The Casca and the Whitehorse Burned Down

We could smell the smoke, as soon as we awoke
On the wind blowing east from town.
I put the coffee on, the thermos took along
When the Casca and the Whitehorse burned down.

The City Volunteers pumped water from the river
To try and hose the old boats down,
But the flames they rose so high and the old wood was so dry;
The Casca and the Whitehorse burned down.

"Fire," he cried, "Fire on the river."
Muddy waters rollin’ deep and brown,
An old man crying out along the river
When the Casca and the Whitehorse burned down.

Old Captain Jim O’Hara was sittin’ in a lawn chair
And damned if that old man he didn’t laugh.
He pointed to the smoke pouring from the stack.
He said, "When did you last see that?"

Fifteen cord to Dawson, a hundred coming back,
Look down how the muddy waters roll.
The dippin’ of the wheel raising rainbows in the wake —
Hear that old steam whistle blow.

Fireweed, the perfume of the smoke,
Muddy waters rollin’ deep and brown.
Pink ladies down in Dawson all come out to meet the boat
When the Casca and the Whitehorse come down.

About this song, Bob writes, "Prior to 1949 when the Alaska highway was opened, most of the commerce in the Yukon was by sternwheeler. The Casca and the Whitehorse were two of these boats. After 1949, they were hauled out and left by the bank of the river near Whitehorse. In the early 70s local people began a restoration effort. On June 20, 1974 the boats were destroyed in a fire set by vandals.

A note on the playing: I think the song should be played too slow, as if everything was happening in aspic. (When we recorded it, it took a while to get the drummer to play behind the beat.) I use a slow, deliberate ragtime finger-picking style with the thumb alternating the first and fifth tone (C to G) on the first and third beat, with an appropriate bass run here and there. Where the bass note is unusual or important to the chord movement, it is indicated like this: Dm/F, meaning a Dm chord with an F in the bass. If you are a beginner and this is intimidating, just play the chord. Similarly, I use some chord variants, like Am7. If the variant is unfamiliar, just stick with the root — in this instance Am. I play the song in C capoed up three frets (in reality E flat). I couldn’t face E flat bare-handed."

This song is recorded on Stringband’s 1988 album "The Maple Leaf Dog", now out of print, but for a cassette you can contact Bob Bossin, Site 24, Gabriola Island, BC V0R 1X0. As printed here, the verses fall into three groups: 1, 2, and 4 are basically the same, though the text will encourage some slight variations as sung; 3 and 6 feel like a chorus, though the words don’t repeat; and 5 stands alone. Also, if you can’t play a Cmaj7 chord, you can try an ordinary Fmaj — it’s a good substitute in this context.