Bow Down

A rare Ontario version of "The Twa Sisters" (Child 10)

Submitted by John Leeder
Musical Transcription by John Leeder
Musical Calligraphy by Patty Rogers

You too may have unrecognized musical treasures gathering dust in your mental attic. I've known this song for most of my life, and pretty well took it for granted. When I became aware that it's a version of "The Twa Sisters" (Child 10), I assumed that it wouldn't be of much interest because the ballad is so widespread and exists in much more complete versions. However, Edith Fowke informs me that, not only is "The Twa Sisters" rare in Canada, but it is an unusual version! Edith writes:

Your "Bow Down" is rather fragmentary but important because the only previous reports of "The Twa Sisters" in Canada are from Newfoundland. Your text is obviously a North American form: there are a number of versions from the States beginning with an old man in the West and a squire: I think the closest is in the Brown collection of North Carolina Folklore, Vol.II, pp.32-33 (given in Bronson, The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads, Vol.1, Princeton University Press, 1959, No.31). Your story is somewhat degenerated: the suitor usually gives the gifts to the younger sister, and it is the older sister who pushes the young one in, not the reverse as you have it. Multitudinous versions of "The Twa Sisters" are listed in Bronson, pp.143-84, and Laws and Renwick, The British Traditional Ballad in North America, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1977, pp.32 and 213.

My mother learned the song about 1935 from a man named Duncan Miller, who had learned it from his father. The family had been homesteading in the vicinity of Alderdale, Ontario (southeast of North Bay), where my mother was teaching school at the time.

Truncated plot or not, "Bow Down" makes a pleasant semi-comic response song which has resounded many times in the final choir at the Rocky Mountain Folk Club.
Bow Down

There was an old man, he lived out west, Bow down, bow down, There was an old man, he lived out west, Bow down to me, There was an old man, he lived out west, he had two daughters of the best, So I'll be true True to my love, my love'll be true to me.

There was an old man, he lived out west,
Bow down, bow down,
There was an old man, he lived out west,
Bow down to me,
There was an old man, he lived out west,
He had two daughters of the best,
So I'll be true
True to my love
My love'll be true to me

A squire courted the older one,
And yet he loved the younger one.

He bought the older a Guinea-gold ring,
And the younger one not anything.

He bought the older a satin hat,
The young one she got mad at that.

They all went down to the riverside,
And there they laughed until they cried.

The young one pushed the old one in,
A-thinking she'd get out again.

The saddle and bridle are on the shelf,
If you want any more you can sing it yourself.