COLLECTING SONGS IN SAINT JOHN N.B.

Chris Lobban

A year ago, when the Saint John Folk Club began looking for old songs they had little idea what they would be able to turn up in the city, and little knowledge of how to set about collecting. But with the enthusiasm of Club founder John Murphy, and a grant from the Canada Council, seven Club members embarked on the project with the conviction that songs would be found. Now their files contain over 140 songs, about half of which have been sung and recorded.

The seven people who took part were Steve Sellers and Becky Bourdage, who did most of the recording. John Murphy, who was active in all phases of the project, Carol MacArthur, Gerry Taylor, Lillian Waithier, and myself.

The recordings will be placed in the New Brunswick Museum, but the goals of the project include not just collecting and documenting the songs, but also singing them again, and the Club hopes to publish a small book of the best songs, perhaps illustrated with old photos. The question at present is, when do you stop collecting? There are still many songs to be recorded from the extensive repertoires of a few key "informants", and John plans to go on collecting.

The project comprised several distinct problems. How do you go about finding the singers? How do you collect the songs from these people? How do you assess the value of what you collect? Then there's gathering background information on the songs and, finally, getting words and music transcribed.

For answers to some of these questions the Club began by reading Kenneth Peacock's manual, and also enlisted the help of experts. Dr. Edward D. ("Sandy") Ives from U. Maine and Charlotte Cormier from U. Moncton came to Saint John to give workshops, and Gary Hughes, Oral Historian at the N.B. Museum also gave advice. They explained that it might be harder to find songs in the urban setting than in rural or close-knit ethnic groups, and so the Club began by advertising the project. Newspaper articles, concerts, cablevision shows, and—especially—word of mouth were used in the initial stages of looking for contacts. Dozens of dead-end leads were followed ("So-and-so knew those songs, but she died.") but singers were eventually found.

One of the most important singers the Club found was in fact not in the city but near Sussex. 72-year-old John Nicholson had already provided material for Sandy Ives in 1965 (see Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songster). His repertoire of lumber camp songs has not nearly been exhausted yet.

Perhaps the most important single find was a scribbler containing the words to 70 woods songs, written down by Thomas Godsoe in the last 10 years of his life. He died in 1954, and unfortunately we have not yet found the melodies to these songs.

In trying to assess the value of these songs the Club sought the advice of Dr. Helen Creighton and Edith Fowke. Both local compositions and versions of imported songs have turned up. Some, of course, had already been collected by Helen Creighton (Folk Songs of Southern New Brunswick) and Louise Manny (Songs of Miramichi). Many of the local songs are about life in the woods; surprisingly few sea songs have turned up, despite the fact that at one time Saint John was a thriving port and shipbuilding area. This may reflect the fact that the lumber industry still exists, whereas shipbuilding and the city's stature as a port had largely declined by the early 1900's. Also surprising was that among the imported ballads there were no Child ballads. Many of the imported songs probably came to the city via the Family Herald, a newspaper which printed lyrics of almost any type of songs sent in by its readers. Quite a number of vaudeville variations from the 1930's, and some sentimental ballads of little significance have also been recorded.
Thomas Godsoe (with axe over his shoulder) with a shipbuilding crew in about 1917. The ship is the Quaco Queen, under construction at St. Martin’s, N.B. Although he worked mostly in the woods, he applied his skills to shipbuilding sporadically, because with the decline in the industry the new generation was not learning the woodworking skills.

Transcribing the lyrics presented little problem, but the transcription of the music required the services of an expert if the nuances of the folk style were to be correctly set down. The Club turned to Kenneth Peacock in Ottawa. So far he has transcribed 20 songs, and the Club has money left over for another 15 or so.

Even though several folklorists have worked in southern New Brunswick before, the Saint John Folk Club has collected additional songs, and more will undoubtedly remain after the Club has finished. . . at least as long as memory and the “old timers” survive.

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