

## **Ballad of the Book Women**

Approximate run time: 80 minutes

### Synopsis

Brought together by their love of reading and the circumstances of the Great Depression, book sisters Edna, Flossie, Mandy, and Rose- along with their loyal pack mule Nellie- whisk us across the Hollers of Eastern Kentucky in this piece of historical fiction. Inspired by true events, these four women tell the Herstory of the WPA Pack Horse Librarian project through storytelling and song. Ballad is an ode to the women and loyal steeds who served in the program, 1935-1943.

### Public Domain Folk/Bluegrass Song List

#### ACT 1

Keep on the Sunny Side  
It is Well With My Soul  
I Was Seein' Nellie Home  
You Are My Sunshine  
Am I Born To Die  
O Death

#### ACT 2

Shady Grove  
Down in the Valley  
Hard Times, Come Again No More

### Notes on Music

All songs in this script include chords and lyrics. All songs are to be performed live. The music and lyrics of the songs used can be found in the public domain. The keys may be altered to best fit voices cast.

The singing should not be overtly “pretty” or refined. The people of the Appalachia and the mountains were taught at home, learning to play and sing songs passed down from older generations. The singing style of Appalachia is specific, incorporating a mountain yodel and nasal vocals versus a refined vibrato.

The music of early Appalachia was greatly influenced by African, Scottish, Irish cultures, much of the passed down knowledge originating from the “old country.” One huge influence being the Banjo, which came to us directly from Africa. By the 1880’s, the sound of hills had a definitive style all its own.

Each artist sings with their own embellishments, as they would have in the hills. These songs were passed along to folks by call and response learning. Recording abilities in the 1930s/1940s meant these traditional mountain songs could be recorded. Traditional songs and folk music was beings released by rising country stars and popularized in the

1950s. By the 1960s, folk music was a huge genre of American Music, spilling over into Blues, Gospel, Bluegrass, Country, and soon, Classic Rock.

**Instrument suggestions for the Bluegrass Appalachian style of folk songs:**

hand drum, hand shaker, spoons, washboard, metal bin/bucket/tin drum, mouth harp, fiddle, mandolin, banjo, dulcimer, hand harp, piano, bottles and jugs, harmonica.

(Homemade/handmade instruments from materials the rural people would have had access to would help reflect the period and resourcefulness.)

SET NOTES

This piece should be staged in a way not reliant on a literal set, to be performed at festivals or touring production. The people of Appalachia did not have much, especially once rural areas began to feel the hit of the Depression. Overall, the “set” should be limited to the bare minimum, pieces that help imply location, relying on well executed props/costuming elements, and characterizations. Many scenes are played in simultaneous locations, showing the juxtaposition between those implementing plans from Washington and fancy state dinners versus those who carry out the hard labor of setting up and carrying out the mobile library programs.

Present time: 1939

Place: Eastern Kentucky

Recommended set pieces:

- A wooden table (light/moveable/foldable) and maybe a few wooden chairs.
- A wooden saw horse with saddlebags/pack bags/rucksacks hanging on it. The saw horse will need to be mobile on wheels/casters/dragged or light enough to be “carried”. Nellie represents the many animals (horses/donkeys/mules) used to carry the books through treacherous mountain passes, creeks and rivers.
- A prop Microphone reflecting the era on a stand for Mrs. Roosevelt.
- Instruments around the stage, depending on the musical abilities of the women cast.
- Prop “Radio” which would have been cobbled together/handmade, AM receiver/amplifier
- Using wooden crates or blank cardboard boxes to move and haul books, props, etc. as needed.

### CASTING REQUIREMENTS

Four (4) Women, stage ages 18-40+

All women must have vocal singing ability as all women have solos, sing a cappella as well as accompanied, and must be able to pick out harmonies. Ability to play an instrument a plus.

The rural parts of Appalachia are steeped in superstition and long held over practices from the old country. Remedies, tales, and superstition that intersected witchcraft. To pay tribute to the connection old world Appalachia shared to the land, the four women each embody an element. Their costuming should reflect and hint at the elements that inspired them.

#### **ACTOR 1**

EDNA [Fire]: the troubadour

Stage age: open to women 40+

Must be proficient in a stringed instrument. They serve as the primary instrument accompanist role

Also plays: Ol'Hal, Adam

#### **ACTOR 2**

MANDY [Water]: the teacher

Stage age: open to women 20+

Also plays: Announcer, any radio/recorded voices, Miss Adelaide the school marm, Mr. Fender

#### **ACTOR 3**

FLOSSIE [Earth]: the head librarian

Stage age: open to women 30+

Also plays: Eleanor Roosevelt, Ossie

#### **ACTOR 4**

ROSE [Air]: the horse woman

Stage age: 18-25, must appear to be the youngest.

Also plays: Primary controller for Mule Nellie.

\*Puppeteer experience preferred

**NELLIE: The Mule**

Operated by Rose, the mule is to be made from a saw horse, old wooden spindle for a neck, and a log shaped head. Saddle bags and book bags are to be supported and hung across Nellie's body. The saw horse may have wheels/casters, or a sliding platform.

Construction and fabrication can be interpreted in many ways, a la "milky white" from "Into the Woods."

ACT 1  
SCENE 1

Time(s): 1939, recording from 1936

Place(s): the home the women share  
Washington D.C., 1936  
Memories of Eleanor's, speaking from  
locations from tours across America

*EDNA enters with their guitar.*

*They turn on the radio, tuning the dial until we hear:*

*MUSIC: John Phillip Souza*

*Cuing a moment of history, a memory, enacting a  
moment in time.*

*The audience is transported between eastern  
Kentucky (present) and Washington D.C (April 1,  
1936).*

*As John Phillip Souza ends, we hear a RADIO HOST  
introducing audio of Eleanor Roosevelt speaking at  
an event from 1936.*

(PRERECORDED) RADIO HOST:

The event held last April [*radio wave static*] recognizing the First Lady's efforts [*radio wave static*] celebrating one year of success for President Roosevelt and his Works Program Administration [*radio wave static*] for a rebroadcast of the First Ladies remarks [*radio wave static*].

EDNA

*(Pleading with the radio) C'mon. C'mon!*

*The Radio cuts out.*

EDNA

Dang it! *(calling out)* Mandy, the juice done gone out.

*MANDY enters*

MANDY

What'd ya do this time?

EDNA

All I did was touch the dang thing!

MANDY

Chipmunk prolly chewed through the wiring lines again. Or wind took the tower down up the mountain.

EDNA

But it was just gettin to the good part!

MANDY

Cain't fix it today. Sorry. (*Exiting*) Let the wireless be, Edna.

*EDNA fetches a guitar instead.*

*SONG: KEEP ON THE SUNNY SIDE*

*Style: Uplifting and hopeful, with a tempo to match.*

*EDNA plays a happy, vampy intro on guitar before singing.*

*During which time the ANNOUNCER will enter with a styled prop microphone:*

EDNA

VERSE:

G	C	G
LET US GREET WITH A SONG OF HOPE EACH DAY		
G	D	
THOUGH THE MOMENT BE CLOUDY OR FAIR		
D	G	
AND LET US TRUST IN OUR SAVIOR ALWAYS		
D	G	
HE'LL KEEP US EVERYONE IN HIS CARE		

ANNOUNCER

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I have the great task of introducing tonight's guest of honor. Without further ado, please offer the warmest of welcomes to the First Lady of the United States, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

*ELEANOR enters  
She crosses to the microphone.*

*Edna softly picks "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life" on the guitar under ELEANOR'S speech.  
MANDY enters with books.*



*ROSE enters.*  
*This signals MANDY and EDNA that it's time to put up*  
*their instruments and get on with their morning.*  
*MANDY and EDNA exit.*

*ELEANOR continues, ROSE goes about her business.*  
*She to a saddle bag on the saw horse, removing a*  
*homemade scrapbook.*  
*She brings the scrapbook to the table.*  
*MANDY enters with a pail for NELLIE, hands it to*  
*ROSE.*  
*MANDY at the table adds pieces of paper to the*  
*scrapbook.*

#### ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

I have been studying some maps which were sent to me, and I am grateful for the correspondence. It is my wish to have these maps enlarged and plastered across this country to show everyone just how many states spend only ten cents per capita on library books for an entire year. These maps illustrate how many states have large rural areas where the population simply can not get books.

*ROSE crosses with the pail to the NELLIE, the*  
*sawhorse Mule,*  
*and pulls up a wooden section in the front,*  
*by the neck as she pats it as she feeds it.*  
*ROSE manipulates the mule sawhorse as she pets it.*

#### ROSE

Eat up, girl. Gotta big day ahead of you. Places to go, important people to see. Just as important as the folks we seen yesterday. And just as important as those we seeing tomorrow. There's a good girl.

*ELEANOR ends her speech.*

#### ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

I have been presented photograph after photograph of girls- women!- traveling alone on horseback, with books strapped to them as precious cargo. These women have begun to implement a sort of mobile library system, trading and borrowing, at times, creating the very books they carry. Each woman covers 100 miles of area, traversing treacherous terrain. They take books to the people, children and adults alike, across Eastern Kentucky.

*A steam engine whistle pierces the air of where*  
*ELEANOR is, continuing her tour across Appalachia,*  
*exiting.*  
*\*quick change into the FLOSSIE\**

*ROSE sings a verse of Keep On The Sunny Side to  
NELLIE.*

ROSE

*A cappella*

THOUGH THE STORM AND ITS FURIES RAGE TODAY  
CRUSHING HOPE THAT WE CHERISH SO DEAR  
THE CLOUD AND STORM WILL IN TIME PASS AWAY  
AND THE SUN AGAIN WILL SHINE BRIGHT AND CLEAR

*A burp is heard.*

ROSE

*(To her beloved horse) Yer welcome.*

*MANDY enters.*

*ROSE slips the scrap book back into a saddle bag.*

MANDY

She all fed?

ROSE

Yessum. Gave her a right sturdy pep talk, too.

MANDY

Make sure you grab a biscuit and feed yerself, Rose. Y'all have a big day ahead. You gonna watch out for our Rosie today, Nellie ol'girl?

*NELLIE give a jolly Mule bray.*

*FLOSSIE and ENDA Enter.*

FLOSSIE

I still say we need a younger steed. No offense, Nellie.

EDNA

We'd have to scrimp and save 100 years to ever afford a decent horse.

MANDY

I don't understand why the WPA can't help, why we gotta provide everything from the steed to the saddle to the hay.

FLOSSIE

They're helpin plenty. Don't forget, the government is makin sure we make a liveable wage.

MANDY

Liveable? Ha! Laughable. After food and firewood, we've only got pennies to show for it at the end of our week.

FLOSSIE

Which is more than most folks have 'round these parts. We should count our blessings and be glad.

MANDY

All's I'm saying is they expect us to do the work and run their fancy program, least they could do is make sure we got the tools to succeed.

EDNA

Like a whole team of Clydesdales. Wouldn't that be sight?

ROSE

Y'all gonna give my gal a complex. You're perfect, Nellie ol girl, just the Mule we need round these parts. Loyal somethin fierce, and the cutest four legged creature on gods green earth, ain't ya? Who's a good girl?

*This pleases NELLIE.*

FLOSSIE

Yes, yes, she's a mighty fine Mule. Enough fussin, Rosie, the Sun is nearly up. If y'all have your wishlists handy, I'm heading to the station to get first crack at what comes off the mornin' train. Prayers for more Encyclopedias.

EDNA

Speakin of prayers, before we all scatter to the winds... *(she extends her hands out, the signal for the other women that before they embark, they pray.)*

*The women join hands in a prayer circle.*

EDNA (continued)

Dear Lord, please watch over these women and myself as we do your work, one book at a time.

ROSE

Don't forget Nessie.

EDNA

And please bless Nessie, that her hooves may be sturdy and the books she carry be both full of knowledge and light in weight.

MANDY

And Lord, please watch over the children of these hills. You surely have a plan for them,  
Lord, and we will do our best to help them.

EDNA

“Arise, O Lord;  
O God, lift up your hand.  
Do not forget the afflicted.”

MANDY

And we especially pray for those still opposed to reading.

EDNA

Or opposed to women reading.

ROSIE

Or opposed to women.

MANDY

We pray for those folks hardest of all, Lord. Though it's difficult every now and again,  
because you know best of all, Lord, that not everyone is a good person-

FLOSSIE

Mandy!

EDNA

-but we still pray for them anyhow.

MANDY

Yes, we do, we pray for them, extra hard, that hopefully one day become better people,  
that maybe one day they'll have a book fall on their head and knock some sense into  
their brains, if they have any brains up in their skulls at all-

FLOSSIE

Mandy!

ROSE

And more Encyclopedias, Lord, please and thank you!

EDNA/FLOSSIE/MANDY

-Amen!

ROSE

Book sisters, let's ride.

ALL WOMEN

*SUNNY SIDE OF LIFE (continued)*

*A cappella*

OH, KEEP ON THE SUNNY SIDE, ALWAYS ON THE SUNNY SIDE  
KEEP ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF LIFE  
IT WILL HELP US EVERY DAY, IT WILL BRIGHTEN ALL THE WAY  
IF WE KEEP ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF LIFE.

*The singing trails off as the women exit and set for  
the next scene: Town Meeting*

*They can keep singing "Keep On The Sunny side" as  
they ready their scrapbooks.*

*End of scene*

ACT 1  
SCENE 2

Place: Town Meeting

Time: evening community event, How to  
make an Appalachian Scrapbook

*All 4 women demonstrate their skills, their wit and resourcefulness, and generosity in putting together a traditional pack horse librarian specialty.*

*Scrapbooks were full of pasted pages and writings by book women, librarians, and patrons who volunteered.*

*Just about any subject you could think of, containing words that would pass the time, pass knowledge, and pass on the latest news, pass on messages from folks around the hills, etc.*

MANDY

Ladies and Gentlemen, Youngins and respected elders, my fellow book sisters and I thank you for being here tonight.

ROSE

And thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Fender, for letting us hold our meetings right here in the post office.

EDNA

Twelve whole attendees! Now folks, that's gotta be a new attendance record, thank you.

FLOSSIE

Tonight, I will be leading you through an exciting activity that anyone can do, young or old, an enjoyable task for the whole family. I assure you folks, even if you can't read or write, we have books with picture pages of all sorts of interesting things.

MANDY

And for those wantin to learn, all kinds of learning pages from donated school books from all across these great United States. Some comin to us from Universities! The books may look a little worse for wear, but they're still good! Books dry real well. Crossing creeks is proolly the worst thing for the books, but ain't no way around it.

FLOSSIE

And those books that fall apart, we salvage every last scrap of paper, savin the hard book backings if they're still good. When things start to fall apart, that's where scrapping comes in handy!

ROSE

And now, Miss Flossie will demonstrate how to construct a real genuine Appalachian Scrapbook.

FLOSSIE

Thank you, Rose. All I need to start my book are pages, some string or twine- anything ya got layin round to tie up papers- and an awl to punch a hole or two-

*FLOSSIE demonstrates, how to easily bind a few pages together, creating a small booklet.*

-and I do believe we just made a book. How about that?

*The other women encourage polite applause.*

Anything you wanna hold onto; recipe cards, news paper clippings, even almanac pages or post cards.

ROSE

You can even take a book missing pages that don't make no sense no more and paste your clippings there.

FLOSSIE

Miss Mandy, bring over what you've been working on.

MANDY

Our scrapbook here has been a group effort, holdin onto any ripped or forgotten pages, articles, you name it. Every day, we gather up our meager offerings and I have been pasting and sortin it all into this master book. We will be keeping it at our Library once it's all finished, for everyone to enjoy. And if you have a writing mind in the family, we'll have papers and charcoals to copy words from the masterbook and keep in your personal collection at home.

EDNA

Learnin to write and read and copy books is how the Bible made it all the way from the holy lands to the hills. Ain't no shame in learnin how to spread the good word, no shame at all. I joined the Packhorse Library the day the WPA rolled out. Heck, before Washington got their politics all over our hills, we was a-delivering books to folks for ages. The first woman to take matters into her own, capable hands, called May Stafford. Back in 1913, May was the first, but tried to do it all herself. She was tough as she was kind. For a whole year she traveled and collected and endured. Without May, I ain't never would-a-started readin. I am the only one in my family who learnt to read and

write. And because of folks taking after May's example, the First Lady herself took up our cause and its spreading faster than a brush fire. This one here is one of my favorites. It uses some of our favorite Bible passages to learn what words look like, how to sound em out, and where in the good book to find em.

MANDY

That is why we do this work, to bring the world to everyone. Learning is for everyone, not just the wealthy or folks born to privilege.

FLOSSIE

I've been working on an index, what a Library calls a "card catalogue." It's used for finding books in the library. The index tells you what kind of books and readings we have. Categories now include gardening and farmin, religious materials, sewing, cooking and baking, stamps, hunting and cleaning, mechanics and repair, nature, and a hodgepodge of notes, receipts, cards, correspondence, and such.

ROSE

I like to call that category "Potpourri," that's a fancy French word for a hodgepodge of scraps of all kinds of stuff until you get a fine smelling mix of petals and branches and such.

MANDY

Miss Edna, goes to show, you don't have to be a youngin to learn. I was of marrying age when I learned to read my first words. If y'all ever need anything just ask one of us book women and we shall be glad to be of assistance.

FLOSSIE

You'll soon be able to take books from right here in town once our very first library is up and running. Any volunteers are gladly welcome if anyone has the desire to sort through books we will receive by donation. So tell your friends and neighbors-

MANDY

Tell your kin-

EDNA

Tell your enemies if you be so bold.

ROSE

The book women of the Pack Horse Librarians will be by real soon.

*End of scene*

ACT 1  
SCENE 3

PLACES: school house, a trail, train station(s)/press tour montage

TIME: starting in their present, Time montage of Eleanor's WPA tour.

*MISS ADELAIDE, the teacher, enters.  
She carries her materials to share with the kids.  
She addresses the audience in this scene as if they  
were her class.  
She carries a stick she uses to write in the air,  
and on the ground as if writing in the dirt.*

MISS ADELAIDE  
Good morning, children!  
...!

Well that was quieter than a flea jumpin on a feather! What, no "good morning, Miss Adelaide?" Let's try that again, shall we?

*MISS ADELAIDE exits and quickly re-enters,  
in hopes the audience will play along!*

MISS ADELAIDE  
Well, good morning, children!

*Hopefully the audience responds!*

I see our class is a somewhat smaller today. No doubt the Ephiriam children are helping their daddy and I dare say we won't see them until after the Fall harvest. Our best attended days seem to be when our book woman journeys up the mountain to see us! Sadly, today is not that day. Now don't y'all fret. Jennilee, please write down the names of our friends who are missing from today's lesson. We shall say a pray for them. Let's give a little appreciation to this beautiful spring morning with a song.

*She encourages the audience, the school children.  
She uses the tracing stick as a conductors baton.*

*SONG: It Is Well With My Soul  
Style: encouraging, medium tempo.*

*A cappella*

MISS ADELAIDE

## VERSE 1

G Em C D G  
 WHEN PEACE LIKE A RIVER ATTENDETH MY WAY  
 Em A D  
 WHEN SORROWS LIKE SEA BILLOWS ROLL  
 G C A D  
 WHATEVER MY LOT, THOU HAS TAUGHT ME TO SAY  
 G C D G  
 IT IS WELL, IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

CHORUS: Call (*and response*)

G D C G  
 IT IS WELL (*IT IS WELL*)  
 G D C G  
 WITH MY SOUL (*WITH MY SOUL*)  
 G C G D G  
 IT IS WELL, IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

G D C G  
 IT IS WELL (*IT IS WELL*)  
 G D C G  
 WITH MY SOUL (*WITH MY SOUL*)  
 G C G D G  
 IT IS WELL, IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

## MISS ADELAIDE

And a prayer for those who could not be here today. May their bodies be strong, their souls be saved, their minds be safe and their bodies be fed. Amen.

*She grabs todays meager stack of leaflets, papers,  
and a few books.*

*She continues to address her students.*

Now class, I have a special treat. When I was in town just two days ago, your favorite friend and mine, our book woman Miss Flossie handed me some new materials for our readings. We are so lucky to have our bookwomen who feed our minds whether it's sunny or snowy. The trials they go through to gift us such treasures! Let's have a look see, and pick out any letters we may not know yet. Now, this book comes to us all the way from South Carolina and the good people who donated it to the state of Kentucky.

*She holds up a weathered and tattered pocket  
almanac.*

“Farmers and Planters Farmer’s Almanac, 1927.”

Goodness, some of you youngins weren't even born yet when this here almanac guide came out. (*Addressing an audience member as a student*) Sutton, you were born in 1929 and if it is 1937 in the year of our Lord, then how old are you? (*The answer should be 8*) And if you are 8 years old now, how old would you have been when this Almanac came out? (*Answer should be 2*) Sutton, since you're so good with your letters and numbers, I want you to help out the other youngins today. We are learning all kinds of words, like Almanac. And, Popular Mechanics.

*She holds up an old Popular Mechanics paper magazine.*

From 1923. This has pictures of real automobiles and the tools used to fix them. Youngins' grab a good, sturdy tracing stick and we'll carve out our letters and words in the dirt together.

*As MISS ADELAIDE exits, ROSE and NELLIE can be heard approaching.*

*ROSE sings a chorus of "You Are My Sunshine" to NELLIE the mule.*

*They are traveling through the steep passes to the remote home of an elderly man who ROSE adores.*

ROSE

*SONG: YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE  
Style: sweet and casual*

*A cappella*

YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE  
MY ONLY SUNSHINE  
YOU MAKE ME HAPPY  
WHEN SKIES ARE GREY  
YOU'LL NEVER KNOW DEAR  
HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU  
PLEASE DON'T TAKE MY SUNSHINE AWAY.

*They stop and take a break at a creek.  
ROSE slurps from her cupped hand.*

ROSE

Drink up, Nellie girl, we still have miles to go before we sleep. I read that in a poem once. One of the purtiest rhymes you ever did hear about a snowy wood. Ever hear it before?

*NELLIE tosses her head as if shaking her head “No.”*

The author wrote all kinds of poems about the beauty of this Earth. I have been guarding this scrapbook collection of poems with my life for ol’Hal. Just don’t tell him its poetry or he’ll be crosser than hornet in a bell jar. It’ll be our lil secret. This book is just the kind of thing he needs, verses about woods and mountains. The language tricks your mind, see, giving you all kinds of wonderful things to ponder. It’s like your mind hears the words and takes you to that place.

*NELLIE playfully tosses her head as if in agreement.*

He’ll sure be happy to see you, girl. What say we pick a few apples on our way for Ol’Hal?

*NELLIE begins to turn and make her way back to the trail at the mention of apples.*

Alright, alright! Hold your horses, darned mule!

*They exit, NELLIE leading the way.*

*Time shifts: 1936-1939, a montage of ELEANOR as seen from across the country.*

*ANNOUNCER Enters.  
ELEANOR ROOSEVELT enters with prop  
microphone.*

ANNOUNCER

Honored guests, please welcome the First Lady of the United States of America, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

ELEANOR

Good morning, Texas. What a send off this is, departing on my first of many stops across America. I have just come back from one of the most interesting mornings I have ever spent. I toured an old soap factory which is now being used to host a handicraft project for unskilled local women. Many of the women are either widowed or husbands have spent their bodies, an after effect of a lifetime of hard labor. These women now meet together and are binding scrap books for children, books to be used in hospitals, and books specially for the Braille project.”

*We hear an applauding crowd.*

*ELEANOR pivots with the microphone, denoting a different speech, a different audience.*

*She is speaking from Detroit, Michigan.*

ANNOUNCER

The great state of Michigan deems that today be dedicated as Eleanor Roosevelt Day!

ELEANOR

My fear is that over time, future generations of Americans may fail to recall the men and women responsible for bringing hope to us all during this period of depression.

*We hear a train whistle, and with that,  
ELEANOR is whisked to another location.*

ANNOUNCER

Today, the First Lady of the United States has made the time in her nationwide library tour to visit us here in Milwaukee. Let us give her a warm Wisconsin welcome!

ELEANOR

“It has been a great pleasure to be here this evening and to hear all the things that have been said about libraries in the district and in general, and the librarians, without whom the libraries would be of little use.”

*A train whistle sounds, and Eleanor is off.  
She exits.*

*As the lights dim on her part of the stage,  
we hear “clip-clop, clip-clop” of a mule.  
“You Are My Sunshine” instrumental/chords played  
by EDNA for a scene change and bringing the  
audience back to the trail.*

*End of scene*

ACT 1  
SCENE 4

TIME: hot summer day.

PLACE: Ol'Hal's front porch

*Ol'HAL enters, to their front porch, under some  
instrumentation.*

*Their pace is slow and steady.*

*Their body is twisted by hard labor and time.*

*They plop into a chair.*

*They lazily search for smoking tobacco in a pocket.*

*They find a small leather pouch and pull it from their  
pocket.*

*They search for their pipe.*

*It is across the porch.*

*Sigh.*

*They get up out of their chair, slowly and carefully.*

*Success!*

*They walk to the pipe.*

*They retrieve the pipe.*

*Success!*

*They turn around 180 degrees.*

*They walk back to their chair.*

*Slow. Steady. Carefully. Purposefully. Patiently.*

*They happily plop down upon the chair a second time.*

*They fill the pipe (mime, please don't smoke onstage).*

*They strike a match (mimed) against the sole of their boot.*

*They go to light their pipe-*

*BUT!*

*ROSIE startles Ol'HAL with a loud and boisterous greeting.*

*He drops the match, spills his pipe and stamps the match  
out on the ground.*

Ol'HAL  
DANGNABIT

*HAL abandons his pipe and shuffles across the porch.*

ROSE

Your favorite mule and her book woman are here!

Ol'HAL

Bless it all, Rosie, caint go sneakin up on an old man like that.

ROSE  
We missed you too, Hal.

Ol'HAL  
Womens shouldn't be traipsing through the mountains alone. Ain't right.

ROSE  
Show me a man brave enough to bring books to all the Hollers across Kentucky, and I swear on my daddy's grave I shall hang up my saddle for life.

Ol'Hal  
You got a right sharp tongue. Not a good look for a woman if ya ask me.

ROSE  
That's funny, I don't remember askin.

Ol'HAL  
Y'all just started showin up one day with talkin and book learnin. Bringin me food and-

ROSE  
What a right bunch of mean ol biddies we are, tryin to take care of our people.

Ol'HAL  
I like you, Rosie. Those other women are- blech- but you, well... you're a good kid. But you know I ain't really "your people." We ain't blood.

ROSE  
Then I guess you won't want these apples Nellie picked just for you- since we ain't "your people." I'll just go toss em in the creek.

*ROSE holds out an apple to Ol'HAL.  
He takes a bite and hold s the apple for NELLIE to nibble.*

Ol'HAL  
Nah, nah, nah, don't you be wastin food in my presence! Give em here. Ya outsmarted me again, didn't ya? Aw Hell, Rosie... I worry about y'all womens is all, worry somethin fierce. I know how men can be. Even a preacher man ain't perfect. And once these men get a sniff of whiskey in em... I cain't barely make it out back thout fear of piddlin on my boots, how I gonna a-charge through the woods to save you?

ROSE  
Hal. Do I look like a woman who needs savin? 'Sides, Nellie and I take good care of each other. Don't we girl?

*Ol' HAL leans on NELLIE and ROSE notices.*

ROSE (continued)  
Hal, why you ain't use the walkin stick I carved you?

O'HAL  
Don't need no cane.

ROSE  
I made it for you, so you can lean on me even when I'm not here.

O'HAL  
If I was forty years younger-

ROSE  
You'd be right behind me on the trail, carrying books all over Kentucky, I know.

O'HAL  
And I wouldn't need no ding dang crutch.

*O'HAL stumbles but ROSE is there so he doesn't fall.*

Oh go on and a-get it already, I know you want to. It's under the mattress.

*ROSE exits to retrieve a wooden walking cane.  
He pets and speaks to NELLIE.*

O'HAL  
Mighty good folks you have, girl. Mighty good indeed. Those women take care of all so  
you take good care of them, ya hear?

*NELLIE affectionately pushes her head gently into  
O'HAL.  
ROSE returns with a wooden cane.*

ROSE  
I brought you a reading right special, Hal. I think you'll really like this one. Authors  
name is Frost.

*ROSE removes a pocket sized book of poems,  
papers all glued in the book and taped together.  
O'HAL shuffles to sit in a chair .*

O'HAL  
Well, ain't gonna read itself.

ROSE

Yes, sir.  
This is called, "Nothing Gold Can Stay."

*(Reciting Robert Frost)*

"Nature's first green is gold."

OL'HAL  
Whatsthat? Speak up!

ROSE  
"NATURE'S FIRST GREEN IS GOLD,  
HER HARDEST HUE TO HOLD."

*Ol'HAL gives a "Hm" of agreement.*

ROSE  
"Her early leaf's a flower,  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief."

OL'HAL  
Hold on a tic. This is that flowery language.

ROSE  
Poetry. Yes.

...

Do you like it?

..?

OL'HAL

...

ROSE  
"So dawn goes down today.  
Nothing gold can stay."

OL'HAL  
Not bad. Reminds me of a song...

ROSE  
Oh, sing it to me, Hal, won't ya?

Ol'HAL

Wouldn't be proper. An old man singing to a young lady.

ROSE

Oh, Hell, Hal, I ain't no youngin' and I sure ain't no proper lady.

...

Well, if you ain't gonna sing me a song, I might as well be on my way. I'm sure one of the other patrons would be more than willing-

Ol'HAL

DANGNABIT, woman. Ya ain't gotta leave but I ain't gonna sing.

ROSE

Fair enough.

ACT 1  
SCENE 5

Time: midday, jumping to days later.

Places: home the women share, to the path leading to Ol'Hals homestead.

*Mail call, a letter from Eleanor Roosevelt.  
ROSE brings NELLIE onstage.  
She has a stack of assorted letters /papers tied up  
with twine/string.*

ROSE  
Nellie and I come from the post office with glad tidings!

*The women assemble around the table.*

ROSE (continued)  
Edna, for you. Mandy, for you. This one's mine.

FLOSSIE  
And?

ROSE  
There wasn't nothin for Flossie.

...  
Except for...

Now, where was it. Where did I put that letter.

FLOSSIE  
Who was it from?

ROSE  
Hmmm....

FLOSSIE  
Quit acting funny, gimme my letter.

ROSE  
You mean, this letter?

FLOSSIE  
Oh, Rosie, give it here, silly girl.

ROSE

Direct from Washington, a letter from the White House!

EDNA

What White House?

MANDY

THE White House?

*FLOSSIE opens the official letter, causing her to sit.*

FLOSSIE

From the desk of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

ROSE

The First Lady herself!

MANDY

Personalized stationary. How fine!

EDNA

Read it out loud for goodness sake!

FLOSSIE

“Dear Miss Shay, I have heard your name mentioned in different circles of conversation and because of your admirable work and dedication to the mission of the WPA Pack horse Librarian project, I am writing to you in hopes that I may visit the library you are building as well as the daily operations of your book distribution. I would very much like to meet the women, and men, who have helped this idea find its feet. Or, its hooves, as it were. I have also sent letters of inquiry to your sheriff and local station conductor. All have been informed of my purpose for visiting and are instructed to communicate with you regarding preparations for the day. I look forward to my visit where I shall be your humble servant in aiding your plans for your local library and mobile book lending services. Affectionately yours, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.”

MANDY

Here? The First Lady of the United States is coming here?

FLOSSIE

Coming next Spring. April, 5th.

EDNA

Well I'll be damned.

ROSE

Flossie, you alright? Mandy, get the smellin' salts!

FLOSSIE

Oh, no time to fuss, we got an arms length list of tasks to do! Our town library must be opened by springtime, ready the First Lady's visit. Edna, call an emergency town meeting.

EDNA

I'll do my best, Flossie, but the government here in town, pokin their noses into our business, I reckon most folks will avoid the hubbub all together.

FLOSSIE

Then kindly remind folks that this is the First Lady of our United States. The closest confidant and partner to the President himself. And if they are true Americans, answering the call for God and country as they so claim after a night of whiskey drinking and manly shenanigans, then they will be at the train depot, April 5, 8 a.m. sharp, waving flags and wearing smiles, all in their Sunday's best.

EDNA

Yes, ma'am!

FLOSSIE

Let's gather a photo from each household. Mandy, you can make it an assignment.

MANDY

I can bring some sketches from the farms this week. Those Ephiriam children can draw just about any landscape of Kentucky with nothin more than some charcoal and a slip of paper.

FLOSSIE

We shall display the photos and pictures about the library. The library is for the people, after all, should have our people represented within its walls. Rose, gather up those newspaper articles you've been cuttin up on the New Deal WPA initiative. Ladies, we have a grand opportunity to show Washington that libraries and schools are just as important as churches and government buildings.

MANDY

Let's invite all of the elders. We'll want our greatest testaments in the front row.

ENDA

I can't hardly believe it. She'll be standing right here in a matter of a few weeks. What do you even say to the wife of the President of the United States?

FLOSSIE

I'd start with, "Hello."

MANDY

I'll start visiting households today, round up some students to volunteer knockin on doors and spreadin the word for extra credit.

ROSE

I'll rustle up some of the men folk to collect-n-cart over any wood crates or pallets we can find.

FLOSSIE

Bring Nellie with you to keep an eye on the men folks.

ROSE

Why, a few crates nailed together makes em practically shelves already, if you stack em and secure em right and proper. Reckon we'll have that ol'Backer dryin barn gussied up to the brim with books by the end of the week.

FLOSSIE

Ladies, let's ride!

*All exit.*

*End of scene*

ACT 1  
SCENE 6

Place: Ol'Hals front porch

Time: Fall, getting dark earlier in the Hollers

*ROSE and Ol'HAL are enjoying their time together.*

Ol'HAL

Read another one them- whachamacallits- the flowery ones-

ROSE  
Poems?Ol'HAL  
One of them.ROSE  
How about one by a woman for a change?Ol'HAL  
A woman poem maker?ROSE  
Yessir, a one Miss Emily Dickinson.Ol'HAL  
Well pluck my feathers and call me dinner, I don't believe it.ROSE  
"Hope is the thing with feathers  
that perches in the soul.  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops- at all"

'Fraid that's all there is of that one. I had to hold tight yesterday mornin' when I found a fresh crate of loose pages at the depot. Hardly didn't make no sense, millions of papers from every which book you could ever dream of. Would've been destined for the bin had a librarian in Chicago not saved them and stuck em on a train. I grabbed a hand full just as Mildred Hennessy looked over. Well, you know the Hennessy's...

Ol'HAL  
Right greedy folk they are.

ROSE

She was all over the box like a fly on a sugar cube. Ain't no one get a single slip of paper after that.

Ol'HAL

It's a fine poem. You did good, Rosie.

ROSE

I knew you'd like it, didn't I tell you, girl?

*NELLIE let's out a playful bray, a few happy donkey noises.*

ROSE

We should be gettin on. Holler'll be dark before long.

Ol'HAL

You sure you can't stay longer? I was about to set up on this here porch and watch the grass grow.

ROSE

Thanks, for the offer, Hal. We'll be by next week. You keep a keen eye on the hills for your favorite gal and her trusty mule.

Ol'HAL

Hey kid, wait up one tic... I wanna tell you... Rosie, if you come by, and I'm not here no more...

ROSE

Hal, somethin wrong? You feelin okay? Lemme feel your forehead. Your tongue lookin funny? How's your appetite?

Ol'HAL

DANGNABIT, Woman, I'm fine. I'm just old, is all, a dyin old man.

ROSE

Well we're all dyin-

Ol'HAL

Man can't get two words in without you takin the reigns!

ROSE

Hal, where's this all comin from?

Ol'HAL

When I was young, wife and I prayed for a girl. But the good lord took my dearest Lil not long after our Adam was born. Never did get that baby girl. Sometimes I wish you was my own daughter.

If the good Lord calls me home, and I don't get to tell you-

ROSE

Oh Hal, I do hope I see you again. For a long time to come. Nellie too. But If I don't, well, you've been a great friend, Hal. And one hell of a conversation partner.

*She extends her hand for Hal to shake.*

And if you're alive next time I drop by, we get to do this all over again.

Ol'HAL

Darlin, look-a-forward to it.

*He shakes her hand.*

ROSE

You take care, Hal, ya hear? I don't know what I'd do without you.

Ol'HAL

Alright, get, you're making my heart ache somethin fierce and I don't like it. Go on now, can't keep a book woman from her patrons, no way no how.

ROSE

Bye, Hal.

Come on, girl.

*ROSE and NELLIE leave with a song.*

*SONG: I WAS SEEING NELLIE HOME*

*Style: playful*

*A cappella*

VERSE

A

IN THE SKY THE BRIGHT STARS GLITTERED

D

A

ON THE BANK, THE PALE MOON SHONE

D

IT WAS FROM AUNT DINAH'S QUILTING PARTY

E

A

I WAS SEEING NELLIE HOME

CHORUS

A

D

A

I WAS SEEING NELLIE HOME, I WAS SEEING NELLIN HOME

D

E

A

AND FROM AUNT DINAH'S QUILTING PARTY-

-And use that walkin' stick!

*Calling from offstage:*

*Seeing that ROSE is gone:*

O'HAL

*Singing:*

I WAS SEEING NELLIE HOME.

SEEING NELLIE HOME, YES

SEELING NELLIE HOME

*O'HAL'S singing trails off to a hum.*

*End of scene*

ACT 1  
SCENE 7

Place: the hills of Eastern Kentucky

Time: Edna's most prominent memory in these hills.

*OSSIE is a reflection of the hardships of mountain life, Great Depression Era struggles visible*

*The song weaved through the dialogue emulates the pain and hopelessness of one of the roughest environments to live in America.*

*SONG: AM I BORN TO DIE?*

*Style: expressive*

*A cappella*

OSSIE

AND AM I BORN TO DIE  
TO LAY THIS BODY DOWN  
AND AS MY TREMBLING SPIRIT FLY  
INTO A WORLD UNKNOWN

*EDNA enters.*

EDNA

These hills are haunted. These hills, reckon the oldest thing since God himself. To think of a lifetime as long? Brother, you ain't got enough hairs on your head to keep track of the years lived by these Great Mountains. Between the fog and the coal dust, the earth hides our very existence. I could've been born anywhere on this earth. Thank God, I was born right here.

OSSIE

A LAND OF DEEPEST SHADE

EDNA

For over 400 million years the mountains have stood. This here dirt was inside the mountains at one point. For ages, this land has endured rain, sleet, snow, and Time. And so shall we. And when I die- praise be to Jesus will be many, many years from now-  
*(Knocks on wood)*

OSSIE

UNPIERCED BY HUMAN THOUGHT

EDNA

When I die, I look forward to resting my bones on the side of these hills.

OSSIE

THAT WEARY REGION OF THE DEAD

EDNA

To haunt these hills with all those who went before me. And I shall greet them as an old friend.

OSSIE

WHERE ALL THINGS ARE FORGOT

A LAND OF DEEPEST SHADE

EDNA

I've met more folks than I can count in all my years. But there is one...

OSSIE

UNPIERCED BY HUMAN THOUGHT

EDNA

She had the most beautiful singing voice I'd ever heard. Could hear it clear across these hills, sailin on the air like some Angel song.

OSSIE

THE DREARY REGIONS OF THE DEAD

EDNA

Sometimes I think I hear her still...

OSSIE

WHERE ALL THINGS ARE FORGOT

EDNA

Ossie and I grew up together. Holler pals. Inseparable. I only had eyes for Ossie. But once a little girl gets of a certain age, they ain't seen as being little no more. Once Ossie became a young lady, her daddy sold her off to a man with land and money. And was about 15 years her senior... and just like that, with a handshake and preacher present, Ossie found herself to be a married woman, 4 days days before her 13th Birthday. Shortly after, she stopped a-comin to town. Her husband needed her at home. Until they both stopped a-comin to church. I couldn't take it no more, I missed my friend, so, leading by May Stafford's example, I started bringing church to her.

*EDNA and OSSIE read from a Bible together.*

OSSIE

Be..joy..ful in..hope, pa..pat..

EDNA

Pay-shunt.

OSSIE

Patient, in aff..in aff.lic.tion? Affliction. And faith.ful in prayer.

EDNA

Very good!

OSSIE

Thank you, Edna, for bringing church to me. And to my husband. Why you're the best friend a gal could ask for. And much more than I deserve.

EDNA

I'd come once a week and bring church to the whole family- to child, after child, after child. I swear, that man couldn't stay off her. But he was good to her. At first.

OSSIE

AND AM I BORN TO DIE  
TO LAY THIS BODY DOWN  
AND AS MY TREMBLING SPIRIT FLY  
INTO A WORLD UNKNOWN

EDNA

The things life does not prepare you for... Barely a smile at her babies, not even the good book brought her solace after a time...

OSSIE

A LAND OF DEEPEST SHADE  
UNPIERCED BY HUMAN THOUGHT  
THE DREARY REGION OF THE DEAD  
WHERE ALL THINGS ARE FORGOT

EDNA

So when her two youngest didn't make it through the winter of 1929, whispers shivered through the hills that she had gone to the devil. She began a-searching for answers. Why had her babies been taken to Heaven? Why had her husband turned vile and cruel? Her husband didn't like her "reading books that a woman had no sense in reading." That was too much for her loving, god-fearing, coal mining husband, who decided it was best for him to take the remaining, healthy children far away. You see, it's different for a man. He could always remarry. Start fresh. Leave the broken parts behind. But a woman... a woman is left alone to pick of the pieces. And some can't manage to put themself back together again.

OSSIE

SOON AS FROM EARTH I GO  
WHAT WILL BECOME OF ME  
ETERNAL HAPPINESS OR WOE  
MUST THEN MY FORTUNE BE

*ROSE and MANDY enter.*

EDNA

Her precious soul was gone three days before I found her body. She's buried along the path, among wild, wildflowers. Ossie's part of these hills now. Every now and again, I speak to her. I stop and smell the flowers that grow above her. I can still hear her voice on the wind, see her glinting green eyes winking with every firefly. Ossie is just one of many lost to these hills, unseen and forgotten by the wide world.

ROSE

We've seen our fair share of death.

MANDY

I could write a book on how life ain't fair.

EDNA

I get angry, at God mostly, then at myself, for questioning him.

MANDY

For doubting.

ROSE

For hurting.

EDNA

But when is enough suffering enough?

*SONG: OH DEATH*

*Style: steady, thumping, ominous.*

*Chord Progression: Am Am7 Am Em D C G Am*

*Rhythmic accompaniment ideal and encouraged for  
this section.  
May add instrumentation.*

OSSIE

Am D Am  
OH DEATH

## ALL WOMEN

Em D Am  
OH DEATH

## ALL WOMEN

Am D C D Am  
CAN'T YOU SPARE ME OVER TIL ANOTHER YEAR

## OSSIE

Am Am7 Am  
WELL WHAT IS THIS THAT I CAN'T SEE  
D C G Am  
WITH ICE COLD HANDS TAKING HOLD OF ME

## EDNA

Am7 Am Em  
WELL I AM DEATH NONE CAN EXCEL  
D C G Am  
I'LL OPEN THE DOOR TO HEAVEN OR HELL

## ROSE

WHOA DEATH, SOMEONE WOULD PRAY  
COULD YOU WAIT TO CALL ME TIL ANOTHER DAY

## MANDY

THE CHILDREN PRAY, THE PREACHER PREACHED  
TIME AND MERCY IS OUT OF YOUR REACH

## ROSE

I'LL FIX YOUR FEET TIL YOU CAN'T WALK-

## MANDY

-I'LL LOCK YOUR JAW TIL YOU CAN'T TALK-

## ROSE

-I'LL CLOSE YOUR EYES SO YOU CAN'T SEE-

## OSSIE

-THIS VERY HOUR COME AND GO WITH ME

## OSSIE

Am D Am  
OH DEATH

## ALL WOMEN

Em D Am  
OH DEATH

## ALL WOMEN

Am D C D Am  
CAN'T YOU SPARE ME OVER TIL ANOTHER YEAR

## EDNA

IN DEATH I COME TO TAKE THE SOUL  
LEAVE THE BODY AND LEAVE IT COLD

## FLOSSIE

TO DROP THE FLESH OFF OF THE FRAME  
THE EARTH AND WORMS BOTH HAVE A CLAIM

## ROSE

OH DEATH, CONSIDER MY AGE  
PLEASE DON'T TAKE ME AT THIS STAGE

## MANDY

MY WEALTH IS ALL AT YOUR COMMAND  
IF YOU WILL MOVE YOUR ICY HAND

## ALL WOMEN

OH THE YOUNG, THE RICH OR POOR  
HUNGER LIKE ME YOU KNOW  
NO WEALTH, NO RUIN, NO SILVER, NO GOLD  
NOTHING SATISFIES ME BUT YOUR SOUL

OH, DEATH  
OH, DEATH  
WON'T YOU SPARE ME OVER TIL ANOTHER YEAR

WON'T YOU SPARE ME OVER TIL ANOTHER YEAR  
WON'T YOU SPARE ME OVER TIL ANOTHER YEAR  
WON'T YOU SPARE ME

*End of scene*

*End of Act 1*

*(Place for an intermission if you chose to do one)*

ACT 2  
SCENE 1

Place: the home the women share

Time: Sunday, no work today

*The Act opens with ALL 4 women and their instruments, a chance to have fun and cut lose, sharing verses of the song.*

SONG: SHADY GROVE  
Style: lively and uptempo

ALL

CHORUS

Am  
SHADY GROVE, MY LITTLE LOVE  
G  
SHADY GROVE, I KNOW  
Am G  
SHADY GROVE, MY LITTLE LOVE  
Am G Am  
I'M BOUND FOR SHADY GROVE

FLOSSIE

VERSE

Am  
CHEEKS AS RED AS A-BLOOMING ROSE  
G  
EYES THE PRETTIEST BROWN  
Am G  
SHE'S THE DARLING OF MY HEART  
Am G Am  
PRETTIEST GIRL IN TOWN

ALL

CHORUS

SHADY GROVE, MY LITTLE LOVE  
SHADY GROVE, I KNOW  
SHADY GROVE, MY LITTLE LOVE  
I'M BOUND FOR SHADY GROVE

EDNA

VERSE

CUT A BANJO FROM A GOURD  
STRING IT UP WITH TWINE

THE ONLY SONG THAT I CAN PLAY IS  
 "WISH THAT GAL WAS MINE"

ALL

CHORUS (*this chorus may be serve as an instrumental jam for 8 measures*)

SHADY GROVE, MY LITTLE LOVE  
 SHADY GROVE, I KNOW  
 SHADY GROVE, MY LITTLE LOVE  
 I'M BOUND FOR SHADY GROVE

MANDY

VERSE

PEACHES IN THE SUMMERTIME  
 APPLES IN THE FALL  
 IF I CAN'T HAVE THE GIRL I WANT  
 I DON'T WANT NONE AT ALL

ROSE

VERSE

WISH I HAD A FINE BIG HORSE  
 CORN TO FEED HIM ON  
 SHADY GROVE TO STAY AT HOME  
 FEED HIM WHEN I'M GONE

EDNA

VERSE

WHEN I GET ON THAT MOUNTAIN TOP  
 TEARS DON'T FALL AND BLIND ME  
 I LOOK BACK AND SEE HER TRACKS  
 THE GIRL I LEFT BEHIND ME

ALL (in harmony)

FINAL CHORUS:

SHADY GROVE, MY TRUE LOVE  
 SHADY GROVE, I SAY  
 SHADY GROVE, MY TRUE LOVE  
 I'M BOUND TO GO AWAY  
 I'M BOUND TO GO AWAY  
 I'M BOUND TO GO AWAY

*End of scene*

ACT 2  
SCENE 2

Place(s): the home the women share,  
Ol'Hal's homestead

Time: when Falls frosts over to Winter

*EDNA practicing things to say to the First Lady  
when she visits.*

*ROSE works on her Scrapbook.*

EDNA

Hello, Mrs. First Lady- I mean, Mrs. Roosevelt, ma'am.

...?

Welcome to our very first library, a-mighty fine library.

...

Those books traveled on a train from all over.

..?

... she'd know that, she's been all up and down this country, silly...

ROSE

You'll give yourself a headache.

EDNA

I don't wanna sound like a downright fool!

..!

Right this way, Mrs. First Lady, ma'am, to our card catalogue.

..?

...she'll know what that is?

ROSE

She'll know what that is.

EDNA

We have a wide variety of materials.

Why here is a menu from a restaurant in Des Moines, Iowa. (*Mispronouncing it, Dess Moiness*)

ROSE  
The "S" is silent.

EDNA  
Oh, right. De Moines (*Moines, with the SSSS*), Iowa.

*MR. FENDER (Mandy) comes barging in.*

MR. FENDER  
Rosie, oh, Miss Rosie, come quick!

EDNA  
Pete, what is it?

MR. FENDER  
He said to come fetch you. Now.

ROSE  
Catch your breath, Mr. Fender. Take a seat. Edna, some water.

MR. FENDER  
No time, no time! We gotta get you to Hal.

ROSE  
Hal?

*Without hesitation, Rose prepares to leave.*

MR. FENDER  
It's bad, Rosie, real bad.

*ROSE exits.  
EDNA exits behind.*

MR. FENDER  
Wait! Wait for me, Rose, you don't know the half of it!

*MR.FENDER exits after ROSE.*

*ROSE and NELLIE on route to Ol'HAL's shack.  
Their path is met with a man; Ol'HAL's son.*

ROSE  
No time to stop , girl.

*NELLIE does not budge.  
ROSE coaxes NELLIE with an apple.*

ROSE  
Follow the nice, juicy apple, Nellie, that's a good girl.

*ROSE is beside her for reassurance.  
ROSE tries to pull her forward by the muzzle, but  
NELLIE does not budge.*

Come on, Nellie, you stubborn ol'thing! Hal could be in trouble! What's gotten into you?

*NELLIE pricks her head up, on high alert.*

What is is girl?

*From offstage, a man is heard singing.*

ADAM

*SONG: Shady Grove  
Style: boastful and confident*

*A cappella*

ONCE I WAS A LITTLE BOY  
PLAYING IN THE SAND  
NOW I AM A GREAT BIG BOY  
AND THINK MYSELF A MAN

*ADAM enters.  
Once NELLIE sees the man, she puts herself in front  
of ROSE, between her gal and the stranger.*

ADAM

SHADY GROVE, MY LIL LOVE,  
SHADY GROVE, MY-

My, my, my, if I didn't see it with my own two eyes I wouldn't have believed it. You must be one of them womens I keep hearin about, horse packing across our hills, pushin Book learnin. One of them books womens.

ROSE  
What gave me away? The pack mule or the fact that I am a woman?

ADAM

You must be that sharped mouthed Miss Rosie my daddy kept a-goin on and on about. Mr. Adam Robert Halloran, Junior. It is "Miss," ain't it, Miss Rosie? My Daddy said me you never bothered marrying. What are you... sixteen? Seventeen?

*ADAM begins to circle ROSIE, as if appraising a fine piece of furniture.  
NELLIE keeps herself between them at all times.*

ROSE

I'll be twenty this summer.

ADAM

A little old for my taste. But surely there's some man out there who'd settle for a woman who don't ride no side saddle.

ROSE

I'd like to see a man try and settle me.

ADAM

Womens as purtty as you livin together like a-bunch-a-old spinsters. Traipsin about, wearin men's britches, ain't natural. Womens goin unmarried.

*ADAM spits.*

ROSE

If I married, I'd lose this job.

ADAM

Ha! Job? A government check ain't no job, them's hand outs.

*ADAM is too close for comfort.*

ROSE

We might be women but we work just as hard as a man for wages.

ADAM

Wastin your time, intimidating folks with books- pffft! You know what folks really do with these books? The burn the spines for warmth and wipe their asses with the pages.

Why, if you women knew what was good for you, bring a man what he really wants: whiskey, bullets, and your company for when he's done with the first two.

*ADAM begins to rifle through NELLIE'S saddle bags,  
causing her to back away.  
They backwards walk in a circle, as ADAM tries to  
take the reins.*

*NELLIE pushes ROSE away from ADAM.*

ROSE

I kindly ask you to not be so familiar, sir. I have patrons who are expecting me and if I don't show they will send out-

ADAM

Oh, they expecting you, are they your majesty? And who'd they send lookin for ya? The army? President Roosevelt himself? How long you think I could keep you occupied before anyone noticed you was missin'?

ROSE

Your father would notice. I've taken care of him for years, bringing him food and medicines and books. Neither rain nor snow nor heat wave could make me miss my route. And you ain't gonna either.

ADAM

Oooo eeeee! The little woman means business!

ROSE

No more games, Mr. Halloran. What has happened to your father?

ADAM

Aint nothin' wrong with a dyin old man.

ROSE

Dying? Let me see him. Let me by!

ADAM

I am takin my father out this God forsaken place and back to Nashville with me. Better to get him to a hospital where they can take care of his final needs. They'll even bring him a Preacher man when the time comes.

ROSE

But that'll kill him! He'll simply die if you take him from the land.

ADAM

Once he do, them 200 acres of these hills will be mine all mine, and all that resides within them.

ROSE

Coal? That's all this place means to you? You sold your soul- and your fathers, to gut his home for coal.

ADAM

What's my business is my business, and its no business of yours, book woman.

ROSE

It is my business, DANGNABIT! Kin or not, that man up on that hill is like family to me, and if you think I'm gonna stand idly by while a monster like yourself, corrupt by greed, steals away a good man like your father-

*ADAM raises his hand to strike ROSE.*

*NELIE rears her tiny body toward the attacker.*

*ROSE crumples, expecting a painful hit.*

*This is hilarious to ADAM, and he instead, laughs at the girl and her mule.*

*He takes NELLIE'S reins, stronger than both ROSE and NELLIE combined, holding her in her place.*

*ADAM takes an apple from one of ROSE'S bags.*

*He takes a bite.*

*He begins to sing as he will take his time to exit.*

ADAM

*SONG: Shady Grove (continued)*

WISH I WAS AN APPLE  
HANGING ON A TREE  
EVERY TIME MY ROSIE PASSED  
SHE'D TAKE A BITE OF ME

SHADY GROVE, MY LIL LOVE  
SHADY GROVE MY DARLIN  
SHADY GROVE MY LIL LOVE  
I'M GOIN BACK TO HARLAN

*MR. FENDER finally catches up.*

*He comforts ROSE, brings her and NELLIE back home.*

MR. FENDER

I'm sorry, Miss Rosie. I'd hoped we'd get here before that devil got back from the station. Your name was one the last words he even spoke before... I'm sorry I let him down- let you both down. I'm not as fast as I used to be.

ROSE

No, Mr. Fender, it's not your fault.

MR. FENDER

He's a right mean son-of-a-bitch.

ROSE

I'm alright. \Did give me a right good scare, though his bark was worse than his bite.

MR. FENDER

You ain't gotta be brave for me, Miss Rosie. It's okay.

*Adrenaline wearing off, ROSE lets her guard down,  
now that she is in safe hands.*

MR. FENDER *(continued)*

Let's get you and Nellie home safe. Make ya a nice cup of coffee myself.

*End of scene.*

ACT 2  
SCENE 3

Place: the home the women share

Time: evening, past supper

*ROSE and MR.FENDER have returned home.  
ROSE has told the other women of her encounter.*

EDNA

Ooooh that scoundrel is lucky it wasn't me comin up that path. Why, if I had been there, I woulda grabbed and twisted his man parts clear off his body.

FLOSSIE

Edna, please spare us the gory commentary.

EDNA

“Upon the wickedness He will rain snares!  
Fire! And brimstone!-

FLOSSIE

-Edna, please. Rose has had enough of a shock for one evening.

EDNA

I told ya, Flossie, I tell ya every damn day; these girls need to learn how to defend themselves! Rosie, you even fire a gun before?

ROSE

I don't like guns...

EDNA

Should at least be carryin a knife in their boots, for protection.

FLOSSIE

Why? So Rosie can assault a land-ownin, votin, white man from the city only to have the long arm of the law shackle her up in some state prison?

ROSE

They've been known to hang women in certain states for less.

MR. FENDER

It would be self defense, wardin off an attacker, sensible jury'd see that.

FLOSSIE

Maybe for a white man, Mr. Fender, but for women and folks who skin shows a different hue, it's "shoot first and ask questions later." A book learning woman, a single woman, an independent woman- that's what the jury will hear. A jury of well to do men who ain't our peers. To put a woman on trial is an opportunity to make an example out of her. It'd be a witch hunt. And they'd try her 100 times harder than any white man. No matter how vile or covered in pond scum his remnants of a soul may be. His words, on his "honor," against hers.

EDNA

"Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoers,  
Seek out their wickedness until you find none."

ROSE

Nellie didn't even think twice. She could smell his foul intentions a mile away.

FLOSSIE

I shudder to think what he coulda done to her, or to you, had he been carryin.

ROSE

That man don't need no gun nor knife to cause pain.

MR. FENDER

Just set my blood boil thinkin he's out there right now, carryin on without a care in the world. Bless his poor father's soul. I'm sorry, Ladies. Sorry you have to put up with it all.

FLOSSIE

The Book Women of Appalachia could bring back Jesus himself and plenty of men would prolly still have a problem with the way we did it or ask us "what took y'all so long?"

ROSE

Mr. Fender, won't you please stay a while longer? At least for some grub.

MR. FENDER

If I spoil my appetite, my wife won't let me come round here no more. As much as she likes yall, a man can't be pokin around another woman's bean pot, if you catch me.

EDNA

How 'bout a song then?

ROSE

Yes, please, stay for a song. For Ol'Hal.

MR. FENDER

Alright, Rosie. For Ol'Hal.

*SONG: Down in the Valley*  
*Capo: 5th fret (key of C)*  
*Style: Sweet, and sorrowful*

	ROSE
G	D7
DOWN IN THE VALLEY, THE VALLEY SO LOW	
	G
HANG YOUR HEAD OVER, HEAR THE WINDS BLOW.	
	D7
HEAR THE WINDS BLOW, DEAR, HEAR THE WINDS BLOW.	
	G
HANG YOUR HEAD OVER, HEAR THE WINDS BLOW.	

ROSES LOVE SUNSHINE, VIOLETS LOVE DEW,  
 ANGELS IN HEAVEN KNOW I LOVE YOU.  
 KNOW I LOVE YOU, DEAR, KNOW I LOVE YOU.  
 ANGELS IN HEAVEN KNOW I LOVE YOU.

THROW YOUR ARMS ROUND ME, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.  
 THROW YOUR ARMS ROUNDS ME, FEEL MY HEART BREAK.  
 FEEL MY HEART BREAK, DEAR, FEEL MY HEART BREAK.  
 THROW YOUR ARMS AROUND ME, FEEL MY HEART BREAK.

DOWN IN THE VALLEY, THE VALLEY SO LOW.  
 HANG YOUR HEAD OVER, HEAR THE WINDS BLOW.

*End of scene*

ACT 2  
Scene 4

Time: a late Winter's evening, a blizzard storm approaching.

Place: the cabin the women share.

*EDNA is listening to a Morse code weather report on the wireless.*

*FLOSSIE paces, waiting on the weather.*

*MANDY occupies herself with the construction of a scrapbook.*

*ROSE enters.*

*She is coming from NELLIE'S stable.*

ROSE

I shuttered up Nellie's stall, reckon she'll withstand the winds once the storm comes.  
Any news yet?

FLOSSIE

Not yet, dear. Come, sit by the fire.

EDNA

A-waitin on the Chicago report. Storms movin in from the Rockies, they say.

ROSE

I put up some old horse blankets round her for a bit of insulation. Reckon let her out one more time before the winds begin to bite.

FLOSSIE

You did well, Rose.

ROSE

Once I can feel my fingers again, I'll do the same in here. Reckon we'll be needing more than newspaper and wood planks between us and the snow that's a-comin.

FLOSSIE

You just get warm.

EDNA

It's done. *(Recites the message on the radio, decoded)* "Storm arrived at the Western Illinois border. Strong winds, will freeze. Snow. Expecting heavy fall across Ohio Valley. Up to three feet expected. Travelers, take caution."

We need to prepare now. Draw plenty of water from the well before it freezes.

FLOSSIE

How much time until snow begins to fall here?

EDNA

I'd say we have half a day, dependin on how fast the storm is moving, once it settles in over the mountains, we'll be snowed in for sure.

*ROSIE rises to leave.*

FLOSSIE

Where do you think you're going?

ROSE

You heard her, we have 8, maybe 10 hours to get to our patrons. Half the children in these hills don't even have shoes on their feet. Hal didn't even have glass on his windows before he- ... if I just sit here like a good-fer-nothin, half the County'll freeze to death!

EDNA

This ain't folks first rodeo.

MANDY

Though this storm sounds right nasty. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to check in on some of the elder patrons? I have a basket full of old socks I was gonna darn up. What if we tell the youngins 'round here they can borrow them?

FLOSSIE

Mandy, that is a wonderful idea. Folks won't see it as charity if they're just borrowing the socks for the winter. But Rose, you're staying here.

ROSE

But it was my idea!

FLOSSIE

And it was the right thing, thinking of others first. The folks we serve will be a whole lot safer over the next few days because of you. But if it begins to snow before we get back, I need you here, for Nellie. We all need you to hold down the fort.

ROSE

Yes, for Nellie. Of course.

*MANDY, EDNA, and FLOSSIE bundle up, preparing to leave.*

*ROSE extends her hands, as EDNA did in ACT 1, to pray before the women depart.*

EDNA

Let us pray.

“The Lord is their strength,  
And he is a saving defense to His anointed.  
Save Your people and bless Your inheritance;  
Be their Shepard also, and carry them forever.”

ROSE

Amen.

*MANDY, EDNA, and FLOSSIE exit.*

*ROSE warms up by the fire, daydreaming.*

*Some time has passed...*

*There is a knock.*

ROSE

What'd ya forget this time, Mandy?

*We hear a voice, unfamiliar.*

MRS. FENDER (off)

Hello?

*ROSE, jumpy, gets to her feet.*

ROSE

Who's there? Com'on, don't be shy.

*MRS. FENDER enters with a basket.*

MRS. FENDER

Rose?

ROSE

Mrs. Fender, goodness, what are you doing out in this cold? Where are my manners.  
Please, come sit by the fire.

MRS. FENDER

Darling Rose, how are you? My Pete told me about your horrible ordeal. But we don't  
have to talk about that and I shouldn't have even brought it up. I baked you some  
muffins.

ROSE

You're too kind, Mrs. Fender.

MRS. FENDER

Please, call me Mary. I do worry about you girls up here, alone.

ROSE

The other girls just stepped out to check on a few homesteads, make sure everyone is hunkered down for the next few days. They'll be back in no time.

MRS. FENDER

Y'all are doing such wonderful work. I'm sorry if folks don't tell you that more often. They should. Some folks just like to spit venom. I guess most men are snakes. But then I thank the Lord for folks like you, and Mandy, and Flossie, and Edna, y'all take care of us.

ROSE

Did Mr. Fender accompany you?

MRS. FENDER

Oh no, dear, he's down at the Post Office.

ROSE

I can't remember the last time I saw the both of you in the same room together.

MRS. FENDER

Someone has to stay behind and hold down the fort.

ROSE

Yes, someone must always stay behind.

MRS. FENDER

I swear, most days, we're like two trains passing in the night. He so looks forward to your meetings and special events. Y'all are a beacon of joy to our mundane days.

ROSE

The Post Office sounds like it'd be exciting work. All that mail a-comin and a-goin from different states, people learning to write and read to send off their thoughts on parchment. I wonder how many hands touch a piece of mail before it reaches its destination?

MRS. FENDER

I guess, it can be a pretty exciting place. During the war, we received letters that was postmarked all the way from Germany.

ROSE

You ever wonder what it's like there?

MRS. FENDER

Dear?

ROSE

Say if you was born some place clean on the other side of the world. I wonder if people are as mean in Germany as they are in Kentucky? Or France? Or Mexico? Or-

MRS. FENDER

I think I understand. People are people where ever they find themselves. We are all flowers from the same garden, after all. Some folks stays where they's born. Some folks up and leave, takin their language and faith with 'em. Some seeds thrive where they's planted, don't fall far from the tree. Some seeds float on the wind until they's find their own way to a place wheres they can thrive. Wether they's mean or kind, I think that comes down to what's in a persons soul.

ROSE

Well. That makes a whole lotta sense.

MRS. FENDER

Where's this comin from?

ROSE

I just... after I lost Hal... after bad thing, after bad thing these hills have done to us, to -everyone-

MRS. FENDER

-Oh, honey, that's where you're wrong. The hills are the only thing keepin us alive. Well, them and grace of God. These mountains give us food when we ain't got nothin to eat and I ain't one to turn my nose up at a good poke salad. Their forests give us lumber, the hills give us coal fire, the rivers give us water, the clean air fills our lungs. Ain't no place on God's green earth quite like it, if you ask me.

ROSE

Thank you, Mrs. Fender.

MRS. FENDER

Here dear, have a muffin. It'll make you feel better.

ROSE

Thank you kindly, ma'am. I mean, Mary.

MRS. FENDER

I'll leave the rest for the other girls. And I wrapped a carrot scrap muffin in there for Nellie. You go on and have a second muffin if you want to, I promise I won't tell the other girls-

*MRS. FENDER is cut off by ROSE hugging her about the waist.*

*MRS. FENDER gives her a gentle, motherly hug.*

*Lights fade down.*

*End of scene*

ACT 2  
SCENE 5

Place: the library book barn is finished!

Time: the morning of Eleanor's anticipated visit

*ELEANOR ROOSEVELT Day*

*The First Lady visits the new library, with the book women.*

*They are in a sort of receiving line as the First Lady walks through the library space on a quick tour.*

EDNA

Mrs. First Lady, you are most welcome here, to the Harlan Country Library. Took just about everyone in town, plus the donations of patrons comin off the trains every week. Not a thing goes to waste here, ma'am, as you'll see on our tour today. Most folks just happy to wake up in the mornin with their health. But the books have brought the people of the hills back to life. I learned to read as an adult, too, so the people around here know it can be done. I reckon if I can learn to read and write at my age with what brains the good Lord gave me, then I reckon it's possible for just about anyone. And with the Braille program you are so eagerly spreading word about across the country, even the blind can read. And Braille bibles are all the talk of the counties around these parts. Why folks are just over the moon to receive anything with reading words or photos of places they'll never see.

ELEANOR

What an inspiration. You women are a testament to your craft.

ROSE

Madam First Lady, I just love your "My Day" column and try to get my hands on every single article. I've compiled my own Eleanor Roosevelt Scrapbook out of all of your writings, ma'am.

*ROSE opens a book, ELEANOR takes it to inspect it.  
She signs it and hands it back to ROSE.*

ELEANOR

Your patrons are lucky to have you. Now you can show them my inscription there, and tell them all that I wish them luck in their quests for knowledge. I shall make a note to keep our daily newspapers and have them sent here every few weeks.

ROSE

Here? You'd do that? For me? I mean, for us?

ELEANOR

Of course, dear. We book women have to stick together.

ROSE

Yes ma'am, thank you ma'am. Maybe later I can show you where and how we keep the horses. Me personally, I prefer a Mule to a horse, but-

*EDNA shoots her a look to stop talking.*

ELEANOR

A horse librarian is nothing without her horse, or Mule for that matter. These long journeys can be exciting but I do find myself longing for the serenity of a horseback ride.

I think donkeys and mules can have a peculiar and sweet disposition. They are wonderful animals and extremely loyal companions. But I have to admit, I am partial to horses myself. I don't think my husband and I would get by without our beloved steeds.

MANDY

Madame First Lady, I work with our teacher, Miss Adelaide and many of the mothers across these hills. The children have learned exponentially, and can now help their fathers write and track the crop rotations, even keep family and property records. They can sign for important transactions and are helpin their parents every night work on writin their own names. Some have been... resistant. But you know as well as anyone, Mrs. First Lady, that a woman can do just about anything she puts her mind to.

ELEANOR

How right you are. We didn't win the right to vote by just thinking about it.

EDNA

I'd like to see a man creek stomp a mule through the Hollers with books on both your backs in weather so cold it takes an ice pick to break free from the frozen stirrups.

ELEANOR

From what I have seen here today and along my travels through these mountains, the fortitude and passion of the women of the Kentucky pack horse librarians remains unmatched. The United States of America, my husband, and I are proud of the progress being made here. With more women like you and your head librarian matron, Miss Flossie, I am resolved with a certain peace that those living in even our most rural areas may have access to a better and more educated life. Ladies, I thank you for your time.

ROSE

You're going already?

EDNA

Rose!

ELEANOR

It's alright. Yes my dear, I am afraid I must be off to the next stop along our tour, but know that you have left an impression on me here today. How very proud I am of each and every one of you.

ROSE

Thank you, ma'am, for everything.

*The bookwomen all exit.*

*ELEANOR makes her way across the stage to her microphone at the train station.*

ELEANOR

I am so thankful to all who have put their trust in the Works Progress Administration, especially those who serve as a first line of contact with the people these programs have been built to benefit. I shall spread the word that the women of Eastern Kentucky are angels on horseback, aiding those in need of medicine or company, children who's schools do not have any books, and keeping this tight knit community abreast of all the latest news. The pack horse librarians should serve as inspiration to all women across this great nation.

*End of scene*

## FINALE

Time: an Epilogue of what the future holds

Place: the foothills and mountains of 1939 Appalachia, Eastern Kentucky

*The finale is a song in which each woman will sing and then tell us the future of her character/what she did/where she went, that the book program was ended in 1943.*

*SONG: Hard Times Come Again No More  
Slow, steady, and sentimental.  
\*hand harp or mandolin would sound lovely*

## FLOSSIE

VERSE:

D  
LET US PAUSE IN LIFE'S PLEASURES,  
A D  
AND COUNT ITS MANY TEARS,  
G D A  
WHILE WE ALL SUP SORROW WITH THE POOR.  
D  
THERE'S A SONG THAT WILL LINGER  
A D  
FOREVER IN OUR EARS,  
G D A D  
OH, HARD TIMES, COME AGAIN NO MORE.

*Instrumental music/plucking continues softly under each speech.*

## FLOSSIE (continues)

Though the Works Progress Administration ended in 1943 amidst yet another World War, the program brought the prospect of hope to the people of Appalachia and would become the educational legacy of First Lady, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

## MANDY

The 1950's shiny veneer of a modern and civilized society blazed its way across the country. Women following in the footsteps of May Stanford became more resourceful, more determined, trading their animals for motor bikes. More modern society also meant more new fangled gadgets designed keep house, essentially, keepin women in the home.



