

# GEORGE KORSON FOLKLORIST

WW I TO COAL FIELDS

WHEN?  
1899-1967

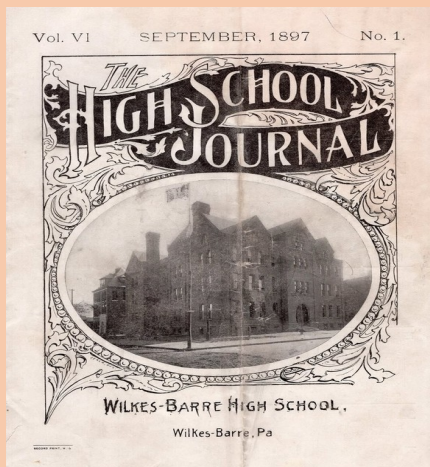
WHERE? Wilkes-Barre



EVENT  
Over 40 years as a folklorist

VOCABULARY  
garrison Folklorist  
Legionnaires Zionist

In 1899, Joseph and Rose Korson welcomed their baby boy, George, to their home in Bobrynets, Ukraine. As a Jewish family, they faced constant harassment and oppression and poverty of this Jewish family motivated them to move to the U.S. After living in Brooklyn for a few years, the family came to the Wyoming Valley when he was thirteen years old. While



attending Wilkes-Barre high school he joined the newspaper staff and later landed a job with the *Wilkes-Barre Record*. In 1921-22 he attended Columbia University to study English and history but had to return to help his family who were experiencing financial problems.

In 1917, the U.S. was in the beginning of their involvement in WW I. Korson had just graduated from high school and had a strong desire to serve. He didn't join the U.S. Army but instead chose to join the Jewish Legion as part of the British Army. That unit's objective was to capture Palestine from the Ottoman Turks (Wynn). While Korson did not experience combat he did serve as an escort for refugees. Wynn also states that when Korson returned in

1919, he told of his time in the field during an interview with a reporter from the *Wilkes-Barre Record*.

The following was excerpted from the interview:

*"I have no thrilling war experience to relate, as the armistice had (al)ready been signed when I arrived with a contingent of Jewish Legionnaires in Palestine. Only the first groups of the American Legion actually saw the firing line, the majority, being used for garrison work. Some of our duties were Turkish and German prisoners of war guards; escorting war refugees from refugee camps in Egypt to their homes in Palestine; general headquarters guards including one for field Marshal -Allenby himself, ammunition dump and other guards."*

He describes rural Palestine as the Zionist movement gathers momentum under the oversight of the British.

*"It seemed as if the scenes and characters of the Bible were living again now, before our eyes. The dress, customs and manners have undergone little change through the ages. For instance, one could see the shepherd by his flock, piping on a reed flute very much as David did when on the slopes of the Judean hills."*

*...there were old villages, and the wells where the veiled women would come out to draw their water daily...*

*Within the last thirty years, however, a new spirit has been working its way into the life of the Palestinian. It has its root in the Zionist movement and is doing much in the effort to make Palestine a fit place to live in.*

*I am referring to the Jewish colonists. There are fifty odd colonies in the country which have been developed by the hardest kind of efforts by Russian and Rumanian immigrants. They brought with them scientific methods of farming from the West as well as idea for sanitation and hygiene and their suffering through tropical fevers is not so general as among their brethren in the cities.*

*..On three occasions I was called upon to do escort duty, that is to help war refugees from refugee camps in Egypt to their homes in Palestine. It was heartbreaking at times to see the wretchedness of these people. Many of them were wan, pale and little more than walking skeletons. And many, particularly the older people, appeared to be nothing more than a bundle of bones held together by a thin tissue of flesh" (Wynn).*

After the war, he joined the staff of the *Pottsville Republican* in 1924. This is where he began collecting songs and stories from the miners and their families for feature articles in the paper. No one had ever collected material on miners before but concentrated on other segments of the population such as cowboys or mountaineers. As an advocate for the rights of miners and improved working conditions for them, he documented their songs and stories. That included anthracite as well as bituminous miner stories. His accomplishments include: five books on the coal fields, founded and directed the Pennsylvania Folk Festival, and developed the start of the National Folk Festival (Warwick's). Along with his wife, Rae, a musicologist, the two began the Library of Congress archive of songs and ballads from the coal fields.



His book *Black Rock* received a Guggenheim Fellowship award in 1957. He also has numerous other awards (Warwick's). His collections including over 37,000 items were originally donated to the D. Leonard Corgan Library at King's College but were moved to the Library of Congress in 2004 (Library).

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

[Library of Congress](#)

[Warwick's](#)

[Wynn From Coal Fields to Palestine Korson](#)

#### PRINT RESOURCES

Gillespie, Angus K. *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*. Pennsylvania State University Press. 1983.