

## The EthnoFolk Letters 5

(In case readers have forgotten, the EFLs were never meant to be a column *by* Judith Cohen, but a feature open to all members. One of the *Bulletin's* co-editors is finally taking up Judy's lead. It's your turn, next....)

Calgary, Alberta  
March 1994

Dear Judy,

When I was gathering background material on Stan Rogers for the last issue, I ran across a story that was, I guess, new only to me—about a New England sailor who was overturned in the proverbial icy Atlantic and kept himself fighting back by singing "The Mary Ellen Carter" over and over for several hours. I gather that this happened during the last year or so before Rogers died and was—quite properly—one of the major experiences of Rogers's career. It's set me to thinking about a couple of times in my life when music has meant a great deal to me.

There's a line in a song by the Incredible String Band, from the 60s; if memory serves, it was one of Mike Heron's, though I don't remember the title. I believe the song's persona is singing to some new-born puppies (actually, "Puppies" may have been the title), and he refrains, "Music is so much less / than what you are." I was in those days a bit more inclined to the *ars gratia artis* school than I am now, and I must confess that I had a hard time with that. It's taken a few blows for me to come to understand that art, like business and a few other activities I can think of, should serve life, not the reverse.

At any rate, I thought I'd like to share a couple of my favorite musical experiences with you, and maybe some of our fellow Society members will remember some of their own tales for us.

The first occurred when I was living in Montréal in the early 70s. Late one fall afternoon, my son, who was about 6 years old then, came howling in from the yard with a gash under (and dreadfully close to) his left eye. I swooped him up and took him to the hospital. Well, I suppose they probably gave him a once-over in reasonable time, but once they determined that it *could* wait a while, of course it *did* have to wait a while.

I have no doubt that whoever got sliced open or stitched up while we waited was in more immediate need than was Stephen, but a 6 year old does get nervous, cold, hungry, and just plain scared. To keep him entertained, I launched into a little racist ditty I'd picked up from a Carl Sandburg record years before, which I'd previously used merely to amuse:

My name is Yon Yonson

I come from Wisconsin

I wurk in de lumbermills dere

Ven I walk down de street, all de people I meet

Dey say, Vat's your name?

And I say....

Of course it goes on until performer or audience have had enough. I don't know what our tolerance level had been when I sang it just for fun, but on this occasion, not only did I not dare give it up until Stephen

tired of it, it was in our common interest that I do my best not to let him get tired of it. So I sang it in different voices, different timbres, different registers, different moods—I'm here to tell you that every change those few bars can be wrung through, I hit during that hour or more it took for the doctor to get around to Stephen. I don't know whether it was delight or hysteria that laughed out through the boy's eyes, but he laughed quite a bit during that hour. The doctor eventually came and took Stephen off, alone, into a very dark operating room, with a very bright round light in the centre of it. I was very scared to let him go, but he went quite bravely and came back with two neat stitches. I went home with a terribly sore throat.

(Twenty years later, when Stephen got married in a little town in southern France, I made a bit of a hit with his bride's little brother, who takes English at school—his English was about as bad as my French!—and wanted to learn a song in English. Their mother seemed to appreciate the attention I paid the youngster, though I don't know that she was particularly pleased that I chose such a repetitive little item to teach him.)

I'm afraid that my other yarn doesn't have such a pair of successful endings. My stepson Mark deLeeuw died five years ago this August. He was a mountain climber, among other things, and had taken a fall on the east end of Mt. Rundle, a very prominent mountain you've probably seen in photos of Banff. The fall occurred in the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of August: warm days, usually, in Alberta (the years when we do get warm days, anyway), but not on the shady side of a mountain. Mark fell to the end of the rope, breaking both ankles and his pelvis in several places; he blacked out for a few moments and then had to climb a few feet up to the nearest ledge. His climbing partner tied him to the ledge and went for help. The ledge was about 3 feet long, ranging in width from a foot at one end to a few inches at the other, sloping downward. Some six hours later, a helicopter got him off the mountain, to the clinic at Banff, from which he was ambulated to the hospital in Calgary. He lived two weeks before a blood clot came loose from his pelvis and shut off his big, sweet heart.

One day in the hospital before that last day, I asked Mark what he'd done all those hours on the mountain. From where he sat up there, he could see, not only the TransCanada Highway, but his own apartment in Canmore. Mark had always been a fidgety kid, and that was when he was not in unbelievable pain and fear. I really wondered how he coped with this experience.

"I sang. I sang until the pain was too great to keep it up, and then I would scream until I was exhausted. Then I would rest until I could sing again."

The next day I came back with another question.

"Mark, what were the songs that you sang on the mountain?"

"Oh, 'Streets of Laredo,' 'Utah Carroll,' you know, all those cowboy songs you taught me."

Of course, I didn't know at that minute how much this communication would come to mean at me, but even then I felt pretty proud. I remembered a woman in one of my basic English classes at Mount Royal College a few years before, who told me that her mother in Ontario had sung her "Utah Carroll" and that she'd learned something about selfless action from those old ballads.

I tell people that this is one of my power stories—that when I retell it, I'm able to remind myself that once or twice I've done something to earn my keep in this world. As I retell it for you now, I suddenly realize that Mark and I—and my ex-student, wherever she may be—are now a part of the history of these songs.

Is that too diffuse a sort of immortality to be very consoling? Perhaps, but, then, what is it that Cathy tells Nelly in *Wuthering Heights*? "...surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?" Mark was cremated, and his ashes scattered in the Bow Valley Corridor, on the east side from Yamnuska and on the west from Chinaman's Peak. I suspect that the updrafts on the mountains took him far over the world. He's always in my songs.

Yours,  
George W. Lyon