1968

The Champion of Moose Hill

Raymond Mace
“The Champion of Moose Hill” tells the true, comic story of a dance gone awry for one poor, inebriated soul. Most folks who sang or knew the song claimed it was written by the great woods-satirist Larry Gorman. However, Alden Mace, Raymond Mace’s father and the informant whose version was included by Sandy Ives in Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs, claimed it was by another poet/satirist, Mose Estey. Estey was himself part of another satire by Gorman called “The Union River Drivers,” but since the greater number of attributions points towards Gorman, suffice to say that Gorman probably wrote the song, and did so sometime in the 1890s.

The lead character in “Champion” is a man named Emery “Muck” Mace. Muck was “A huge man, who was eternally interested in stirring up a little excitement,” but also “reputed to be a perfectly fine person until he got ‘full,’ but then he became a bully and a scrapper.” In the words of Sandy Ives the events of the night described in this song unfolded as follows: “The incident celebrated in ‘The Champion of Moose Hill,’ occurred at the old Fred Jordan place at the foot of Moose Hill in Osborn. Jordan had a large ell attached to his house; the downstairs served as a carriage house and woodshed, and upstairs there was a large room that was used for dances. On this particular night, Mace arrived at the dance pretty full, and right away asked Annie Giles to dance with him. She refused and went out on the floor with Nahum Jordan. Mace swore that if he couldn’t dance he’d be damned if anyone else would either, so he grabbed for Nahum, but Nahum’s daughter, Helen Jordan Giles, came to the rescue; she hit Mace over the head with a stick. Reports vary as to just how hard she hit him. Some agree with the ballad in saying that she knocked him cold; others say she only gave him a couple light licks ‘to give him the idea.’ At any rate there was soon a song celebrating the struggle.” (95)

A few notes may help expand our understanding of the song and explain some further background. In Larry Gorman, Ives argues that “The Champion of Moose Hill” is a parody of “The Champion of Court Hill,” an older (probably Irish) song about a woman scorned by an unfaithful young man. The lyrical format of the former seems to be based on the latter, particularly the opening stanza in each, and multiple informants sung “Moose Hill” to the tune of “Court Hill.” Stanza seven of the transcribed lyrics, marked in brackets, was not sung by Raymond Mace but can be found in the singing of Ralph Cushman of Ellsworth (his interview can be found in NA 56.1). Third, when the song states, “I’ll mount the stage no more” in the eighth stanza, it means the stagecoach. Apparently, Muck climbed right on top of the stage and rode it to Osborn from Aurora. This was no small feat considering the condition of what are now routes 9 and 179 in the late-nineteenth century when they were only rough dirt roads. Moose Hill is located on the eastern side of Rt. 179 in Osborn; these roads were the most likely route between Aurora and Osborn. Finally, the family names present in this song are, or at least were, significant families in the Aurora-Osborn area. Muck Mace’s relation to Alden and Raymond Mace is not specifically enumerated,
but Alden was originally from Aurora. A quick look at a map or drive down Rt. 9 will show all of them – Mace, Jordan, and Giles - among local place names.

1. You people all, both great and small, I pray you lend an ear; My name and occupation you presently shall hear. My name it is bold Emery Mace, I practice fistic skill – Oh, the fatal night when I got tight and knocked out on Moose Hill.

2. On that fatal day I chanced to stray to Moose Hill for a spree; It was the plan of every man to prove my destiny. I saw it in their faces and I read it on the bill That if I got tight I’d have to fight that night upon Moose Hill.

3. I let them run and have their fun, I hoed right in with them; There was Mrs. Giles, and she all smiles, I saw her wink at Nahum. Then Nahum he jumped and grabbed me and tried to hold me still, While Mrs. Giles the club she piles upon me at Moose Hill.

4. The first blow that she struck me came square across my head; For twenty minutes I lay there – they thought that I was dead. The women they revived me then, they did try their skill, For they thought that I must surely die that night upon Moose Hill.

5. My brother Fred stood at my head, so mournful he did cry; The poor little lad he felt so bad, for he thought that I must die. He knew that he alone would be to pay the funeral bill, For he knew that Muck had had hard luck and was penniless on Moose Hill.

6. I didn’t die, I’ll tell you why: my skull was only cracked; But little you know the terrible blow that lady gave poor Mack; It would have killed a tiger or slain a wild gorill’, But you know that Muck had better luck than to be murdered on Moose Hill.

7. Now I fought ‘em all, both big and small, the best I didn’t care; And I never fought ‘em with a club, I always fought ‘em fair. I licked the Amherst champion, Fred Titus I nearly killed; But with just one welt I lost the belt to a woman on Moose Hill.

8. So now I’m done, my race is run, my fighting days are o’er, So I’ll confess, my mind oppressed, I’ll mount the stage no more;
And from the ring I’ll gently spring, and it’s sore against my will
That Helen bold the belt shall hold, the champion of Moose Hill.

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