

7-22-1961

Guy Reed

Philip Walsh

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Song: "Guy Reed"

Singer: Philip Walsh

Town: Events take place near Livermore Falls, ME; recorded in Northwest Bridge, NB

NA 3614 CD 2065 Track 3

Collector: Sandy Ives

Date: July 22, 1961

Roud: 1968

Laws: C9

"Guy Reed" is one of several songs by one of the great woods "songmakers" in Maine and the Maritimes, Joe Scott. Guy Reed, son of Joseph and Remember Mitchell Reed, was born in 1874 in the Byron, Maine area, and died in a logging accident just a few miles above Livermore Falls, Maine, on September 9, 1897. Tremendous quantities of logs were decked up along the bank of the Androscoggin River, where they stayed until they were needed at the International Paper Company's mill down river. "Breaking in a landing" required first of all that someone pull the keylog that held the whole pile; then if all the logs did not go, someone had to take a peavey and pry loose the recalcitrant logs holding back the rest. Needless to say, it could be extremely dangerous, but like most dangerous jobs, it became routine. In the case at hand, the crew that included Guy Reed had been breaking in landings all day and wanted to quit, since it was getting dark. But the foreman wanted to break in just one more. When the pile did not break with the keylog, young Guy likely volunteered for the job of trying to break the remaining logs loose. As the song says, Reed (and probably others) started a log rolling down the bank, hoping to knock the pile loose, and when that did not work, Guy ventured onto the pile to free up the single log. He evidently yanked too hard, or else slipped, and the whole landing went over him, killing him instantly.

"Guy Reed" achieved wide circulation, not only orally but through newspapers. Joe Scott almost certainly wrote the song at the time of the accident, or possibly refurbished a song he had written earlier. It was known from New Hampshire to Prince Edward Island, and it did not take long to spread through the area – less than ten years to cross the whole span. The rapid spread is almost entirely a result of the song's fine lyrics and tune, and not its wide and frequent publication in area newspapers. More so than the numerous songs about similar logging accidents or about logjams on river drives, "Guy Reed" elicited a powerful emotional reaction from many men who sang or heard the song. These were not only men who knew Guy, or worked in the same area, and the response was not even limited to days long past. Phil Walsh, in fact, broke down in tears after the performance heard here. The song remained an intensely moving experience for woodsmen decades after they stopped worked in the woods. The tune also demonstrated evidence of the song's power, as everywhere the song is found it is sung to the same tune, that of an older song "Bright Eyed Little Nell of Narragansett Bay" (about a young woman who drowned in a storm). "Guy Reed" was thus a perfect combination of lyrical beauty, a story of a shared experience among all woodsmen (the risks inherent in their job and its dire consequences), and a popular tune. As Sandy Ives wrote in *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker*, "But even more than other river ballads, ["Guy Reed"] became a universal lament that such things must be, that a fine young man should die such a hard death on a sunny afternoon. It does not rage, though. It accepts, and gives us that death as death ought to be and so seldom is: heroic, the result of daring, with companions kneeling and weeping, with a fine funeral, with the promise of sleep at home with the family, and with the hope of eternal life on that bright celestial shore where we shall all meet again." (170)

1.

Oh, well do I remember one dark and stormy night,
The rain it fell in torrents and the lightning flashed so bright;
The moon and stars above me could not their light reveal,
Dark clouds so gloomy their welcome light concealed.

2.

The post brought me a letter I hastened to purpose,
'Twas written by a friend of mine, it bore me startling news;
Of once I knew a fine young man as e'er you wished to see,
All in an instant he was hurled into eternity.

3.

While him and his companions where the waters they do roar,
Were breaking in a landing on the Androscoggin shore;
They worked the face of one of them from the bottom to the top,
'Til thirty feet this landing had a perpendic'lar drop.

4.

To work the face much longer 'twould be a foolish part,
When a jar so slight you see it might that lofty landing start;
Then all the crew decided that one of them should go
To roll a log from off the top to start the logs below.

5.

This young man he among them with a heart so stout and brave,
Not thinking that before night he'd be all straightened for his grave;
Not thinking that the almighty hand was soon to lay him low,
To leave the ones he loved so dear in sorrow, grief, and woe.

6.

Oh, a log he quickly canted, the landing creaked below,
Until it sped unto the verge, it would no further go;
Then this young man he approached the verge of landing high,
While all the crew with pale cheeks and trembling limbs stood by.

7.

Up went the shout of warning to warn him of his fate,
And for an instant he did pause, he seemed to hesitate;
He rolled the log 'bout halfway off when the landing broke like glass,
And quick as thought he disappeared into that rolling mass.

8.

The logs they quickly canted from off his mangled form,
The birds were sweetly singing and the sun shone bright and warm;
Strong men knelt down beside him, and their grief could not command,
Unhidden tears that fell like rain and rolled into the sand.

9.

His comrades bore him gently and laid him on the green,
Beneath a spreading spruce that stood beside the burbling stream;
The burbling sparkling water fled o'er her rocky bed,
It seemed to sweetly softly say farewell unto the dead.

10.

This young man he was buried by the order of K.C.,
A funeral more attended you would very seldom see;
The church and yard was crowded by people young and old,
Once more to view that face so fair now forever pale and cold.

11.

His mother she died early when he was but a child,
They laid her down to slumber near that forest fair and wild;
A sister and a brother's now sleeping by her side
In the village churchyard near that river's dancing tide.

12.

His poor old aged father he's stricken now with grief,
The joys of earthly pleasure cannot bring him no relief;
His untold gold and silver, procession wealth in store,
Sunny skies or music sweet cannot the dead restore.

13.

The blackbird and the swallow, the sunshine and the rain,
The robin and the thrushes in the springtime come again;
The songbird and the sparrow in foreign lands may soar,
But loved ones in death that sleep will come again no more,

14.

Come all ye friend kidren [sic] pray for him who's dead and gone,
To a better home in heaven far away beyond the sun;
Of him you loved most dearly you'll never again see more,
Until you cross death's valley to that great eternal shore.

Sources: Ives, Edward D., ed. "Twenty-One Folksongs from Prince Edward Island." Orono, ME: Northeast Folklore Society. *Northeast Folklore* 5 (1963), 63-68; and Ives, Edward D. *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978, 140-77. "Guy Reed" also appears in several other collections, including Ives, Edward D. *Folksongs of New Brunswick*. Fredericton, N.B.: Goose Lane Editions, 1989, 183-86; Ives, Edward D. *Drive Dull Care Away: Folksongs From Prince Edward Island*. Charlottetown, PEI: Institute of Island Studies, 1999, 96-99, 246; and Gray, Ronald Palmer. *Songs and Ballads of the Maine Lumberjacks with Other Songs from Maine*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924, 24-28.