

Labor Song's Writer, Frail at 83, Shows She Is Still a Fighter

By WILLIAM SERRIN
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KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Florence Reece, who will be 84 years old next month, lay in her hospital bed, fragile and white. She tried to eat, but, with her stomach ailment, that seemed too much effort. She said she would probably just have coffee.

Then a visitor, Guy Carawan, a singer and folklorist, gave her two presents. One was a pot his wife, Candie, had made; the other was a copy of a new record album, "They'll Never Keep Us Down." This is an important record, for it includes a recording of Mrs. Reece singing the song she wrote in 1931, "Which Side Are You On?" The song, the anthem of mining and of the American labor movement, contains this famous verse:

*They say in Harlan County,
There are no neutrals there;
You'll either be a union man,
Or a thug for J.H. Blair.
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?*

Mrs. Reece has always been a fighter. "I will get better," she said.

Florence Reece and her song are part of the rich folklore of the American labor movement.

"Florence symbolizes that ordinary people out of their own life experiences can capture in simple words and feelings the idea of struggle," Mr. Carawan says.

Organizing Mine Workers

In the 1930's Mrs. Reece and her husband, Sam, and their seven children lived in Harlan County, on the side of Big Black Mountain in eastern Kentucky. Sam Reece was an organizer for the United Mine Workers of America.

That was a time and a place of great coal wars, and in 1931 an especially bitter fight broke out. The operators were allied with the high sheriff, John Henry Blair; the deputies were nothing more than company policemen.

Five carloads of deputies arrived at the Reece home and carted Sam Reece off to jail. He was let out, but the deputies, with pistols and rifles, staked out the Reece house. Sam knew if he came home, he would be gunned down. He stayed in the mountains.

Florence did not know where Sam was, and was sick with worry. She decided to write a song, and set the words to the music of an old Baptist hymn, "Lay the Lily Low."

*Oh, workers, can you stand it?
Oh, tell me how you can.
Will you be a lousy scab
Or will you be a man?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?*

About 1940, Pete Seeger, an "eager young college dropout wanting to learn union songs," learned the song from Tillman Cadle, a coal miner then living in New York. In 1941 it was recorded by the Almanac Singers, of which Mr. Seeger was a member, and the forerunner of the Weavers. This version made the song famous.

Born April 12, 1900, in Sharps Chapel, Tenn., Mrs. Reece grew up in a coal camp at Fork Ridge, Tenn. She met her future husband when she was 15. Her mother opposed a wedding. Her father, a coal miner, had been killed the year before in a slate fall, and her mother said Sam Reece could not take her daughter. But that December the two crossed the state line to Kentucky, where her mother's permission was not needed, and got married.

The two were married for 64 years, until Sam Reece died in 1978 of pneumoconiosis, or black lung. It was, Mrs. Reece wrote in 1981 in "Against the

Current," a collection of her poems and stories, "not half long enough."

Scene in Film

Mrs. Reece has always talked for unions, at the grocery store, the laundromat, at rallies. One of the memorable scenes in the Academy-Award winning documentary film, "Harlan County, U.S.A.," a study of the 1974 Brookside, Ky., coal miners' strike, was Mrs. Reece exhorting strikers and singing her song.

The new album is notable because, according to Mr. Carawan, it is the first time Mrs. Reece has been recorded singing "Which Side Are You On?" The recording was made by Mr. and Mrs. Carawan in 1980 at Mrs. Reece's home in Fountain City, Tenn.

The songs were collected by the Carawans, staff members at the Highlander Research and Education Center, in New Market, Tenn., which works for social and economic change in Appalachia.

A few days after presenting Mrs. Reece with the album in the hospital, Mr. Carawan, on the telephone, said he had good news.

Mrs. Reece, as she had said, was better and was home. She was, she said, as spunky as ever.

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Candie Carawan

Florence Reece