

# Four Versions of “The Drinking Gourd”

The four major versions of “The Drinking Gourd” as set out by Joel Bresler on his website, [http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/What\\_The\\_Lyrics\\_Mean-Notes.htm](http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/What_The_Lyrics_Mean-Notes.htm)

The four versions are:

1. H. B. Parks
2. Lee Hays of The Weavers
3. John Woodum, a street singer in Shreveport, Louisiana.
4. Randy Sparks of The New Christy Minstrels who based his version on that by John Woodum.

## H. B. Parks.

Harris Braley Parks (1879-1958). This version collected in 1912 (Hot Springs, North Carolina), 1913 (Louisville) and 1918 (Waller, Texas). Published in 1928.

Follow the Drinking Gourd was first published in 1928 by the Texas Folklore Society. It was discovered by H.B. Parks, a Texas entomologist who was also an amateur folklorist. According to Parks, he heard the song three times: first in North Carolina in 1912, then Louisville around 1913, and Texas in 1918. The lyrics were explained to him by yet another person in Texas. All of his informants were black

## Lee Hays

Lee Hays (March 14, 1914 – August 26, 1981) was an American folk-singer and songwriter, best known for singing bass with The Weavers. The group was formed in November 1948 by Ronnie Gilbert, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman, and Pete Seeger. Hays and Seeger were formerly members of the Almanac Singers.

This version collected ca. 1920, supplemented with lyrics from the Parks version, most likely sourced from the 1934 Lomax book. In 1947, Lee Hays published an arrangement of Drinking Gourd in the People's Songs Bulletin, where he wrote a monthly column. It was first recorded in 1951.

In an undated letter to Pete Seeger, Hays says he learned parts of the song from his elderly black "nurse", Aunty Laura, while a child. According to 1920 census records, Lee Hays was six years old and living in Forrest City, Arkansas – that's about 150 miles due west from the source of the Tombigbee.

Pete Seeger wrote me [Joel Bresler] that the melody came from Aunty Laura, while the lyrics originally came from anthologies – most likely the Parks version reprinted in a Lomax songbook in 1934 (see here.) I'll note in passing that Hays never mentioned Aunty Laura to his biographer, Doris Willens, and she cautioned me that Hays was a "fabulist."

## John Woodum / Randy Sparks.

This version collected by Randy Sparks from John Woodum in 1955 (Shreveport, Louisiana); Lyrics recorded on a 1963 LP, “Ramblin,” by the New Christy Minstrels, formed in 1961.

In the fall of 1955, singer Randy Sparks was appearing in Shreveport, Louisiana. During that engagement he heard a black street singer in his seventies named John Woodum perform a version of the

song. Sparks reported, "I never heard such a song as Drinkin' Gourd before."

The lyrics Woodum sang were substantially different from either the Parks or the Hays versions. The two earlier versions encode a map. The Woodum version is inspirational – urging an escape – but contains absolutely no geographic information. Woodum was the first known artist to use the lines, "Think I heard the angels say, Stars in the heaven gonna show you the way" in the Drinking Gourd song.

# 1. The H. B. Parks Lyrics (Texas Folklore Society, 1928)

Mr. Parks claimed to have heard three versions of this song, in 1912 (Hot Springs, North Carolina), 1913 (Louisville) and 1918 (Waller, Texas).

## VERSE 1

When the sun come back,  
When the firs' quail call,  
Then the time is come  
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.

## CHORUS

Foller the drinkin' gou'd,  
Foller the drinkin' gou'd;  
For the ole man say,  
"Foller the drinkin' gou'd."

## VERSE 2

The riva's bank am a very good road,  
The dead trees show the way,  
Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on,  
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.

## CHORUS

## VERSE 3

The riva ends a-tween two hills,  
Foller the drinkin' gou'd;  
'Nuther riva on the other side  
Follers the drinkin' gou'd.

## CHORUS

## VERSE 4

Wha the little riva  
Meet the grea' big un,  
The ole man waits--  
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.

**Note.**

The following version was reproduced by John A. Lomas and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) citing H. B. Parks.

**Foller de Drinkin' Gourd, p. 227-228.**

FOLLER DE DRINKIN' GOURD

"One of my great-uncles, who was connected with the railroad movement, remembered that in the records of the Anti-Slavery Society there was a story of a peg-leg sailor, known as Peg-Leg Joe, who made a number of trips through the South and induced young Negroes to run away and escape. . .

The main scene of his activities was in the country north of Mobile, and the trail described in the song followed northward to the headwaters of the Tombigbee River, thence over the divide and down the Ohio River to Ohio . . . the peg-leg sailor would . . . teach this song to the young slaves and show them the mark of his natural left foot and the round hole made by his peg-leg. He would then go ahead of them northward and leave a print made with charcoal and mud of the outline of a human left foot and a round spot in place of the right foot. . . Nothing more could be found relative to the man. . . 'Drinkin' gou'd' is the Great Dipper. . . 'The grea' big un,? the Ohio.'" \*

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the verse: "Fol - ler de drink - in' gou'd. Fol - ler de drink - in'". The second staff contains the melody for the second line: "gou'd. For de ol' man say, 'Fol - ler de drink - in' gou'd.'". Above the second staff, the text "Repeat for verse" is written. The notes are simple, with some rests and a final double bar line at the end of the second staff.

When de sun come back,  
When de firs' quail call,  
Den de time is come,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd.

Chorus:  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd;  
For de ol' man say,  
"Foller de drinkin' gou'd."

De riva's bank am a very good road,  
De dead trees show de way;  
Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)

De river ends atween two hills,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd;  
'Nother river on de other side,

Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)

Wha de little river  
Meet de gre' big un,  
De ol' man waits  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)

**Footnote:**

\* H. B. Parks in Volume VII of the Publications of the *Texas Folk-Lore Society*.

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**Editor's Note:**

This text was obtained from a website maintained by the Traditional Music Company. URL:

<http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/american-ballads-and-folk-songs/american-ballads-folk-songs.html>

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A Side By Side Comparison.

<b>Parks</b>	<b>Lomax</b>
1. When the sun come back, When the firs' quail call, Then the time is come Foller the drinkin' gou'd.	1. When de sun come back, When de firs' quail call, Den de time is come, Foller de drinkin' gou'd.
<b>Chorus:</b> Foller the drinkin' gou'd, Foller the drinkin' gou'd; For the ole man say, "Foller the drinkin' gou'd."	<b>Chorus:</b> Foller de drinkin' gou'd, Foller de drinkin' gou'd j For de ol' man say, "Foller de drinkin' gou'd."
2. The riva's bank am a very good road, The dead trees show the way, Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on, Foller the drinkin' gou'd. <i>Chorus.</i>	2. De riva's bank am a very good road, De dead trees show de way; Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on, Foller de drinkin' gou'd. <i>Chorus.</i>
3. The riva ends a-tween two hills, Foller the drinkin' gou'd; 'Nuther riva on the other side Follers the drinkin' gou'd. <i>Chorus.</i>	3. De river ends atween two hills, Foller de drinkin' gou'd ; 'Nother river on de other side, Foller de drinkin' gou'd. <i>Chorus.</i>
4. Wha the little riva Meet the grea' big un, The ole man waits-- Foller the drinkin' gou'd. <i>Chorus.</i>	4. Wha de little river Meet de gre' big un, De ol' man waits Foller de drinkin' gou'd. <i>Chorus.</i>

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## 2. The Lee Hays Lyrics (The People's Songs Bulletin, 1947)

Recorded by The Weavers in 1951.

### VERSE 1

When the sun comes back,  
and the first quail calls,  
Follow the drinking gourd  
The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.

### CHORUS

Follow the drinking gourd,  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.

### VERSE 2

The river bank will make a mighty good road  
The dead trees show you the way  
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on  
Follow the drinking gourd.

### CHORUS

### VERSE 3

The river ends between two hills,  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the drinking gourd.

### CHORUS

### VERSE 4

Where the great big river meets the little river  
Follow the drinking gourd  
The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd

**Note:**

A statement by Pete Seegers, a member of the Weavers, indicated that Hays may have also used the version printed by John and Alan Lomax in 1934, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*.

<b>Hays</b>	<b>Lomax</b>
1. When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls, Follow the drinking gourd The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom If you follow the drinking gourd.	1. When de sun come back, When de firs' quail call, Den de time is come, Foller de drinkin' gou'd.
<b>Chorus:</b> Follow the drinking gourd, Follow the drinking gourd, For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom If you follow the drinking gourd.	<b>Chorus:</b> Foller de drinkin' gou'd, Foller de drinkin' gou'd j For de ol' man say, "Foller de drinkin' gou'd."
2. The river bank will make a mighty good road The dead trees show you the way Left foot, peg foot, traveling on Follow the drinking gourd.	2. De riva's bank am a very good road, De dead trees show de way; Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on, Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)
3. The river ends between two hills, Follow the drinking gourd, There's another river on the other side, Follow the drinking gourd.	3. De river ends atween two hills, Foller de drinkin' gou'd j 'Nother river on de other side, Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)
4. Where the great big river meets the little river Follow the drinking gourd The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom If you follow the drinking gourd. <i>Chorus.</i>	4. Wha de little river Meet de gre' big un, De ol' man waits Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)

### 3. The John Woodum Lyrics (1955)

#### VERSE 1

When the sun goes down  
And the first quail call  
Follow the drinkin' gourd  
Then it's time, children  
to come one and all and  
Follow the drinkin' gourd

#### CHORUS

Follow the drinkin' gourd,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd  
There's a roadsign in heaven  
On that muddy path to freedom  
Follow the drinkin' gourd

#### VERSE 2

Pegfoot gonna show you the way  
Follow the drinkin' gourd  
Keep on movin' the Old Man say  
Follow the drinkin' gourd

#### CHORUS

#### VERSE 3

Think I hear the angels say  
Follow the drinkin' gourd  
Stars in the heaven gonna show you the way  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.

#### CHORUS



## **4. The Randy Sparks Lyrics**

**Based on but differing from those of John Woodum.**

### CHORUS 1

Follow the drinkin' gourd, we gonna  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
Oo-oo-oo-waa,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd

### VERSE 1

Think I heard the angels say,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
Stars in the heaven gonna show you the way,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.

Step by step keep a'travelin' on  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
Sleep in the holler 'til the daylight is gone,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd

### CHORUS 2

Follow the drinkin' gourd, we gonna  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
Keep on travelin' that muddy road to freedom,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.

### VERSE 2

There's a good day comin' and it won't be long,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
All God's children gotta sing this song,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.

Follow that river 'til the clouds roll by,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
Keep on movin' better look to the sky,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.

### CHORUS 3

Follow the drinkin' gourd, we gonna  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
There's a little bit of heaven in that muddy road to freedom,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.  
Step by step keep a-travelin' on,  
Follow the drinkin' gourd.

## Foller de Drinkin' Gourd

John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934), p. 227-228.

### FOLLER DE DRINKIN' GOURD

"One of my great-uncles, who was connected with the railroad movement, remembered that in the records of the Anti-Slavery Society there was a story of a peg-leg sailor, known as Peg-Leg Joe, who made a number of trips through the South and induced young Negroes to run away and escape. . .

The main scene of his activities was in the country north of Mobile, and the trail described in the song followed northward to the headwaters of the Tombigbee River, thence over the divide and down the Ohio River to Ohio . . . the peg-leg sailor would . . . teach this song to the young slaves and show them the mark of his natural left foot and the round hole made by his peg-leg. He would then go ahead of them northward and leave a print made with charcoal and mud of the outline of a human left foot and a round spot in place of the right foot. . . Nothing more could be found relative to the man. . . 'Drinkin' gou'd' is the Great Dipper. . . 'The grea' big un,? the Ohio.'" \*

Fol - ler de drink - in' gou'd. Fol - ler de drink - in'

gou'd. For de ol' man say, "Fol - ler de drink - in' gou'd."

Repeat for verse

When de sun come back,  
When de firs' quail call,  
Den de time is come,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd.

Chorus:  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd j  
For de ol' man say,  
"Foller de drinkin' gou'd."

De riva's bank am a very good road,  
De dead trees show de way;  
Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)

De river ends atween two hills,  
Foller de drinkin' gou'd j  
'Nother river on de other side,

Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)

Wha de little river  
Meet de gre' big un,  
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Foller de drinkin' gou'd. (Chorus.)

**Footnote:**

\*H. B. Parks in Volume VII of the Publications of the *Texas Folk-Lore Society*.

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**Introduction by John L. Lomax**  
**to**  
***American Ballads and Folk Songs:***

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

When I went first to college in Texas I carried in my trunk, along with my pistol and other implements of personal warfare, a little manuscript roll of cowboy songs. My father's farm and small ranch was located on the Chisholm Trail, over which many thousand Longhorn cattle were driven to Dodge City, Kansas, sometimes on to Montana and the Dakotas. Especially at night when lying awake, I had heard the cowboys sing to the cattle "bedded down" near our home. These songs and others like them were also current among a number of neighbor boys, older than myself, who each spring went on the round-up and afterwards trailed a herd of cattle to a Northern market. They brought new songs back with them for the entertainment of their friends.

On one occasion I exhibited my store of cowboy songs to a somewhat startled Texas English professor. I was told politely that they had no value. So I put them away until I became, years afterwards, a student in Harvard. There, during a course in American literature taught by Professor Barrett Wendell, I was encouraged to believe that the songs were worth preserving. In order to aid my work in collecting, he and Professor George Lyman Kittredge sent out to many newspapers of the country a letter asking that all types of folk songs be forwarded to me. Later on, after I had been appointed a Traveling Sheldon Fellow "to investigate American folk songs," Professors Wendell and Kittredge were joined in a second appeal to the public by Dean L. B. R. Briggs and Professor Fred N. Robinson. Such sponsorship resulted, during the three years I held the Sheldon fellowship, in the accumulation of a great mass of material. Two books of cowboy songs were issued from material secured principally in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming, and other states where I visited and recorded tunes in saloons and on remote ranches.

Several thousand pages of unused manuscript were filed away. The present book is a direct outgrowth of the collection which was then made under Harvard patronage. Whatever its fortune, it goes to a public whose interest in folk material is much greater than in 1910, when *Cowboy Songs* was published. At that time no publisher would print the cowboy song music, except a few illustrative examples. Records of this music had been made on wax cylinders, which, alas! have crumbled with age. However, the music then set down and printed, long unnoticed, is now often heard over the radio. It has been said that the song "Home on the Range" was the most popular tune of the first half of 1933. The music for that song was obtained twenty-three years ago from the Negro proprietor of a low

drinking and gambling dive in the slum district of San Antonio. It remained safely buried in Cowboy Songs for nearly a quarter of a century. The publication of this volume is, therefore, largely due to the unflagging interest of two men. So long as Professor Barrett Wendell lived, he gave my work his cordial support, and through the resulting association I, in turn, gave him my everlasting affection. To me, as well as to all who collect folk songs, or who write of this literature, Professor Kittredge is ready with advice, help, and, when needed, forceful admonition. These words are set down in grateful recognition and appreciation. Many other people have helped to make this book possible. Entitled perhaps to first mention is Miss Mary Gresham, a competent musician and teacher of Washington, who transcribed from aluminum, wax, and celluloid records made this summer much of the Negro music in this book, and, in addition, other songs from singing and from rough manuscript notation. Edward Neighbors Waters, Assistant in the Music Division, Library of Congress, wrote out the music for approximately fifty songs, principally from singing. Other members of the Music Division, notably Carl Engel, its Chief, Oliver Strunk, Assistant Chief, and Frank Megill, Assistant, were constantly courteous and helpful. None of the faults of the book or responsibilities growing out of it, however, are chargeable to these persons.

To Mrs. Janice Reed Lit of Haverford, Pennsylvania, whose helpfulness in many ways has been constant since the book was first definitely planned; to Professors Howard W. Odum, Guy Johnson, and A. P. Hudson, all of the University of North Carolina, that is, along with near-by Duke University, the folk song collecting center of the South; to Professor Arthur G. Brodeur of the University of California; to Professor Joseph W. Clokey of Pomona College; to Frank Dobie of the University of Texas; to Professor E. C. Beck, Central State Teachers College, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan; to Louise and Cletus Oakley of Brown University; to Professor Lucy Lockwood Hazard of Mills College; to "Slim" Critchlow, Forest Ranger and soloist for the Utah Buckaroos; to Dean L. B. R. Briggs of Harvard University; to Professors Josiah Combs and Newton Gaines of Texas Christian University; to Professor George E. Hastings of the University of Arkansas; to Sigmund Spaeth, New York City; to Professor George Pullen Jackson, Vanderbilt University; to Sam P. Bayard, State College, Pennsylvania; to Mr. H. H. Fuson, Harlan, Kentucky; to Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Callaway, Comanche, Texas; to Carl Sandburg, Harbert, Michigan; to Professor and Mrs. Harold William Thompson, New York State College for Teachers; to Miss Dorothy Scarborough, Columbia University; to Major and Mrs. Isaac Spalding, Washington, D. C.; to Professor H. M. Belden, University of Missouri; to John A. Lomax, Jr.; to Miss Martha Harrold, Memphis, Tennessee; to John Lang Sinclair, New York City; to Shirley Lomax Mansell and Bess Brown Lomax, Lubbock, Texas, to all these, special thanks are due for special favors.

Along with these in point of service I must place that group of Negro "boys"\* who this summer, cheerfully and with such manifest friendliness, gave up for the time their crap and card games, their prayer meetings, their much needed Sunday and evening rest, in order to sing for Alan and me that group whose real names we omit for no other reason than to print the substituted picturesque nicknames. Those black "boys" of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee by their singing removed any doubt we may have had that Negro folk songs are without a rival in the United States, To Iron Head, Clear Rock, Chin Shooter, Lead Belly, Mexico, Black Samson, Lightning Can't Make It, Butter Ball, Ing Shing, Scrap Iron, Bowlegs, Tight Eyes, Double Head, Bull Face, Log Wagon, Creepin' Jesus, Long Distance, Burn Down, Steam Shovel, Rat, Black Rider, Barrel House, Spark Plug, to two "girls," Dink and Bat, and others who helped without giving their names, and to many another among the thousands we saw, in happy memory tinged with sadness, I offer grateful thanks.

As this book represents twenty-five years of desultory collecting, I cannot but fail to omit to mention names that should be included in the list to whom is also due, and who herewith receive, my gratitude: Miss Virginia Brown, Dallas, Texas; Joanna Colcord, author of *Roll and Go*; Professor John H. Cox,

University of West Virginia; Professor Frank Davidson, Indiana University; Captain A. E. Dingle, West Bermuda; Professor Horace A. Eaton, Syracuse University; Professor Milton Ellis, University of Maine; Captain R. J. Flanagan, Manager of Central State Farm, Texas; Colonel Frederick Stuart Greene, Commissioner of Public Works, Albany, New York; Judge Louis B. Hart, Buffalo, New York; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Superintendent R. L. Himes, General Manager Louisiana prison system; Captain H. J. Jackson, Manager Darrington State Farm, Texas; George Milburn, formerly of the University of Oklahoma; Professor and Mrs. George M. Miller, University of Idaho; Bertha K. Millette, Washington, D. C.; John J. Niles, co-author *Songs My Mother Never Taught Me*; Miss Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, New York University; Professor L. W. Payne, University of Texas; F. E. Peyton, Greenwich, Connecticut; Miss Louise Pound, University of Nebraska; Allen Prothro, Chattanooga, Tennessee; Augustus H. Shearer, Buffalo, New York; Frank Shay, author of *Drawn from the Wood*, Provincetown, Massachusetts; Peter Smith, publisher, New York; Manager O. G. Tann, Parchman, Mississippi; Professor W. H. Thomas, College Station, Texas; Henry Trevelyan, Wiergate, Texas; Professor R. P. Utter, University of California; R. V. Utter, Clayton, Missouri; John T. Vance, Library of Congress; Stewart Edward White; Professor Newman I. White, Duke University; Owen Wister, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; Professor Homer E. Woodbridge, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut; Miss Louise Wyman, author of *Lonesome Tunes*; Miss Jean Thomas, author of *Devil's Ditties*, Ashland, Kentucky.

J. A. L.