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The Teamster in Jack MacDonald's Crew

Joseph Walsh

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Song: "The Teamster in Jack MacDonald's Crew"

Singer: Joseph Walsh

Town: Recorded in Morrell Rear, PEI; events took place in and around Sherman Mills, ME

NA 65.13 CD 88 Track 15

Collector: Sandy Ives

Date: September 1, 1965

Roud: 13997

When Walsh sang "**The Teamster in Jack MacDonald's Crew**" for Sandy Ives, it was a song he had never heard before and did not hear from anyone after, despite his best efforts to find it. Walsh either learned the song while working near Katahdin Iron Works around 1911 or from a friend back on PEI, he was not entirely sure. The facts of the song are remarkably accurate. Earl Stubbs, married to Thankful Coffin on October 16, 1900 and father of four children (Vance, Lilla May, Annie, and Earl born 1901, 1903, 1905, and February 8, 1908, respectively), died at age 28 on January 23, 1908. He contracted spinal meningitis (or "cerebral meningitis" as it is listed on his death certificate) in a lumbercamp somewhere north of Mount Katahdin and died at his home in Sherman Mills, ME. Newspaper accounts and other records show that events unfolded as the song describes: Stubbs complained of headache and the men in camp decided to haul him some sixty miles through bitter cold and snow to his home. According to Walsh, the song was composed by Sife Mooney of PEI and another man, both of whom were in the camp with Stubbs. Three other men are named in the song: Tom Proctor was the boss; Jack MacDonald was the foreman in camp; and Dr. Francis Harris of Sherman Mills signed Stubbs' death certificate.

Death on the job is a common theme within the Anglo-American song tradition, and particularly in the lumberwoods tradition. But "Teamster" is unusual in that it is not about violent, accidental death on the job. It follows the patterns of this type of song, but it remains unusual for two reasons. First, the song is based around a man who died from an illness. Moreover, the song is not really even about the man who died. In the song, Stubbs is a passive actor, as evidenced, for example, in the fourth stanza where the crew performed the tender act of moving him into a higher, and therefore warmer, bed. Instead, the song's sympathy is really for the crew, not Stubbs or his family. The ninth stanza is the culmination of praise for Proctor, MacDonald, and the rest of the crew. As such, "Teamster" is an occupational song written by woodsmen for woodsmen, and all evidence suggests that the actions taken by this crew were normal ways of handling a sick comrade in the woods. When Ives spoke with Stubbs' daughter, Lilla May, she did not even know the song existed. In short, Earl Stubbs never warranted an obituary in the local newspaper, but he did rate a ballad.

A few notes on the structure of the song are worthwhile. For one, the tune is apparently unique to this song, or at least the source for the tune is lost to history. A second point of interest is that the song did not catch on despite its truthful telling of Stubbs' illness and the crew's response. In his essay on "Teamster," Ives speculates that song did not catch on because it lacked poetic value. The song's phrases were understated and quotidian instead of flowery and elaborate (like in "Peter Emberley" or any Joe Scott song). Economy of language was not valued highly in traditional songs of the Northeast, even though more recent observers may enjoy the spare, understated lyrics that were rich with implication. Finally, the version heard here is not necessarily complete. Walsh later sang an additional stanza that would have fallen after the second stanza heard and printed here.

1.

Come listen to my story,
The truth I'll tell to you;
It is about a teamster
In Jack MacDonald's crew.

2.

Our crew it was a merry one
Of eighteen men or more;
Our winter's work had scarce begun
When Death had darked our door.

3.

We were talking after supper when
One of the teamsters said,
"I hear Stubbs complaining of
A pain that's in his head."

4.

The night passed on and morning came,
The sickness it grew worse;
We moved him from the lower bunk
Into the upper berth.

5.

And when we went to breakfast
We dared not leave him alone;
We wrapped him up in his blankets warm
All for to take him home.

6.

Jack MacDonald and Tom Proctor
Took a pair of trotty bays,
And before stars had ceased to shine
They were miles upon their way.

7.

They took him to his little home
In the town of Sherman Mills,
And to break the news unto his wife
It did require great skill.

8.

They sent for Dr. Harris while
His wife and family cried.
But to rescue him from Death's cold grasp
It was in vain they tried.

9.

Here's to MacDonald and his crew,
Our blessing do we give;
And may their troubles they be few
And happy may they live.

10.

And when Death comes knocking at our door
And we are called to go,
Let us pray that we will meet our Lord,
Let his mercy on us show.

Sources: Ives, Edward D. *Drive Dull Care Away: Folksongs From Prince Edward Island*. Charlottetown, PEI: Institute of Island Studies, 1999, 165-67; and Edward D Ives, "'The Teamster in Jack MacDonald's Crew': A Song in its Context and Singing," 74-85 in Jabbour, Alan and James Hardin, eds. *Folklife Annual 1985*. Washington: Library of Congress, 1985.

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