

8-1962

The Good Old State of Maine

James Brown

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Song: "The Good Old State of Maine"

Singer: James Brown

Town: Learned near Lily Bay (Moosehead Lake); recorded at Fifth Miramichi Folksong Festival

Na 62.5 CD 66 Track 6

Collector: Sandy Ives

Date: August 1962

Roud: 1955

People have likely been singing, whistling, and humming while working for as long as music and work have existed. This relationship has developed twofold, both as a way to make work go faster (either by passing the time or establishing a rhythm for work) and as a means of expressing discontent with work or working conditions. In many industries, for example, songs became a staple of union activities and protests. In Maine, where the song tradition developed among notoriously unorganized laborers - farmers, fishermen, and woodsmen - the role of the song in the workplace was very different. Songs and singing were leisure activities, and while it was not necessarily unusual to find men singing while at work, the protest song did not develop as a genre in Maine or the Northeast in general.

The genre most closely resembling protest songs was a subset within the tradition of satirical songs, such as "**The Good Old State of Maine**" or the previously discussed "Canaday-I-O." Some scholars suggest they served as a means of control over bosses, preventing them from being hard-driving skinflints. The argument suggests that as a boss, if someone "songed" you, then other men would know not to go to work for you and business would collapse. Eckstorm and Smyth made this argument in their discussion of "The Good Old State of Maine" (or their title, "Henry's Concern"). They argued that that Gorman was man of influence, and this song likely influenced good workers and kept them away from New Hampshire and the Henrys. Yet, as Ives noted later, so many satirical songs were written that if this were the case, then no one would have been able to find men willing to work in the woods. It was more likely that this was primarily a way of blowing off steam after a hard day, week, or winter in the woods.

Aside from the tradition as a whole, this song has a particularly interesting story behind it. Written by Larry Gorman, known to woodsmen of Maine and the Maritimes (and maybe even beyond that) as "The Man Who Made the Songs," the song warns woodsmen not to leave Maine for work in New Hampshire. The legend behind the song says Gorman was actually forced to sing the song for Mr. Henry. Not only did Henry like the song, so the story goes, but he even endorsed it as wholly truthful (see stanza 13). Moreover, the perceived injustices endured by Gorman were actually common practices in many lumbercamps of New Hampshire, Maine and elsewhere. Henry made his money and his reputation first in the Zealand Valley in the White Mountains (where Gorman worked for him), then in Lincoln, NH. Though James Henry was known as a tightfisted and hard-driving lumberman, he was hardly the only one. Other inaccuracies or exaggerations in the song also suggest that Gorman was perhaps overstating his problems with Henry and Sons, such as the list of foreigners who were not to be found in Maine and complaints about the weather. In fact, a number of different ethnic groups brought many languages to Maine, and everyone is familiar with the harshness of Maine winters. The version printed here includes two stanzas (marked in brackets) not heard in James Brown's singing.

1.

Oh bushmen all, give ear to call, a tale I will relate,

For my experience in the lumberwoods was in the Granite State;
Its snow clad hills and winding rills, its mountains, rocks, and plains,
You would find it very different from the good old State of Maine.

2.

The aleners [aliens] and foreigners they flock in by the score,
The diversity of languages would equal Babel's Tower;
Italians, Russians, Poles, and Finns, the Dutchman and the Dane,
You ought never hear such drones as those in the good old State of Maine.

3.

The difference in the wages, boys, is scarcely worth a dime,
For every day you do not work you are forced to lose your time;
For to pay your passage to and fro you'll find but little gain,
You will do as well to stay at home in the good old State of Maine.

4.

For it's in the Zealand Valley you'll find seven feet of snow,
And work when the thermometer is thirty-five below;
They average there three storms a week of snow and sleet and rain,
You will seldom find such weather in the good old State of Maine.

5.

Our boss he will direct you with a loud commanding voice,
Saying, "You know the regulations, boys; therefore you have your choice."
Of course he did not make those rules, of him we don't complain,
But I never heard such rules as those in the good old State of Maine.

6.

It's every night with pen and ink they figure up the cost,
The crew was held responsible for all things broke or lost;
An axe, a handle, or a spade, a cantdog or a chain -
A man is never charged for tools in the good old State of Maine.

7.

They figure things so very fine it's hard to save a stamp,
For its every month they do take stock of all things 'round the camp;
Stoves, pots, tea kettles, knives, and forks, the draw-shave and the plane,
Of those they take but small account in the good old State of Maine.

8.

The rules and regulations as I mentioned here before,
In typewriting and in copies posted up on every door;
For to lose your time and pay your board or work in snow and rain,
They'd call us fools to stand such rules in the good old State of Maine.

9.

Now if you do not like the style you can go down the line,

But if you leave them in the lurch they'll figure with you fine;
Cut down your wages and they'll charge your carfare on the train,
I never heard of such a thing in the good old State of Maine.

10.

Oh, it is of the grub I'll give a rub, of which it well deserves,
Our cook become so lazy he allowed the men to starve;
'Twas bread and beans, and beans and bread, and bread and beans again,
For grub we sometimes had a change in the good old State of Maine.

11.

And for those sub-contractors now I've got a word to say,
If you work for a jobber here you are apt to lose your pay;
For there is no lien law in this state, the logs you can't retain,
While the lumber's holding for your pay in that good old State of Maine.

[12.

Our meat and fish is poorly cooked, the bread is sour and old,
The beans are dry and musty and doughnuts are hard and old;
To undertake to chew one, that would give your jaws a pain,
For they're not the kind we used to find in that good old State of Maine.

13.

So now my song is concluded and my story's to an end,
If I have made a statement wrong, I'm willing to amend;
I like the foreman and the crew, of them I can't complain,
For a better crew I never knew in that good old State of Maine.]

14.

Here is adieu to camp and crew, to Henery and Son,
Their names are great throughout this state, they're some of the sons of guns;
I wish them all prosperity until I return again,
But I'll mend my ways and spend my days in the good old State of Maine.

Sources: Eckstorm, Fannie Hardy and Mary Winslow Smyth. *Minstrelsy of Maine: Folk-Songs and Ballads of the Woods and the Coast*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927, 111-13; and Ives, Edward D. *Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs*. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 1993, 103-5, 180-87. The discussion of the Northeastern woods song tradition in Ives, Edward D. *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978, 371-401 is also instructive.