

HORSES AND TRAIN ROBBERS

THE CARAVAN STAGE COMPANY AND B.C. FOLKLORE



L-R: Susan Kyle, Ron Weihs, Alan Bates, Nick Hutchinson.

In the Interior of British Columbia, Bill Miner, an historical charcter who twice robbed the Canadian Pacific Railway, is one of the major folk heroes. Among people where few good words are heard for the railway, stories are told and legends have grown up which treat Bill Miner as a modern Robin Hood.

In the following pages we present two songs by Ronald Weihs which

deal with the story of Bill Miner. These are part of a group of songs which he composed through his involvement with the Caravan Stage Company. Canada Folk Bulletin has asked Ron to describe his experiences with this extraordinary company and explain what he sees as its role in the folk culture of British Columbia. Ronald Weihs was born in Toronto and studied English Literature at the


University of Toronto. He has acted with Toronto Workshop Productions and is the author of several plays. Since coming to British Columbia he has spent two years with the Caravan Stage Company, and now plays fiddle with a band called Kickin' Horse.

Fred Weihs

I was holding my horses in the park in Keremeos, waiting to move my wagon to its place in the circle. A small boy and his even younger sister stared up at me.

"What is it?"


I assumed he meant all of it: five wagons, nine great Clydesdale draught horses six riding horses, and the whole busy, tired, cheerful crew of hippie - gypsy - cowboys, all unloading, unharnessing, shouting, getting water, digging the firepit, holding horses.



THE GREEN COVE

COFFEE HOUSE

Fridays 9:15-12 p.m.
Admission \$2.50
Britannia Gardens Coffee Shop
1661 Napier St. (at Commercial)



**MAINLY TRADITIONAL
FOLK MUSIC**

Vancouver Folk Song Society 684-4933

"It's the Caravan Stage Company. We put on shows."

He stared at me.

"We do music and square dances. And we do a cowboy play, about an outlaw who robbed trains. And on Sunday there's a free show with music and puppets and clowns and wagon rides."

"I wish I could see it."

"Why can't you?"

He looked very sad. He shook his head.

"We don't have TV."

I travelled two years with the Caravan Stage Company, the world's only horse-drawn theatre, doing shows not on TV. From June to October, 1976, we travelled through the Slocan valley performing a Commedia D'elle Arte play entitled the *Stag King*. The following summer we ambled through the Okanagan, and the Nicola and Similkameen valleys with a musical about a train robber who lived and operated in that very district. The play was *Hands Up* and the train robber was Bill Miner.

Hands Up was a collective creation of the Caravan, and a very special labour of love. It occupied the company for most of those two years in a very long, confusing, intoxicating, infuriating collective process. I'm going to talk about that process, and about the Caravan phenomenon, and what I think it's all about.

The Caravan makes a very strong statement, just by its very existence. Newer and faster are not always better: there are some people who choose to slow down, to live in the landscape instead of speeding past it,

to build carefully and skilfully by hand instead of living as consumers of mass production, to maintain a continuity with the past rather than sacrifice its most attractive features to technological progress. The Caravan shows how we can live in the partnership with animals, and learn from those relationships—not rule as despotic lords of creation using other species as so much raw material for our appetites. There are other measures of excellence in the performing arts besides the degree of mass exposure; some very fine thing can only be done on a small scale. It doesn't take much money to do what you want; it does take co-operation.

Ten years ago, Paul and Nans Kirby came to British Columbia from Montreal, with a bad case of future shock and the big city blues. They settled on Vancouver Island, built gypsy wagons, bought horses. Paul apprenticed himself to a tough, clever old horse-logger, learning all he could about the delicate art of driving a team of horses.

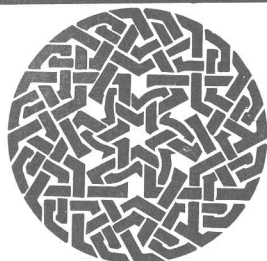
After two years of preliminary work, a tiny band took to the road, crossed the ferry to the mainland, and began its wanderings through the interior of B.C.—over the Coquihalla pass to Hope and on to Merritt, up into the Cariboo and down into the Shuswap. Known as the “Little People’s Caravan” in those days, the company performed puppet shows, music, and clown and circus acts.

By 1976, when I joined, the Caravan had four wagons on the road—the original Vardo (the gypsy word for a horse-drawn home), the hitch wagon for parade hitches, an old-time medicine wagon, and the

Sally wagon—named for a madame who ran a horse-drawn brothel in the Cariboo gold rush. Work began that year on a one-horse publicity buggy, on the road the following year, and plans were made for a two-storey “omnibus” wagon with spiral staircase, now under construction.

Road-wise, with plenty of hard-won experience, the Kirbys decided that it was time to become more ambitious about the company’s theatrical side. They expanded the company, and asked Nick Hutchinson, a young director with a reputation for inventiveness and originality, to come in as artistic director. The name was changed to Caravan Stage Company.

Nick was living in Lillooet at the time, having sworn off theatre to become a cowboy. He had bought an old rodeo bronco named Snake, and



Bill Lewis Music Ltd

For the largest selection of folk guitars, banjos, mandolins, and dulcimers, see

Bill Lewis Music
3607 W. Broadway, Vancouver, B.C.
Canada. Tel: (604) 738-3151

Come and see our new banjo room—many many banjos in all price ranges. Folk books and hard-to-get blues and folk records.

was spending his time wearing his cowboy hat, sipping beer in the Braelorn pub, and riding around on Snake. He seemed ideal.

Early in April, 1976, sixteen of us, plus assorted children and animals, assembled in a tiny house in Tappen, near Salmon Arm, to work out the Caravan approach to theatre and entertainment. We started to work on music, on puppet shows and circus acts, and on the *Stag King*. We wanted something that was truly our own, however—a collective creation.

Nick told us all to read Don Quixote. In one fashion or another—from the Classics Comics version on up to the mammoth original—we all did. It all seemed a bit remote from B.C. though, so we started to toy with the idea of a modern, British Columbian Don Quixote, someone who assumes the identity of one of the legendary outlaws of the Old West.

“That sounds like Bill Miner,” Paul said, and then proceeded to initiate the new Caravanners in the legend of the Caravan’s favorite outlaw. Most of us had not been aware until then that we were all members of the Bill Miner Society for Cultural Advancement, or that the most sacred Caravan feast day was Bill Miner day, the first full moon in August, when we hang up our hangups on the Bill Miner tree. Paul told us about it.

Bill Miner was called “the master criminal of the American West” by that master detective, William Pinkerton. He started robbing trains in his teens, and didn’t quit until he was in his seventies. He followed three principles: he never killed a man, never robbed the poor, and (in his own words) “conducted an

unceasing war against the railroads and express companies.”

“They rob the people and I rob them,” Old Bill said in an interview in the last year of his life. “Which of us is the worse?”

It was quite late in his career that Bill came to British Columbia. He settled near Princeton in 1904, as George Edwards, prosperous Southern gentleman—white hair, silver moustache, friend to children, fiddle player. Preached the sermon when the pastor was sick.

In 1904, the CPR was stopped by masked gunmen and robbed for the first time in its history, near Mission, B.C. The crime went unsolved despite exhaustive police work.

Two years later, it happened again near Kamloops. This time, the robbery went awry; the total take was fifteen dollars and some cough syrup, and the horses wandered off, so that the bandits had to make their escape on foot.

The tracks were followed, and three men were overtaken; Louis Colquhoun, Shorty Dunn, and kindly, popular old George Edwards. George tried to bluff it out, but Shorty, impetuous and gun-crazy, started shooting.

When the news spread through Kamloops that old George was in jail, mobs started to form to rescue him from this gross miscarriage of justice. But one of the arresting policemen had noticed a distinctive tattoo.

“Better watch out for that one, boys,” he said at the time. “That’s Bill Miner.”

After a sensational trial, Bill and his companions were sentenced to the B.C. Pen.



photo: Nan Gregory

The opening scene of "Hands Up". L-R: Nanc Kirby, Ronald Weihs, Susan Kyle, Alan Bates, Allan Merowitz, Peter Anderson, Paul Kirby, Peter Hall, Doug Saba.

"No prison can hold me," said Old Bill.

He escaped about a year later, never to be found again in Canada, though he did resume his career in 1911, in Georgia.

Old Bill is remembered with affection throughout the B.C. interior, where the CPR has never enjoyed great popularity. As an editorial remarked at the time,

"About time somebody robbed the CPR. They've been robbing Us for years."

We researched and wrote for the rest of that season—in and around rehearsing *Stag King*, grooming horses, playing music, making pup-

pets, learning and teaching square dances, rebuilding wagons, preparing publicity, travelling, performing, and on and on. It was the coldest, rainiest summer that B.C. had had for decades; some thirty per cent of our shows were rained out. Pay averaged eight dollars per week.

Frank Anderson's fine little book on Bill Miner (Frontier Publishing, Calgary) provided a launching point for our researches; we decided, however, to build up the story from original sources. This meant consulting the newspapers of the time, visiting the Kamloops and Princeton museums, conducting a good many interviews with old-timers, and travelling over the Bill

Miner territory to get a feel for the landscape.

We conducted long, elaborate improvisations—one was a night-long poker game, in which I won fifteen dollars—and these produced seeds of characters, ideas, situations.

In Lumby we were stopped for two weeks. Every day I went to the pub, watched a glass of beer go flat (I couldn't afford to drink it) and wrote scenes and songs. There was a good deal of friendly interest from the other customers, particularly when they found out I was writing about their favourite train robber. When I finished, they would buy me beer, and we would talk about what I was doing.

In the spring of 1977, it fell to me to take all the scraps and songs and opinions and interviews, as well as scenes by Richard Newman, Peter Hall, and Peter Anderson, and put them into a coherent script. This was still going on during rehearsals, so the end was a frantic scramble, but it all came together by the time we had to hit the road.

The design, by Catherine Hahn, was very exciting, as was Nick's staging. The play was performed within a circle formed by wagons and banners; in the robbery scene, the wagons simulated the train. There was extensive use of masks and non-representational techniques, all enjoyed without difficulty by the audiences. Performance times were set so that the first act would take place in daylight, and the second act in darkness. The lighting system was custom-designed to run on car batteries.

The response of the audiences, made up of people who had regarded

the Bill Miner story as part of their own heritage, was everything we could have wished.

Toward the end of the run, we performed the play in the Kamloops jail—where Bill himself had been incarcerated—before about a hundred inmates. It was a remarkable experience; lines and scenes felt very different, and new meanings emerged. The audience seemed guarded at first, but by the end of the first sequence, and the song "Somebody Robbed the CPR," they were enthusiastic. Most of the second act takes place in the B.C. Penitentiary, with its lament for the forgotten men in prison, and ends with Bill's escape, and the entire cast urging him on with the song "Run Billy Run." We thought that the second act might upset the administrators, but they didn't seem to mind.

One of our great pleasures during the run was to meet elderly people after the show who added to our knowledge of Bill Miner and his time. In Penticton, Mr. J.H. Munro added a remarkable sidelight to the story. As customs officer, he was in charge of the shipment of gold which was to have been on the train that was robbed in 1906. The shipment was delayed, and the night of the

Looking for a rare record?

Subscribe to

THE RECORD FINDER

6 issues \$5 12 issues \$7 (USA)
10 15 (overseas)

Subscriptions: E.S. (Stan) Turner
4164 Marlborough Ave.
San Diego, California 92105

robbery, the gold was safely stashed under Mr. Munro's bed.

A particularly honoured guest was Mrs. McDiarmid of Princeton, the daughter of Princeton's first settler, John Fall Allison, who had been taught to dance by Bill Miner, a frequent visitor to the household. She had sent us a poem written by their hired hand, Shorty Dunn. The poem is a fine, vigorous dramatic monologue, if a bit bloodthirsty. It was used in the play.

The songs in the play were all original, and were based on the musical resources and styles of the company, favouring acoustic, old-timey, folk-sounding material played on guitar, banjo, fiddle, harmonica, and assorted jug-band instruments. The songs were performed without amplification, outdoors, by actors who did voice exercises every day to prevent strain. The audience had no trouble hearing, and there was an intimacy that I believe is lost when a p.a. system is interposed between performer and hearer.

I wrote most of these songs, including three collaborations. Most were written to help move the play along, as well as existing on their own; there are a couple therefore that are a little difficult to detach from the context of the play. Most of them work well on their own, all the same.

Richard Newman wrote four of the songs, including Louis Colquhoun's plaintive song, "The Things I Wanna Know." It seemed to speak for everyone in the caravan:

**The city has its dangers, it just
gets more and more;
The country seemed the place to
get away.**

**But nothing ever happens, and
no one knows the score
And thirty just gets nearer every
day.**

**If only I could be an outlaw,
Robbing banks and trains of all
their gold,
Sit around the campfire
swapping stories;
I bet they knew the things I
wanna know.**

*(Copyright Richard Newman
BMIC, 1977)*

We were tired of cities, tired of television, movies, radio, records that all sound the same. The usual alternatives, minority theatre, coffee houses — with their dedicated performers and slightly larger band of dedicated listeners—seemed too exclusive, too far away from most of the people in B.C.

The Caravan represents a viable alternative (very arduous, but viable). They neither work for the railroad, or run away from it—they challenge it. The Caravan does not need media hype, but serves as its own best advertisement, coming into town with horses snorting, harness jingling, and wagons blazing in circus colours. It is not a second-rate, road-show version of something playing in New York or Toronto; it is the one and only Caravan—here right now, gone tomorrow, and so much more alive than anything else in town.

Easterners and urbanites don't appreciate how important the horse is to the culture of the B.C. interior. Most of the older people have had considerable contact with work horses, and look at the Caravan's Clydesdales with the eyes of experts. The horses, and the way the Caravan

uses them, generate a mutual respect, and break down the distrust that can exist between long-haired performers and working people, farmers, cowboys. They know at once that we value the things that have been.

The Caravan moves slowly through B.C., meeting people, getting immediate response from a wide cross-section, making many friends. The music and the plays emerge from the intimate contact with the culture in which it lives. The result is not folk art in the sense that academics and collectors use the term, but it is folk art in the sense I like it to have.

There's a lot of it in B.C. nowadays—remarkable log houses, wood sculpture, music, crafts of all varieties. Folk culture in B.C. is very alive, and growing in depth and richness, despite T.V., bar bands,

and country radio stations. The Caravan is a part and an important manifestation, of that cultural upsurge.

Ronald Weihs

Two notes:

A new half-hour National Film Board film on the Caravan, directed by Dorothy Hénaut ("The New Alchemists") has just been completed. It's excellent and should be available this spring through the N.F.B.

We made a 45 r.p.m. record of three of the Bill Miner songs. Want a copy? Send \$1.75 to

*Ron the Fiddler,
1723 Napier St.,
Vancouver, B.C. V5L 2N1*

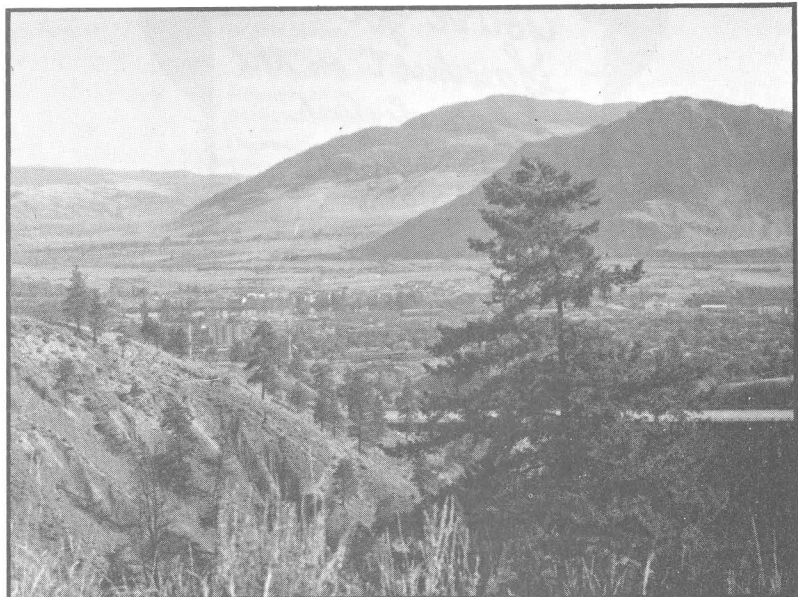


photo: A. Winch

The B.C. Interior: climbing out of Kamloops

Sawdust is Here!

the great
SNEEZY WATERS
and his excellent band



TORONTO SUN:
"THE ALBUM IS A TREAT ... SING WITH
PASSION & PLAYED WITH PUNCH."

OTTAWA CITIZEN:
"THESE GUYS ARE GETTING OFF AND
THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT."

GLOBE & MAIL:
"THE MUSIC IS SUNG WELL, WITH
HUMOR WHEN NEEDED AND PLAYED
BEAUTIFULLY BY A COLLECTION OF
OTTAWA FOLK."

TO ORDER YOUR COPY
SEND A \$7.00 MONEY ORDER
PAYABLE TO: SNEEZY WATERS INC.,
BOX 4226, STATION "E",
OTTAWA, ONTARIO
CANADA
K1S 5B2
(ONTARIO RESIDENTS
ADD \$.49 PROVINCIAL SALES TAX)