

9-28-1963

Blueberries & Leathery Ice

Lindsey Smallidge

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Recommended Citation

Smallidge, Lindsey. 1963. "Blueberries and Leathery Ice." NA2970, CD852.7. Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, Raymond H. Fogler Special Collections Department, University of Maine.

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Story: "Blueberries" & "Leathery Ice"

Storyteller: Lindsey Smallidge

Town: Northeast Harbor, ME

NA 2970 CD852 Track 7

Collector: Richard Lunt

Date: September 28, 1963

Motif: "Blueberries: X1490 (Miscellaneous plant motifs), X1796 (Extraordinary speed), and X966 (Remarkable jumper); "Ice": X1540 (Lies about water features) and X1622.4 (Remarkable freezing of body of water).

Both stories heard here are included in the tenth volume of *Northeast Folklore*, "Jones Tracy: Tall-Tale Teller from Mount Desert Island," as parts of Jones Tracy's basic canon. Tracy was born April 2, 1856 on Foster's Island while in transit between Petit Manan Island and Harrington, ME. He descended from a line of tall-tale tellers and folk heroes, and first moved to Mount Desert Island when his father bought a 97 acre farm on MDI in 1861. Jones worked mostly on the family farm (and later on his own farm) and in the woods during winters. His story-telling flourished and grew popular in his old age; he died April 9, 1939 just after his 83rd birthday. He was known as a hard-working, stubborn man (though not unfriendly) even in his later years. A family legend has it that there is a notch in Acadia National Park at the north end of Somes Sound where Jones would not sell a piece of his land (a story that may have some truth behind it). Smallidge said these tales came from John Brown, another teller of tall-tales. Brown lived on Somes Sound near Tracy and was about 20 years older than Jones. He may have been influence on Jones (both in style and repertoire), but it is so similar to other collected versions of the story that were credited to Tracy that it is hard to tell who the stories originally came from. At any rate, both men deserve credit as good storytellers.

The first story heard here extolls the bountiful blueberry crop of MDI. "Blueberries" is listed as story number five among Tracy's basic canon. The story is apparently local in character, but universal in its exaggeration of the marvelous fruits of the land and great speed of the hero. There is still great pride among residents of MDI (and many other places in Maine) in the quantities of blueberries on the mountains and the tale reflects that pride. The story only makes sense if one is familiar with "tacking," a nautical term that describes how one sails into a headwind. Essentially, this is accomplished by angling the sails and cutting across the wind diagonally with the sails turned to catch the wind. What the character in the story accomplishes is thus a near miraculous feat. The berries are plentiful enough so he can pick a full pail very quickly: he jumps off the bowsprit (the pole that sticks out from the boat's bow), collects the berries, and as the boat is tacking (turning) he jumps back onto the boom (the horizontal beam that holds the sail) as it swings across the boat. Not only would this require great speed and agility, but it would be very dangerous! As a geographic reference for where this supposedly took place, Somes Sound is a large fjord that cuts through the middle of MDI and Robinson Mountain is now called Acadia Mountain, on the western side of Somes Sound (also next to Echo Lake). There is still a Robinson Lane that follows the northern edge of the mountain.

The second story also focuses on an amazing natural feature of Somes Sound: the newly formed ice. The tale is based on the observation that newly frozen salt water ice is very springy. In fact, one can walk on it and it will stretch and sink without breaking (just as described in story). The storyteller has made the most of the possible humor here, because it is impossible that salt water ice would stretch down so one

can't see the shore, let alone the mountain tops. The story uses the same reference to Robinson (Acadia) Mountain and also includes Brown Mountain (now Norumbega) which sits on the eastern side of Somes Sound.

Transcript:

John Brown was coming up [Somes] Sound on a schooner and tacking back and forth across the Sound; and the water is very deep up near the shore there and she'd run right close to the shore before she'd come about on the other tack. *[Side conversation and laughter.]* So he, 'twas the summer and there were a lot of blueberries on the mountain over there, Robinson's mountain, so he took a pail and when she came into the shore he got out on the bowsprit and jumped ashore and he filled the pail and when she swung around, the boom came around there, he jumped onto the boom with a pail full of berries and away they went...

[More side conversation and laughter. Leads in to next story.]

...He tells about skating on the new ice. When salt water first freezes you've probably seen how leathery it is; it'll sink right down under your weight and still hold. When I was a kid we used - I don't know why I didn't get drowned - we used to go down to the shore here, take a sled, sit on the sled like that and kick our heels through this ice and push ourselves around. On this soft ice we'd be going like this.

[Demonstrates how they would kick the ice with their heels and push; also side conversation.] Well, anyway. He was skating on this soft ice and it was buckling under him so he couldn't see Robinson's mountain on one side or Brown's mountain on the other.

Source: C. Richard K. Lunt, "Jones Tracy: Tall-Tale Teller from Mount Desert Island." *Northeast Folklore* 10 (1968), 29-30 & 36-37.