

Loss of the John Harvey and Union of St. John's

By Maureen Chafe

In 1994 I began researching the folk music traditions of Conception Bay North, Newfoundland. My original purpose was to document folk songs from oral tradition in this small section of Newfoundland's east coast. After two months in the region, I had more than enough material to satisfy the requirements for the thesis that I was writing to finish the M.Mus. program at the University of Calgary. I was amazed at the quality and quantity of 'authentic' folk music that I found there. This initial visit whetted my appetite for more. I have since made numerous visits to the area, tape recorder in hand, in search of more songs.

Newfoundland folk music and lore is rich with songs and stories concerning ships and life on the sea. The two songs that I have chosen to include here are stories about the loss of ships and men's lives to those infamous storms that rage the North Atlantic. The first, *Loss of the John Harvey*, recounts the fate of a schooner that sailed the Atlantic Seaboard in the early Twentieth century. The second recollects the tragic story of the *Union*. This vessel capsized in a storm and was subsequently boarded by the crew of another ship, who found a number of men killed.

Stories concerning the fate of the schooner *John Harvey* and its crew are known on the South Coast of Newfoundland both in story and song. The only other recorded variant of this song that I know of can be found in Kenneth Peacock's *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*. Peacock collected it from Kenneth Pink of Rose Blanche in 1959. The historical facts of the shipwreck are the same, but the melodies used by each singer differ greatly. Al Stacey sang this variant of *The Loss of the John Harvey* for me on November 8, 1994. Mr. Stacey learned the song from his Grandfather.

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Two Newfoundland Folk Songs:

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On November 11, 1994 I was fortunate enough to be in the home of Jack Kehoe and to hear him and his brother Tom piece together this old song that they learned from their parents. The *Union of St. John's* originated as an American Broadside ballad, perhaps as far back as the 1820's. The fifteen original verses can be found published in *Minstrelsy of Maine: Folk Songs and Ballads of the Woods and Coast*.

In the 1850's *The Union* was one of the best-known songs in Maine, but in 1927, the authors of *Minstrelsy of Maine* found that it was no longer in oral tradition. They write: "Of all the songs we have tried to find, none has been so hard to recover as this of the *Union*." Laws includes this song in his *Native American Balladry* (dD32), he does so only in the appendix under the designation "ballads contributed to collectors without evidence that they are still being sung." In Newfoundland, however, there is record of *The Union* in oral tradition many times in the Twentieth Century.

There is some confusion over whether the vessel hailed from St. John's, Newfoundland or St. John, New Brunswick. Lehr writes "The ship could possibly have been from Newfoundland since there were two (and possibly more) wrecks recorded of ships named the *Union* from Newfoundland around that time." The place where the shipwreck occurred is also in question. In the Kehoe variant given here and in Peacock it is Bellow's rock. In another Newfoundland variant it is 'Mount Bernard Rock' and the original broadside is 'Mount Desert Rock'.

Kenneth Peacock collected *The Union* from three separate locations in Newfoundland between the years 1952 and 1958. Anita Best collected it in two different places in 1976 and 1980. In Maine it was often sung at lumber camps where "the soloist took the song while the crew, after every stanza, came in on a rousing chorus of *The Union of Saint*

John, my boys, The Union of Saint John." There is no indication of this performance practice in Newfoundland.

A beautiful recording of this ballad sung by Newfoundland singers Anita Best and Pamela Morgan can be found on "All the Best: Folk Music of St. John's, Newfoundland" Pigeon Inlet Production PIPCD-7322.

Folk music traditions appear to be alive and well in Conception Bay North, Newfoundland. There remain advocates of Newfoundland's folk culture who sing and play music as they always have, developing in the wake of changing musical climates, but never disappearing. It will be interesting to note whether these two songs of tragic shipwrecks will remain in oral tradition in the future.

Looking for . . .

We're looking for several persons whose articles were published in past editions of the Journal. We have since lost track of them.

If anyone of our readers can supply contact information, such as a current postal address, or a current email address, we would be most grateful.

Hugues-Jocelyn Cano, Journal Vol. 18 Jennifer J. Connor, Journal Vol. 14 C. J. Hendrickson, Journal Vol. 10 Miles Krassen, Journal Vol. 2 Robert Paquin, Journal Vol. 8 Anthony Proracki, Journal Vol. 2

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