proffitt, moved to the Cracker Neck section of the eastern Tennessee mountains from [Wilkes County](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, N.C., shortly after the Civil War. Frank's grandfather, John Proffitt, joined the Union army and was a member of the Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry. His grandfather's brother, Benjamin Proffitt, fought on the Confederate side. When Frank was nine, the family moved back to North Carolina, to the Beaver Dam section of [Watauga County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, just a few miles below the Tennessee border. There Frank Proffitt lived the rest of his life.

During Proffitt's boyhood, life was very much like colonial pioneer days, when each family made nearly everything it used, including musical instruments. Music was a part of life. As a boy, Frank learned the old songs and ballads from his father, his grandfather, and his Uncle Noah and his Aunt Nancy Prather. He had little formal education, finishing sixth grade in a mountain school. All during his life, however, he read whatever he could find—and he had time to think and to wonder. He had a deep feeling for the ways and the songs of his forebears. Proffitt was sixteen when he walked barefooted across the mountains to see his first town—Mountain City, Tenn.

In 1937 Dr. Frank C. Brown of [Duke University](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, on a collecting trip in Watauga County, recorded a few songs from Frank Proffitt. They appear in the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* <sup>[5]</sup>, published by the Duke University Press in 1952. From 1938 until his death Frank Proffitt was a close friend of Frank and Anne Warner and contributed more than a hundred songs to their collection: *Traditional American Folk Songs from the Frank and Anne Warner Collection* published in 1984.

In the last few years of Proffitt's life—in the first half of the 1960s—he became to many a symbol for the newly awakened interest in the traditional singer. He was recognized as the source of the song "Hang Down Your Head, Tom Dooley" <sup>[6]</sup>, which catapulted the Kingston Trio to fame in 1959 (their recording of the song sold over three million copies) and is said to have begun the widespread interest in American folk music abroad. He made recordings for Folkways and for Folk-Legacy. From time to time he left his farming to sing at festivals, including the first [Chicago Folk Festival](#) <sup>[7]</sup> (1961) and the Newport Folk Festival (1964), and at universities and colleges.

In 1961 and 1962 Proffitt was a staff member at Pinewoods Camp in Plymouth, Mass., run by the Country Dance and Song Society of America. His homemade dulcimers and fretless banjos were ordered by people near and far. At Alan Lomax's request, he made a gourd banjo like those used in the days of slavery for a film being made in Williamsburg, Va. Proffitt was featured in stories about folk music in *Time* magazine and other national publications. He was chosen by the governor of North Carolina to participate in North Carolina Day at the New York World's Fair in 1964. The state used his picture in a booklet encouraging summer visitors to come to North Carolina. *Sing Out* magazine (November 1965) published an article by him, "Good Memories For Me." His friends and admirers and correspondents—and visitors—were innumerable. When he died, leading newspapers across the country (including the *New York Times*) carried the story of Frank Proffitt and his music.

Proffitt married Bessie Mae Hicks, the daughter of Nathan and Rena Hicks of Beech Mountain. Nathan Hicks, too, was a maker of musical instruments and a singer. The Proffitts had six children: Oliver, who made a career in the U.S. Air Force; Ronald, a graduate of [Berea College](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, with a Ph.D. in physics from the [University of Kentucky](#) <sup>[9]</sup>; Franklin (Frank Jr.), a visiting artist under the aegis of the [North Carolina Council of the Arts](#) <sup>[10]</sup>; Phyllis (Mrs. Lynn Hicks); Eddie; and Gerald.

Frank Proffitt was buried in the small private Milsap burying ground about a mile from his home. His headstone carries a line from one of his songs: "Going Across the Mountain, O, Fare You Well."

#### References:

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John Foster West, *The Ballad of Tom Dula* (1970).

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"Guide to the Frank and Anne Warner Papers, 1899-2000 and Undated, Bulk 1933-1985." Duke University Libraries: Rubenstein Library / Collection Guides. <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/warnerfrankanne/> [12] (accessed September 25, 2014).

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*Tom Dooley*, Library of Congress audio recording, posted by Library of Congress from the Anne and Frank Warner collection. <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196323> [15] (accessed September 29, 2014).

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