Anne Grimes had a gift for collecting songs—partly because she knew how and where to find them.

“Everybody thinks you find folk music in the hills; you don’t . . . it’s in people’s heads,” she told a reporter for the Columbus Citizen-Journal in 1971 before performing at Governor John Gilligan’s Inaugural Gala at the Ohio Theater in Columbus, Ohio. Born into a pioneer Ohio family in which music had been important over the generations, Anne Grimes felt a kinship with the traditional singers she discovered. As she told the reporter: “In the folk music field, the technical term is ‘informants’; I prefer to think of the people as contributors.”

During the height of her collecting and performing career in the 1950s and early 1960s, Anne Grimes sang several times at the annual National Folk Festival and recorded on Folkways. She also became an expert in the lore and techniques of the plucked or lap dulcimer (also referred to as the mountain or Appalachian dulcimer), and the Anne Grimes collection of these rare folk instruments—now housed at the Smithsonian Institution—ranks among the nation’s finest. But much of her time and energy was devoted to collecting hundreds of songs and ballads that she then performed in concert-lectures with the general theme of Ohio history through song. She collected in the major cities of Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati as well as in most of Ohio’s eighty-eight counties, including inland cities such as Chillicothe, Greenville, Athens, Springfield, Cambridge, Lima, and Hillsboro and Ohio River Valley towns such as Gallipolis, Marietta, Steubenville, and Portsmouth.

Her “finds” included rare Child ballads (as they are known from their classifying scholar, Francis James Child) and other British survivals that she came to regard as her specialties—those songs
related to or patterned after old English, Irish, or Scottish ballads and folksongs. As she wrote in her liner notes to her Folkways record: “These are recognizable by their antique tunes, or ‘airs,’ often almost chant-like, in minor keys, or gapped-scale modes. The impersonal ballad stories are often sung in ‘old style,’ with straightforward, clear diction, odd melodic ornamentations, and unexpected held notes and rhythm shifts.”

The bawdy songs Anne Grimes collected she considered some of the most important and choice of her early material. She rarely performed her bawdy ballads—and then only the mildly bawdy ones such as Bessie Weinrich’s “Big Shirt”—but she appreciated them on many levels and researched them to their Renaissance and even medieval roots.

As for the homegrown Ohio songs, contributors sang songs about wars in the Ohio territory, transportation, political campaigns, the temperance movement, American Indians, and the Underground Railroad. The Anne Grimes Collection also includes songs about
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everyday life; local ballads about murders, train wrecks, and scandals; as well as hymns, minstrel material, children's songs, and popular composed songs such as those of Dan Emmett and Benjamin Hanby.

A proud Buckeye herself, Anne Grimes asserted that Ohioans generally are proud, if not sentimental, about their state's complex and diverse history as represented in these songs. In her liner notes to her Folkways record, she wrote:

They boast of Edison (Light) and the Wright Brothers (Flight) and tell of renowned Buckeye educators, statesmen, authors, composers, entertainers and reformers; and of agricultural, religious and industrial leaders, and, of course, the eight “Ohio Presidents.”

The state’s area, between the “Great River” (the Ohio) and Lake Erie, has geographical advantages, natural resources and beauty, which have made it a center of transportation and trade since prehistoric times. It drew French trappers and explorers to the “Beautiful River,” made the “Ohio Country” a contested battleground before and after the Revolution, and caused “Ohio Fever” to inspire its pioneer settlement. . . .

Ohio is also proud of its place as a median or average cross-section of the country. Even the vegetation is a combination of southern Appalachians, Great Plains and Lake. Ohioans speak with unregional accent, sounding “southern” to New Englanders and “northern” to natives of the “Deep South,” although phrases, terms and inflections from both are recognizable, especially as surviving in the regions of the early land grants.

Many of the descendants of Ohio’s first settlers live on their families’ original land grants. During the period of the westward movement, Buckeyes profited by the many emigrants who passed through the area by the National Road, the canals, rivers and lakes, and, by so doing, became better established and more firmly rooted in the state.

Anne Laylin Grimes was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1912. Among her earliest memories was the singing of family songs by her parents, Clarence D. and Fanny Hagerman Laylin, and by her grandparents and other relatives. Musical evenings sometimes involved chamber music with her father on cello; her brother, Ned, and sister, Louise, on violins; and her mother and Anne herself on the A. B. Chase grand piano. Her schooling in music began at the age of five with piano study, and she continued to study piano, music theory, and voice through high school and college. Following her graduation with both Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Music degrees from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1934, she completed course credits for a master’s degree in music history at Ohio State University, where she was a soloist with the Ohio State University Concert Choir.
A classically trained musician and accomplished pianist, Anne Grimes from 1942 to 1946 served as music and dance critic for the Columbus Citizen newspaper in Columbus, Ohio. Earlier, from 1940 to 1942, she hosted a music series on WOSU radio for which she was arranger, writer of program notes, and accompanist, as well as piano and vocal soloist. One week, when a planned program collaborator became ill just before broadcast time and she had to carry on alone, she played and sang some of her grandmother’s songs. Favorable listener reaction included contributions of similar passed-down family and community songs, marking the beginning of her folk music collection.

At first, she captured songs on paper through musical notation. In 1953, however, she was able to begin recording sound on magnetic tape, thanks to her purchase of a state-of-the-art Magnecorder, a reel-to-reel tape recorder with fine fidelity. During the 1950s alone, she tape-recorded some 170 people. She often collected on her own, sometimes daring winter storms, floods, and other barriers as she took off in the family station wagon in search of traditional music, her only companion her Magnecorder, which weighed some fifty pounds. But often she was accompanied by her husband, Dr.
James W. Grimes helps restore the oil painting Perry’s Victory by William Powell (1865), on display in the Rotunda of the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus, 1946. Columbus Citizen, Scripps-Howard Newspapers/Grandview Heights Public Library/Photohio.org

Anne Grimes with her children, Jennifer, Mary, Sara, Steve, and Mindy, 1951. Photo by Dan F. Prugh courtesy of the Columbus Dispatch
James W. Grimes, and sometimes by one or more of their five children.

A graduate of Cornell University in landscape architecture with a PhD in fine arts from Ohio State University, James Grimes, who died in 1981, was a professor in the Department of Fine Arts at Ohio State from 1934 to 1961 and chairman of the Department of Art at Denison University from 1961 to 1970. He also was a professional artist: a painter/craftsman, portraitist, and art historian. His work included the extensive collecting, restoring, preserving, publishing, and exhibiting of Ohio art for the Ohio Historical Society. Born in 1902 into a Cambridge, Ohio, family descended from Guernsey County pioneers, he understood and supported Anne Grimes’s work harvesting and saving a generally overlooked musical heritage of Ohio and the Midwest.

Sharing his wife’s excitement over her growing collection of folksongs and dulcimers, James Grimes helped her in many ways, including designing the costumes she wore in performance, accompanying her on collecting trips, and locating dulcimers. His enjoyment of the people and places they visited together on her collecting trips is evident in the photographs he took. Works of art themselves, and featured throughout this book, these photographs became an important part of the documentation of the Anne Grimes collections.

As for the Grimes children, we were often the first to hear our mother’s version of a newly collected song as she practiced her singing on us before performing in public: “If I hear the kids humming the tune of a song around the house, I know it’s a good one,” she said. To help illustrate in her lecture/recitals how folksongs change as they are handed down, she noted our adaptation of “Aunt Rhodie,” in which we had the goose dying in the mailbox rather than in the millpond. As she explained, millponds “aren’t very real to city children.”

Contributors to the Anne Grimes Collection included many fine singers with sureness of rhythm, pitch, and melody, although few had
any formal musical training. Rating her singers as “uniquely good,” she added that this may well have stemmed from the prevalence of singing schools in Ohio, lasting through the nineteenth century.

In an interview in 1980 with Dr. Ellen Gibb, a folk scholar who was then at Ohio State University, Anne Grimes said of her contributors:

From the very aristocratic to just the country guys or some of the lovely old ladies—I always knew when I had a real contributor. And the funny part about it, there’s one or two that I just got one song from that had been “their” song for years.

But there again, it was something that was very special.

Most contributors were from families that had lived in Ohio for several generations, and they were representative of the complexity and diversity of Buckeye tradition. They were homemakers, poets, farmers, educators, businesspeople, lawyers, ministers, artists, domestic workers, and politicians. Some were members of her own family, chief among them her mother, who was from a Richland County, Ohio, pioneer family. Some Anne Grimes met only once. Others became close friends who visited often in her home, as she did in theirs. Some she invited to perform with her and, with her encouragement, some of her major contributors participated in Ohio Folklore Society meetings during the 1950s, when she served as secretary-treasurer, editor of the newsletter, and president.
Contributors also attended “great and productive” singing gatherings at the Grimes home in Columbus, where they traded songs and stories among themselves and with other invited guests. Major contributors such as John Bodiker, Sarah Basham, Bertha Bacon, Arthur Tyler, Faye Wemmer, and William Lunsford joined in the singing at parties that also might include folk experts and scholars such as Dr. Francis Utley, the Ohio State English professor who helped found the Ohio Folklore Society. Several of these musical gatherings in the Grimes household were tape-recorded to become part of the Anne Grimes Collection, most notably the party she gave for guest of honor Carl Sandburg, the author, poet, and folklorist.

Most of the traditional singers in the Anne Grimes Collection sang unaccompanied, though a few played guitar or banjo. Her introduction to the dulcimer came in 1952 when she saw one in a craft shop in Asheville, North Carolina, where she participated in Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s Mountain Dance and Folk Festival. She was able to find the maker, Wade Martin, a baseball player who whittled in the off-season and who came from a family of fiddle makers, including his father, Marcus Martin. She took the Wade Martin dulcimer home, “fiddled with it,” tried to learn what she could about dulcimer history, and began to create dulcimer arrangements for her songs.

As she began taking along her dulcimer to lecture-recitals, the instrument attracted the attention of people in the audience who had seen one or had one at home. That was the beginning—using the Wade Martin dulcimer as “bait”—of her discovery of a living tradition of dulcimer players in central and southern Ohio. This discovery
Anne Grimes holding the Middletown dulcimer in her home in Upper Arlington, Ohio, mid-1950s. 
Photo by Mac Shaffer courtesy of the Columbus Dispatch. Smithsonian Institution Collections, 
National Museum of American History, Behring Center
of dulcimers north of the Ohio River was a surprise to folk scholars, and to her. Her tape-recordings of Ohio players—represented in this book by Brodie Halley, W. E. Lunsford, Jane Jones McNeerlin, Arthur Tyler, Lilly McGhee Ward Swick, Ken Ward, Bob White, and Okey Wood—include their discussions about dulcimer technique and lore.

Meanwhile, she also began collecting dulcimers, ending up with thirty-one pre-1940 vintage dulcimers that include eleven from Ohio and the rest from Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Most are from the Upper Ohio River Valley area, where she came to believe the dulcimer originated, although she agreed with the majority of scholars that the origins of this native American instrument remain obscure.

By 1955, her preferred performance instrument was an old walnut dulcimer she found in Middletown, Hamilton County, Ohio, that she especially liked for its wide fretboard and rich tone. She explained that, like violins, dulcimers get better as they age. She replaced the Middletown dulcimer’s original horizontal hand-forged iron tuning pins with cello pegs and played it almost exclusively until 1966, when she commissioned Ohio dulcimer maker Ron Chacey to make a more durable copy. From then on, she played the Chacey dulcimer, also a fine dulcimer. How to tell a good one? Anne Grimes said: “You can heft one and tell if it is good. It’s light, with a solidity in the middle.”

As a folksinger and dulcimer player, Anne Grimes followed the traditional styles she learned from contributors. Her playing and singing can be heard on her 1957 Folkways record Ohio State Ballads: History through Folk Songs: Anne Grimes, with Dulcimer, which has been reissued on both tape and CD by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Most of her live performances were at local venues, for folklore society groups, music organizations, folk festival audiences, historical meetings, and state and regional civic, cultural, political, agricultural, and religious groups. She always hoped that her performances of songs she had collected would elicit still more songs from her audiences. Attired in costumes patterned after dresses worn by her own great-grandmother in Ohio one hundred years before, she nearly always asked: “Does my singing remind you of any songs from your own family?” And people often responded by approaching her after a performance with the invitation: “Come see us—my mother sings.”

This singing with the hope of inspiring others to sing, whether on stage or in individual sessions with contributors, Anne Grimes called “priming the pump” of the well of memory. In performance, she helped the process by gearing her programs to the locale of the venues she played. In Mt. Vernon, Ohio, for instance, she might sing “Old Dan Tucker,” attributed to Mt. Vernon native Dan Emmett; in Portsmouth, Ohio, she might include a canal song or two.
In a December 1954 column in the *Columbus Citizen* on one of her performances in Columbus, Ben Hayes caught the Anne Grimes style:

Girl singers are all the time sitting on grand pianos—you’ve seen them. Well, Anne Grimes, Ohio’s famous searcher-outer of folk songs, climbed right to the top of an upright piano, without any assistance, this week at Schiller Park, an autoharp in one hand, a dulcimer in the other—making, let us say, a noteworthy impression on members of the Columbus Grandmothers Club.

And then she sang. In that Grimes golden voice, Anne sang the warning songs and the answering-back songs the grandmothers of the grandmothers once had sung to them.

She projected the old songs with verve, picking the dulcimer on her calico lap with a turkey feather, while perched half-way up the wall—hers was a hi-fi performance.

And spicy, too. One leg-o’-mutton sleeve slid from an attractive shoulder; Anne’s petticoat flashed white as she tapped her foot to her spirited singing of Old Dan Tucker. That followed:

“Whistling girls and crowing hens
Always come to no good end.”
“I am priming the pump,” Anne told the grandmothers. “I want you to remember the songs your grandmothers sang as they worked—as they kneaded bread, as they fried chicken, and the songs they sang to lull you to sleep. It just isn’t done today—I guess TV has replaced the old songs.”

She began with “Ohio fever” tunes, which includes “The Little Mohee” and “Come Along, Young Lovers,” and ran through several pump-priming categories, mentioning the sad ballads, the murder songs, and even Red Skelton’s favorite, which urges someone to go and tell Aunt Rhodie that the old gray goose is drowned in the mill pond.

She produced results. Eyes lighted up, heads nodded, feet were tapping to the old Dan Tucker rhythm. . . .

Meanwhile, in the Ohio countryside, Ruth S. Morgan, a columnist for the Quaker City Home Towner, described the spirit of Anne Grimes’s singing and collecting when she was booked as a main evening attraction at the 1958 Hill Town Folk Festival during the annual homecoming at Senecaville in Guernsey County:

Home Coming festivities are once more history and our town has again settled back into its usual calm. With the exception of the children, perhaps no one enjoyed the affair more than Mrs. Anne Grimes, of Columbus, one of the program attractions arranged by officials for the celebration. Mrs. Grimes represented the Hill Folk Festival portion of the program, she being a noted Ohio folksong singer and balladeer. With her pleasing personality (and in old-fashioned dress) she charmed the people who came to the Open House, held for her on Friday afternoon at Garfield Hall, with her singing and playing and general sociability.

Her dulcimer, an old-fashioned stringed instrument of pioneer days, was a musical instrument of interest and one with which many folks were not familiar and in some cases had never before seen. She explained the methods of playing it and sang many tunes for the guests, at intervals between the serving of punch and cookies.

Quite interested in hearing old songs and tunes—the “handed down” kind coming from parents and grandparents
that linger in one’s mind—she prevailed upon Mrs. Laura Carpenter, local resident but formerly of Monroe County, to sing and tape record one called “The True Maiden” for her.

Mrs. Grimes didn’t stop with the Open House hours, however, as immediately following she went to call on Mrs. Laura (Hartley) Lingo, one of the community’s oldest residents, who is much interested in music but was unable to get to the hall. She later visited with Mrs. Daisy (Arnold) Wilcox. She mingled and talked with folks at the Methodist church where she ate her supper, and her scheduled appearance on the platform at the Home Coming grounds that evening drew a large number of listeners. Following the program, she sloshed up through the soggy grounds and stopped and chatted with the Apple Butter stirrers, and then to our house for coffee and cookies, and here the apparently indefatigable folksong expert announced she was coming back in the morning to visit Salesville.

Her Friday night appearance ended her official visit here, but she had not yet had enough and after spending the night with friends at Senecaville, she came back on Saturday. In the morning she called on Mrs. Winnie Reynolds at Salesville, the lady in charge of the Apple Butter stirrin’ the night before, seeking old tunes, information on Morgan’s Raiders...
and other historical facts. She and Mrs. Reynolds joined in singing an old war song, “Goodbye Ma, Goodbye Pa,” and she made acquaintance with the Reynolds’ daughter, Mrs. T.W. St. Clair, Columbus, whom she later expects to contact in regard to a book of folk songs.

Another visitor, Chas. O. Reynolds, Zanesville, furnished her with some information on the Morgan Raiders. Before she left, she purchased some of the Home Coming apple butter.

Mrs. Grimes then came on to Quaker City and viewed the Saturday parade and mingled with more people. Again she unloaded her dulcimer and favored with an impromptu “sing” on the Wilcox porch, for Mrs. Wilcox and several interested folks who congregated there. After that, she graciously showed her instrument and sang a tune or two for workers at the church lunch stand who had been unable to get away to hear her on Friday.

Mrs. Grimes was pleased with her visit here and was interested in people in this locality. It has been suggested that she should visit Calais people over in Monroe County who could, no doubt, give her some old ballads and folk tunes. She has many in her collection and this is one I like for its vibrant ring:

A, B, C, D, E, F, G,
H, I, J, K, L-M,
N, O, P, Q, R, S, T,
And that’s the way to spell ’em.
Then comes U and then comes V;
Let the chorus ring ’em,
W, and X, Y, Z,
And that’s the way to sing ’em.

Anne Grimes conducted her “hunting trips” and research related to her developing collection of Ohio folk music largely independent of any public or institutional aid. When she started her folklore work in the 1940s and early 1950s, academe in Ohio offered little in folklore studies. Recognized folklore scholars did offer courses in individual disciplines like sociology, music, anthropology, and linguistics at nearby Indiana University and the University of Pennsylvania, with less extensive offerings at Detroit’s Wayne State, and in Kentucky and West Virginia. But scholars in these institutions were unaware of the extent of a surviving “live” Buckeye folk music tradition before her discoveries.

That is not to say that she worked in isolation. She had support from many other folk performers, scholars, and collectors. Her tape collection, for instance, includes songs shared with her by Bob Gibson, the folksinger; Bascom Lamar Lunsford, the folklore expert;
as well as her fellow performers at the National Folk Festival in St. Louis: May Kennedy McCord, Pete Seeger, and Jenny Wells Vincent. Besides the Ohio Folklore Society, organizations helpful to her included the Ohio Historical Society, which cited her in 1958 for “distinctive contributions to the history of the State of Ohio.” But more formal recognition for her work came only much later, when she was awarded in 1993 the Ohio State University School of Music Distinguished Career in Music Award and in 1994 the Ohio Wesleyan University Alumni Association’s Distinguished Achievement Citation.

Anne Grimes wanted to prove to scholars that there was traditional music worth saving in Ohio, and she delighted in sharing her discoveries with them. Her greatest satisfaction, however, came in demonstrating to the contributors themselves—as well as to their families and even their communities—the value of their songs. As she told the reporter for the *Columbus Citizen-Journal* in 1971:

Someone will invariably say after a performance, “Why, I just remembered a song my grandmother or grandfather or Uncle Harry used to sing you might like. . . .” Sometimes I already know the source of it, quite often I don’t. . . . So I look and ask for all the historical help I can get.

It’s a wonderful feeling to help people sort of “find” something that’s really belonged to them all along.

As a traditional performer with strong Ohio roots, Anne Grimes thought she had an advantage—in contrast to what she called “itinerant” professional folklorists—in harvesting and saving an overlooked musical heritage in her home state. With forebears on both sides who were active in the state’s development, she credited this background with giving her invaluable local contacts; knowledge of local history, sentiments, and opinions; and historical information and facts behind the local material she collected. In her liner notes to her Folkways record, she explained:

I have found that my contributors’ previous unawareness that their “old songs” were folksongs has been an advantage in collection, since their singing has an unspoiled spontaneity and authenticity, possibly not available today where traditional singers have become more self-conscious or fit their renditions to preconceived “folk” molds.

Most of the tape-recorded material in the Anne Grimes Collection, collected from 1953 to 1957, was duplicated by the Library of Congress in 1958. The Grimes family moved in 1962 from Upper Arlington, a suburb of Columbus, to the village of Granville, Ohio. Anne Grimes lived in Granville for the next thirty-three years, in a historic 1834 house across the street from Denison University. As time and health permitted, she continued to give programs throughout Ohio and the Midwest. She also served as a judge from the early
1960s to 1992 at Dulcimer Days at Roscoe Village, Ohio, a festival she helped found, as well as at a number of other national and regional festivals.

Anne Grimes did some collecting of songs and lore in the Granville area, but increasingly she turned her attention to organizing and sharing her audiotape and dulcimer collections. She archived her research notes, transcriptions, letters, and other materials, partly with the help of two assistants made possible by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council in 1978. As she became known to new generations of folklorists, she welcomed visitors from around the country to her home, including scholars, folksingers, and dulcimer makers and players who came and stayed, sometimes for days.

During the 1980s, Anne Grimes worked with the Ohio Historical Society on duplicating her original tape recordings. Also during the 1980s, several audio- and videotapes about the Anne Grimes collections of folksongs and dulcimers were made at the Grimes home in Granville, including more than fourteen hours of audiotape interviews conducted by Dr. Ellen Gibb, the folk scholar who was then at Ohio State University; an audiotape interview with Anne Grimes conducted by Penelope Niven McJunkin for the Carl Sandburg Oral History Project; and a presentation by Anne Grimes of her dulcimer collection videotaped by Harold Heckendorn, retired sound engineer and volunteer for the Ohio Historical Society.

In 1995 Anne Grimes moved to Kendal at Oberlin, a Quaker-affiliated retirement community in Oberlin, Ohio, where she occasionally continued to collect songs and give programs. Her last performance on a national stage was at the Smithsonian Institution in 1997. There she talked about her dulcimers, showed slides of some of her favorite contributors, played her dulcimer, and sang along with her old friend Joe Hickerson, then head of the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress.

Traveling along the highways and byways of Ohio in the 1950s as a folksinger and collector of traditional music, Anne Grimes encountered a host of people who opened up their homes to her to share their most precious family heirlooms—their songs. She tape-recorded these treasures for posterity and further preserved them through her lecture-recitals all over Ohio—from the state capital of Columbus to lake towns in the north and river towns in the south—and beyond. In performance, she never failed to acknowledge the source of her material—her contributors. In this book, Anne Grimes shares with a new audience both the music and her stories about the people who sang, played, and otherwise contributed to preserving our musical heritage.
Anne Grimes in Granville, Ohio, mid-1980s. Photo by Barbara Vogel reproduced with permission