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## Lumbercamp Singing and the Two Traditions

Edward D, Ives

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narrative based upon such extensive knowledge on the part of the performer must represent a factual account of past events.

My remarks have, by now, I hope, served to illustrate the fact that not only is the notion of truth in folksong one that is both complex and far-reaching in its implications, but also that the singer recognises it to be so in as much as he articulates a concern for questions alluded to here. These facts constitute in themselves sufficient reason why we should be devoting ourselves to systematic investigation of truth and belief in folksong to the same extent that these problems are currently receiving attention from students of prose narrative. The idea of truth is a lively one in the mind of the folksinger and one that is in some cases clearly articulated by him. Such ideas merit further examination.

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**Résumé.** John Ashton: "La vérité dans la chanson folklorique: quelques développements et applications."

Cecil Sharp a remarqué par écrit en 1907 que les chanteurs traditionnels anglais avec qui il travaillait l'assuraient fréquemment au cours de la conversation de la veracité des faits à la base de leurs chansons narratives. Depuis cette époque, la tendance des chanteurs à chanter ce qu'ils considèrent être de "vraies" chansons ou, tout au moins à s'intéresser aux éléments tenus pour vrais dans les chansons, a été très bien documentée dans le domaine de la chanson de langue anglaise.

Le but de cette communication est de montrer la valeur de l'enquête systématique dans les aspects de la "vérité" contenue dans la chanson folklorique, en se rapportant plus particulièrement aux questions de formation et de modification du répertoire de chansons vis-à-vis l'esthétique de groupe d'une communauté de chanteurs folkloriques.

## LUMBERCAMP SINGING AND THE TWO TRADITIONS<sup>1</sup>

EDWARD D. IVES

What I will do in this short paper is to describe singing as it occurred in the lumbercamps of Maine during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What was its function, when, where, and (in broad terms only) how was it done; who were the singers, and what was the basic repertoire? I will then take my own early assumption that there were two traditions in the Northeast: something called "lumbercamp" or "woods" tradition and something called "local" tradition. I will wind up by redefining these two traditions and showing what part the lumbercamps had in one of them.

We can begin with the very obvious fact that in the woods singing was simply one form of entertainment or pastime. It was not something used to time the blows of the axes or to keep men moving together while they were rolling or lifting logs on the drive or on the yards or landings. In this way the lumberman's life contrasts rather sharply with what we read about the sailor's

<sup>1</sup>This paper is a brief summary of what will be a full chapter in my forthcoming book, *Joe Scott: The Woodsman Songmaker* (University of Illinois Press, 1978).

life, where the shanties were work-songs and very distinct from the songs men sang for pleasure in the forecandle off watch.<sup>2</sup> There were no work-songs in the woods at all in the commonly accepted sense of that term, and there is no need to labor the point further. Singing was an off-hours or leisure-time activity for woodsmen.

Most leisure time would have been spent in camp in the men's part or bunkroom. Keep in mind the picture of a none-too-large room with double-tiered pole-constructed bunks down each side and a long bench — the deacon seat — running along the foot of the lower bunks. Everything is rough-hewn of round logs (even to the pole floor), lit by kerosene lanterns, probably overheated by the big ram-down wood stoves in the middle of the room, and filled with anywhere from a dozen to seventy-five or eighty men who have put in a hard day's work in the outdoors. Some camps were near enough civilization so men could get out week-ends; in others they might get out at Christmas or New Year's; but it was not at all uncommon for men to be in the woods from October right through to March. For the most part, then, through the whole of the long and bitter winter, the men in the lumbercamp were an isolated community. Six days a week they went to work by lantern light in the morning, worked in small crews quite isolated from each other all day, and then — \*"when it was a pretty hard job to tell a spruce from a yellow birch"<sup>3</sup> as Ned Stewart said — they'd take up their lanterns again and return to camp.

Supper would be over as quickly as the cook could clear the men out of the cookroom — no lingering over coffee (or, more likely, tea) and absolutely no conversation. Lumbercamp food may have been plain ("Beans and brown bread for breakfast, brown bread and beans for dinner, and a mixture of the two for supper,")<sup>4</sup> but it was plentiful and generally appreciated. However, there was to be no nonsense about its consumption. Shut up and eat; then get your hide out and over to the men's part where you belong! That was the rule, which meant that by six or six-thirty the men were back along the deacon seat, and there they stayed until the lights went out at nine o'clock.

There were many activities that might fill this leisure time, and it is important to remember singing was only one of them. Aside from personal pursuits, like whittling or reading, there might be card playing, games of many sorts (often pretty rough ones), conversation (with concomitant storytelling or "telling lies"), step-dancing, and so on. On the whole, though, nothing very ambitious was apt to happen on week nights, because there were usually a number of odds-and-ends chores to be taken care of. \*"Of course in a woods camp like that the evenings aren't long," said John Colbath. "You know, men working hard and they don't get in until after dark. By the time they get their supper and get their clothes and tools taken care of . . . the evening's pretty well gone."<sup>5</sup> There was leisure time in the evenings, but the men seem to have

<sup>2</sup>There is a substantial literature on shantying. For an excellent bibliography, see William M. Doerflinger, *Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

<sup>3</sup>Ned Stewart, Rumford Center, Me. 7/28/67, NAI 67.1 (Throughout this paper, accession numbers will be given for all material in the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History at the University of Maine, Orono, Maine. "NA" will indicate regular accessions; "NAI" will indicate material in the so-called "Ives Collection." An asterisk before a quotation indicates that it is taken verbatim from a recording.

<sup>4</sup>*Eastern Argus* (Portland, Me.), Dec. 8, 1884.

<sup>5</sup>John Colbath, Bangor, Me., fall 1972, NA.721.



tended to their own affairs, patching pants, mending mittens, taking care of tools, whittling out a new axe handle or perhaps a gum book, reading a magazine, or just sitting around talking. Psychologically, they were looking to the next day's work, and to getting a little rest after this one. Saturday night was the big night.

That should come as no surprise, since in our culture Saturday night has always been the night to howl. The work week is over, and Sunday is a day of rest. Men in the lumbercamps were simply continuing a pattern they had been following all their lives. Saturday night was special, and symbolic of that specialness was the fact that the lights were left burning after nine o'clock, some say till midnight, others claiming they'd be left on as long as anyone wanted them on:

There is no agreement as to just how organized and extensive the entertainment was, and I think we can assume that this varied tremendously from camp to camp. There are those who claim that all told Saturday night was just longer than other nights and nothing special happened at all, just as there are those who claim that there was singing and dancing every night.

Some men remember that many things would be going on at once, and any singing would take place right along with the other activities. John O'Connor, who worked in Miramichi lumbercamps in the late teens and early twenties, recalled it that way: "No, they wouldn't all be listening," he said, "because the camp would be a big place. There'd be a fella singing here, and those that would be interested — there might be four or five or half a dozen around him — they'd be listening."<sup>6</sup> A good deal may have depended on the size of the camp, of course. That would make sense, but there's not much data to support a conclusion either way.

Sometimes Saturday night entertainment would be highly organized and would involve the entire crowd. Angus Enman of Spring Hill, P.E.I., was especially eloquent in this regard. He had worked for years over in the Androscoggin watershed in Maine and New Hampshire, and when I asked him about singing in the camps he replied,

"Oh great! Ohhh great! Well, you know, it wasn't what it is now, singing. Most singers now gotta have a guitar, but then there was no music at all. Saturday night, you see, when you'd come into the camp after supper you had to tell a story or sing or dance. If you didn't, they'd ding you; they'd put the dried codfish to you . . . They had these old dried codfish and two or three would throw you down and whale you with it . . . Hit you! Hard! Yeah. You take one of them old Cape Bretoners, great big old Scotchmen; or them Dutchmen, one of them big buggers from River Herbert, Nova Scotia . . . If you couldn't sing, you could tell a good story [or] perhaps you could dance. Oh, yes, somebody he'd go round: "Now boy, come on. Do what you're going to do."<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to compare Enman's testimony with that of Bill McBride, a Michigan lumberjack, who told Herbert Halpert that on Saturday night a man would have to "sing a song, tell a story, dance a jig, or up he went — he'd have to go up in a blanket."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>John O'Connor, Hope River, P.E.I., 8/31/65, NAI.65.11.

<sup>7</sup>Angus Enman, Spring Hill, P.E.I., 8/19/58, NAI.1.38-40.

<sup>8</sup>Herbert Halpert, "A Michigan Lumberjack Singer," *Hoosier Folklore*, 1 (1942), 83.

Lumbercamp singing was a solo tradition: one man singing while others listened in silence (there was seldom any joining in on the refrains, for example). And usually a man had to be coaxed to sing ("my throat's awful hoarse tonight" . . . "Hell, I can't sing" . . . that sort of thing), a pose which reinforced the expected singer-audience relationship by making it incumbent upon his audience to listen attentively once he *had* agreed to sing. And since singing — even on the most codfish-dinging Saturday nights — was an alternative (one *could* do something else), certain men became known as singers just as others might be known as step-dancers. We frequently hear these singers described as "old" or "older," but more common than references to older men being the best singers are references to men from the Maritimes, who often as not are spoken of as Irish or sometimes "Scotch." Emile Leavitt's comments are to the point:

There was an awful lot of people that came from the province of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. You know, English-speaking people, Scotch, Irish. They worked in the Maine woods then, and they had a lot of these songs, you know, ballads. I've heard them, Saturday nights they'd sing all night almost, till twelve o'clock. It was always ballads about somebody's girl or something . . . About the girl they left behind, you know, all that kind of stuff. These were woodsmen from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. They were country people, you know, but they had an awful lot of these songs. And Saturday night they always got out and sang them. Some of them lasted a long time; some of them must have been fifteen, twenty verses to them, long, long, songs. The whole story. It was a story by itself.<sup>9</sup>

Joe McCullough of Mineral, New Brunswick, agreed. \*"There was more singers from here than there was from over there [in Maine]," he told me, adding that he didn't know why that was.<sup>10</sup> Others claim that the Prince Edward Islanders were the greatest singers of them all, but whichever province may be said to bear the palm away, there is no doubt in my mind that the better singers came from the Maritimes. In my own collecting work, I have found ten good singers from Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick to every one from Maine. Even some of those from Maine had strong Maritime ties; Ernest Lord of Wells was born and spent his young manhood in New Brunswick, and Billy Bell of Brewer was from the Island — and more an Islander than a Mainer any day. Franz Rickaby claimed that in the lumbercamps of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota "the hegemony in song belonged to the Irish."<sup>11</sup> We can say the same for Maine lumbercamps, but they were mostly second-generation Irish from New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, or Nova Scotia farms.

What made up the repertoire of these singers? It varied tremendously, to be sure, but all its variousness centered in the British broadside ballad tradition, which is about what Emile Leavitt meant by songs "about the girls they left behind" or what is generally meant by "come-all-ye's." Equally as popular were many native American ballads, especially those modeled on the British broadsides and even more especially those having to do with war or the sea, while the so-called Child ballads were almost non-existent in woods tradition.

<sup>9</sup>Emile Leavitt, Old Town, Me., fall 1972, NA.718.

<sup>10</sup>Joe McCullough, Mineral, N.B., 8/21/64, NAI.64.8.

<sup>11</sup>Franz Rickaby, *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-Boy* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1926), p. xxv.



A reading of any of the standard collections from the Maritime Provinces will, with some correction, give a pretty accurate picture of what was sung in the woods. To put it another way, woods repertoire was made up of songs we might have expected men from rural New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island to have been singing in the late nineteenth century, and returning woodsmen kept that tradition alive at home well up into the twentieth. It is hard in the Maritimes sometimes to see which way the influence ran strongest — camp-to-home or home-to-camp — but by the turn of the century that's a pretty academic question. What is more important is to see that Maritimes tradition and Maine woods tradition are basically the same, and, as Norman Cazden has ably demonstrated, that the same songs are found in the repertoires of lumbercamp singers in New York, Ontario, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota.<sup>12</sup>

In the past I have talked about lumbercamp tradition as something different from local tradition, or at least that seems a kind of underlying assumption I've been making all along. Yet I've already contradicted myself by insisting on the essential identity of "Maine lumbercamp" and "Maritimes" tradition. Were there really two traditions, then? Yes, but rather than "lumbercamp" and "local," I'm proposing the terms "public" as opposed to "domestic" tradition, and (perhaps a little more adventurously) a "men's" as opposed to a "women's" tradition. And Wilmot MacDonald's childhood memory from Glenwood, N.B. is a good place to begin working this out:

[My father was] a beautiful singer. And when that Snowball's Mill was running in Chatham, when we was little lads not over six or seven years old, I seen as high as nine hired horses in my father's yard on Saturday night, pay night. They all come in and each fella would have a bottle of whiskey (whiskey was awful cheap then: dollar and a quarter a quart). And they'd all land at the old man's, and they'd all set there and the old man would sing songs. He might take a couple of drinks of liquor, and he set there; maybe he'd sing ten songs . . . They all acome to Will MacDonald's; that's where they came from Chatham. Oh, yes, I guess I could remember some of those Saturday nights!<sup>13</sup>

Notice, first of all, that it is still Saturday night we're talking about, the end of the work-week, with the difference that now there's drinking involved (and outside the lumbercamps that drinking/singing linkage is a very standard one for men in this area). Second, the emphasis is still on "singers," in this case Wilmot's father. Third, notice that it is still a *men's* gathering, or at least the men predominate *even though it takes place in a home*. It is *Will MacDonald* singing for the "fellas," and this pattern is manifest — either *expressly* or by implication — in much of the testimony I have gathered on *singing occasions*. There may have been women present; in fact, there usually *were* women present, but when they weren't looking after the children or out in the kitchen preparing a "lunch," they were listening quietly. As a rule they didn't sing in public. I asked Wilmot did his mother every sing? Yes, he said, she was a beautiful singer, but only around the house.

Mother would sing any time she got them dishes cleaned up and maybe two or three of the children there and she maybe putting a

<sup>12</sup>Norman Cazden, "Regional and Occupational Orientations of American Traditional Song," *Journal of American Folklore*, 72(1959), 310-44.

<sup>13</sup>Wilmot MacDonald, Glenwood, N.B., 7/10/63, NAL.1.133.



child to sleep in her old rocking chair . . . She never sung for [outsiders]. Now, anyone come there, you know, she hardly — in fact, I don't believe she sung a song at all. The old man used to entertain them, but I noticed . . . that any time she was singing she was just in the rocking chair singing there to the children and maybe sewing, even spinning at the wheel.<sup>14</sup>

His mother knew a lot of songs, but Wilmot wasn't much interested in them, and while he learned his only Child ballad (No. 4: "Lady Isabel") from her, he never cared much for it (until he discovered it raised goose pimples on visiting folklorists).

Women did sing. Some of them, like Wilmot's mother, sang quite a lot, but they would be more likely to do so around the house at chores during the day or in the evening, and only within earshot of the immediate family or at most a near neighbor who might have dropped in. That is why I speak of the "puttic" or "performance" tradition as essentially a men's tradition, and the "domestic" tradition as essentially a women's tradition. And there are three implications of this split that I would like to suggest at this point.

First, the so-called lumbercamp tradition was largely an extension of the male public performance tradition found in the Maritimes. The lumbercamp offered an occasion when singing was an accepted entertainment form long after it had ceased to be all that important elsewhere. In addition, the lumbercamp was looked on even by Maritimers as a place where a man would be apt to learn songs, which would then be sung and learned by others back home. Edmund Doucette made the point well in talking about old times around Miminegash, P.E.I.: "'A lot of the boys used to go to New Brunswick in the lumberwoods. We'd always look forward for when some of them would come home; they'd learn some of those new songs . . . They'd all gather into this house where this fella was . . . and he'd have to sing the song and that's the way we learned them.'<sup>15</sup>

Just to show how complete the interchange could be, we can take Jack Rodgerson's experience. He came to the Maine woods from Crapaud, P.E.I., and while he did a lot of singing in the camps, he claimed he learned most of his songs (including some of Joe Scott's) before he left the Island, "'Because when those [woodsmen] would come home we [kids] would stand around," he said, "and I think a kid retains."<sup>16</sup>

Second, we have the lovely paradox that the men's tradition of lumbercamp and public performance was involved with the serious business of leisure-time entertainment, while the women's tradition of domestic in-the-family singing was often work-oriented in that songs were sung to pass the time while one was spinning or sewing or cooking or looking after the children or other such frivolous pursuits. And that is all I think I'm going to say about that.

Third, by the very nature of the tradition within which they moved, and since they were around the house more of the time and for longer than boys were, girls would be more apt to learn and repeat the songs their mothers and

<sup>14</sup>*Idem*. For further comment on women as singers, see Gerald L. Pocius, "The First Day That I Thought of It Since I Got Wed," *Western Folklore* 35 (1976), 109-22.

<sup>15</sup>Edmund Doucette, Miminegash, P.E.I., 7/14/63, NAI.1.144-147.

<sup>16</sup>Jack Rodgerson, Berlin, N.H., 9/10/65, NAI.65.15.

grandmothers sang, absorbing them along with their skills in spinning and bread-making and naturally associating them with these activities which would fill the rest of their lives. Since these songs did not depend upon public approval in any major way, is it possible that the domestic tradition would contain older, more "old-fashioned" songs than the public tradition? Is that why most of the Child ballads have been collected from women in the Northeast, for example? It is a subject worthy of a whole lot more study.

A modest warning before we leave this subject of the two traditions: we should not expect anything like a dichotomy or a polarity. I doubt that the distinction was ever consciously maintained, to begin with; it's just the way things worked out. There was a good deal of similarity and sharing. We are not surprised to hear women singing songs they learned from their men-folk, and if I am right that Child ballads are essentially women's songs, we shouldn't be surprised to find men a little scornful of them ("never cared much for that kind of song" . . . "My poor old mother used to sing that.'). But songs flowed both ways, and Bill Cramp's story of how he learned his favorite song, "The Old Elm Tree," from his sister not only shows that but is a nice example of domestic tradition with which to close this part of the discussion: "I was going by the house this evening. She was to her supper dishes. The door was open, and I could hear her singing that song. And I thought that was the prettiest tune that I ever heard. I walked right up within a few rods of the kitchen door and set down there and listened to it 'til she finished that song. I knew if I let her know I was there she wouldn't finish it."<sup>17</sup>

As I have already said, lumbercamp singing was simply an extension of the male-dominated performance tradition of the Maritimes, but it had a very special place in that tradition. It was the place where one learned *new* songs. Julian Bream once remarked that he had been criticized for not playing Dowland's music on a lute made in Dowland's time, "but when Dowland played," he said, "he was playing what for him was a new lute." It is a point well taken here. We talk about the "old" songs, and we discuss "the tradition" as if it were (or had been) something closed, established, final, canonized. Yet in the foregoing pages we have seen men seeking novelty, learning "new" songs, cornering men coming home from the woods "to learn some of the new songs." Wilmot MacDonald remembered how when he came down out of the woods people would ask him, "Did you learn any new songs, Wilmot?" and if he said he had they'd want him to sit right down and sing them. It is a paradox that in order for there to be continuity, there must be change. A closed tradition is a dead tradition.

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<sup>17</sup>Bill Cramp, Oakland, Me., 3/22/66, NAI.66.1-5.

Résumé. Edward D. Ives: "Les deux traditions."

*Une discussion des contextes de l'exécution traditionnelle de chansons dans les états du nord-est et les provinces maritimes délimite deux traditions dans les contextes d'exécution: la publique, qui est dominée par les hommes, et la domestique, où les femmes sont prépondérantes. On compare les répertoires et les styles dans les deux traditions, ainsi que leurs rôles dans le contexte général de la musique régionale traditionnelle.*