Edith Fowke, one of Canada’s foremost folk song collectors was born in Lumsden, Saskatchewan, of Irish parents. She was educated at the University of Saskatchewan, taking her MA in English. In 1950, she and her husband Frank moved to Toronto where she began producing radio programs on folk music for the CBC. As well as her work on radio, she has collected folk songs in many parts of Ontario, and is the author of numerous books and articles on Canadian folk music. In 1970, she received the Book of the Year Award of the Canadian Association of Children’s Librarians for her anthology of Canadian children’s lore, Sally Go Round the Sun. Currently, she teaches folklore at York University in Toronto, and is editor of The Canadian Folk Music Journal. She has received honorary degrees from Brock and Trent Universities, and in 1978 she was awarded the Order of Canada in acknowledgement of her work in collecting and promoting Canadian folk music.

The following interview was recorded in Toronto by Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat.

Fred Weihs

CFB: What I thought we might start with, Edith, is your route into folk music.

Edith: I was more or less a freelance writer and editor before I got involved with folk music. It started really very casually with some of the early Dyer-Bennett, Josh White, and Burl Ives records in the late ’forties, early ’fifties.

CFB: Most of these would have been American in origin?

Edith: Oh, yes, entirely American at that stage. It started with getting some of these early folk song records. Soon I found I was getting more of
them than anything else - it seemed to appeal to me - and I decided there should be a radio program of folk music. So I went to see Harry Boyle and suggested it, and Harry being the type he is, he said "Have a go."

CFB: What was the earliest Canadian recording of any folk songs?

Edith: Ed McCurdy, I think.

CFB: Was that in the mid-fifties?

Edith: Probably early fifties. And Alan Mills, of course. I don’t know when Alan’s first records came out, but, at that time, Ed and Alan were the only people singing Canadian folk songs.

CFB: Was this about the time you started the radio show?

Edith: Yes. "Folk Song Time" ran till about ’fifty-eight, off and on. The show was a half-hour, sometimes an hour. It started originally as a summer replacement for the opera on Saturday afternoons. After ’fifty-eight, they changed it to "Folk Sounds", a more ‘pops’ show for which I did the scripts, and that went on until about ’seventy or ’seventy-two. So for something over twenty years I was doing radio programs.

In addition to doing these series, I did a lot of other programs - children’s programs ("Songs to Grow On"), lumbering songs, sea songs, "Canada’s Story in Song" (that book started as a radio series that Alan Mills and I did together)…

CFB: So publishing came out of your interest in pursuing areas first explored by your radio show?

Edith: Yes. At the beginning I was simply doing the radio shows with records, but in doing the scripts, I had to find out about the background of the songs. I kept chasing to the library, and that got very wearisome, so I started building up my own collection of folk song books. I would get requests from people when I played any Canadian folk songs: where could they get them? Well, there were no places they could get them. The only existing books were the ones like Barbeau’s, Creighton’s, and Mackenzie’s, which were not what they wanted. That led me to think, “We need a singing book.” Folk Songs of Canada was the first, in 1954.

Following that we did Folk Songs of Quebec with the idea of introducing French-Canadian songs to English Canadian people. It never worked very well, but that was the theory behind it. Also in doing that book I found that there were no Canadian songs published from west of Quebec.

CFB: That was what inspired you to start collecting?

Edith: Yes, I thought, “Let’s see what there is in Ontario.” That was what started my collecting, which was roughly around ’fifty-seven, ’fifty-eight. By that time I’d done hundreds of radio scripts. I’d done Folk Songs of Canada and researched the songs in it. I knew the Mackenzie, Greenleaf, Creighton collections. I knew what existed. What I didn’t know was whether anything else existed at that point.

CFB: What was your first lead?

Edith: A friend of ours who had a summer cottage at Peterborough told me that there were people up there who reminded him of hillbillies in the Appalachians. I started by spending a weekend there. I went to the chap
who wrote a local history column in the *Peterborough Examiner*. I told him what I was after, and asked him if he knew any oldtimers who were interested in songs. He hadn't heard of any, and neither had the President of the Peterborough Historical Society, but he sent me to William Towns. Mr. Towns was interested in local history, and ran the general store at Douro about fifteen miles outside Peterborough. When I told Mr. Towns what I wanted, he said, "My wife's father sings some of the old songs." So I went into their house - it was behind the store. That was our first recording session, and his wife, Mary Towns, is also on my records - a very fine singer. Her brother also sang some. They told me of some others around Peterborough that they knew of, and the people whose names they gave me gave me other names. For two or three years I'd keep going out to Peterborough, usually just at weekends - I wasn't getting any Canada Council grants to spend months there or anything.

Then I was on the television show "Tabloid" (which was one of the early forms of the six-to-seven news show) talking about the songs I'd found at Peterborough and Mr. Abbot's daughter heard the show and wrote me about her father. I wrote and asked her to send me the names of some of the songs, and as soon as I saw the titles I knew that he had traditional songs, so we spent our holidays that summer up in Hull recording him.

Then I got onto Moe Asch of Folkways and got him to bring out some of the records. Moe brought out the "Folk Songs of Ontario" somewhere around 'fifty-nine. Mr. Abbott's album came out a bit later, and then there were the "Songs of the Great Lakes" and the "Lumbering Songs", all in the 'sixties. I also went down to Glengarry County. Again, some woman there had written to me about the songs of her family. That was how I met Mrs. Fraser, who was, next to Mr. Abbott, the best informant I found.

**CFB:** How did you decide which geographical area might be conducive to finding songs?

**Edith:** I soon began to realize that it was the Irish Catholics who had the songs. Peterborough is Irish, so is the Ottawa Valley. I tried among some of the Scots communities in western Ontario but had very little luck.

**CFB:** You mean they had no songs at all?

**Edith:** Very few - among the Protestants, I didn’t find any Scottish songs, until I got to Glengarry, where there are the Scottish Catholics.

**CFB:** This is a result of the Puritan influence?

**Edith:** Yes, from John Knox, John Calvin, and so on. Anything that isn't religious is sinful! It's really rather interesting. I wouldn't say that this is a rigid rule, but by and large the best singers that I found, the singers with the most songs, were Catholic. I found very few Protestants who had any great number of songs.

**CFB:** Were the songs you were finding primarily traditional songs originally from the Old Country, or was there very much indigenous material?

**Edith:** A mixture. The larger part of them, of course, were British.

6 CFB
That holds wherever there's been collecting. In French Canada, Barbeau says that nine out of ten originally came from France. I would say in English Canada it's four out of five, certainly not more than that, somewhere between seventy and eighty percent British in origin.

But normally I got a mixture of British and domestic songs, particularly lumbering songs. If it hadn't been for the lumbering camps, I doubt whether I'd have found very much by the time I started here. It was the lumber camps that preserved and spread the songs; and similarly it was in the lumber camps that new songs were created.

CFB: What was your feeling about finding that mixture? Take for example, a song which could be definitely dated to nineteen-ten, a song that was made up in the woods, the people are still alive, or at least they're still in historical memory - "Oh, that was so-and-so who did that on that day." How did you see that as fitting in with any kind of definition of folk music?

Edith: If it's in oral tradition, it's folk music. The songs I was getting from traditional singers, they weren't learning them from print. They weren't learning them from records. They had learned them orally, so that age is not the prime criterion. Also, it's not that easy to date them. Most of the lumbering songs are late nineteenth-century, rather than nineteen-ten. A few of them would be that recent, but as far as I could judge, it was the eighteen-eighties, eighteen-nineties. At that time, I used to have run-ins with Carmen Roy of the National Museum. She couldn't understand why I was collecting these local songs. She changed her mind later; she was honest enough to tell me that I was right.

CFB: What did she feel you should be collecting?

Edith: Not the more recent songs; I mean, they weren't old enough. But I didn't record well-known popular songs - "When You and I Were Young, Maggie", or "Annie Laurie", that kind of thing - even though they probably did learn them orally. My time was limited; I couldn't spend it on well-known things like that. I concentrated on getting the less usual things.

CFB: So even when you found afterwards that some of the songs perhaps had music-hall origins...?

Edith: They're still traditional. You look at Traditional Songs and Singers From Ontario, where I give the full list of Mr. Abbott's songs. You'll see that a lot of the titles there are not what used to be thought of as folk songs. I probably fall in between the British and the Americans, as Canadians usually do. The British, notably Maud Karpeles, won't recognize anything that's less than a couple of hundred years old. When they were recording in the Appalachians, they didn't record any of the mining songs that were found
there later; and Newfoundland - she didn't take any of the sea ballads that Greenleaf and Peacock collected; and so on. Whereas in the States I think it's gone almost to the other extreme. I'm thinking of the Ozark folksongs of the Brown collection of North Carolina: it's full of popular stuff, late nineteenth century pop stuff. Now, I wouldn't say those are not traditional but they're not the sort of songs that I would bother printing.

**CFB:** What were the songs like that you collected in Ontario? One thing that we're looking for in songs is a good story. That's a problem with some songs that are collected: the story starts off fine, then we get into a long list of names of who was there, and then we wish everyone well and hope we don't offend anybody, and off we go - that's it.

**Edith:** That sounds like some of the lumbering songs.

**CFB:** Yes. I wonder if that was the original form of the song, or if something's been forgotten?

**Edith:** A lot of the lumbering songs fall in two groups. The one is what I call "the lumbercamp song", and I'm sure every camp every year made up their own version in which you get the names of the men who did the different things, and a description of what happened. One of those is OK, but when you get twenty of them, it gets monotonous. The other group is the ones about the men killed in the woods and on the rivers. There again, there's a fair similarity - "The Jam on Gerry's Rock", "Jimmy Whalen". There are only a certain number of ways in which you can tell about somebody getting killed. So there is a certain monotony to the subjects of the lumbering songs. To a certain extent, other types, like the sea songs, follow the same patterns.

**CFB:** Have you developed a methodology or collecting technique which you have passed on?

**Edith:** No; my technique was, I suppose, trial and error. I never had the problems that they talk about in all the books about collecting, you know, where you have to spend a week getting to know the singer before you suggest that you want to record his songs. I never had that problem. Of course, I hadn't the time. I wasn't collecting on a year-round basis. I was collecting on weekends, and I would go to a singer and tell him what I wanted. Sometimes they'd say, "Oh, I don't sing any more - my voice is no good", you know, try to put me off like that and I'd say, "Well, sing one song...some old song". I'd tape it on a tape recorder, and play it back to them and they'd sing everything they knew. And nine times out of ten it worked like that. I think the secret was that they realized I was interested. I really did value their songs, and it was so unusual to have anybody interested in the old songs. Time after time they say you have to establish rapport with the singer - on social occasions, and all that. I never found it necessary.

**CFB:** For your collections, how large a percentage of what you've collected have you published?

**Edith:** I would say that I've published probably not more than 300, but I have collected something like 2,000 songs.

**CFB:** What criteria do you use for which ones to publish?

**Edith:** It depends on the book.
Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario was songs by some of the best singers, and also the best and most complete songs. For the Lumbering Songs, I published the best versions of all the lumbering songs I had. For example, the "Jam on Gerry's Rock"; I had half a dozen versions, and I'd use the most complete, the best tune.

CFB: You didn't make any composite texts?

Edith: No, no, not in the printed collections. In Folk Songs of Canada there are some composite texts, but the distinction there is that that is a singing book, not a printed collection. There's no singing book that's ever been published that has been exactly as the singer sang it. You can't. Especially if you have piano accompaniment, or any accompaniment; it has to be regularized. Printed collections, on the other hand, should be as close as possible without carrying it to the extent of printing funny dialect. In Traditional Singers, Lumbering Songs, the Penguin Book, none of the versions are changed. They're as close to the authentic thing as you can get.

CFB: You said before that you started in folk song actually as a disseminator rather than as a collector. If one of the characteristics of folk song is the oral tradition, where does that place us today? How can folk songs actually exist in this day and age, given that the oral tradition is being more or less wiped out by the media?

Edith: It is a problem. The oral tradition still exists - in certain communities - the Newfoundland outports, villages in northern Ontario, villages in the Rocky Mountains, places where they are not tied up with the media - but in the urban centres, I think it's become more of the revival type.

CFB: What was it and what is it, then, about folk music that makes you spread it around?

Edith: Well, it just appeals to me; I like folk songs, I enjoy them. I thought they should be better known. I suppose there's a missionary zeal. I think it's natural, if you find songs that you like, you want your friends to hear them. And then as I got into it - you see, my background is English, not music - I was interested in the texts. I was interested in the history of the songs, where they came from, what they reflected, particularly, as Canada's Story in Song shows, in the relation between songs and historical periods and occupations, how they reflect the life of the people.

CFB: What role has the Canadian Folk Music Society played in the dissemination of folk music in this country?

Edith: The Canadian Folk Music Society was started as a branch of the International Folk Music Council by Marius Barbeau, and for its first few years its main object in life was to hold the IFMC meeting in Quebec City - I think this was 1961 or '62.
Then it sort of staggered along for a while; nothing very much happened.

CFB: Did you see its task at the outset as being only an academic society?

Edith: Not really, no. There weren't enough academics to run a society. It was always a mixture, but it was very small, very ineffectual. When they started the Canadian Folk Music Society Newsletter, somewhere around 'sixty-seven, that gave it a little bit of focus, although it appeared rather irregularly.

We were always wanting the Society to do something concrete. Barbara [Cass-Beggs] and I decided we would get out a bibliography. We did a little reference list around 'sixty-seven and that was the first fairly concrete thing that we'd done. Then we decided we wanted a journal, an academic journal, as well as the non-academic Newsletter. So around 'seventy-two the Journal was started. Of course, I was stuck as Editor; it was a one-woman job, really.

I think it is the Journal which has started to build the Society up again. We've been getting library and institutional memberships because of it. I think this last year it's really moving; I feel much more hopeful about it than I did before.

CFB: What kinds of things do you see the Society doing besides putting out the Journal?

Edith: Well, of course the Journal is my particular interest. I've always done a lot of editing and writing and so on, so I'm more concerned with that. Some of the people are more concerned with promoting performing.

CFB: Do you see the two things as going hand in hand?

Edith: Sure-I'm all for performing traditional Canadian material, but it's not something I personally am involved in.

CFB: Can you tell us about the folklore courses which you teach?

Edith: Yes, you know I'm a full-time professor, which a lot of people don't seem to realize. I'm a professor of English who teaches three folklore courses: an introduction to folklore for second year, which is very general; third year-ballads and folksongs primarily British and North American, primarily in English; and fourth year-Canadian folklore, which covers roughly the materials in Folklore in Canada. These count as English courses and the people who take them get their degrees in English.

CFB: When you're teaching the course, in what directions do you encourage your students to go?

Edith: Well, of course, when I started teaching at York seven years ago, I had visions of us getting a folklore department there; that was still in the expansion period. With the financial climate now I think it's very unlikely that there are going to be any more folklore departments, although there will be the odd folklore course here and there.

I have two students this year who are doing theses under me. One was an undergraduate student doing individualized studies for an honours degree, and she did her thesis on the types of women in ballads - a very good analysis, partly psychological, partly historical. She's taken both by ballad class and my folklore of
Canada course. I have an MA student who is doing a detailed study of the ballad “Molly Bawn”. She’s collected all the known versions; she’s got something over eighty of them, and she is analysing them to see if there are recognizable differences between the Irish, English, Scottish, Canadian, and American. What I am mainly concerned about is that, if they’re sufficiently interested in folklore, that they go on and do something in it.

CFB: What is “doing something” these days? Going out and collecting more? Is there more out there?

Edith: Oh yes, in northern Ontario, I’m sure there’s a lot there. I’m sure there’s a lot to be found still in British Columbia. I don’t think there’s very much in the Prairies. Farming and ranching are not the type of thing that promote folk songs.

CFB: Do you have any new publishing projects under way?

Edith: My projects for the coming year? I’m probably going to do a book of children’s games, but this will be the ordinary games that they play in the playground. That’s one project that I’ve assigned to my students. I’ve given them four small collecting assignments in a year—either riddles, proverbs, children’s rhymes, children’s games, or superstitions. They get the source, something about the age, ethnic origin, information on the informant, and check them with reference books like the motif index. Over seven years I’ve accumulated a stack of children’s games. I’ve been sorting through them and classifying them, picking out the different types of games. Strangely enough, “Red Rover” is by far the most popular; there are far more versions of that than anything else. You see, this gives me an idea of which games were most popular in Canada, how widespread they were, and so on.

CFB: Do you plan to do more folk song collections?

Edith: Yes, but the only thing is, I have to think of something to tie it together. You see, I don’t believe in just publishing miscellaneous songs. It has to have some unity, some purpose. Of course, Folk Songs of Canada and More Folk Songs of Canada were the anthology type, but I don’t think there’s a market for a third one of that type.

All my books were a response to a specific need. I did Folk Songs of Canada because I got requests for where people could find Canadian folk songs, and I knew they didn’t want the Creighton, Mackenzie type of thing: they weren’t singing books. I felt French-Canadian folk songs should be more available to English Canadians, so I did Folk Songs of Quebec. I think that songs composed at certain periods of history give people a more vivid impression of what it was like then, than you can get by reading any historical account.
That was the motive behind Canada's Story in Song; it was expressly designed to be used in teaching History and Social Studies. Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario was to represent the repertoires of some of the best Ontario singers. It turned out that it was almost entirely British songs, because they're the most musical. And doing that I found that I had all these lumbering songs, and again, the lumbering songs gave a more vivid impression of what it was like to work in the woods in the late nineteenth century than you can get by reading about it. So that was the purpose of the Lumbering Songs. These are the two sides - one the British tradition, the other the Ontario tradition. The Penguin book - I found that my books weren't being distributed in the States or Britain. There was a Penguin book of English folk songs, American folk songs, and Australian folk songs, so I thought, "Well, there should be a Canadian book". Strangely enough, the major sale is in Canada, so it isn't really doing what I hoped it would do. Sally Go Round the Sun - there was no book of Canadian children's material.

CFB: Looking back after twenty-five years, how do you feel about what you have accomplished so far?

Edith: Well, at the time Folk Songs of Canada came out, nobody knew any folk songs except "Alouette", and now a fair proportion of the people know a few of them. They are used in a fair number of schools. It's been slow but has caught on. The fact that Folk Songs of Canada has continued to sell for over twenty-four years indicates that it's reaching some people.