

Festivals in New Brunswick

by Ronald Labelle

This year, the 25th annual Miramichi Folk Song Festival will be held between July 1st and 3rd in Newcastle, New Brunswick. Although after 25 years, the festival should have become a vital well established institution in the Miramichi area, the reality is that it is now in decline. Each year there are fewer of the old ballad singers present. Their place is often taken by local singers who do not possess the rich and unique repertoire of their elders. The festival is slowly being transformed into an annual local amateur concert. The crowds that used to flock to the festival are also becoming thinner. Five years ago, it was standing room only in the Newcastle Town Hall where the Festival is held. But attendance has decreased each year and in 1981 the hall was only half filled.

It seems Canada's oldest annual folk festival will continue its decline as more of the old singers disappear. The most famous of the Miramichi ballad singers, Wilmot MacDonald, may be absent this year because of failing health. Among the excellent singers that folklorists used to travel hundreds of miles to hear, only a few remain, such as Allan Kelly and Marie Hare.

When people talk about the festival these days, they often reminisce about past festivals and how the event has lost its vigour. The

absence of the old singers is always mentioned as the cause of the decline, but there are perhaps deeper problems affecting the festival. The event has always been strongly identified with the Miramichi area. Nearly all the performers are from the region and they sing about a way of life that was common to the people there. Local ballads tell of life in the lumber-camps, of log-driving on rivers, and of adventures at sea.

Today, the Miramichi has lost its prominence in the field of forestry and shipping. Institutions founded in Chatham have either closed their doors or moved elsewhere. The area suffers from neglect and decline, as young people leave in great numbers. The pride that was once the Miramichi has obviously suffered because of these problems.

The Miramichi Folk Song Festival was a reflection of the cultural richness of the region. Like the other truly authentic folk festivals in Canada, it represented a regional culture and expressed the pride felt by members of the culture. It seems the festival has become another casualty in the decline of the Miramichi.

The participation of younger members of the community is important to the vitality and success of a festival. Young people of the Miramichi have not taken an interest in their cultural heritage and it seems that local ballads will only be preserved by outsiders who come to collect them. One rare exception to this is Mrs. Germaine Smith, daughter of Allan Kelly, who knows many of the traditional songs in her father's repertoire. As the years go by, the Miramichi festival is drawing near to its close. Mrs. Maisy Mitchell, the organizer, hopes each year to find a younger person to take over her duties. She has so far failed. At 83 years of age, Mrs. Mitchell is understandably concerned about the lack of a successor.

The question may be asked why New Brunswickers in general care so little about their only folk festival. Both French and English speaking New Brunswickers hold numerous local events such as summer festivals, fiddle contests and fairs but no attempt is made to establish an annual folk festival with a wider significance. Many cultural events are organized by the French language population but folk music has often only a marginal importance in these festivities. The "Frolic Acadier", an outdoor concert which was held every summer in a field in Cap-Pele, was disbanded in 1980 because of organizational and administrative problems. The "Frolic" was both a folk and rock festival, and suffered from the same problems that plagued festivals of the kind elsewhere. The "Festival Acadier" in Caraquet has taken on importance in recent years as a focal point for Acadian culture in New Brunswick, but folk music is not given a predominant role among the festivities which serve to highlight Acadian nationalism. Since 1980, the "Foire Brayonne" has become a cultural festival for the people of the Madawaska area in north-western New Brunswick, but there again folk music is only one of many elements in the festivities which are intended to show that the "Republic of Madawaska" has an identity of its own.

It would be hoped that organizers of the festivities marking the 200th anniversary of the province of New Brunswick in 1984, will be able to organize an event to unit New Brunswickers in a celebration of the rich and varied folk traditions of the peoples inhabiting the province. If that were to take place, then perhaps the decline of the Miramichi festival would be succeeded by the birth of a provincial folk festival. Such a festival would prevent authentic New Brunswick folk music from disappearing from the public stage.

