

The Duckworth Chant: An Annotated Anthology of Sources

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It appears that the Duckworth Chant, originally a marching cadence also known as the Jody (which in its later versions has been a jogging cadence), was developed at Ft. Slocum, N.Y., late in WWII. It was originated by a Black private, Willie Lee Duckworth, Sr. (a native of Sandersville, Washington Co., GA), in May 1944 while marching back to post from a bivouac nearby in Westchester County at Ardsley. The cadence caught on among the troops, who continued to use it on post. The post commanding officer, Col. Bernard Lentz, heard the cadence. Since WWI, Col. Lentz had been known as the author of “the cadence system of teaching close order drill.” Not only did Lentz approve the chant, he authorized its use, and soon the post band as well as others on the post staff were at work on its development. According to Col. Lentz, the War Department also promoted the chant. By 1945 it can be documented in Missouri and occupied Germany; and three separate versions from Slocum were recorded on a V-Disc that same year. By 1947 it was well-known enough, at least within the armed forces, to be the subject of a parody on another V-Disc.¹ Eventually, in 1950 and 1951, a version was copyrighted by Col. Lentz and Pvt. Duckworth. By 1951 it was well-known enough to be the subject of a Yiddish parody by Mickey Katz. Various versions were recorded as popular songs from the big-band version by Vaughn Monroe in 1951 to the R&B version of Titus Turner² in 1961, and it has been featured in various films beginning in 1949 with *Battleground* and including the 1952 *Sound Off*, for which it was the title song. While it is no longer likely to be recorded as a hit song, it does continue in films, usually about the military (but the tune is still well-known enough to have been used recently in the cartoon *Sponge Bob Square Pants*).

There was no audio recording of the original chant, nor any known attempt to transcribe its original lyrics. Reading between the lines of several published lyrics, it is clear that some of them trace to Ft. Slocum and are as early as late 1944. Over time various stories have been told about its origins. This document is an attempt to transcribe sources about its origins, at least some of the major ones, and to put them in chronological order. These sources have been put together here for the first time. While

¹ The 1945 Slocum V-Disc was unnumbered. The 1947 disk, recorded 5 June, featured Brazilian pianist Dick Farney (performing name of Farnesio Dutra e Silva) and bassist Slam Stewart performing “Worth Duckin” and was the A side of V-Disc 799. Cf. Richard Sears, **V-Discs: A History and Discography** (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 287-288, 991-992.

² There was a Titus Turner stationed at Ft. Slocum in 1955; *The Islander* (post newspaper), 1 April 1955, p. 5.

The above, the now famous P.T.C. “Chant” -- snappy, precise, will ring in the opening of the outdoor ceremonies of the 5th Provisional Training Center graduation, this afternoon on the parade grounds at 1430.

II. Introduction to V-Disc (1945)

In an undated V-Disc, three separate versions of the chant were recorded at Ft. Slocum: one with T/Sgt Henry Felice and a Rehabilitation Class⁷; one with S/Sgt Gladys Woodard and the WAC Detachment; and another with Pvt James Tyus and a Rehabilitation Class. Although the disc is undated, Rehabilitation Classes did not begin until early 1945. Although production of V-Discs continued until 1949, the Rehabilitation Classes ceased in 1945. The third version alludes to Hitler not yet being defeated. The three versions are prefaced by a recorded introduction, spoken by Felice.⁸ Substantially the same statement is also printed in the editions of Col. Lentz’ work on drill, **The Cadence System of Teaching Close Order Drill** (1951; p. 77) and **The Cadence System of Teaching Close Order Drill and Exhibition Drills** (1955; p. 70).

On a cold spring evening in May 1944 as the Provisional Training Center⁹ was returning¹⁰ from a long tedious march through swamps and rough country, a chant broke the stillness of the night. Upon investigation, it was found that a negro soldier by the name of Willie Duckworth, on detached service with the Provisional Training Center Fort Slocum¹¹, was chanting to build up the spirits of his weary comrades.

It was not long before the infectious rhythm was spreading through the ranks. Footweary soldiers started to pack¹² up their step in cadence with the growing chorus of hearty male voices. Instead of a down trodden, fatigued company, here marched 200 soldiers with heads up, a spring to their step, and happy¹³ smiles on their faces. This transformation occurred with the beginning of the Duckworth Chant.

Upon returning to Fort Slocum, Pvt. Duckworth, with the aid of the¹⁴ Provisional Training Center instructors, composed a series of verses

⁷ ACTCOTS ceased operations in Oct. 1944, and the mission of Fort Slocum changed. It became a center for the rehabilitation of court-martialed soldiers. The first of the “Honor Battalions,” as the graduating classes were called, graduated in March 1945. With the end of the War later that year came the end of the rehabilitation classes too.

⁸ This information comes from Felice’s colleague Woodard, conversation Jan. 2008. She adds that the recordings were done indoors, in the post auditorium, the building known as Raymond Hall. Although most of the V-Discs were recorded at various studios or performance venues in New York City, the head of the V-Disc program, Capt. Robert Vincent, had a portable Presto disc recorder which was carried to field locations (Sears, *op. cit.*, p. li) and that must have been the case here.

⁹ Printed version: “as a company of the Provisional Training Center.”

¹⁰ Printed version adds: “to their camp at Fort Slocum, New York”

¹¹ Printed version omits “Fort Slocum”

¹² Printed version: “pick”

¹³ Printed version omits “happy”

¹⁴ Printed version omits “the”

and choruses to be used with the marching cadence. Since¹⁵ that eventful evening the Duckworth Chant has been¹⁶ made a part of the drill at Fort Slocum as it has¹⁷ proved to be not only a tremendous morale factor while marching, but also coordinated the movements of close order drill with troop precision.

III. Early Reception & Distribution (1945; 1951)

In the first post-WWII edition of Col. Lentz' book (1951; preface) is included the following material:

The Duckworth Chant (the familiar "Sound Off") was the idea of a negro soldier -- Willie Duckworth, stationed at Fort Slocum, N.Y., in 1944. He was aided in the development of the Chant by instructors at the Training Center and members of the Band,¹⁸ located at the post at the time. The chant became popular at once and it was not long before the War Department had it printed and recorded and distributed to the millions of soldiers of the far-flung American Forces.

Note. The following is an extract from a letter received shortly after VE-day by Colonel Bernard Lentz from his son, Lt. Colonel Bernard V. Lentz, then located fifty miles south of Stuttgart, Wurttemberg, Germany:

"The Duckworth Chant (Fort Slocum edition) now resounds in the Third Battalion, 399th Infantry. The Companies are all pretty good at it by now. You should see the Dutchmen stick their eyes out when we go marching by with that number. The other day one of the companies was taking a march and they started to chant. About five minutes after they marched out, they had more kids (potential Jerry burp-gunners) following them up than the Pied Piper ever had; about 500 from three years up.

¹⁵ Printed version substitutes "After"

¹⁶ Printed version substitutes "was"

¹⁷ Printed version omits "has"

¹⁸ The post band, eventually the 378th Army Service Forces band, was authorized 1 June 1942. Under the direction of T/Sgt Abraham M. Small, formerly an orchestra leader in New York City, it took the small post band of 12 musicians to a full complement of 28 (**Casual News**, 17 Jun 1942, p. 4), later increased to 40. (In fact Sgt. Small led a post band even before the war; it was just unofficial.) Members of the Slocum band also played with the NYPOE band out of Ft. Hamilton under the direction of Capt. Harry Salter (originator of "Name That Tune"). The Slocum band itself recorded two V-Discs (nos. 93 and 136) conducted by Salter, the latter with vocals by Pvt. Leon Gray, a member of the ASF Dance Band at nearby Camp Shanks. (The Camp Shanks band also included Pvts. Mercer Ellington [son of Duke] and Frank Loesser, along with Sgt. Sy Oliver.) Cf. Sears, *op. cit.*, pp. 17, 323-325, 990. In addition to forming the usual Army brass and woodwind marching band, from 24 Feb. 1944, Slocum had a performing orchestra (**Casual News**, 15 Feb 1944, pp. 7, 17). It was led by WOJG Edward Sadowski, trumpeter and formerly a Pfc. with the Slocum band. The orchestra included violinists Avram Weiss and Sandor Salgo, the latter eventually professor of music at Stanford University.

The hike was eight miles long and most of the Heinie brats made it, so enchanted were they by the doughboys and their chant.

We have mastered your sequence about change step twice, to the rear march and forth and it is a very rhythmic number.”

IV. A Note on Henry Felice (WWII; 1951)

Henry “Jack” Felice¹⁹ led the first version recorded on the V-Disc. The 1951 edition of Col. Lentz’s book also reprints (p. 73; also p. 75, 1955 edition.) the “Felice Special Platoon Drill,” with the following introductory note:

This special drill was developed by Mr. Henry Felice, professional dancer²⁰ of New York City, who was a master sergeant and outstanding drill master at Fort Slocum, N.Y., during World War II.

V. Early Reception According to Alan Lomax (1945; 1960)

Alan Lomax, the eminent collector of American folklore and popular song, documents its spread to Missouri as early as 1945. Although he identifies its origins as Black, he calls it “Sound Off” (not The Duckworth Chant) and seems to be unaware (even by his publication date of 1960) either of Willie Duckworth or Fort Slocum. The following is from his work **The Folksongs of North America** (London: Cassell & Co. 1960; paperback by Doubleday Dolphin), pp. 581-582 and 595.²¹

In my basic training camp in Missouri they had us count the rate of steps in close formation marching. We shouted out of parched throats and cursed the sergeant under our breath. Then round the corner came the Negro battalion, marching as one man, with somehow a hint of syncopation in its step. When the big, handsome, coloured sergeant counted the steps, every one of those hundreds of left feet hit the road on the off-beat. Every throat opened on the chorus. Big, four-part blues chords roared over our heads. For just a moment, army life and basic training seemed almost a pleasure.

World War II was the first time that a great number of Negroes had been accepted on something like an equal basis in the American Army. The process of expelling Jim Crow from the armed forces was not complete, but discrimination was on its way out, and you could hear it

¹⁹ According to his widow, M/Sgt Henry Felice died 18 June 2001. Of the other principals in the Duckworth Chant at Ft. Slocum., T/5 Willie Lee Duckworth died 9 Feb. 2004. Col. Bernard Lentz died 13 Dec. 1961. Gladys “Woodie” (Woodard) Borkowski is a retired USAF M/Sgt now living in CT. Of Pvt. James Tyus, nothing further is known.

²⁰ In addition, he seems before the War also to have been the author, along with Tommy Dennis, of a song, “Little Sleepy Head,” copyright 1940.

²¹ I am indebted to John Patrick, a folklorist from St. Louis who is studying the Jody, for this reference.

between the lines of this virile folk song of World War II. *Sound Off* is cynical, disillusioned, and touched with blues cadences, but it contains a note of confidence and a joyful acceptance of the nature of life and love that is new in American folk song.

Collected and arranged by Alan Lomax from Negro soldiers in Missouri, 1945. In many variants this was sung by all Negro outfits²² in World War II.

VI: Lentz, Introduction (1950; 1951)

Col. Lentz's book on cadences documents that by 1950, the Duckworth chant had spread from the Army to the Marine Corps and the USAF, particularly via units in Washington, D.C.

The 1950 (Fourth) Edition of the (*sic*) THE CADENCE SYSTEM OF TEACHING CLOSE ORDER DRILL contained, in addition to the time-tested Lentz cadence system of instruction in close order drill, some new features, including the Duckworth Chant, Butts' Musical Rifle Drill,²³ and some special drills.

This edition proved so popular that all of these features are being included in the 1951 (Fifth) Edition, plus additional special drills, including manual drills, such as the Queen Ann (*sic*) Salute, marching drills, such as the Jones Sequence, and several drum and bugle corps drills.

Special acknowledgement is hereby made to the following organizations for their assistance in preparing new material on special drills:

2d Battalion, 3d Infantry Regiment, Military District of Washington, D.C.;

Marine Drill Platoon, Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C.

United States Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps, Washington, D.C.

²² This claim is ambiguous. Does it mean, it was sung by (some) all-Negro outfits; it was sung by all of the (all-)Negro outfits; it was sung only by all-Negro outfits, as contrasted with white ones? In any case there is not a lot of evidence concerning its early (WWII) reception, except that it originated late in the war, did spread to the ETO (Lt/Col Lentz' note, above), was officially sanctioned by the War Dept (Col. Lentz' note, above), was originated by a Black private, was used by units at Slocum (rehabilitation classes, and WACs, that were not segregated Black units) and perhaps one of the three earliest recorded versions (that of Pvt. Tyus) exhibits a Black syncopated version. It is not clear, but perhaps Lomax's theory here is the basis (whether literary, or psychological) for later claims, see below, that the Duckworth chant originated among Black units.

²³ Unlike the Duckworth Chant or the Felice Special Drill, which were new, the Butts' Drill had been in Army use from before the turn of the 20th century. First demonstrated in 1896 by 2/Lt (later Brig/Gen) Edmund L. Butts at Madison Square Garden, it was a system of coordinated calisthenics using rifles, two sets of five exercises each. Cf. Lentz' 1951 edition, pp. i-ii, 41-57.

Mr. Samuel C. Stovall of Technical Writing Services, was also very helpful.

Colonel Lentz has made an outstanding contribution to instructional methods in teaching close order drill. His cadence system increases interest and enthusiasm and in a remarkably short time produces a high degree of precision in close order drill; it is especially recommended for quick results with untrained men and with units which lack precision and interest in close order drill.

THE PUBLISHERS

VII. The Duckworth Chant at Carnegie Hall (1950)

The *New York Times* for 8 January 1950 announced, for 8:30 that evening, a performance by De Paur's Infantry Chorus, conducted by Leonard de Paur.²⁴ The entire program was:

Truth Shall Deliver	Schumann
Come Away Death	Kay
Here is Thy Foot Stool, from Three Chorales from Tagore	Creston
On Journeys	Dai-Keong Lee
Group of folk-songs from Latin America	Arr by Gurgel-de Paur
The Duckworth Chant	Arr. by de Paur
Quiet Flows the Don	Dzerzhinsky-de Paur
Song of the French Partisan	Gurgel-de Paur
Roger (<i>sic</i>) Young	Loesser-de Paur
Group of Spirituals and Work Songs	
Adoramus Te Christe	Palestrina
Ani Ma-Amin	Arr. by de Paur
Bless the Lord, O My Soul	Ippolitoff-Ivanoff
The Lord's Prayer	Malotte-de Paur

²⁴ Leonard de Paur (1914-1998) had a long and distinguished musical career, including a stint in 1942 as director of the Army Air Force show, "Winged Victory." In 1944 he organized a chorus in the 372nd Regiment, which continued after the War as the De Paur Infantry Chorus, later simply the De Paur Chorus until 1957. He retired in 1988 as Director of Community Relations for Lincoln Center. Cf. Isaiah R. McGee, "The Origin and Development of Prominent Professional Black Choirs in the United States," PhD dissertation, Florida State University, 2007.

VIII. New York Times (1951)

VIII.a How the Duckworth Chant Originated

The following appeared in *The New York Times*, 28 Oct. 1951, p. 30, under the byline of John Stevens, Special to the NEW YORK TIMES. Duckworth is mentioned, but (then living back home in rural Georgia) he is not interviewed. Reading between the lines, it may very well have been the case that Col. Lentz (then resident in Larchmont, near NYC) was a source (as, clearly, he was for the article following). The account mentions Lentz favorably, emphasizes his distinctive approach to drill, it tells the story more or less from his point of view, and takes liberties referring to him familiarly as the Old Man (which, see below, is changed in a re-write of the same material the following year

TIRED G.I.'S CHANT BECOMES SONG HIT. Private's 'Sound Off' Originated During Fort Slocum Hike -- Now It's Everywhere.

NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y., Oct. 27 -- On a raw spring night in 1944, Private Willie Lee Duckworth was one of 200 leg-weary soldiers slogging home to Fort Slocum here after a twenty-four-hour bivouac at Ardsley, thirteen miles away. The boys' boots were dragging, but Willie changed that.

Softly at first, Willie began a chant, making up words as he went along. The tune, in strict marching cadence, captured the aching feet and vocal chords of Willie's mates and they arrived at the post on the double, on time -- and on key.

Today the staccato wail of ex-Private Duckworth's "Sound Off" resounds from radio and television loudspeakers, from the brass sections of college football bands and from juke boxes throughout the land. Squads of marching youngsters shout or bark it in the streets -- "One, two three, four; one, two -- three four."

Credit for "Sound Off's" rise to eminence must go to Willie's Fort Slocum commander, Col. Bernard Lentz, an authority on the Army's cadence system of close-order drill, which on occasion permits all men in the ranks to give command in unison.²⁵ For thirty-two years the colonel has been perfecting a method to eliminate drudgery from and inject precision into infantry drill.

In the days following the bivouac, Colonel Lentz was amazed to see drill teams and work squads marching briskly to their tasks, chanting

²⁵ "On occasion"? It is in fact Lentz's very distinct contribution to close order drill that this be done not occasionally but routinely; and of course he would be the "authority" on the "cadence system of close-order drill" since this phrase was precisely his trademark. Use of Lentz' system *always* requires that commands be voiced in unison; but of course the system itself might be used only on occasion. While Lentz commanded Ft. Slocum it was generally in use there, and (cf. the 1961 obituary by Tychem, below) also at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, before WWII. How widespread it might have been throughout the rest of the Army is difficult to gauge however.

as they went. The “Old Man” summoned Private Duckworth and asked him the origin of the song.

“I made it up in my head,” the Negro soldier from Georgia explained.²⁶

Colonel Lentz forthwith incorporated “the Duckworth chant” in the daily drill at Fort Slocum. With the help of musicians on the post, Willie’s creation was transcribed and later, was published in a revised edition of the colonel’s “The Cadence System of Teaching Close Order Drill.”²⁷ To the original verses, the composer’s fellow-soldiers added dozens of new ones, some of them printable.²⁸

The popularity of “Sound Off” among the G.I.’s was noted at the Pentagon²⁹ and before V-J Day copies had been distributed by the War Department to United States military posts throughout the world.

The song remained an almost exclusively Army affair in the first post-war years. Then, in 1949, it was employed as incidental marching music in the motion picture “Battleground.” In recent months radio, television and juke-boxes have done the rest.

Complaints in Cadence

The lyrics of “Sound Off” relate the good-natured gripes of a soldier-in-the-ranks, set to music and punctuated by the sharp commands and counting-off peculiar to infantry drill. Private Duckworth complains, in cadence, that “the captain rides in a jeep, the sergeant rides in a truck, the general rides in a limousine, but we’re just out of luck.”³⁰

He moans, “I don’t mind to take a hike, if I could take along a bike,³¹” and he pleads, modestly, “if I get smacked in a combat zone, gimme a WAC to take me home.”³²

²⁶ Compare this with the less heroic version told in the Grisamore interview of 2002, below: “I told him it came from calling hogs back home . . . I was scared, and that was the only thing I could think of to say.”

²⁷ There are some discrepancies regarding publication dates. The original was a mimeograph from the War Department in WWI. The Seventh Revised Edition of November 1955 cites previous published editions of 1919, 1925, 1950, 1951, 1953. The Fifth Edition mentions material on the Duckworth Chant as early as the Fourth Revised Edition of 1950. The frontispiece of the Fifth Revised Edition of February 1951 (which does contain material on the Duckworth Chant) however cites no previous editions, though it has Introductions from 1919, 1925, 1940, 1950 and 1951. But in addition to the edition of November 1940, there is an edition of September 1941. It is not listed in the 1955 edition as forming a distinct edition itself, but consisted of the 1940 edition with a page of *corrigenda*.

²⁸ Dozens? Of the printable ones, all of 20 (in 2’s & 4’s) were printed in the sheet music copyrighted 1950; while there were 9 couplets plus a chorus in then 1951 edition of Lentz’s book. See the 1989 Boyd interview, below, where it is claimed that Duckworth himself wrote 23 verses. It is proverbial of later versions of the Jody, that commands censored lots of verses. This indicates that from an early time in its evolution, soldiers adopted raw versions of the Jody which publishers were loathe to print -- a feature not uncommon with folk and popular songs.

²⁹ An interesting archaic turn of phrase; strictly at the time it would have been the War Department -- as in Col Lentz’s phrase, see above.

³⁰ In fact, this set of lyrics does not occur in any of the recorded versions in 1945; nor in the cinematic version in “Battleground,” 1949; nor in Col. Lentz’ edition of 1951. It is however verse 8 in the 1950 sheet music, and is recorded in the Vaughn Monroe version of 1951. It became part of the Jody, but it does not seem to have been Duckworth’s. See discussion below of the second Lentz obituary.

³¹ This verse occurs in the Felice version on the 1945 V-Disc.

Colonel Lentz, forty years out of West Point, retired in 1947³³ to Larchmont, where he, too, has taken up song writing. Two of his compositions: “I Want My Mama Mellow” and “Don’t Bother Father While He;s at the Bar,” have been published by Shapiro, Bernstein & Co., Inc. which holds the copy-rights to “Sound Off.”

Willie Lee Duckworth, long out of the Army, is home in Sandersville, Ga. His royalties are pouring in.³⁴

VIII.b Duckworth Receives Carver Award

Two months later, on 29 Dec., the *New York Times* carried the following announcement about Duckworth receiving an award. It is obvious that the source for this article is Col. Lentz, then living in Larchmont.

COMPOSER TO BE HONORED. Negro Who Wrote ‘Sound Off’ Will Get Carver Award

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES. LARCHMONT, N.Y., Dec. 28 -- Willie Lee Duckworth of Sandersville, Ga., who as an Army private composed the new famous “Sound Off,” a chant that his commanding officer, Col. Bernard Lentz, incorporated into his cadence system of teaching close-order drill, will receive the first annual achievement award of the George Washington Carver Monument Foundation Jan. 5 at Joplin, Mo.,³⁵ his now retired commander was informed at his home today.

Colonel Lentz, who became the Negro soldier’s musical mentor and arranged for publication of the chant in 1944, is one of a list of celebrities invited to witness the presentation at Joplin, home town of Mr. Carver, the noted scientist, on the latter’s birthday anniversary. The award to Mr. Duckworth will be a feature of a program in which the scientist’s birthplace near Joplin will be made a national monument.

³² This verse is recorded only in the Merrill Staton Choir version, otherwise derivative of the Vaughn Monroe version.. “Smacked?” This may be the only instance of that word being used in the Jody. The 1945 Felice version has “If I get shot in a combat zone, Just box me up and send me home,” and that verse continued later. By the Vietnam era, it was added, “Pin my medals upon my chest,” and then either “Tell my mama I done my best” or else “bury me in the leaning rest.” Sometimes the verse is “If I die in a combat zone, . . . “ There were other verses about WACs, for instance “I don’t mind a bivouac, if I could take along a WAC,” and of course one of the three 1945 recorded versions is a specifically WAC version.

³³ A suggestive discrepancy: According to his Cullum file from West Point (see below for explanation), Col. Lentz (USMA 1905) was retired as of 30 June 1942 by operation of law (later changed, 4 June 1946, to disability). But he had been assigned command of Ft. Slocum 11 Feb. 1942, and remained as such on active duty until 1 Dec. 1945 (at which time he stepped down as CO of Ft. Slocum). He was finally relieved of active duty 11 July 1946. It was T/5 Duckworth who did not leave the Army until discharged until 1947.

³⁴ Throughout his life he continued to collect royalties, and after his death these continued to flow to his family. As to the amount of royalties, cf. the 1989 Boyd interview, below.

³⁵ See the reference to this below, in the Hollingsworth interview of 1989.

IX. Possibly Pittsburgh Courier (nd; maybe ca. 1951)

From the family files of Willie Lee Duckworth³⁶ is an article identified only as “Courier Magazine Section, 3” but which may well be from the Pittsburgh Courier, a Black newspaper distributed nationally. It must postdate at least the 1949 film *Battleground* it mentions, as well as Vaughn Monroe’s 1951 recording. It does not mention the 1952 Mickey Rooney film *Sound Off* nor the 1961 Titus Turner R&B recording.

Willie Lee Duckworth Was Lucky When His Song Caught the Fancy of Col. Lentz.

WILLIE LEE DUCKWORTH was not a goldbrick in the Army, but he sure made it pay off, with a helping hand from his commanding officer at Fort Slocum, New York, Colonel Bernard Lentz (above, left), now in retirement at Larchmont, New York. Today one can hear the fruits of Duckworth’s labors on the radio, television, on the fields of colleges, on juke boxes -- everywhere.³⁷ You see, Willie Lee Duckworth (above at right) is the author of “Sound Off,” the rousing marching song that is better than a thousand recruiting posters.

Willie, who now lives in Sandersville, Georgia, simply grew tired of the same old grind of slogging wearily along on hikes. One day in 1944 he and 200 other soldiers were returning to Fort Slocum, boots dragging and bored. Then Willie started to chant, making up the words as he went along, in strict military cadence. The boys arrived at the post on the double, on time. Duckworth kept up his chant and drill teams hopped to it.

Colonel Lentz, an authority on close order drill, immediately incorporated Duckworth’s chant into the daily drill. Colonel Lentz, a songwriter in his own right, pushed the chant and later it was published by Shapiro, Bernstein and Company. The rest is history. The GIs can even use “Sound Off” to air their complaints. And they do. The song made the rounds of military installations and was used as incidental marching music in the MGM picture “Battleground.” Vaughn Monroe made a recording. Now everyone knows what “Sound Off” sounds like.

Colonel Lentz, an experienced songwriter, has given Willie Lee Duckworth much help, which resulted in the song being published. Willie Lee is getting his royalties in bucketsful and everyone is happy. All of which proves that imagination can go a long way in the Army.

³⁶ In January 2006 I dropped in to the Sandersville, GA, home of Edna Duckworth, widow of Willie Lee Duckworth Sr. She and her son Willie Lee Duckworth Jr. welcomed us graciously, granted an interview, and shared some of the documents and photos her family had preserved, which I scanned. As noted some of them make up the current anthology of sources.

³⁷ This may well allude to the actual words of the 1951 *New York Times* article, above.

X. Publicizing the Film *Sound Off* (prob. 1952)

The cutting quoted below was also in the collection of the Duckworth family. It has no date nor attribution attached. From an internal reference in 1989, see below, it may have appeared in the Sandersville (GA) *Progress* for 5 May 1952. Though it mentions details about the film *Sound Off* which appeared in 1952, it does seem to use verbatim several paragraphs from the 1951 *New York Times* article (above). These will be underlined. Somehow the road along which Duckworth marched as he composed the chant has become dusty in the interim since 1951 (asserted twice), but whether this is due to any new information, the reader may judge.³⁸ However from the fact that it appeared in the local paper, it does seem to have been syndicated, and so probably got more exposure around the U.S. than the *New York Times* original, demonstrating once again the adage that when it comes to publicity (in contrast with writing) there is no such thing as bad publicity.

Cold Night in Army Inspired Song “Sound Off.”

HOLLYWOOD, Calif. -- There’s a fellow at Sandersville, Ga., who’s going to get a bigger kick than anyone else when he sees Columbia’s “Sound Off.”

Especially when he hears Mickey Rooney, accompanied by a choral background of 50 voices, fill the screen with a rendition of the song, “Sound Off,” for which the picture was named.

“Sound Off” was born on a cold night in 1944. Pvt. Willie Lee Duckworth was one of 200 leg-weary soldiers slogging home to Ft. Slocum here after a 24-hour bivouac at Ardsley, 13 miles away, the distance between Willie and unbelievable fame and fortune.

Softly at first, Willie began a chant, making up words as he went along the dusty road. The tune, in strict marching cadence, captured the aching feet and vocal chords of Willie’s mates and they arrived at the post on the double, on time -- and on key.

In the days following the bivouac, Colonel Bernard Lentz, Ft. Slocum commander, was amazed to see drill teams and work squads marching briskly to their tasks, chanting as they went. The colonel summoned Private Duckworth and asked him the origin of the song.

“I made it up in my head,” the Negro soldier from Georgia explained.

With the help of musicians on the post, Willie’s creation was transcribed and later was published in a revised edition of the colonel’s manual (sic) “The Cadence System of Teaching Close Order Drill.”

³⁸ Felice’s introduction to the 1945 V-Disc suggests the march was at night; so if there was dust, probably it wasn’t terribly visible.

The popularity of “Sound Off” among the G.I.’s was noted at the Pentagon and before V-J Day, copies had been distributed by the War Department to [omits: United States] military posts throughout the world.

From then on, radios, recordings and bands did the rest.

Toay (*sic*), Willie Lee Duckworth, long out of the Army, is home in Sandersville [omits: Ga.]. His royalties are pouring in.

And when Willie comes marching home from his local theater after seeing “Sound Off,” his feet will feel a lot lighter than they did on that dusty road 13 miles from Ft. Slocum on that cold night in 1944.

XI. Obituaries of Col. Lentz (1961-62)

Col. Bernard Lentz died 13 December 1961, at St. Albans Naval Hospital after 3 months hospitalization.³⁹ Three very different obituaries were published. The first is from the *New York Times* for 15 Dec. 1961. It is consistent with the 1951 *New York Times* account concerning the details of how the chant originated (and once again underlined to so indicate). The second, found in the vertical files of the New Rochelle Public Library, has no attribution but (from internal evidence; e.g., offhand reference to Wykagyl) would seem to be from a local newspaper, possibly the *New Rochelle Standard-Star*. This obituary tells a story about the Duckworth chant at variance with all other sources: that Lentz’s cadence system was synonymous with the “Sound Off” cadence itself, and that Duckworth was a Tin Pan Alley singer who cashed in on Lentz’ system, though with Lentz’ assistance, by adding some new lyrics. (Consult the footnotes for some skeptical questions.) The third is by his friend Brig/Gen Andrew C. Tychsen, and appeared in the West Point publication **The Assembly** for Summer 1962, p. 93.⁴⁰ It says nothing at all directly about the Duckworth chant but does comment extensively on Lentz’ own system of teaching drill, and so provides information for setting the Duckworth chant in its historical context of infantry drill (as well as for evaluating claims found in the second obituary).

XI.a *New York Times* Obituary 15 Dec. 1961

BERNARD LENTZ, DRILL EXPERT, 80. Creator of Cadenced Calling While at Ft. Slocum Dies. Col. Bernard Lentz, U.S.A., retired, originator of the widely used Lentz system of cadenced calling of military drill orders, died Wednesday in the St. Albans Naval Hospital, Queens, at the age of 80. He lived at 39 Oak Avenue, Larchmont, N.Y.

³⁹ In earlier days, he might have died on post. But after 1950, the (previously formidable) post hospital was converted into HQ the Chaplain School; on post, only a dispensary remained, and hospital cases from Ft. Slocum were sent to St Albans, in Queens.

⁴⁰ Thanks to Marilee Meyer, archivist of the Cullum Files, USMA West Point, who early in 2006 provided information on Col. Lentz, including a copy of this obituary. (Cullum Files are kept on the lives & careers of graduates of USMA. Each graduate is assigned a discrete “Cullum number,” determined first by year of graduation and then numerical standing within the class. Hence in the title Col. Lentz is identified by his number, 4407.) Throughout various editions from before the War, Lentz credits Tychsen for his help.

As World War II commander of Fort Slocum, New Rochelle, N.Y., Colonel Lentz was credited with the rise to popularity of Pvt. Willie Lee Duckworth's marching chant, "Sound Off."

He incorporated "the Duckworth chant" in the daily drill at Slocum. Musicians on the post transcribed it and later it was published in a revised edition of the colonel's manual, "The Cadence System of Teaching Close Order Drill."

After his retirement in 1946, Colonel Lentz, too, took up song writing, and a number of his compositions were published.

He was born in Theresa, Wis., and graduated from West Point in 1905. In World War I he served on the Army General Staff. Colonel Lentz planned the development battalions of the national army in which more than 260,000 young men were either educated or rehabilitated physically during the war. After the war he directed the Victory Loan parade here.

In 1914 and from 1920 to 1926 he was Professor of Military Science and Tactics at the University of Minnesota.

In 1938 Col. Lentz became executive officer of the Second Corps Area here. Later he commanded Fort Dix., N.J., and in 1941 he was in charge of the overseas discharge and replacement depot at the New York Port of Embarkation.

He assumed command of Fort Slocum, a depot for soldiers going overseas, in 1942. He also was commandant of the Atlantic Coast Transportation Corps Officers Training School there.

Surviving are his widow, the former Edna Vosburgh; two sons, Bernard V. and Jerome H.; a daughter, Mrs. Leslie Bankard; two brothers, Alfred and Joseph; a sister, Mrs. Charles Keyser, and nine grandchildren.

XI.b Possibly *New Rochelle Standard-Star*, 14 Dec. 1961

Col. Lentz, Ex-Slocum Chief, Dies. Col. Bernard Lentz, eighty, one of the most famous Fort Slocum commanders, died yesterday in St. Albans Naval Hospital, Queens, where he had been confined for three months.

He was commandant at the Fort between 1942 and 1945, the war years. He resided at 39 Oak Ave., Larchmont.

Born Jan. 23, 1881, in Wisconsin, he was the son of the late Henry and Mary Harth Lentz. He was a Larchmont resident for 15 years.

Col. Lentz was a graduate of the 1905 class of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He retired from the Army in 1945 as commander of Fort Slocum.

Surviving are his wife, the former Edna H. Vosburgh, of the home address; two sons, Bernard V., and Jerome H., and a daughter, Louise Bankard, all of Long Island.

Col. Lentz was the originator of the Lentz system of “sound off” cadenced drill, widely used in the Army. He was the author of songs and helped Tin Pan Alley singer Willie Duckworth to get to the top singing “Sound Off” songs.⁴¹

The Lentz cadence was the “Sound off -- one, two! Sound off -- three, four!” that was popular during the war.⁴²

Willie Duckworth cashed in on this system by recording the words, “The captain rides in a jeep. The sergeant rides in a truck. The general rides in a limousine. Sound off -- one, two, three, four.”⁴³

Colonel Lentz was graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1905. He was dispatched to the Philippines, returned to become a military professor at the University of Minnesota in 1914. During World War I he was on the general staff in Washington.

He became well-known as an infantry specialist and was the author of several textbooks on the subject.

Col. Lentz’ son, Jerome H. Lentz, was a lieutenant colonel during the second world war. He led an infantry battalion into Gotha, a small

⁴¹ No evidence is offered for this “Tin Pan Alley” characterization, and what evidence there is suggests otherwise. First of all there is no evidence that Duckworth ever recorded anything. If he got to the “top,” it was by succeeding in getting royalties for a one shot deal (see below, 1989 Hollingsworth interview; he reckoned himself the only ASCAP member with only one song to his credit). Second he neither came from Tin Pan Alley, nor landed there. The 1930 census shows him in Sandersville, Washington Co, GA, ae. 7, son of George Duckworth, laborer; his military records show him from the same place, pre-war occupation light truck driver; and newspaper articles cited below show that he returned there after military service, working in a mill, aspiring to buy a truck (as in fact he did, in part thanks to song royalties) and run a pulpwood business. As the Hollingsworth interview (see below) indicates, after 1952 he never again traveled by airplane! So: Tin Pan Alley, urban sophisticate, gettin’ over on the Man (though with the Man’s connivance)?

⁴² As a matter of fact, Lentz’s book on the cadence system went through several editions from 1919 to 1941. However the term “Sound off” does not occur, nor does the counting of cadence, 1,2! 3,4!, in any of them. What was distinctive about Lentz’s system is that the *troops*, not just the drillmaster, vocalize commands (all the standard commands of the Infantry Drill Regulations) as they are executed. From the edition of 1951 onward, “Sound off” and “1, 2! 3,4!” are mentioned, but specifically in connexion with the Felice Special Platoon Drill and particularly the Duckworth Chant, both of which came from Ft. Slocum in WWII.

⁴³ First of all (and unfortunately for the historian) there is no recording of Duckworth’s original version from 1944; the earliest recording is the 1945 V-Disc mentioned above. Indeed, there is no indication that Duckworth himself *ever* recorded the chant (nor, to repeat, anything else whatsoever). Second the earliest appearance of something like this verse cited (the citation above omits a fourth stanza, “And we’re just out of luck” to rhyme with “truck”) occurs, to repeat, only in the Vaughn Monroe version (and the sheet music to it, copyrighted by Lentz in 1950 and his publishers in 1951). It does not occur in any of the three V-Disc versions of 1945. It does not occur in the *Battleground* version of 1949. It does not occur in the 1950 edition of Lentz’ book, nor for that matter in the 1955 edition. It does not occur in the version of the sheet music copyrighted for Australia and New Zealand, nor for the version copyrighted 1960 and 1961 (and used by Titus Turner). The 1951 Mickey Katz Yiddish parody has verses about privates & majors & colonels but they are completely different. If anyone “cashed in on this system” by recording the verses cited, clearly it was Vaughn Monroe who had a highly successful record and the only one to use these particular lines (for which however Lentz and Duckworth still held copyright). Third, this story is psychologically improbable. If a colonel had long before invented the chant, how is it that an obscure private (and a subordinate) could simply waltz in and make it a cash cow? Just by writing a few new verses?

German city, and captured a Nazi staff headquarters with more than 200 taken prisoner.

Col. Lentz also wrote songs. One, "I Want My Mama Mellow," was recorded and another, "Don't Bother Father While He's At The Bar," was a favorite of his friends.

He describes the songs as "gay nineties sentiment and 1949 tempo." He did not write the music, but hummed the tunes and had arrangers put the notes down.

Col. Lentz was at Fort Slocum from Feb. 18, 1942 to Nov. 28, 1945, when a retirement dinner of lobster Newburgh, his favorite, was given by community and Army friends at Wykagyl Country Club.

Religious services will be held at West Point at 2 p.m. Monday, and interment will follow in West Point National Cemetery.

XI.c Obituary from **The Assembly** (1962)

Bernard Lentz. NO. 4407. Class of 1905. Died 13 December 1961, at St. Albans Naval Hospital, Long Island, New York, aged 80 years.

FOR MANY YEARS, I served under Colonel Lentz and knew him as a friend and fellow soldier.

His outstanding trait, and this throughout his military career, was his ability to instill in all those who served under him a desire to emulate his own dynamic spirit of service to his country. As a cadet at West Point, he was influenced by the late Master of the Sword, Lieutenant Colonel Herman J. Koehler, to further the cadence method of training men to participate in the commands of close order drill and their execution. In this desire to inspire the individual, rather than impose compulsion on mass formations, Colonel Lentz never wavered.

The Lentz Cadence System was, however, far more than just a method of drilling large numbers of men to move quickly and expeditiously from one place to another. Many have testified that what appeared at first to be mere drudgery, turned out to be one of the most important events of their lives. They were indeed moved to give their utmost, not only in the immediate drill, but in all phases of military training. They wanted to become the best soldiers in the Army.

Here are but a few excerpts from the many letters received during his life and in condolence:

"Throughout what is now over 60 years, it has been my privilege and joy to have close companionable friendship of the man so many of us have always affectionately known as Doc Lentz. He was a man who served his country well, and who made the Army better because he was privileged to serve in it."

“His famous book on Cadence System did more to promote the speedy training of our hundreds of thousands of troops in World War II than any other one thing.

“He was more than a commanding officer to all of us -- he was more like a father. His excellent judgment, great kindness, keen intellect, and undying sense of humor, made him a never-to-be-forgotten personality.”

“A fine military leader, he had a philosophy of life as expounded in lectures and informal chats that made a deep impression upon me. Above all, I shall always remember the Colonel as a warm, understanding, and kind human being.”

I myself knew and loved the Colonel as a fine leader of men.

I can still hear ringing in my ears his lectures to students and troops and reserve officers in summer camps through many years, with never a diminution of keen anticipation of the well-remembered words and phrases that he gave so effectively and with a dash of humor. It was a joy to witness the fine reaction of his hearers. Here was a man, born in a village of Wisconsin, with all the sterling qualities of the pioneers who settled there during the 19th Century. From teaching school in the proverbial red schoolhouse, he was indeed fortunate to obtain an appointment to West Point and to become one of her distinguished sons.

Throughout his live he maintained a cheerful outlook and made the people about him happy as a result. A devoted husband and parent, he had a zest for life up to the very end. He composed several songs which were noted for their pungent gaiety. One of his achievements, for which he was justifiably proud, was to become a member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers.

In my opinion, the outstanding moment in the military life of the Colonel occurred in the late thirties at Schofield Barracks when he commanded the famous 21st Infantry affectionately know as “The Gimlets.” He had demonstrated to the entire Department the value of the Cadence System of training in the rapid transition from recruit to that of well-coordinated and spirited soldier. At a huge graduation ceremony numbering several thousand on the Division parade ground, under the glare of massed searchlights, the troops made the welkin ring with a roar that could be heard for miles, by giving their own commands in mass and executing in perfect order the various steps and the manual of arms. The effect was simply overwhelming due to the obviously complete participation by every individual in the exercise. The Department Commander, the late Major General Bryant Wells, remarked, “For over 40 years I have been searching for an elusive something that would represent a grand inspiration in the training of troops. Tonight I have realized that objective.”

His last command was that of Fort Slocum where he carried on through the war years a tremendously successful program of restoring the morale of returnees from overseas and of those about to embark.

An example of this was a letter he received from overseas in 1942 from a young paratroop officer who was later killed in action. After mentioning the many lessons of sound leadership learned from Colonel Lentz while under his command in the New York area, the lieutenant closed his letter with this statement: “Yes, Colonel, the above mentioned ‘nuggets of wisdom’ will remain in my memory until the Great Architect calls this lieutenant to a fuller life. And, Sir, just as surely as your wisdom has influenced my life, so shall I consider you the finest officer and gentleman I have ever known.”

In Larchmont, N.Y., where he and his beloved wife settled after his retirement, Colonel Lentz was well known and highly regarded by many in all walks of life. His keen interest in everyone and everything in life drew to him the affectionate regard of all with whom he came into contact. He gave to his community the same unswerving loyalty that he had demonstrated throughout his military career.

And so we come to the passing of a fine gentleman, a great citizen, a superb teacher of men, whose entire life was dedicated to the motto of his Alma Mater: Duty -- Honor -- Country.

XII. Three Local Newspaper Interviews (1989)

These three pieces also come courtesy of the Duckworth family. Two of them are without attribution but they all describe the 1989 Kaolin Festival in Washington Co., GA, where Duckworth lived and during which, 45 years after the fact (at which time Duckworth was approaching 66 years old), the winner of the first annual Carver Award in 1952 again was honored publicly for his chant, this time as Grand Marshal of the festival parade. The Hollingsworth piece clearly draws on the 1952 Hollywood press release (in turn derivative of the 1951 *New York Times* piece) but the writer uses quotation marks as appropriate, evidently has checked her facts and more importantly she seems to have conducted original interviews with Duckworth, thus breaking some new ground. Her article comprises local intelligence in the very best sense.

XII.a Long Caption above Photo

The 1989 Kaolin Festival was highly successful, reported Chairman Paul Turner after eight days of activities that involved thousands of people.

The theme, “Sound Off,” was inspired by citizen Willie Duckworth’s composition of the famous marching cadence and song. Duckworth was Grand Marshal of the annual Kaolin Parade, and guest of honor at a screening of the movie “Sound Off” at the Pastime, where it was first shown in 1952.

(below the caption: photo of Paul Turner and Willie Duckworth, shaking hands.)

XII.b Hollingsworth Interview

(No title) by Brenda Hollingsworth

In 1944, Willie Lee Duckworth created a marching cadence for soldiers to march to, a chant that first was called *The Duckworth Chant*, and later became *Sound Off*, the name of a movie starring Mickey Rooney, and a hit song.

To honor and recognize Duckworth's talent, the Washington County Chamber of Commerce has chosen (*sic*) "Washington County Sound Off" as the theme of the 1989 Kaolin Festival, September 30-October 7.

Duckworth will be a special guest at the Kaolin parade and banquet.

In March⁴⁴, 1944, Willie Lee Duckworth was a private, one of nine black soldiers at Fort Slocum, New York. One of the officers said he couldn't drill "blacks," and assigned Pvt. Duckworth to drill the others.⁴⁵

According to a press release from Hollywood⁴⁶, published in *The Sandersville Progress*, May 5, 1952, Pvt. Duckworth made up the words to *Sound Off* on a cold night in 1944, with "200 leg-weary soldiers slogging home to Ft. Slocum after a 24 hour bivouac at Ardsley, 13 miles away."⁴⁷

Softly at first, Willie began a chant, making up the words as he went along the dusty road. The tune, in strict marching cadence, captured the aching feet and vocal chords of Willie's mates and they arrived on the post, on the double on time -- and on key."

That press release was written to announce the release of the *Sound Off* movie based on the chant/song written by Duckworth.)

⁴⁴ Notice that in the 2002 interview, below, it is claimed that Duckworth was assigned to Ft. Slocum in March 1944. However all the other sources, above, date the Duckworth chant to a bivouac in May 1944.

⁴⁵ This sentence suggests a number of interesting points. First, it would not have been the task of an officer to drill anyone; probably an NCO (non-commissioned officer) instead. Second, does "couldn't" mean couldn't, or wouldn't? (That he might in 1944 have used the term "blacks" [in such a way as to take quotation marks later] suggests, "wouldn't.") Third, this suggests that between March when he arrived and the May bivouac when he invented the chant, already Duckworth had gained some leadership experience in drilling others. Fourth, this is especially interesting in that the Army was still officially segregated (leading some internet posters to doubt that there would have been any Black troops on Slocum at all; e.g., <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/bloggers/1489526/posts?page=12>). From the documents here, as well as from WWII photos of Ft. Slocum in the holdings of the New Rochelle Public Library, clearly there were Black troops there in 1944; so that Army integration did not exactly begin with presidential fiat in 1948. (See discussion, below.) But why these nine, at Slocum, at that time?

⁴⁶ See the 1952 rewrite of the 1951 *New York Times* article, above.

⁴⁷ Oddly, omits: "the distance between Willie and unbelievable fame and fortune," which is what the Hollywood press release adds to the *New York Times* original. Did Brenda Hollingsworth have access both to the Hollywood press release (which she does quote) and the original *New York Times* article from which it was modified?

The chant began its road to history when the base commanding officer, Col. Bernard Lentz, heard it, and asked the private where he had learned it. "I made it up in my head,"⁴⁸ was the response. Col. Lentz then ordered all the men on the base to use the chant and had Duckworth lead the drill.⁴⁹

Lentz and musicians on the post helped transcribe *Duckworth's Chant*, and it was published in a revised edition of the colonel's manual, *The Cadence System of Teaching Close Order Drill*.

As a composer of folk songs, Lentz realized the value of the chant and sent it to music publishers he knew, Shapiro, Bernstein & Co., listing Willie Lee Duckworth as the lyricist and Bernard Lentz as the composer.

About this same time, the pentagon became aware of *Sound Off* and copies were distributed to military posts throughout the world.

Duckworth says he received a letter from the "war department" about the chant, but then didn't hear much more until after he left the service in 1947. Them (*sic*; then?) royalty checks began to come in from the publishers.

The first movie to use the chant was *Battleground*, followed by the Columbia Pictures production of *Sound Off* written by Blake Edwards and Richard Quine, starring Mickey Rooney with Anne James, Sammy White and John Archer. Blake Edwards and Mickey Rooney are familiar names.

Sound Off first was shown in Sandersville at the Pastime, July 20, 21 and 22, 1952, with the July 20 production actually at 12:01 the next morning. In Tennille, it appeared at the Erin Theatre December 30 and 31.⁵⁰

The publishing company declined to search their records to discover how many times the song has been used in movies, but estimated "dozens" of times, as it has been used in almost every army movie made. Some that Duckworth recollects are *Pvt. Benjamin* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

In the mid 50s the song was number three near the top of the music charts.

Because the song was copyrighted, Duckworth is paid something everytime the song is used, a small sum each time, but he says, the song helped him purchase his own pulpwood truck and go into business for himself.

⁴⁸ This repeats verbatim the response from the presumptive 1952 press release, which in turn repeats verbatim the 1951 *New York Times* article, whose source is probably Col. Lentz. But cf. the 2002 interview with Duckworth, below, which provides a different account.

⁴⁹ This is a detail not found in previous accounts, that Duckworth (Black, a private) was ordered to lead the drill for the entire post. This, if true, would have been extraordinary. Other accounts have him developing it in cooperation with others, post musicians and existing drill instructors. Existing drill instructors were corporals, sergeants, staff sergeants, tech sergeants; it would have been most unusual to bypass them in the chain of command by a mere private, not to mention the racial issues.

⁵⁰ At the time of his separation from the service at Ft. Eustis in Jan. 1947, T/4 Willie L. Duckworth listed his home address as Route 2, Tennille, Georgia. (This and other information from his military records, provided from NARA through the kind permission of his widow, Edna Duckworth.)

ASCAP member

His payment comes through ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. ASCAP, according to Duckworth, is like an insurance company -- they retain a percentage, and send the rest on to him. Sheet music is still available.

Duckworth says he is the only member of ASCAP that has just one song. He tried to write others, and sent them off to publishers, but they were returned with the comment that the publisher (at that time) only printed folk songs and he had written rock and roll. He sent them to a publisher on the West coast, but there were contract problems with Shapiro, Bernstein.

In the 60s Duckworth had a band of high school boys called the "Rocketeers," that performed all around the area, but as the members graduated, the band folded.

Willie Lee Duckworth was born and raised in the Linton Road area of Washington County. He attended T.J. Elder School, quitting before graduation to go into farming. September 4, 1944,⁵¹ he was drafted and sent to New York, where he helped load and unload ships.

He was later sent to Okinawa, returning home in 1947.⁵² His first job was at a sawmill, but in 1954, Duckworth was able to go into the pulpwood business, using the residuals from the song to purchase a truck.

Now age 65, Duckworth has slowed down some and turned the business over to his son, Willie Lee Jr., but he still helps his son many days.

December 29, 1944, home on furlough after basic training, Pvt. Duckworth married Edna, his wife of almost 45 years. They have one son, Willie Lee Jr., and five daughters Connie Pinkston, Delores Duckworth, Gail Jenkins, Barbara Ann Jackson and Betty Jean Griner; eighteen grandchildren and one great grandchild.

His eyes light up when he says "I love fishing!" Duckworth is planning his retirement years at his favorite fishing holes at Clark Hill and Lake Oconee, each depending on the seasons of the year. "I'm going to fish as long as I'm able," he promised.

A fire in 1960 completely destroyed the Duckworth home and any souvenirs of his Army days, or of the *Sound Off* days.

One of the most treasured souvenirs was a silver coin, with George Washington Carver on one side, backed with Booker T. Washington. Duckworth had gotten the coin on a trip to Joplin, Missouri for some publicity for the *Sound Off* film.⁵³ He says he was presented his coin one

⁵¹ His military records show his date of service as commencing 14 Aug 1943. If indeed he invented the Duckworth chant at Fort Slocum by May 1944, the official dates would seem to be more believable.

⁵² His military records show he reenlisted 25 Dec. 1945 on Okinawa, Ryukyu Islands, where he stayed until 19 Feb. 1946. Records do not show when he left Ft. Slocum, nor under what circumstances. He was separated from the service 21 Jan. 1947 at Ft. Eustis, VA.

⁵³ See the *New York Times* article, above; in fact he received the first annual Carver Award.

hour before President Harry S. Truman received his copy of the coin. His flight to Missouri was the last time he flew in a plane.

Also lost were his copies of the 45 rpm recording of Vaughn Monroe singing *Sound Off*.

Duckworth is an active, self-assured man who is very comfortable with the fame his song has earned. He is excited over the recognition his community will be giving him at the Kaolin Festival this fall.

XII.c *Macon Telegraph & News*

He wrote the song that makes the Army march. By Bill Boyd.⁵⁴
Macon Telegraph and News 17 Sept. 1989.

*Ain't no use in goin' home
Jody's got your gal and gone
Ain't no use in feelin' blue
Jody's got your sister, too
Sound off (one two)
Sound off. . .*

In 45 years, millions of soldiers have chanted those words and dozens of similar verses as they marched and double-timed countless miles. They surely will be chanting those verses a hundred years from now.

Because there will be cadence as long as there are soldiers, Willie Lee Duckworth of Sandersville has attained a certain immortality for writing "Sound Off." It also earned him some money -- enough to buy his own pulpwood truck and open his own business.

But he has received little recognition outside his hometown.

He says that doesn't bother him, but I think that, deep inside, it has to.

Willie Lee Duckworth was born in Washington County 65 years ago. He quit high school to try farming, and then, at 19, he was drafted and shipped off to Fort Slocum in New York. And that's where he left an indelible mark on Army cadence.

Since even the services practiced segregation in those days, blacks and whites seldom drilled together.⁵⁵ And when nine black soldiers at

⁵⁴ This article is now included in Boyd's collection **Fat, Dumb and Happy Down in Georgia** (Mercer University, 1999).

⁵⁵ By means of Executive Order 9981 on 26 July 1948, President Truman officially ended segregation in the American armed forces. This date has caused some skepticism that Black troops would have been at Ft. Slocum in WWII, and even that Duckworth himself would have been there, as the 1945 Felice narration says, on detached service with the Provisional Training Center. For example, "the US Army was still strictly segregated in 1944. I'd think it would have been highly unlikely that a black soldier would have been on 'detached service' in that time period." (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f->

Fort Slocum had a hard time drilling to the commands of a white officer, Mr. Duckworth, then a buck private, was told to drill the blacks.

The Georgian made up the words that day as he went along. Very shortly, white soldiers took up the chants, too.

Col. Bernard Lentz, the base commander, heard the chant and soon ordered its use by all soldiers.

And with 23 verses furnished by Mr. Duckworth and the help of base musicians, the colonel put it to music and published it in a cadence manual. At the time, the cadence was titled "The Duckworth Chant."

After the war, Mr. Duckworth returned to Sandersville and worked in a sawmill until the early 1950's when his chant became a hit song with the title "Sound Off." It was performed by Vaughn Monroe.

It also became the basis for a movie by that name, and Mickey Rooney had the starring role.

Since then, parts of "Sound Off" have been used in dozens of movies, including "Private Benjamin." Each time it's used, Mr. Duckworth gets a royalty check.

When the movie "Sound Off" was going good, Mr. Duckworth said he received as much as \$1,000 per month -- certainly a pretty fair sum in the '50's.⁵⁶ But he didn't splurge with the money. He bought a pulpwood truck and opened his own business. And although the company has remained small and the royalty checks were never that big again, Mr. Duckworth and Edna, his wife of 45 years, have lived comfortably and reared six children.

But he always has worked. Still does. One recent day, I had to wait for him to come out of the pine forests to be interviewed.

The man I met is tall, slender and likeable. He's also very frank about "Sound Off" and how it has affected his life. He talked about:

- Recognition -- "I've never had much, but it doesn't bother me like it might bother some people. I'd rather be out fishing than anything you can name.
- The movie world -- "I've never met Mickey Rooney or Goldie Hawn . . . I'd like to meet them, but it doesn't bother me that I haven't."

bloggers/1489526/posts; visited 1 Feb. 2008). But as a matter of fact, in the collection of the New Rochelle Public Library, there is a photo datable (from insignia) to as early as March 1944, showing a racially mixed formation in a public demonstration in the Fort Slocum armory building. Other photos show racially mixed awards ceremonies the probably pre-date 1945, as well as mixed rehabilitation classes in 1945. And indeed Army-wide, there had been a quiet policy of integrating transportation, post exchanges and recreational facilities on stateside posts since March 1943 (James E. Westheider, **The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms**, Rowan & Littlefield 2007, p. 6), as well as experiments (though tentative) in integrating training schools and even combat units. So Truman's order did not occur in a complete historical vacuum.

⁵⁶ Yes it was! To put this in perspective, by this time the top rate of pay for a colonel with maximum years of service was well under \$1,000 monthly. In other words, hypothetically, had Col. Lentz still been on active duty, his regular pay would have been less than the residuals collected (at this time at least) by ex-Pvt. Duckworth.

- The immortality of his chant -- “It makes me feel good that someone might still be using it a hundred years from now . . . I just wish I was gonna be here to hear it.”
- Changes in his work -- Many verses have been added and someone changed the name in the original version from Jody to Alvin when it was published.⁵⁷ “But that doesn’t bother me either . . . as long as they keep sending me the checks.”

Well, Willie Lee Duckworth may never have made it in big-time entertainment, but the folks who run Washington County’s Kaolin Festival plan to treat him like a celebrity. The festival theme is “Washington County Sounds Off,” and Mr. Duckworth is going to be the grand marshal of the parade, the first black person ever to be so honored.

But as soon as the festival is over, I’m betting he goes fishing. To him, snaring a big-mouth bass is better than hobnobbing any day.

XIII. Last Interview with Duckworth (2002)

This piece, found on the internet, appears to be a newspaper interview from a local paper in Georgia. The article carries the byline Ed Grisamore. It was found on the website aged.ces.uga.edu and gives contact information as 744-4275 and egrisamore@macontel.com. In it Duckworth gives an alternate, non-heroic version of

⁵⁷ Although this is the closest anyone has come to demonstrating that Jody was original with Duckworth himself, “Jodie” does appear in the 21 Sept. 1944 *Casual News* (see above), on the 1945 V-Disc, as well as in the version printed in Lentz’ edition of 1951. “Jody” appears also in the version of the sheet music copyrighted by Lentz (though crediting Duckworth as well) in 1950 and 1951; whereas “Alvin” appears in the version of the sheet music copyrighted by Lentz in 1960 and 1961. But the only recorded version with “Alvin” is the Titus Turner R&B version of 1961, and the Duckworth chant continues to be referred to as “the Jody” (and never, “the Alvin”). Whence the character Jodie/Jody? As a matter of fact (though Jodie was then an uncommon name) in 1942 there was at least one soldier at Ft. Slocum named Jodie (Sgt. Jodie McCubbin). But there is no evidence that he was connected with the development of the chant two years later; and (unless somehow he fit the part of the draft-dodger back home, bird-dogging the soldier’s girlfriend) it would make no psychological sense that a serving NCO would have been the basis for the Jodie character. A more plausible suggestion can be found in Bruce Jackson, “What Happened to Jody,” *Journal of American Folklore* 80(318):387-396, 1967, p. 387: “Jo-dy” (or “Jo-die”) is from “Joe de Grinder,” Black dialect for “Joe the Grinder.” In the Army (as well as in prison, from which Jackson documents his examples) “(o)ne mutual concern is who is doing what, with, and to the woman one left at home. In Negro folklore, this concern is personified in the songs and toasts about one Jody the Grinder -- “Jody,” a contraction of “Joe the,” and “Grinder,” a metaphor in folk use for a certain kind of coital movement.” Jody the Grinder pre-dates WWII; Jackson cites one recording by John Lomax in 1939. Jackson himself documents a version, though recorded in 1965, which he thinks on internal evidence dates to at least 1947 and possibly earlier. In it “Jody” and “Joe the Grinder” are used interchangeably; and when the soldier husband returns unexpectedly to find his wife shacked up, there occurs the line (p. 390): “Mr. Jody Grinder, meet Mr. G.I. Joe.” So it is possible that Jody the Grinder, via historic Black folklore to Army folklore, is the basis for the character in the Jody chants, from Duckworth onward. Once again I am indebted to John Patrick for pointing out the crucial link between Jody and Joe the Grinder.

how he originated the chant: that he was scared of Lentz, and the only thing he could think of to say was that it came from calling hogs.

SANDERSVILLE - Willie Lee Duckworth lives with his wife, Edna, in a blue house along Highway 242 as it edges east toward Riddleville and Bartow.

The rural mail carrier brings the usual assortment of envelopes addressed to "Occupant" and "Resident." There are circulars from the Food Lion, applications for credit cards and sweepstakes entries from faraway places.

But every couple of months, a special letter will travel the time-worn path to his door.

It is a royalty check. The royalties make him feel like a king.

There were years when those checks brought more money than he made hauling pulpwood in Washington County. In many ways, they have been gifts that keep on giving. They have helped put food on the table and buttons on his shirts.

In 1944, Willie Lee Duckworth, an unsuspecting buck private from Georgia, authored one of the most popular marching cadences in Army history.

At first, it simply was known as the "Duckworth Chant." It later gained fame as "Sound Off."

Ain't no use in goin' home.

Jody's got your gal and gone.

Ain't no use in feelin' blue.

Jody's got your sister, too.

Sound off!

One, two.

Sound off!

Three, four. ...

With those words, and others, Duckworth made the journey from foot soldier to footnote in military history.

"Sound Off" became the title of a song performed by big band leader Vaughn Monroe. And this year marks the 50th anniversary of the movie by the same name, starring Mickey Rooney.

"It made me famous for a while," Willie Lee said. "And it put some money in my pocket."

He celebrated his 78th birthday this past Tuesday. Although many folks in Washington County are aware of his contribution, the march of time has delivered a generation of others who know little or nothing about Duckworth's serendipitous fame.

He was raised by his grandparents in a sharecropper's house not far from where he now lives. He was working in a sawmill when he was drafted during World War II. It was the first time he had been more than 100 miles from home.

Duckworth was assigned to a provisional training center in Fort Slocum, N.Y., in March 1944. On orders from a non-commissioned officer, he improvised his own drill for the nine black soldiers in the unit. Soon, all the ranks were buzzing and keeping rhythm.

Col. Bernard Lentz, who was the base commander, approached Duckworth and asked where he developed his unique chant.

"I told him it came from calling hogs back home," Duckworth said. "I was scared, and that was the only thing I could think of to say."⁵⁸

The marching cadence built upon a military tradition developed to keep soldiers in step and their spirits high.

Over the years, many variations have been added to the original 23 verses Duckworth wrote with the help of Lentz and others.

"Sound Off" is still making noise, with the blessings of the old soldier who dreamed it up.

XIV: A Closing Absurdity (Illustrating the Need for 25 Pages of Sources)

On 1 February 2008, a Google search of "Duckworth chant" yielded 1,280 hits; while "Sound Off" plus either "Jody" or "Duckworth" yielded 12,900 hits. There is a lot of interest in the Duckworth chant; there is also a lot of writing out there which, at best, can claim a certain ring of Truthiness. For example:

In WWII, black troops were, apparently, given more freedom of self-expression than were white troops. Fancy drill teams, particularly from Fort Duckworth, Alabama,⁵⁹ toured and popularized jazzier cadence counts. There was a pop record in the early 50s that wound up on the hit parade.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Compare with the *New York Times* version from 1951: "I made it up in my head."

⁵⁹ No such place. Ever.

⁶⁰ As of 1 Feb. 2008, this identical claim was found on two websites:

<http://www.mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=5488>, and

<http://sniff.numachi.com/pages/tiSOUNDOFF;tiSOUNDOFF.html>. It is impossible to tell whether one is the source of the other or whether they both repeat a common source.