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The Little Mohea

Harvey Gurney

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Song: "The Little Mohea"
Singer: Harvey Gurney
Town: Appleton, ME
NA 2255 CD 1198 Track 1
Collector: Jeff McKeen
Date: April 3, 1991
Roud: 275
Laws: H8

"**The Little Mohea**," also known by many other names and spellings, is an old song that likely developed from an older English broadside song known as "The Indian Lass." Most folklorists agree that "Mohea" probably developed in its American form among sailors, and some even point to whaling ships specifically. Phillips Barry, seemingly the lone dissenting voice from this opinion, suggested that "Mohea" actually predated the English broadside. Moreover, he argued that "Mohea" originally told the story of a romance between a pioneer and a Native American, which was later altered by men at sea. In the song, "Mohea" refers to the island of Maui, and the song does not properly distinguish between Native Americans and the various people of the Pacific islands. Whatever the song's origins, for which there is only little direct evidence, it was very popular across North America, appearing in collections from Florida to Montana to Nova Scotia and Labrador. It was popular among sailors, woodsmen, and even transferred to Grange meetings (at least those where Harvey Gurney was performing), which makes it something of a natural fit for a place like Maine. The air to "Mohea" is fairly stable despite its wide geographic range, but it does contain a fair number of variants. The tune, which is easily recognizable in the version heard here, served as the source for an even better known song.

The Patrons of Husbandry was founded by Oliver Hudson Kelly in 1867 as a secret society of agriculturists concerned with education, economic cooperation, political lobbying, and fraternal association. The first Grange in Maine was established in Hampden in 1873, and by 1887 the state had the largest Grange membership in the nation. The chief function of the Grange in Maine has always been social – to improve the quality of life for farm families. From the very beginning, music played a central role in Grange activities. Recent Grange musicians retained many older styles of music and traditional entertainment. From the "official" Grange piano music to songfests and harmonica tunes, the music of an earlier age is still heard in Grange halls throughout the state. On the performance of "The Little Mohea" heard here, Harvey Gurney provides his own accompaniment on harmonica and concertina. He knew and liked the song after hearing it on the radio, and he learned "Mohea" from a songbook (though he did not say if it was the official Grange songbook). This song does not fit the style most closely associated with the Grange – the piano march – but it represents the rest of the musical catalog of Grange musicians well. It is an old song performed by a musician playing solely for the enjoyment of himself and others. The performer need not be trained or even necessarily very talented as long as he or she played from the heart, and that seems to summarize the music of the Grange.

1.

As I was walking down by the sea shore,
The waves were playing, the wind it did roar;
As I sat amusing myself on the grass,
Who did I spy but a young Indian lass.

2.

She sat down beside, and holding my hand
She said, "You're a stranger in a strange land;
If you will follow and come with me,
I'll teach you the language of the little Mohea."

3.

She asked me to marry and offered her hand
Saying, "Father's a chieftain who rules this fair land;
Father's a chieftain, and a ruler you could be,
I'm his only daughter, my name is Mohea."

4.

"No, my fair maiden, it never can be,
For I have a true sweetheart in my own country;
Now I must leave you, so farewell my dear,
My ship's a sailing, home I must steer."

5.

The last time I saw her, she was knelt on the sand,
As my boat passed by her she waved me her hand;
Saying, "When you get over, to the shore, the one you love,
Remember your Mohea in the coconut grove."

6.

As my ship landed with my girl on the shore,
Friends and relations gathered 'round me once more;
As I looked around me, none could I see
That compared with my little Mohea.

7.

The girl I had trusted proved untrue to me,
So now I turn my course backward across the blue sea;
I'll turn my course backward and away I will flee,
Spend the rest of my days with my little Mohea.

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, 230-33; Creighton, Helen. *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*. New York: Dover Publications, 1966, 103-4; Flanders, Helen Hartness, Elizabeth Hartness Flanders, George Brown, & Phillips Barry. *The New Green Mountain Songster: Traditional Folk Songs of Vermont*. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1966, 144-46; Leach, MacEdward. *Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast*. Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1965, 258-60; Laws, G. Malcolm, Jr. *Native American Balladry*. Revised Edition. American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series, 1. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964, 233-34 (H8); Belden, H.M., ed. *Ballads and Songs: Collected by the Missouri Folk-Lore Society*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966, 143-45; Huntington, Gale. *Songs the Whalemens Sang*. Barre, MA: Barre Publishers, 1964, 148-51; Huntington, Gale, ed. *Sam Henry's Songs of the People*. Athens: University of Georgia

Press, 1990, 372-73; & Chase, Richard. *American Folk Tales and Songs and Other Examples of English-American Tradition as Preserved in the Appalachian Mountains and Elsewhere in the United States*. New York: Dover Publications, 1971, 128-29.

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