

by Allan Kirby

Edith Fowke and Traditional Music in Rural Ontario

I have lived most of my life in Northumberland County in the Canadian province of Ontario. The northern border of Northumberland County is also the southern border of Peterborough County. For years I played country, folk and bluegrass music with various groups throughout both of these counties. For most of that time, I did not realize the significance of the places that I played or the people that I met.

It was only when I began to study folk music and music history at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario that I learned of the importance of Peterborough County in Canadian folk song history. I was surprised to discover that it was in Peterborough County where the noted Canadian folklorist, author, broadcaster, and song collector, Edith Fowke began her extensive fieldwork. Throughout her entire song collecting career she visited the county on a regular basis.

In February of 1998, while visiting the archives at Trent University in Peterborough, I came across a typewritten manuscript prepared by Edith Fowke. The eight page manuscript, titled "Folk Songs of Peterborough", is an essay which appears to have been written around 1965. In this work, Edith mentions that it was generally assumed in the 1950's that Ontario had few folk songs and it was probably too late to find any that might have existed. Nevertheless, she bought a tape recorder in the autumn of 1956 and decided to do some looking around. (Fowke, 1965)

Edith describes, in this manuscript, her first excursions to Peterborough County. She said that she started there because it had been settled by Irish colonists and friends had told her that descendants of these original settlers still lived in the area. In the fall of 1956, Edith went to Peterborough County and met with Nick Nickells of the local newspaper, the *Peterborough Examiner*. He had considerable information about the older residents of the area and put Edith in touch with William Towns of Douro Township. Edith visited William Towns at his general store in the village of Douro and asked him if he could tell her of anyone interested in older songs. William replied that his wife Mary sang some old songs, as did his father in law, Michael Cleary. Edith's first recording session took place shortly thereafter, in the Town's home located directly behind the store.

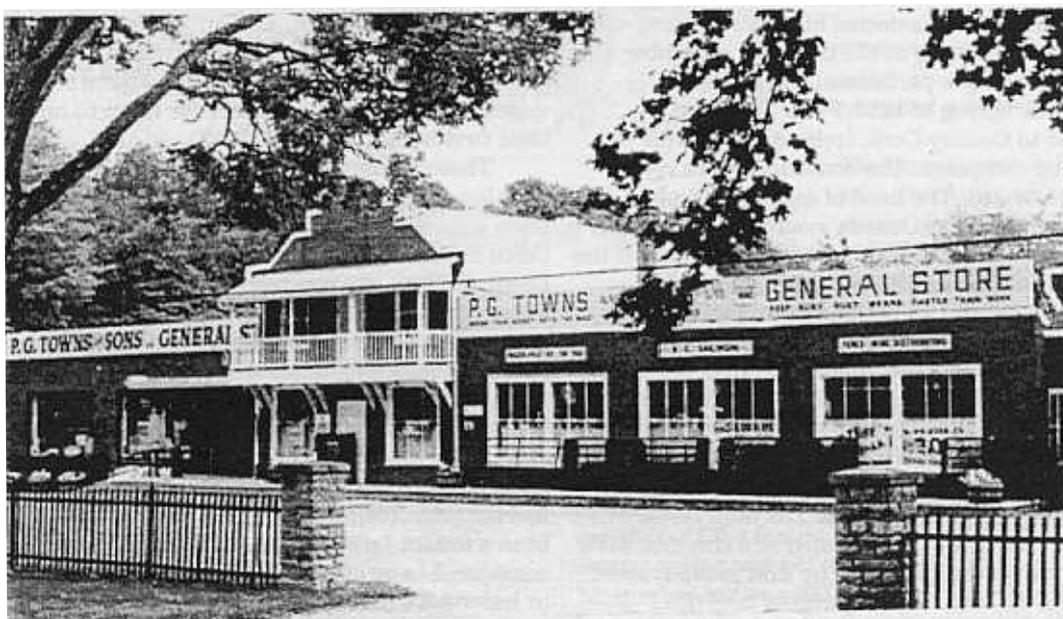
More than forty-two years after Edith Fowke first visited William Towns in his large general store in Douro, Ontario, I went to the same place. I had been there many times before, but when I visited in February of 1998, I did so with a sense of history and a vision of Edith Fowke being there. Douro is just east of Peterborough, but it is very

muh out of the way. There are no major highways nearby and the road into the village is virtually free of traffic. St. Josephs Roman Catholic Church and the large P.G. Towns General Store still dominate the village centre. When in the centre of Douro, I always get the feeling that this is a place that has changed very little over the past century.

Inside the P.G. Towns General Store, the atmosphere is rustic and friendly. William Towns' son Michael now operates the store. He is a warm and neighborly individual who still prefers to greet his customers by name. He readily recalls the visits of Edith Fowke to the store. He remembers 1956 when Edith recorded his mother Mary Towns and his grandfather Michael Cleary. Edith visited the

singers was outstanding. Edith Fowke's field trips yielded studio quality recordings. A number of these were selected to produce an album titled Folk Songs of Ontario. The album was released by Folkways Records of New York City in 1958. Folkways released a second album, Lumbering Songs from the Ontario Shanties in 1961. This album was made almost exclusively from Edith's Peterborough area recordings.

An interesting characteristic that distinguished many of the singers in Peterborough County, according to Edith, was that they not only sang songs that could be traced to 19th century Ireland, but that they also sang newer songs that detailed the way of life of the pioneers and



P.G. Towns General Store

store and the Towns home, located behind the store, on a regular basis for many years. Edith was impressed by the quality of the voice of Mary Towns. She was also struck by the fact that the songs sung by Mary Towns and Michael Cleary were Irish ballads that could be easily traced back to the 19th century. Edith recorded dozens of songs at the Towns home and would eventually select two of the Mary Towns recordings for a Folkways record album.

Edith Fowke traveled with a very high quality tape recorder. She preferred to record her informants in their own homes. She felt that this created a comfortable atmosphere in which the singers were readily able to recall and perform songs with ease. At times, the performance of these

subsequent generations in rural Ontario. A large number of the songs told of life in the lumber camps. There were also songs about farmers, politicians, accidents, illness, and leisure activities.

An example of a singer from Peterborough County, who had a combined knowledge of both the old and the more contemporary folk songs, was John Leahy. As far as I can determine, he was probably the third singer ever to be recorded by Edith Fowke, following Mary Towns and Michael Cleary. Edith became aware of John Francis Leahy through the Towns family. He lived on a farm located on the 7th concession of Douro Township. The Leahy family, like the Towns family had come to Peterborough County in 1825 as a part of the Peter Robinson Immigration.

The history of this immigration helps to explain why Peterborough County is so rich in Irish folksong and story. In 1822, the British government decided to undertake an experimental emigration scheme to alleviate the distress in the south of Ireland caused by overcrowded conditions, poverty, and unemployment. Britain was particularly concerned with the rising crime rate in the area along with the possibility of a rebellion. The British Under Secretary of Colonial Affairs, Robert Wilmot Horton, wrote Sir John Beverley Robinson, the Attorney General for Upper Canada, and asked him to appoint a suitable man to oversee a planned emigration. The man had to be a Canadian since he was to accompany the settlers from Ireland to Canada and help them establish themselves on their land. Sir John selected his older brother, Peter Robinson, who at the time was a member of the Upper Canada parliament. (Bennett, 1987)

In the spring of 1823, Peter Robinson travelled to County Cork, Ireland to begin his recruiting campaign. The conditions were very straightforward. The head of each family who emigrated to Upper Canada would receive a ticket for 70 acres of land which he was to cultivate. If the land was cultivated within 3 years, he would receive a deed and an option to purchase another 30 acres for 10 pounds. If it wasn't cultivated, he would have to pay rent. (Bennett, 1987)

Peter Robinson limited the emigrants to those who had no assets or capital whatsoever. They had to be paupers. He also imposed an arbitrary age limit of 45 years old or less, although some exceptions were made to this. The final result was that just over 2500 men, women and children were chosen for the emigration. The first group crossed the ocean in 1823. The majority of the Irish emigrants were in the second group which left Ireland in May of 1825. Throughout that month, 2024 men women and children were loaded onto

nine ships, which set sail for Canada. (Bennett, 1987)

The month long voyage was difficult for the pioneers who were confined to small narrow bunks in the holds of the ships. They were not allowed on deck for the entire trip. They were sick and exhausted when they docked in Quebec City in June. By the end of July they had been moved to Kingston, Ontario. They camped there for a few weeks and were organized into various groups. In August, 1825, 500 of the settlers travelled to Cobourg, Ontario by steamboat and then north to Rice Lake by ox cart. The final leg of the trip was by rowboat from Rice Lake to a place on the Ottonabee river where they disembarked. This place on the Ottonabee river would be named Peterborough in 1826 in honour of Peter Robinson. It was there that Robinson organized the settlers, gave them provisions for their first winter in the woods, and provided assistance for them to build their first home. (Bennett, 1987)

These settlers may have arrived in Canada with few worldly possessions, but they had with them a treasure of Irish folk song and story. When Edith Fowke recorded the songs of John Francis Leahy in 1956, she was recording the results of a Canadian oral tradition that reached back four generations to his great, great, great, grandfather Michael Leahy. Michael was one of the few immigrants of 1825 who exceeded the arbitrary 45 year-old age limit. He was 56 years old when he came, with his family to Peterborough County. He had been selected, in spite of his age, because he had considerable agricultural experience, having been a tenant farmer. As well, his family was considered to be of fine character. They had toiled in Ireland for the Earl of Kingston who after renovating his estate wanted to be rid of his tenants. (Diamond, 1985)

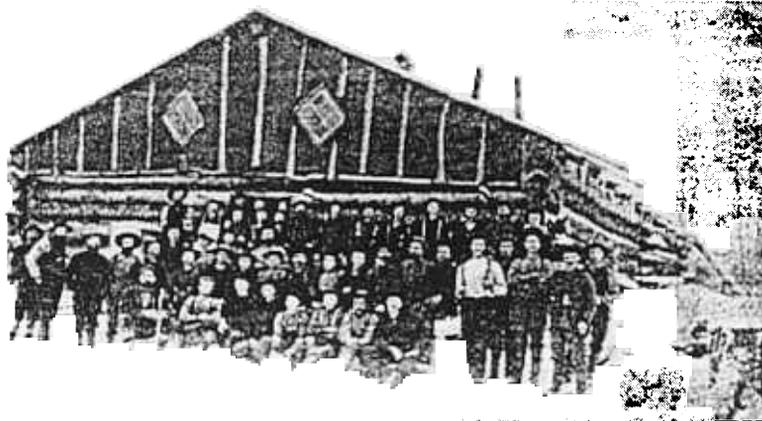
Michael Leahy and his family cleared their Peterborough County land and soon their farm enabled them to live in considerably more comfort than they were used to in Ireland. As the family grew, more farms were acquired. By the middle of the 19th century, the Leahy family was a very well established and respected part of the Peterborough County farming community.

One member of the second generation of the family was John M. Leahy. He was a great grandson of the pioneer Michael Leahy. He was born in 1865 and because of his dark hair and complexion, he was given the nickname "Black Jack". Black Jack grew naturally into the farming life in Peterborough County. He was an entrepreneur. He sold beef, eggs, poultry, milk, and vegetables throughout most of the year. In the winter, however, Black Jack worked in the nearby lumber camps. (Diamond, 1985) Edith Fowke noted



An original Peterborough County Homestead:
A.Kirby

that Peterborough was the centre of a flourishing lumber trade in the 19th century, and every little town in the vicinity had its own lumber mill. She attributes the survival of the Ontario folk songs to the lumber camps. She collected most of her songs



Lumber shanty in Peterborough County, circa 1865: Courtesy Peterborough Centennial Museum and Archives

either from men who worked in the woods or from men and women whose fathers, uncles, and grandfathers had gone to the lumber shanties. (Fowke, 1961)

It is quite probable that when Black Jack worked in the lumber camps, he learned a significant number of shanty songs. These songs would compliment the older Irish ballads as part of the Leahy family oral music tradition. Other influences in the family music tradition came through marriage. Ann Milloy was another descendent of the settlers who had come to the area through the Peter Robinson immigration. She lived in the village of Downeyville and in 1894, she married Black Jack Leahy. Ann loved music and carried with her a abundance of songs learned in the oral tradition. She hosted parties and dances at the Leahy farm house. She played the violin, sang, and told stories. A song composed by Michael Diamond tells of Ann Milloy, the following is the first verse:

*Now I've travelled all over the country, in the
States and Ontario too,
I've danced in the backwoods of Douro, and
I've found a young lady to woo,
She's a step-dancin' fiddlin' lady, so sweet she
makes my heart thrill,
And she sings like a lark in the morning,
young Annie from sweet Downeyville.*

(Diamond, 1985, p.146)

Downeyville is located east of the Peterborough County Line, a considerable distance

from Douro. It is uncertain how Black Jack Leahy ever came to be in Downeyville to meet Annie. However, according to this local poem by Mary Milloy Harrington, Downeyville did have a reputation as an excellent location to quench one's thirst. The following is a verse from the poem "The Hotels":

*"The Cross" was where the
main roads crossed, in the
village of Downeyville,*

*There were three hotels
located there, and every
day they'd fill,*

*With men who came from
miles around, who
travelled near or far,*

*They would stop to have
friendly chat, and a sip
across the bar.*

*By: Mary Milloy Harrington
(Diamond, 1985, p.255)*

Ann and Black Jack had 3 boys and 2 girls. Their third son, John Francis Leahy, was born in 1902. Ann taught him to sing and dance. She taught him the songs of the Ontario lumber camps and she taught him the older songs of Ireland. It is likely that she passed on songs that she had learned from her father, her husband, and other members of the family. A wealth of folk songs and stories were passed on to John Francis Leahy by his mother in the oral tradition. It was a gift that he carried with him for the rest of his life. It is possible that the songs and stories may have eventually been lost if it were not for Edith Fowke. As luck would have it, in the fall of 1956, Edith Fowke found her way to the Leahy farm in Douro Township.

Edith recorded John Francis Leahy on the original farm that had been given to the family when they came to Douro as part of the Peter Robinson settlers in 1825. When John sang for Edith, he sang both the older Irish folk songs and the more contemporary songs that told of the lumberjacks and life in the woods. For example, in 1958, Edith recorded John singing a song that she considered to be quite rare:

I'll eat when I'm hungry and drink when I'm dry

*If the water don't drown me, I'll live t'ill I die
If the water don't drown me while over it I roam,*

For I am a river driver and far away from home.

(Fowke, 1970, p.203)

The oral tradition in Peterborough County was an accepted part of the culture well into the 20th century. By most accounts, learning songs in the oral tradition was fun. In 1977, Mary Towns recalled how she had learned some of the songs from her father:

It was so nice in the winter with the fire on and the lamp lighted with us around the table to do our homework and my father singing away with perhaps his feet up on the front damper of the wood stove. Then maybe some relatives or friends would drop in for a while, which made a real little party of singing, and always a nice cup of tea and lunch before they left. We so often sang on the sleigh in the winter going visiting. My father told us many times that when he was young they would go, a group on a wagon or sleigh and when they arrived to the house, they would not have a song finished. They mostly always finished it before anyone got off the wagon or sleigh.

(Towns, 1977)

Edith Fowke not only recorded these Irish descendants, she also befriended them. Michael Towns told me Edith Fowke regularly exchanged letters and visits with his singing mother, Mary Towns. Edith also encouraged these folk singers to perform for the public. She felt that folk music was meant to be shared. Edith invited Mary Towns to perform at the International Folk Council Meeting in Quebec City in 1961. A few years later, Mary performed at the Mariposa Folk Festival, held at Innis Lake, Ontario. John Leahy was also invited by Edith to perform in public. He made his first appearance at the Mariposa Folk festival on the Toronto Islands in 1969. In his book, The Children of the Settlers, Michael Diamond describes John Leahy's first appearance at the festival:

John and several others from Douro were invited to appear there in 1969. The invitation was by Mrs. Edith Fowke, an expert in the field of folksongs... It was the farthest John had ever travelled away from home in his lifetime. Gathered at the Festival was an assortment of musicians, singers, hippies, yuppies and back to earth

types...John stepped up onto the stage. In his clear voice and Irish brogue he sang a song about the frogs croaking in the marshes and the tree toads a'whistling for rain. A silence descended upon the crowd as they listened intently to the words of a song they had never heard before.

Enchanted by its story, they demanded he sing another and another. Being well educated in music they understood that here before them was a living link with Ontario's past, someone unique who had preserved the songs and stories of the shantyboys.

(Diamond, 1985, p.160)

That first song that John Leahy sang at Mariposa was originally recorded by Edith Fowke at John's Peterborough County home in 1958. She transcribed it and it was published in Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods as "Johnny Murphy". The first verse of seven is as follows:

*One evening last June as I rambled, all over the hills and valleys alone,
The mosquitee notes was melodious, how merry the whippoorwill sang
The frogs in the marshes was croaking, and the treetoads were whistling for rain,
And the partridge around me were drumming, on the banks of the Little L'eu Pleine.*

(Fowke, 1971, pp.100-102)

Edith noted that this song was not common to Ontario and John Leahy was the only one who ever sang it for her. The song had originated in Wisconsin in the 1870's and travelled east through the lumber camps.

Once Edith started recording in Peterborough County, she couldn't stop. One informant led to another. For example, Mary Towns or John Leahy told Edith about Dave McMahan, another local farmer with an extensive repertoire of songs. Dave was born in 1903 and was also of Irish descent. He



19th century Peterborough County Barn: A.Kirby

was raised on a Douro Township farm and spent his winters in the lumbering shanties when he was young. Edith recorded him at his farmhouse. She then went across the road and recorded his brother, Bob McMahon. This was typical of how Edith travelled throughout the county for the next nine years recording hundreds of songs from more than a dozen singers.

Edith Fowke discovered more than lumbering songs and Irish ballads in Peterborough County. It was a farming area and there were agricultural songs. In these songs it was common to include the names of local individuals. The following is a verse from the "Threshing Song":

*Oh the first man came there was Laddie
McBrick
He swore by his maker the straw came out
quick
He called for a hand to give aid on the stacks
We're threshing by steam says Hickson Red
Jack*

(Fowke, 1967, p. 396)

As Edith increased her Peterborough County song collection, she found songs with a strictly local focus. These were usually known by a large number of the local singers. Typical of the local songs was "Johnston's Hotel". It discussed the finer points of the Peterborough County Jail during the term of Magistrate Dalton Johnston. The following is a verse:

*If you want free board at Johnston's Hotel
Just ramble down George Street a raising hell.
Dry bread and water don't cost you a cent
Your lights and water go on your back rent.*

(Fowke, 1967, p. 396)

Frank Leahy was born in Peterborough County in 1875 and like John Leahy, he was a great grandson of the pioneer Michael Leahy. Frank became a prominent member of the Peterborough County farming community and he also became a well known violin player. In 1911, he married Agnes Garvey who played the organ. This union resulted in four sons who were exceptional fiddle players. More than a few nights on the farm were spent playing music.

One of these fiddle-playing sons is Frank Leahy Jr. who now farms in Peterborough County near the town of Lakefield. He and his wife Julia, a champion step-dancer, have 11 children. Each of these children learned to step-dance, play the violin, and perform on at least one other musical instrument. In the early 1980s they entertained throughout the county as The Leahy Family. When their reputation grew, they travelled and entertained across Canada and parts of the United States. In 1985, The Leahy Family was the subject of an award winning documentary film.

In the 1990's, the family members changed the group name to Leahy. Leahy would become one of the supergroups of celtic music, touring throughout North America and Europe. In 1998 and 1999 they won Juno awards and on one of their European tours, they went to Dublin, Ireland to perform and record with the traditional Irish group, The Chieftans. When this occurred, the Leahy family brought their musical tradition full circle. It was their great, great, great grandfather,



The Village of Douro, Peterborough County, Ontario: A.Kirby

Michael Leahy who departed County Cork, Ireland in 1825 to settle in Peterborough County, Canada.

In the liner notes for the 1961 Folkways Album, Lumbering Songs from the Ontario Shanties, Edith Fowke writes:

The most fruitful area for song collecting I have discovered so far is the region around Peterborough, some ninety miles north-east of Toronto. There among the Irish-Canadians whose ancestors first came to this land in 1825, I found some of the best traditional singers that I have ever heard.

(Fowke, 1961)

Alan Kirby, a past contributor to The Bulletin, is a musician living in Northumberland County, Ontario.

Bibliography:

Bennett, C. (1987). Peter Robinson's settlers. Renfrew, ON: Juniper Books.

Diamond, C. M. (1985). The children of the settlers. Oshawa, ON: Maracle Press.

Fowke, E. (c.1965). Folk songs of Peterborough. unpublished manuscript. Peterborough, ON: Trent University Archives. manuscript # 97-1016.

Fowke, E. (1958). record album liner notes from Folk Songs of Ontario. Folkways Record Album No. FM4005. New York: Folkways Records.

Fowke, E. (1961). record album liner notes from Lumbering songs from the Ontario shanties. Folkway Records Album No. FM4052. New York: Folkways Records.

Fowke, E. (1967). Folksongs of the county. In Borg, R. (ed.) Peterborough: Land of shining waters: An anthology (pp. 391-398). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Fowke, E. (1970). Lumbering songs from the northern woods. Austin TX, University of Texas Press.

Towns, M. (1977). Mary Towns. In Usher, B. & Page-Harpa, L. (eds.) For what time I am in this world: Stories from Mariposa (pp. 37-38). Toronto: Peter Martin Associates. (p 38.)

Good News for Child Ballad Lovers!

First, there is now a website containing all the versions of all 305 Child ballads. It lacks the notes of Dr. Child himself, but this a major boon to devotees of the Child ballad.

<http://ling.ill.hawaii.edu/faculty/stampe/OraL-Lit/English/Child-Ballads/child.html>

Second, as we all know, the printed collections of the Child ballads have been out-of-print for eons. They've been selling at astronomical sums in used bookstores and on eBay. But, Loomis House Press is now in the process of re-printing all five volumes. The first volume (with additional notes) is currently available in paperback at \$25 (U.S.), a great bargain.

<http://www.loomishousepress.com/child/index.html>