Fowkelore

Vera Johnson

The following article was written, at the editors’ request, as 1995 turned into the present year. We wished to give Edith Fowke the tribute she deserved while she yet lived; we were aware that we had limited time to accomplish this, but we did not know how limited. We have left the essay in present tense, poignant though this be, as an indication that it was intended to serve a different function. How you would have read it, how we would have framed it, we will never know. Like Vera’s memoir of her own career, which we presented last year (29.1, March 1995), this piece is based upon Vera’s famous and notoriously thorough diaries (for which we trust she has an archive earmarked for a distant day). As Michael Cooney reminds us elsewhere in this issue, Edith was unlike many folklorists in her concern to see songs live, among new hosts or old; Vera’s memories demonstrate Edith’s interest in the folk music revival from the ’50s through the ’70s.

Vera also kindly submitted the accompanying biographical and bibliographical notes, based primarily upon material sent to her by Edith. We have made a few additions and alterations to the latter, but do not pretend that these are inclusive listings of Edith’s life or work.

No, that’s not a typographical error in the title. This article deals with my recollections of Edith Fowke as a warm, compassionate human being and a dear friend. She is also, of course, an eminent folklorist who has been delving in the rich fields of Canadian traditional music for more than 46 years, producing records, books, magazine articles, and tapes, the details of which will be set out at the end. So will the details of her association with York University and the degrees and honours that have poured in on her.

My own interest in folksongs was originally sparked and later nourished by Edith’s weekly programs on the CBC in the late forties: Folk Song Time and its successors. She wrote the scripts and provided the records. Bill Reid (now a noted Haida sculptor) did the narration. They were wonderful programs, and I quickly became a devoted fan.

In late 1951, I moved out to Toronto with my youngest sister, Mollie, and my three daughters. We arrived on October 17th, and for the first two weeks I was busy with the provincial election campaign. November 5th, Edith and I met for the first time when she came over for lunch. We discovered we had a great deal more in common than our interest in folksongs. We were both socialists and pacifists. We were both omnivorous readers, with a special interest in murder mysteries. We were both writers and editors, though in different fields. We were both the children of immigrants. My father was a transplanted New Englander, and my mother an English girl who met him in Assiniboia, Saskatchewan. Edith’s parents, William and Margaret Fulton, had come from Ireland and settled in Lumsden (population then 500), while our family moved to Regina. We were both former members of the Regina Leader-Post Torchbearers’ Club, which published a weekly magazine for amateur writers and artists, distributed with the Saturday edition of the paper.

(In 1980, belatedly, we discovered another bond. As young women, our favourite book had been The Rosary by Florence L. Barclay, and the recollection made both of us shudder.)

There were differences, of course, as well as similarities. One major difference was my complete lack of academic qualifications. Fortunately, it never occurred to me that I should feel inferior because of this. And Edith and her husband Frank are such honest, down-to-earth people that I can’t imagine them ever flaunting their superior educational achievements.

Another difference: I had worked in the trade union movement for years, for the IWA and sometimes for the Steelworkers, for Retail, Wholesale, and others, as well as for the BC Federation of Labour and the Ontario Federation of Labour. I was dedicated to the union movement as well as to the CCF. Edith had worked for the CCF, Citizens’ Forum, Friends of Overseas Students, The Co-operative Committee for Japanese-Canadians, and the Woodsworth Foundation. But in 1952 the Steelworkers, led by David Lewis, packed the annual meeting of the CCF and drove out most of the people who had been running the programs. Edith fought them for a whole year but finally decided it wasn’t worth the effort and switched to folklore, which she found much more satisfying. I continued to be active in the CCF and the labour movement, but I shared Edith’s dislike of David Lewis, based on what I had seen and heard of him at a convention in Vancouver.

A further difference was that I had three children; Edith and Frank had none. However, they treated my girls with the same warm friendliness they showed to me.

And one final difference—Edith has stayed a trim 120 pounds most of her life, while I have fought a life-long battle to get back to 110 pounds where I belong, instead of 160 or even higher. (I...
made it once, back in 1958, but never again.) This difference could have inhibited our friendship, because I had a tendency to resent people who managed to stay slim without even trying. However, I decided very early on that this wasn't her fault, merely a matter of genes.

A week after our first meeting I spent an evening with Edith and Frank, who is an engineer, at their home and was introduced to her marvellous collection of folk records (in those days they were practically all LPs and books). Those were only the first two of many happy get-togethers during the three years we spent in Toronto. We had rented rooms in a house not far from High Park and when we staged our first party (an afternoon affair, not a soiree) the Fowkes were among the 20 guests who crowded into our cramped quarters. I served spaghetti followed by fruit salad and whipped cream, we had a song session and played The Game (a form of charades) and had a great time.

On June 21, 1952, the big event of the day for me was Mollie's wedding to Gerry Doherty, but I had to leave it for a while in the afternoon to entertain at a garden party at Woodsworth House. Edith's friend Merrick Jarrett was also performing. Edith had probably arranged our participation.

Edith had been busy preparing Folk Songs of Canada, and Richard Johnston was preparing the music. She was always asking friends for songs, and I passed on to her "Smoky Mountain Bill," which was very popular in Saskatchewan in the thirties. It sounded "folky," and I had heard it sung by many people, although I never found a recording. Edith decided to include it, although "its origin is a matter of speculation." She thought it might be an American import, but the Library of Congress had no record of it.

There were other interesting events in 1952, most of them involving Edith. We saw Paint Your Wagon, starring Burl Ives, but I reported on that in my previous article. I lost some weight. (For those remarkable coincidences that occur frequently in real life, although no writer would dare to embed them in fiction, when Mollie was wheeled into a two-bed ward she discovered that she was sharing the room with Richard Johnston's wife.

Another occasion I remember vividly took place in August the same year when Edith and Frank invited us to spend a weekend with them at their cottage. By that time my husband, Mac, had joined us. We drove to Island Grove in our recently acquired Willys Jeep (which Alan Mills had renamed the Jillys Weep) and parked. Then we took the ferry to Snake Island in Lake Simcoe and found the cottage. It was a wonderful weekend: swimming, sunning, moving rocks so we could safely dive from the dock, and singing around a campfire on the beach on Saturday night.

On December 31, 1953, Mac and I and Mollie and Gerry, were invited to a New Year's Eve celebration at the new Fowke home at 5 Notley Place: a dream house, ranch style, the back overlooking a ravine. Lots of congenial people were there, including Colin Cameron and his wife, whom I had known in BC. I got quite tight and sang for hours. I hope Edith didn't tape the performance.

In January 1954 we went with the Fowkes and our friends Norman and Gloria Newton to a Peter Seeger concert. His singing was wonderful, his banjo playing fantastic, and the warmth of his personality spread out from the stage. Two nights later at Notley Place we had the chance to assess his performance off-stage, and he was just as real and lovable. With him were the members of a folksong group, and the singing went on and on. Pete was still there when we left at 2:00 am. He was getting soggy with beer and disinclined to catch his plane at 5:00 am. But I think he made it.

On a June night the same year we were back at Notley Place with a friend of ours Edith wanted to meet. This was a young missionary, Hazel Grace McLean, who had just returned from Africa where she was spreading the Gospel, and learning all she could about the Africans and their history and culture. She brought along a native costume and displayed it for us, also some hand-carved figurines. Among the guests were Richard Johnston and his wife and Sam Gesser and his brother of Folkways, and two other friends of ours. Richard had brought along a projector, so we could view Hazel's slides, and later Hazel recorded a number of native songs for Edith.

In 1954 we headed back to Vancouver (I didn't want to leave, but Mac and the girls persuaded me) and on September 30 Edith wrote me about her recent activities. She told me about her visit with Burl and Helen Ives in New York, and the afternoon she spent on their boat which they were trying to sell. She had visited Pete Seeger at Beacon and met his father, Charles—a marvellous person with a fabulous knowledge of folksongs. She also met Kenneth Goldstein for the first time, and his knowledge (of texts, rather than tunes) was equally fabulous. Alan Mills, she told me, was now doing a set of voyageur songs, and Edith would select the songs and write the notes. She had a new series of children's songs, Animal Fair, starting on Saturdays on CBC, running ten weeks. She also told me Pete would be coming to Vancouver in October.

On February 20, 1955, Edith wrote again, telling me Songs to Grow On had followed the Animal Fair programs. She said they missed me at the New Year's Eve party, also at one they held in January for Joe Glazer. (I hadn't met him yet, but would later.) Joe and Edith were working on a book tentatively entitled Songs for the Workers. Later that was changed.

By August 30, Edith and Richard were working on a book of French-Canadian songs which was soon ready for the publisher.

In November she told me Frank had finished painting their bedrooms and was working on a record cabinet. Then she hoped he would prepare some built-in bookshelves for her study. She had made another trip to New York in October, had seen Helen Ives, Josh White, Jean Ritchie, Moe Asch and others and had also seen three plays. She offered me a cold cure: 1,500 to 2,000 milligrams of Vitamin C, repeated every two or three hours until the cold disappears. It cured Frank's in one day!

Another letter was sent in December
of 1956. Edith had been very busy in the past year, mainly with CBC. She and Alan Mills did The Song History of Canada over CBC from July to September and Songs of the Sea from October to December. They were now thinking of doing a book along the same lines. Folk Songs of Quebec, which should have been out last Easter or the fall of 1955 at the latest, was still held up at the publisher's. Burl Ives had made a trip north last autumn, and they had a wonderful party at the Variety Club which went on till 3:30 am Burl had asked her how I was doing. Edith was still working with Joe Glazer on their book of labour songs.

I responded in January. We were now living in the Okanagan and I told Edith that unfortunately we weren't able to get any of the programs she had mentioned. I invited her and Frank to come and stay with us in the summer. When Edith answered in December 1957, she was working on a radio series on Australian Bush Ballads with Merrick Jarrett as the singer and narrator. Song History of Canada and Songs of the Sea had also been released as a Folkways recordings, and she and Alan had done a third series of programs, Legends of Indonesia. Song History of Canada made the New York Herald-Tribune's list of 100 Best Records of 1956, and Songs of the Sea was on the 1957 list.

Two of her radio adaptations of others' stories had been produced on CBC's Summer Fallow in 1956. Perhaps it was around this time that she decided to adapt one of my stories for radio. She had also edited a book of Dr. Robins' stories, Logging with Paul Bunyan, which came out in the spring of 1956. But her main activity in 1957 had been collecting Ontario folk songs with her tape recorder.

In January, 1958 she wrote again asking for further information about my self-styled hermit friend, Stan Botting. She wanted me to send her the words for "I Went to the Woods" and "The Dying Outlaw," also to have a tape made, and said I should get a complete list from him of the songs he knew. A month later she thanked me for the tape, said she had played it through several times and enjoyed it very much. She called Stan "a pleasant singer" and said he knew some unusual songs. About half of them she had never heard before, and even the ones she was familiar with were considerably different in his versions. "The Wreck of the Mary L. McKay" was particularly interesting because Helen Creighton had collected a song called "The Mary L. McKay," which was almost entirely different except for the lines about the cook. She thought she would use "I Went to the Woods" on a short item she was doing for the CBC about Irish songs in Canada, scheduled for March 17. She also hoped to use "The Dying Outlaw" in her book, The Song History of Canada.

I wrote three letters to Edith in March, first telling her that we had arranged to bring Stan over to our home on the day of the broadcast, so we could all hear it. (His new cabin didn't have electricity.) Then Stan decided he didn't want any publicity about him going over the air, but he did ask me to tell Edith that he was born in London, England, in 1892 and that his experience in farming, logging, herding stock and pioneering was in BC and Alberta.

Finally, I told Edith that I was applying for a writing scholarship at the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and needed a letter of recommendation. She promptly supplied one, and I won the scholarship.

In July Edith asked me to check on the date when Stan learned "The Dying Outlaw," as Wilf Carter recorded one with the same title in the 1930s as his own composition. I asked Stan, and his reply was very definite. He had heard Nels McKim sing it in 1912. But Stan was upset and feared he might become involved in a legal action. Edith and Frank went off to Britain for a holiday, and had a wonderful time. They saw most of the leading folklorists and folksingers, plus a lot of scenery. Edith asked me to reassure Stan that he needn't worry, there would be no legal proceedings. She also asked me to tell
him that most of the lines in his version were slightly different from the way Carter sang it, and that his version was better.

The next batch of news came in March of 1959. The book with Joe Glazer, now retitled Songs of Work and Freedom, should be out before the end of the year, also Song History of Canada, done with Alan Mills. She was working on another book, on Canadian folklore for children.

Then on July 24, Edith arrived in Vancouver. Her aunt, Mrs. Fulton, brought her over to Mollie and Gerry’s place on Braemar Avenue in North Vancouver, where my daughters and I were renting a suite in the basement. It was a wonderful reunion. We had a good visit, got caught up on all the news. I phoned Phil Thomas, and Edith talked to him for half an hour. Later my sister Marge and her daughter Marion came over in their car and we gave Edith a lift back to her aunt’s.

The next night we had a get-together at the home of Phil and Hilda Thomas with Al and Jeannie Cox, Barry Hall, and Captain Cates. It was a lively evening with lots of singing and playing, and both Captain Cates and I put some songs on tape. Then he gave me a lift home.

The following day Edith met me at the office where I was working (The White Pass and Yukon Route) at four. Paul Phillips was supposed to join us there, but he was delayed and didn’t make it until five. They talked (I probably joined in now and then) until 5:30. Then Edith and I left for North Vancouver and dinner with Mollie and Gerry and their children. (By that time they had several.) Afterwards Gerry drove us to Lynn Canyon, where he swam and we simply enjoyed the scenery. And talked.

Back at the house, we listened to Edith’s record, Folk Songs of Ontario, which was excellent. Then Gerry drove Edith to town to catch a bus.

On July 3rd my boss was away, but I worked at the office all day until five, when Edith and Emma Caslor arrived. We went to the St. Regis for a beer and my sister Marge joined us briefly, then left. We had dinner—a sumptuous crab salad—at the Georgia Coffee Garden. Then we went to see a play, Mary Stuart, with Viveca Lindfors, Bob Christie and Lloyd Bochner. We had excellent seats in boxes and thoroughly enjoyed it. Marge joined us at the intermission. Afterwards, as prearranged, we met our friends Glen and Diane Morley (Glen had been musical director of the Summerland Singers and Players when I belonged, and Diane was a talented composer) and their friend, Barbara Sully. I gather from my notes that we all travelled in Barbara’s car, but perhaps she had a roomy station wagon. In any case we went to an after-theatre party at Gretchen Grinnell’s. (She is Emma Caslor’s daughter.) It was an exciting evening for all of us but especially for Glen, as among the guests was a world-famous concert pianist, Lloyd Powell, and Glen was really thrilled to meet him.

Edith wrote in August to say how much she had enjoyed the visit and how surprised she was to find so many people with a keen interest in folk songs. She thought that Phil Thomas and Paul Phillips both knew considerably more about the subject than any of the young singers around Toronto. She liked Molly and Gerry’s house, envied them the location and had pleasant memories of our visit to Lynn Canyon, which was a delightful spot.

In December there was another letter to let me know that Songs of Work and Freedom and Canada’s Story in Song would both be out in January. Edith wanted me to tape some of Captain Cates’s songs. And had I met Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger when they were in Vancouver? Well, I hadn’t actually met them, but I had gone to Al Cox’s place and sat on the floor while they sang, listened and enjoyed them.

More news in February, that Peggy and Ewan were bringing out a folk music year book and had asked Edith to handle the Canadian section. She said I should consider myself the BC reporter for the year book and asked for lots of information. She also told me the release dates of the two books had been changed again. Songs of Work and Freedom would be launched February 12th (Lincoln’s birthday) and Canada’s Story in Song would come out a month later.

I sent Edith the information she needed, and a half-hour tape of Captain Cates recorded at CBC studios, thanked her for the Fowke/Glazer book which she had sent and reported that I was singing the songs and plugging the book at all the folksong groups. I suggested Steve McIntyre’s bookstore might handle it.

In August I had to pass on the news that Captain Cates had died quite suddenly the previous Saturday. Ten days earlier he had been to a Hi-Riggers concert, told two stories and sang two songs which delighted us. I also told Edith that People’s Book Store was now stocking Songs of Work and Freedom. And later the same month I thanked Edith for Song History of Canada. She had done a wonderful job. I was pleased to see "The Dying Outlaw" was included.

By December 1960, Folk Song Time was back on the Trans-Canada Network, and Edith hoped we were receiving it. She had heard Burl Ives would be at the Klondike Festival and wondered if the White Pass and Yukon Route was involved in any way. (It wasn’t, but my boss, Roy Minter, was in touch with Tom Patterson, who was travelling to the Yukon with Burl Ives, and Burl called me.) In the summer she and Frank had visited Sam Eskin, Ben Botkin, Jean Ritchie, Oscar Brand, Ruth Rubin, Ken Goldstein, Alan Lomax and several others. Folkways was releasing an album of square dance music she had recorded, as well as an album of old Mr. Abbott. Another album of songs by Lamont Tilden might be out before spring. She was looking for unusual children’s songs or
In August 1961 Edith sent another report on her varied activities (preparing records, small assignments from CBC, preparing a section on folk songs and folk tales for The Literary History of Canada, &c). She wondered if I had any new discoveries to report like Stan Bottle or Charlie Cates. Peter Wyborn and Alan MacCrae were now in Toronto, and they had told her the folk song scene in Vancouver was riddled with feuds. Did I have any details? I replied that I knew nothing about any feuds. I had left North Vancouver, was now at 777 Burrard Street, and was planning to come east in January. I looked forward to seeing them.

But Edith and Frank were leaving December 23rd to visit Mexico. If they were still away when I arrived, they could leave a spare key with a neighbour. In the meantime, they would appreciate receiving suggestions of places to see and people to look up. My reply was lengthy.

When they returned in February 1962, they expected to find me at their place, but instead received a long letter explaining how all my plans had been changed, that instead of travelling to Toronto I was marrying the bookseller Stephen McIntyre. Edith and Frank had visited San Miguel and seen some of my friends, including the writer Dennis Wiegand. (Just as I expected, they found him where I had left him three years earlier, having a few drinks at La Cucaracha.) Reva Brooks, the photographer, and Leonard Brooks, the painter, were away in Spain. But they did manage a visit with Romeo Tabuena, the artist, and his wife, Nina, and spent a pleasant few hours talking and listening to records. They spent a week in Mexico City, saw the National Folklore Ballet, visited the pyramids and Xochimilco and Taxco, &c., then drove down to Vera Cruz. Coming back they took Highway 85 through the mountains, which was quite spectacular. On the trip they learned enough Spanish to read road signs and order meals by pointing at the menu.

Sometime that same year Edith made another trip to Vancouver. I can't remember the date, but in August she wrote to say how much she enjoyed the visit. "I am glad things have turned out so well for you. I like Steve very much and hope to see you both again in the not too distant future." Steve and his sister Emma had both sung songs which interested her, and another letter came in August asking me to send her the words and also some children's rhymes which Barry Hall had promised her. I sent off the words to "Ace Down in the Hole" the same month (though I was sure it was just a pop song), as well as the mining song Emma had sung, which was a clever parody of a Gay Nineties favourite. But in January the following year I had to report that I had tried to pin Barry down on the children's rhymes but was never able to get hold of him before he took off for the east. I hoped Edith had made contact out there.

In 1963 Edith and Frank made another trip to Europe that was great fun and she also travelled to Ottawa and Banff in June, to Newport, New York City and Philadelphia in July, and New York again in October. She would be attending the American Folklore Society's meeting at Detroit in December and Waterloo University's folk festival in January. She was still trying to chase down children's rhymes. Her book on the subject was finally taking shape.

In March of 1965 I told Edith about the Eiran Harris collection which Steve and two other booksellers had just arranged to purchase. "The folk song and folklore section would have you swooning," I said. Edith had just got back from Trinidad and was leaving for Philadelphia in a couple of days. She was certainly interested, but before she could make any offer the whole collection had been offered to Simon Fraser University for $17,000 and negotiations were proceeding.

In December I told Edith what a bad year this had been for me. I had been hospitalized with rheumatoid arthritis and later my sister Marge died and a few days later so did my favourite cousin, Priscilla. Then came the break-up of my second marriage. In June of 1966 Edith was hoping to be in Vancouver for another visit. I don't know if she made it because I can't find any records, but in August I was heading for England and planned to see her in Toronto. Presumably I did so, but again, no records.

Just before Christmas that year I wrote to Edith reporting on the folk clubs where I had sung, the folksingers I had met (including Jean Ritchie, the Watersons, the Corries, David Campbell, Alex Campbell, the Ian Campbell Folk Group, Belle Stewart, Dave Swarbrick and Martin Carthy, some of whom were also friends of Edith). The following May I told her about visits with two special friends of hers, Eric Winter and Jeannie Robertson.

In 1967 Edith was in Nassau for a week in February, Washington and Philadelphia at Easter, spoke at Bowling Green and Columbus, Ohio, in April, and when she wrote to me in May had just returned from Ottawa, where she spoke to the Women's Canadian Club. She and Frank would be coming to Expo in June, and she planned to take in the Newport Festival in July, as well as the Beers Festival and Mariposa. In addition, throngs of visitors would be arriving, and she had to keep up her weekly radio series and continue work on two books. I was returning to England, and Edith asked me to pass on greetings to a number of her British friends. She also recommended places where I might sing in New York, Toronto, and Montreal.

In February 1968 I was back in Vancouver and intended to fly to London in September, but wanted to attend some festivals in the east. Could she pass on

"...with old Mr. Hughey, one of my early informants."
the dates?

In March I wrote again to thank her for More Folk Songs of Canada, which had just arrived, and again asked for information about festivals. In her reply, Edith recommended I send a letter and tape to Estelle Klein, Artistic Director of the Mariposa Festival, which I did. She booked me for the New Songwriters’ Workshop, and Edith and I arranged to go to the Beers Festival together. A good trip and two good festivals. Then I went on to New York and Ottawa and eventually England, while Edith returned to Toronto, attended the annual general meeting of the Canadian Folk Music Society in October, spent a week in Ottawa in November, and finally headed for Bloomington, Indiana, to take part in the annual general meeting of the American Folklore Society.

One of my letters went astray, so Edith didn’t write again until May of 1969. She was just back from a trip to Vancouver to see her aunt, had phoned my sister Mollie while she was there, and gave me their latest news. She didn’t think she would be going to Newport this year but was considering going to Britain in August, when the International Folk Music Council would be meeting in Edinburgh and the Blairgowrie Festival would also be taking place. I replied in June, giving her details of various folk festivals I recommended. I wouldn’t be there when she came but said she was welcome to use my bedsitter in Tooting Bec.

Later I learned that when Edith arrived, all the hotels were jammed, so it was lucky for her that she could go to my place. She had a fine time at the Edinburgh conference, the high spot of which was an excellent ceilidh, and then went up to Blairgowrie, where she had her first chance to hear Willie Scott and Davy Stewart. Belle and Alex were there (the founders of the Singing Stewarts of Blairgowrie), and for the first time she heard their daughter Sheila sing and was delighted. “I think she’s going to be even better than Belle and Jeannie,” she told me.

With friend Mary Ramsay she travelled to Inverness and then made a bus tour through the Highlands to Skye. The scenery on that route (as I know from experience) is great, and luckily the weather cooperated with them. Heading south, Edith stopped in Yorkshire to visit our mutual friends, Bill and Wendy Price, and they took her to one of the local clubs. “I was delighted with the vigor of the British folk scene—it made me most envious for, as you know, Canada has nothing to compare with it.”

Back in London she went to Cecil Sharp House for a Saturday night concert and to another club where the Johnston family (a fine Irish group) were the guests. She also visited Eric Winter, who had become a good friend of mine as well, and Bill Leader and Leslie Shepard and Bert Lloyd, but missed Ewan and Peggy, who were on holidays. In addition she saw three plays.

When Edith got back to Toronto, after a very pleasant three weeks, she found that Frank had not spent such a restful time. In fact, the two Basenji pups, Adam and Gypsy, and their mother, Sherry, had almost driven Frank up the wall. Sherry had chewed the big chair downstairs into pieces, and consequently they had to move most of the furniture out of the recreation room. They had already sold two from Sherry’s litter but Edith thought they would have to sell Adam as well. Sally Go Round the Sun was due out within the next month, and she was expecting page proofs of Lumbering Songs any day.

On December 31 I arrived in Toronto by train, and Edith met me. We drove home to park my stuff and say hello to the dogs, then with Frank we went to the New Year’s Eve party being held by Bill White’s choir, which Frank and I had belonged to so long ago. It was a wonderful nostalgic evening. The next day I went on to Montreal and New York and London.

Edith wrote in February 1970, said she had received no letters from me since I left but thanked me for the photos of the pups and of Ken Goldstein. They had sold Gypsy, not Adam. They were now trying to civilize Adam by bringing him upstairs, but he always wanted Sherry to chase him, and she was always happy to oblige. Edith was thinking of making another trip to Britain in 1971, perhaps in July, and wanted to know which were the best festivals. Should she aim for Keele or were there better ones for traditional music? Would it be better to go in August? I responded, probably recommending Keele, though I can’t locate a copy of the letter. July was the month of the Cambridge Festival, but there were others in August. I don’t know if I mentioned the Hobby Horse Festival at Padstow, but I certainly should have.

I wrote Edith in May, told her I had met an old friend of hers, Bob Walker, who was now running the Worksop Folk Club in Nottinghamshire. He wanted her to come and stay with him and his wife. (This was an excellent club, incidentally. I hope Edith managed to visit them but I can’t recall her mentioning it.) And I wrote again in November, telling her I’d be leaving Christmas Day to return to the UK, but en route I was booked for December 29th at Fiddlers’ Green in Toronto and then for three nights at the Yellow Door in Montreal. I think I stayed with her on the 29th and 30th, and then went on.

In June 1972 Edith thanked me for my notes and the offer to use my room. She was booked into the Penn Club for four days after arrival, then would be wandering. However, my place might come in handy later on. I wrote to her the same month recommending two folk clubs in York, and said I was looking forward to seeing her at Mariposa.

I arrived in Toronto on July 13, phoned Edith and arranged to meet. Then I went to the Executive Motor Hotel and had reunions with lots of friends, as well as meeting new people. Ken Goldstein arrived about ten, and Edith just behind him. The three of us went to her place, where Ken and I stayed overnight. It rained all night, and next morning the island was one vast bog. That was Friday. On Saturday, things were no better. I gave one concert from a picnic table, then went to Area 6, where Joni Mitchell was performing. When she finished I went backstage, and we had a good visit. Later Faith Petric of San Francisco and I went to the hotel to have a hot rye, as we were both absolutely sodden. The bar was closed. So we walked over to the picket line at Toronto Western Hospital and I wrote three songs for the pickets and led them in the singing. Then we went back to the hotel. Edith was there, and I went home with her.
Sunday I took bus and boat to the island and again saw lots of friends. Had supper in the performers’ area with Edith. Joni joined us for a while, then left with Jackson Browne. I went to the Open Sing. Suddenly there was a mass exodus. The crowd had discovered that Bob Dylan was on the island. I went down to the boat, found Edith and Ken Goldstein aboard. We got home early, went to bed.

Monday Edith delivered Kenny to the hotel, then took me to the bus depot and we said our goodbyes.

Now there’s a sudden leap to July 5, 1973, when I arrived at the Executive Motor Hotel for the next year’s Mariposa Festival. This time I was booked, and shared a room with Malvina Reynolds, which was great. Edith couldn’t make it, and when she was still Barbara Donald, before she married Clyde, came over to the hotel and we had a few beers together and got caught up on news. The theme of this year’s festival was Women’s Liberation, and it led to a lot of interesting programs. Later a gang of us, including Jean Carignan, Giles Losier, and John Allen Cameron, went to CBC to do a program under the guidance of Elizabeth Gray, who was filling in for Peter Gzowski. It was a mess. However, it was finally over and when Elizabeth Gray insisted CBC would pay my taxi fare to Edith’s place, I didn’t argue.

After reading a booklet of Edith’s which said aspirins destroy Vitamin C, I decided to stop taking aspirins (which relieved the pain from arthritis) and start on massive doses of Vitamin C. Unfortunately, there were so many unpleasant side effects that I went back to the aspirins. The day after the broadcast, Edith went out for lunch and the afternoon, and I wrote two songs. After dinner she recorded some of my songs on her new Sony. Then we went to Fiddlers’ Green. Bruce (Utah) Phillips and Janey Voss were the main guests, while the Boys of the Lough, Martin Carthy and others did floor spots. It was a great evening. Tam Kearney went home and got his calendar and when he returned, gave me a booking for August 24. Next morning Edith drove me to the station to catch the bus for Montreal.

From 1972 to 1976 we exchanged very few letters, mainly because we were both so busy, but we did see each other now and then. Edith came to the August booking, and we had a wonderful night. I spent a few days with my friends Jim and Ellen Bury, then checked into the Ford Hotel on August 30. Edith treated me to lunch at a restaurant on St. Thomas Street, then I had to rush off and do various chores, ending up at the Royal York Hotel to register for a science fiction convention, Torcon II. By 7 o’clock I was exhausted and in pain, so went back to the Ford and to bed. Sunday I moved into the Royal York. What a contrast, sheer luxury! Monday at 3:30 the con ended, and I led a final singsong in the piano lounge. At 6:30 I took a bus to the airport, boarded the plane for London, found my nonsmoking seat and saved one for Val Robb, another of Edith’s friends, whose husband is a very talented singer/songwriter.

On February 26, 1974, I was singing at Fiddlers’ Green and again there was a good crowd, including Barbara Gilmour and the Burys. Edith couldn’t make it, but we did arrange a short visit a few days later. Usually the subway trip to Warden is fairly humdrum, but this time at one stop a woman, her face all bloody, was being loaded into an ambulance. And at another point a second woman was being put in a different ambulance, with an inhalator standing by. I never did find out what had happened.

In June I was in London again and in the West End found a copy of Edith’s Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs. I was surprised to read in the introduction that thanks were also due to “Peggy Seeger and Vera Johnson, who transcribed some of the songs.” I do have a vague recollection of writing out the music for one song but can’t remember what it was. Edith is always conscientious about thanking people who assist her in any way.

On September 6th I was visiting Fiddlers’ Green again, and the guests were Buffalo Girls. The next day I phoned Edith and talked to her for about half an hour, then took off for Malton Airport and London.

Then it was 1975, and in January I had a gig at Fiddlers’ Green which was great, as usual. The next day Edith met me at Warden and took me to Notley Place for dinner and the evening. Then I returned to Tam’s and later went on to London. In June I returned to Vancouver, then flew to Toronto to sing at Mariposa. Spent a night with Edith, then moved to Tam’s place and shared a booking at Fiddlers’ Green with Bill Steele, a friend of mine from the San Francisco Folk Club who wrote that marvellous song, "Garbage." Edith was there. Off to London again, and back to Vancouver in November.

In March of 1976, I did a booking at the Yellow Door in Montreal, then bussed to Toronto and went to Tam’s place. Next day, the 9th, was very spe-
cial, as we went out to the airport to meet my friends Jacqui and Bridie, who ran the Coach House Folk Club in Liverpool (the best club in England, I thought) and were just starting an American tour. Also at Fiddlers’ Green that night were two more good friends, Cathy Fink and Duck Donald. Jacqui and Bridie did two of my songs, and Cathy and Duck also did two, which pleased me no end. Edith was there, and I’m sure she enjoyed it as much as I did. I had already sent her a copy of my first record, “Bald Eagle” (produced by Sweet Folk All Recordings Ltd.), but now Boot Records was also bringing it out under licence, and it was good to have LPs to sell.

In April I was in England, late in June in Toronto for Mariposa and Fid- dlers’ Green. Edith and I had a rather hurried visit on June 25th, as she was leaving for England the next day.

On July 23, after almost a month’s travel, filling bookings here and there, I caught the bus for New York City and subsequently White Plains. But just outside Herkimer, NY, the bus crashed and overturned. One woman was killed; the rest of us were all taken to hospital. I had to phone my friends in White Plains and cancel the visit. Five days later I was released with what the doctors diagnosed as “deep bruising” and caught a bus for Toronto. There I phoned Edith, who was just back from England, and again we had a long chat.

On September 15 I arrived back in Toronto and found that this time I would be staying with David and Caroline Parry, as Tam and Jim were in Britain. We had a great night at Fiddlers’ Green on the 17th. Edith and Frank were both there, and we were able to get caught up on news.

On October 3rd, I turned up at the Vancouver Airport for my Wardair flight to London, only to learn that the travel agent had given me the wrong departure time, and the plane had already left. They booked me on another flight leaving next day. The stewardess came to me with a sad story about three people who wanted to sit together but couldn’t because there were no vacant seats. Would I mind moving up to First Class?

First Class is terrific! It’s not just the attentiveness of the stewards, who are always anxious to do anything to please you; it’s not just the free food and drinks they press on you; it’s not just the menus they offer and the roast they bring in on a tray and slice before your eyes, offering you rare or well done pieces, whichever you prefer; it’s not just the way they prepare the seats so that you can stretch out over three of them and sleep comfortably. It’s the combination of all these things. I think I could enjoy being rich. It’s the process of accumulating money that would bother me, and I think Edith feels like this as well.

In November I returned to Vancouver. Not First Class.

In 1977 I wrote to Edith from Lon- don, telling her that my song book was out and I had asked my daughter Sandy to mail her a copy. That brings us to 1977. In January I was in Toronto again. We had a small crowd but a good night at Fiddlers’ Green on the 20th, and on the 24th Frank collected me at Warden and took me home. We had dinner, chatted, I sang a few songs and stayed the night. The next day Edith drove me to Warden. On March 19th I flew from Vancouver to London and made the return trip on May 14. In June I was in Toronto, did a gig at Fiddlers’ Green (another good night).

On the 22nd I went to the West-minster Hotel on Jarvis Street, a new venue for Mariposa, met friends, stayed there overnight. June 23rd I spent an exhausting day at the festival and the next day host ed a workshop I had suggested on the songs of Malvina Reynolds. Hedy West sang, then Jean Redpath. Then Joan Pelton, Michael Lucas, Michael Cooney and I alternated to the end. I spotted Edith in the audience, but by the time we finished she had disappeared. However, I phoned her after dinner and had a long talk, and we arranged to meet the next day. The 25 was a good day on the island. Edith and I met and got caught up on news. I introduced her to Chris Kearney. One of Chris’s best friends was the son of a good friend and co-worker of Edith’s, so they had lots to talk about.

In August I was booked at the Van- couver Folk Music Festival and also at the Owen Sound festival. On the 21st I bussed to Toronto, attended to various chores, then took the subway to Warden, where Edith picked me up. We had dinner and a pleasant visit, and I stayed overnight.

In 1979 I arrived in Toronto on March 1st after a long and complicated trip. We had a great night at Fiddlers’ Green on the 2nd, in their new quarters. Some of Edith’s students showed up, and we had a pleasant chat. The rest of March, I was travelling to Hespeler, Toronto, Montreal, New York City, White Plains, Saratoga Springs, Montreal and Ottawa.

One day in May there was a phone call from Edith, who had just arrived in London after a visit to Padstow. It was an election day, so I voted, then met her at Cecil Sharp House. She thanked me for the letter I had sent on April 1st, enclosing skipping rhymes and games I had been carrying around for months and telling her about the visit from her students. We got caught up on our latest news. Mike Yates of Topic Records joined us. After agreeing on arrangements to take a trip together the next day, and another the following day, we parted.

I was at Euston Station well before time and stationed myself at Platform 6. I didn’t realize the train leaving from there would depart at 11:40, whereas the one we wanted was leaving at 10:40 from Platform 13. When I didn’t see Edith I began to worry, so I phoned her hotel. She was in her room, they told me, so I asked to be put through. Somebody said, “Hello?” I said, “Is that Edith?” The only answer I got was, “Hello?” I hung up and tried again. This time there was no an- swer. I reached the manager again; she sent the porter up, and he reported Edith was not in her room. Then I checked the departure time at the gate where I was waiting and discovered I had goofed. A bit more investigation, and I found I should have been at Platform 13, but the 10:40 had already left.

I assumed Edith was on it, so the only thing I could do was catch the 11:40 and try to find her in Birmingham. Unfortunately, my assumption was incorrect. Edith had arrived too late to take the 10:40, but she took it for granted I was on it. Because of our faulty reasoning, we didn’t look for each other, just boarded the train and found seats a few
cars apart. We didn’t see each other when we got off at Birmingham either. Edith took a taxi to Roy Palmer’s place; I took a bus to my cousin Norah’s. There I started phoning. There were 30 R. Pal-
mers in the phone book, and I tried 15 of them, with no luck. I tried BBC, but they couldn’t help. I did finally reach a Roy Palmer who said he collected folk music and didn’t know of any other, but Edith wasn’t there. I finally realized he was putting me on and hung up. I phoned the library, but it was closed.

At last I decided to call my folk-singing friend John Swift, and it turned out that his wife, Jacquie, had the number. I called and talked to Edith, who suggested we catch the 8:18 to Euston. That was fine with me, so we enjoyed our separate visits.

When I reached New Street Station, I found there was no 8:18 to Euston, only an 8:53, and it was a slow train, travelling via Nuneaton. We had lots to talk about on the way, so that was no problem. It was after 11:00 when we reached Euston and caught the Northern Line tube heading south. I told Edith she should get off at Embankment, and she checked the map and said that was the third stop. I said, “Yes,” but I didn’t bother checking—which was another goof. After Edith left, I noticed the sign “Charing Cross” and realized this was the old Strand station, recently renamed. The wrong one. The last District and Circle Line trains had stopped, so Edith would have to wait for a bus. She didn’t reach the hotel until quarter to one.

The next day we met at Liverpool Street, she was still very shaky. I helped her to the taxi rank, left her leaning against a fence while I approached the first couple in the line-up and asked if they would let us jump the queue. The woman’s reply, delivered in loud high-pitched Cockney, was, “Not bloody likely!” I managed to get help from the First Aid man at the station, and we took a taxi to her hotel near Earl’s Court. I helped Edith to her room and to bed, then left.

In the morning I phoned and she was still weak, but otherwise fine. I was singing at Croydon that night, but she had arranged to visit Eric Winter, so we said our goodbyes and promised to see each other again at Mariposa.

On June 10th I was in Vancouver and had a phone call from David Warren in Toronto asking me to participate in a panel on filksongs at a science fiction convention on June 15th. (Filksongs are the science fiction equivalent of folk-songs. They are usually written to traditional tunes but deal with SF themes.) As Edith was also to be on the panel, I didn’t hesitate.

That date was also the first day of Mariposa. We didn’t stay for the evening concert but went over to the Ramada Inn for Beta Draconis, the official name of the con. Edith had prepared a tape of selected filksongs, and Shelly Rabinovitch and Jane Horne sang related folk-songs. At the end I did “Time, Boys, Time” (which I had written as a campaign song for the British bid to hold a worldcon, using a traditional tune) and “The Sweetheart of Sordido V,” in which I used my own tune but celebrated a character in a story by Roger Zelazny. Then Shelly asked me to sing “God’s Not Dead,” which is not a filksong and has nothing to do with science fiction, but I sang it anyway.

The next day was Saturday, and a wonderful day at Mariposa. Edith and I took the same ferry back and had dinner together. Royston Wood (another member of the Young Tradition) and a friend joined us. Sunday was another great day at the festival, and we made the most of it.

We didn’t see each other again until September of 1980, but a lot had happened in the interim. I had made two more tours of the British folk clubs, went to the Owen Sound festival and the Philadelphia festival, my friends in White Plains, &c. And I wasn’t the only one who had been busy. Edith and Judy Merrill had both been working on a projected book, tentatively entitled The Best of Filk. On September 10th I was able to look over the proposed book and was astonished to see how much they had accomplished. I suggested a few additions. Edith wanted the words to the filksongs I had done on the panel, and I promised to send the music later. I also gave her the words of the “Star Wars Round,” which I had picked up somewhere or other.

Edith dug out her copies of the Torchbearers’ Magazine, dating back to 1929, and a scrapbook of her own contributions, written between the ages of ten and fifteen. She hadn’t seen them for years and was amazed to discover she had written both fiction and poetry. I read it all and got a big charge out of it. We also had lots of news to catch up on and talked until 10:45, when she drove me to Warden station.

The next day was Friday, September 12, and I was half of a double bill at Fiddlers’ Green, the other half being Stan Rogers. The place was packed, and Edith was one of those who helped to pack it. We had a great night.

Once again we separated, and once again there were no letters (although I did send her a batch of stories collected from my grandson and a bunch of songs from his friend Kevin.) On June 28, 1982, Edith wrote to say she hoped to be in Vancouver at the end of July and in England about August 16. She still wanted...
the music for "The Sweetheart of Sordido V." There was also a letter from Judy Merrill saying the anthology was almost complete and they wanted my permission to include the two songs, but unfortunately I didn’t receive these letters until October 1st, when I returned to Vancouver. Later in October I tripped over my purse, crashed into the wall and broke my right arm, so I couldn’t write out any music until the cast came off.

Now to 1983. In May I had a phone call from Phil Thomas to let me know Edith was in town. I talked to her, and we arranged to meet at the Joyce Loop the next day at five. We each had a burger at Bino’s, then took the bus to my new home at Le Coeur Housing Co-operative. As well as exchanging news, we went over my collection of murder mysteries, and Edith recommended a lot of writers who were new to me. I listed all the people she spoke of and in the months that followed, tried them all and began collecting them: Douglas Clark, Michael Delving, Joseph Farrington, Sara Woods, Stephen Greenleaf, J.R.L. Anderson, &c.

I was still working through the list in 1984. In March I had to give up my London bedsit. I was no longer working as a legal secretary and couldn’t afford it. And I was so busy working for the co-op where I lived that I had no time for correspondence. But in January I read Edith’s article about an Ontario murder ballad in the Bulletin, and in May I saw a story in the Sun reporting that Edith had won the $2,000 Vicky Metcalf Award honouring authors writing for young people. I made a note to myself to write and congratulate her, but alas, I failed to do so. In July there was a call from Toronto from Edith. They were both fine, and she planned to visit the UK in August.

In February 1986, there was another call from Edith. She hadn’t heard from me for a long time. She and Frank were both fine, and she would be out here for a meeting in May. On May 29th I went out to Gage Towers and had lunch with Edith and Judy Merrill, got caught up on their news. On November 1, I was back at UBC for the AGM of the Canadian Folk Music Society. I listened to the last part of the Captain Cates workshop, talked to Edith and to Phil Thomas, then went to other workshops. Afterwards Phil and Hilda Thomas and Edith and I shared a Chinese dinner. They left in the car for a concert and dance at the ANZA Club and I bussed home.

In 1988 I found another snippet of news in the Sun, a review of Edith’s latest book, on children’s games.

Our next meeting was in 1991. On the 4th of June Edith and Frank were in Vancouver, en route to an Alaska cruise. Al Cox joined us, then Barry Hall. We had a pleasant evening, with songs by Hilda, Barry, Phil, Al and myself, and lots of talk and laughter. Then Phil drove Edith and Frank to their hotel in Richmond and dropped me at a convenient bus stop.

In 1991, I received a song book and greetings from Eric Winter. Edith had taken the photo used on the cover.

In May of 1993 I was in Toronto at the AGM of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada. On our only free night I took the subway to Warden, as arranged earlier, and Frank met me. I think Frank told me he was 93 but said him only 89. For "only" 89, he was doing well except for some loss of hearing. Edith was doing well too, though a little fragile.

In April of 1995 I wrote to Edith thanking her for the introduction to my memoir in the Bulletin and giving her news of myself, my three children, six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. Later I sent her another copy of my songbook. She responded in May, enclosing various information I needed for this article.

I know Edith has been a great help to folksingers and collectors all across Canada and elsewhere. She is still stretching out a helping hand to us through her books, her articles, and her records, and it is a process that goes on and on. Thank you, Edith, on behalf of all of us. And my personal "thank you" for doing my laundry when you stayed in my bedsit at Tooting Bec and leaving a cheque to help with the rent and phone. And for sending me $100 when I was broke in Mexico, needing money to get back to Vancouver and find another job. Thank you for allowing me to become acquainted with your Basenjis, Sherry and her son Adam, and take them for walks. (A very strenuous business, I can assure you.) And for introducing me to so many of your friends, some of whom have since become friends of mine as well.

I have only one regret. I know that later on you began playing bridge and soon became an expert, and I wish I had been able to see you operating in that venue. Ah well. Maybe next year.

---

1 The original title was "The Long Night"; it was published in Maclean’s magazine on April 15, 1953, and resold to John Bull, a British magazine, but their fiction editor had the story rewritten to give it a British setting and make it conform to English police systems. After that the John Bull version was resold to Danish and Dutch magazines under a new title, "Who Has Seen This Man?" The man who did the rewrite, J.C. Storey, asked for the right to adapt it for television and this was granted, subject to my approval of the script, but it was never received. I have copies of the Dutch and Danish publications, and I used to have a copy of John Bull, but it has disappeared. This annoys me because I am pretty sure that the story Edith adapted for radio was the John Bull version. Edith’s script was entitled "Flood on the Goodwins." I don’t know where that title came from, certainly not from me. The Goodwins are in the Straits of Dover, and my original story was set in Canada and the USA. It was broadcast by CBC over the Halifax station.

2 A doctor later found I had cracked ribs. He prescribed pain-killers, which helped me to get through a two-night booking at the Regina Folk Guild. Then I got a lift to Calgary for another gig. As a result of that accident, my lawyer managed to extract $3,000 from the bus company, and I immediately arranged for the publication of the Vera Johnson Song Book No. 1. I frequently tell people that No. 2 will be out as soon as I can arrange another bus accident.