Instrumental Music of Sheenboro

by Christopher McGuire

There is a small town on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River which has certainly kept the Irish musical heritage alive and flourishing; the town is Sheenboro. Located in Pontiac County in the township of Sheen, Sheenboro was a classic example of an Ottawa Valley Irish stronghold. At its peak, c. 1926-1946, Sheenboro consisted of thirty families, most of these being Irish Catholic, and only one family of Protestants — the Millers. The families of Sullivans, Keons, Sheas, Donnellys, D’Arcys, Brennens and McGoldricks settled the lands of Sheenboro which had been divided by Majors Gale and Duberger in 1795. The name, Sheen, like most of the first townships in Pontiac County, originated in Britain.

Sheenboro, like so many of the towns at the foot of the Laurentians, depended on basically two sources of income, mixed farming and in the winter — lumbering. Music became an integral part of the lifestyle. The “bee” gave the hard-working pioneers a chance to work together, socialize, and engage in singing and dancing, known as “hoolies in the kitchen” in Sheenboro.

Even after the first radios arrived in Sheenboro around 1936-37, the prime musical sources remained the homes and the dance hall in Sheen. Use of the fiddle, the human voice, the piano (if available) and the spoons, gave the people of Sheenboro all the instruments they needed. One peculiar instrument was the crown from the roast of beef. Two of these bones were then hit together or tapped on a piece of wood. This was known as “rattling the bones.”

The Sheen Hall, located right beside the church, has seen many a great party. Jigs, reels, hornpipes and waltzes were the mainstay of dances in the Sheen Hall. In Sheenboro the square dance consisted of four couples dancing a set of three songs: the first was the jig, Rippling Waters and Haste to the Wedding being the most popular; the most popular second song was The Road to Kingdom Come while the set closed with McDonald’s Reel or St. Anne’s Reel.

Among the other types of dances used in Sheenboro was the Waltz, particularly the one known as The Sheenboro Hop which was performed by fiddle, piano, guitar and
spoons as were the dances for the square dance. It is doubtful that this melody was written in Sheenboro but possibly an Irish melody was adapted to make a waltz.

From pioneering days through the poverty of the Depression on into the hardships of World War II music remained a vital, lively force in the life of Sheenboro. Its vitality lives on in tunes such as The Sheenboro Way and The Sheenboro Hop which occasionally may be heard at reunions of Sheeners today.