



The Chapeau Boys

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Tracking Down the Chapeau Boys

by I. Sheldon Posen

"It's a story. It's a *wonderful* story. It's a *hell* of a wonderful story." O'Kane Payne blinked and beamed at me across the formica top of his kitchen table. We were sitting in his farmhouse just outside Chapeau, Quebec — a village of 250 on the Ottawa River, across from Pembroke. The 'story' the 67-year-old former logger and cattleman was so keenly praising wasn't really a story, but the plot of a locally composed song.

"Yes," he said, "they hired here from Chapeau and went to Pembroke and went up the lake there, spent all winter, do you see, in the lumber camp and came back home in the spring. Oh boy, it's a dandy song, for sure!"

It is also the most popular traditional song ever to come out of the Ottawa Valley. It may even be the widest known, most imitated and most borrowed-from song relating to a specific Canadian locale other than "The Red River Valley." It is called *The Chapeau Boys*, and in the spring of this year it celebrated its 100th birthday.

There are not many places you find century-old ballads still talked about, let alone sung, as if they had been written yesterday. Practically everyone around Chapeau remembers or knows someone—most men over fifty — who went to the camps or worked on the drive, the operations memorialized in the song. And logging still figures in the economy of the village, although some things about it have changed. Steamboats and three-day hikes into the camp have been replaced by a daily commute in the half-ton. Saws are driven by gasoline, not muscle, and the old horse teams have given way to skidders — specially-fitted caterpillar tractors — that can go *almost* all the places a horse could. But in spirit, if not technology, *The Chapeau Boys*

Paddy Gregg's living legacy

Most outsiders can follow the plot of the song pretty well. That's one of the reasons it has had such long-lasting and wide appeal. But interested readers may wish to know that "early roses" are a variety of potatoes; the sumptuous Russell Hotel stood on Confederation Square in Ottawa and was, from the 1860s to 1912, the gathering place of Ottawa society; "turkeys" refers to loggers' packsacks, a kind of home-made duffle bag; and "bones" are castanet-like instruments made from the rib bones of a beef or pig.

This version of the song comes from Lennox Gavan of Quyon, Quebec.

I'm a jolly young fello, Pat Gregg is my name
I live at the Chapeau, that village of fame
For singing and dancing and all sorts of fun
Sure, the boys from the Chapeau cannot be outdone.

A while on your patience I beg to intrude
I hired with Fitzgerald, he's agent for Booth
To go up on Black River so far far away
To the old Caldwell farm to cut and make hay.

We packed up our duds on the eleventh of July
Bob Humphrey, Girard, Ned Murphy and I
And straightway to Pembroke our luggage did take
We boarded the Empress and sailed up the lake.

We arrived at Fort William, that place you all know
We tuned up our violins and rosined our bow
Our silver strings rang out a clear trilling noise
And the Oiseau Rock echoed, "Well done, Chapeau boys!"

We arrived at Des Joachims, we landed all right
We walked fifteen miles up to Retty's that night
There we were welcomed, the truth for to speak
It was our desire to stay there a week.

But we left the next morning with good wishes and smiles
From there to the Caldwell was forty-six miles
North over the mountain Bob showed us the route
And when we got there we were nearly done out.

The board at the farm, the truth for to tell
Could not be surpassed in the Russell Hotel
We had roast beef and mutton, green tea sweet and strong
And the big early roses full six inches long.

We had custard, rice pudding, and sweet apple pies
Good bread and fresh butter which would you surprise
We had cabbage, cucumbers both pickled and raw
And the leg of a beaver Bob stole from a squaw.

When the haying was over we packed up our duds
We shouldered our turkeys and off to the woods
To fell the tall pine with our axes and saws
We terrified wild animals, wild Indians and squaws.

Now the boys from the Chapeau can dance and they sing
We feel just as happy as an emperor or king
We have seven fine fiddlers, there's none of them drones
And Michael my brother can rattle the bones.

When our drive it is over, I hope 'twill be soon
We expect to be down by the last week in June
And if God spares our lives to go home in the spring
We will make the new hall at the Chapeau to ring.

So now to conclude and to finish my song
I really believe I have kept you too long
Our cook's getting sleepy, he's nodding his head
So we'll all say our prayers, boys, and roll into bed.



is as much about Chapeau present as it is about Chapeau past.

It is also a clue to another side of life in this tiny community. Musically, Chapeau is something of a special place, and has been since the middle of the last century. If the Ottawa Valley represents the biggest lode of traditional singing in English this side of the Maritimes — and most folklore scholars would say it does—then the Chapeau area may be its richest and longest-lasting vein. Old songs, new songs, Irish lyrics, country-western tragedies, comical ditties, Victorian chestnuts, Child ballads, woods 'come-all-ye's', rock & roll hits — you can hear them all in Chapeau.

It isn't unusual to walk into Fred Meilleur's hotel on the village's main street on a Saturday afternoon and find a couple of 'the old lads' singing the old songs to each other over endless beers and Coke glasses full of white wine. Across the street at Keon's and later on at Fred's, touring bands play Irish or country music or rock & roll or all three.

Having any private gathering in town without including *The Chapeau Boys* would be like having a family party without inviting Grandpa. The song turns up at birthday parties, wedding parties, Christmas parties, card parties, welcome parties for strangers, farewell parties for anyone, parties to celebrate the opening of a welding business, mixed stags, male stags, box socials, barn dances, parish dances, kitchen sings, Friday evening sings in the back room of Meilleur's hotel, St. Patrick's Day sings in the front room of Meilleur's Hotel, high school concerts, concerts for the Golden Age Club, amateur night concerts, concerts to raise money for the Chapeau Merchants (the village's junior league baseball team), outings by bus, outings by car, truck rides to work and the odd tractor ride. When *The Chapeau Boys* is sung around Chapeau, people perk up and take notice. When it is played as a waltz (its tune is reminiscent of "Sweet Betsy From Pike"), people get up and dance to it, and they mouth the words silently as they twirl. The way that lovers have 'their song', that's the way Chapeau has *The Chapeau Boys*.

But the true measure of the song's status as a Valley classic is the breadth of its domain. Maine folklorist Edward Ives writes that a singer he worked with, Wilmott Macdonald of Glenwood, New Brunswick, learned *The Chapeau Boys* "right out of the *Family Herald* — a weekly rural newspaper published Canada-wide from 1895 to the 1960s. It printed songs requested by its readers in a column called 'Old Favourites'. The column, says Ives, "acted as a kind of folk-song clearinghouse for all of Canada." *The Chapeau Boys* appeared three times in 'Old Favourites'.

Any song that could be so attractive in so many places away from home must have something going for it besides hometown chauvinism. *The Chapeau Boys*, in fact, has something for practically everyone. It's specific enough with names and activities to give the listener a good bite of real Ottawa Valley experience, but general enough to make sense to someone who's never set foot in a lumber camp.



It's also about something that everyone understands: good times. Work is mentioned in *The Chapeau Boys*, but it never actually takes place in the song. Not that lumbermen are strangers to danger, even death. Both are acknowledged in the song, but a balance is struck between the worst the men were up against in making their living, and the best they could look for in making their lives. In *The Chapeau Boys*, death gets one line, life and its pleasures, forty-seven.

Ask anyone in Chapeau who wrote *The Chapeau Boys*, and they are likely just to quote you its first line: "I'm a jolly young fellow, Pat Gregg is my name." Gregg, who died in 1938, is still remembered around the village. When he was young, he worked in the lumber camps but, recalls O'Kain Payne, Gregg, as an adult, "was a river man. He worked for the ICO as an inspector." The ICO is the Upper Ottawa Improvement Company, the government-authorized river authority whose main task is regulating the traffic of softwood logs floating down to the saw-and-pulp mills along the river. Gregg patrolled his own neighborhood, the upper end of the Ottawa. Paddling a canoe alongside the great booms of logs, "he'd go up and down the river every second day or so," says Payne, "making sure that folks didn't take logs out."

Most memories of Gregg have to do, not with work, but with music and sociability. 'Jovial' is the word you hear most often in describing him. He was a great one to entertain. Payne remembers that Gregg smoked a meerschaum pipe that he'd take out of his mouth, putting its stem flat against his front teeth, "and he'd take his fingers and he'd tap out a tune on his teeth there—oh boy, would that ever be beautiful, eh?"



But his main instrument was the fiddle. “He was one of the leading fiddlers around,” said the late Jack Poirier, himself a fine fiddler in his day. “He could play it behind his back.” It was as a fiddler, not as a singer or composer, that Gregg figures most often in people’s recollections. The late Jimmie Marcotte, a farmer from Chichester who spent all his seventy-two years around Chapeau, recalled that “every time there’d be a wedding, Paddy’d get on at Chapeau Church. There was always a place for him to sit in the wedding couple’s buggy beside the teamsters. And he’d play the fiddle all the way back home to the party. Play at the party, too.”

Seventy-three-year-old Loy Gavan, one of Chapeau’s best singers, remembers as a youth driving some of the old people around the village every night during the Christmas season, visiting different houses. Gregg was one of those old people. “They used to have lots of wheat wine to

drink,” says Gavan. “Pat would play the violin and step dance, and we had a damn good time, you know, and play cards and have a dandy lunch every place we’d go.”

But, although Christmas saw its share of merriment, St. Patrick’s Day was Gregg’s day to shine. He wore a green suit, tie and hat in honor of the day, and he’d play the fiddle from the time he got up until early the next morning. Lennox Gavan, the famous Quyon hotelier and a fine interpreter of *The Chapeau Boys*, grew up in Chichester across from Chapeau and had to walk past Gregg’s house on his way up Chapeau Hill to school. He recalls that one St. Patrick’s Day, “Gregg was out there on the veranda playing the fiddle, and by the time I got there, there were about twelve or fifteen kids standing around with their book sacks. They hadn’t got up the hill yet. So I joined the gang. About eleven o’clock, the teacher sent somebody down to see where all the kids were. We were all still there, eating hot biscuits and maple syrup while he played and sang for us. He was a grand old fella.”

The person who remembers Gregg best is his daughter, Mary Houwen, a former schoolteacher now living in Renfrew. A tall, long-bones woman who smilingly refuses to tell her age, Houwen laughs easily as she talks about her father: “He was thin, about six-foot-one, and he sometimes used to smoke that old leaf tobacco.” She passes me a photograph of him, the only one she has. It is cracked and scaling, but I can see the face in soft focus, lined and mustached, with high forehead, bushy eyebrows, and heavily-lidded eyes that look off to the left. His hands hold a violin to his Adam’s apple and a bow across the strings. “I used to spend a lot of time with my father — I was his favorite. I’d go away with him for hours, fishing or just in the canoe. He showed me all the different leaves of trees, and I’d get him to tell me all the things he’d done.

“My father wrote *The Chapeau Boys* in 1884. I know that because he was born in 1863 and he told me he wrote it when he was twenty-one. He used to work in the logging camps and I guess a lot of it was composed maybe in his head and he’d write it down a little bit. When he came home, he finished it up, I guess. They sang it in the First World War. I know that because some guys that came back were talking to my father afterwards, and they told him, ‘Pat, they were singing your song in the trenches in France’.”

However vivid his daughter’s memories, though, Pat Gregg’s claim to the authorship of *The Chapeau Boys* has been seriously undermined over the past two decades. In 1966, the late Father Joseph E. Gravelle, the foremost genealogist and ‘unofficial historian’ of the Ottawa Valley,

published a newspaper article declaring the “the author of this famous song must not be confused with a younger Pat Gregg of Chapeau who played and sang it in the Chapeau Hall in the later years.” Rather, Father Gravelle asserted, according to genealogical evidence, it was this “younger” man’s grandfather who had written the song, and the year was 1870, not 1884.

Father Gravelle’s theory met with a sympathetic and influential audience. Two major collections containing Ottawa Valley lore —Edith Fowke’s *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* and Joan Finnigan’s *I Come from the Valley* — both reprinted *The Chapeau Boys* and Father Gravelle’s opinion along with it. Because both authors are well-known authorities in their respective fields, Father Gravelle’s theory is now taken as fact among folk-song scholars and readers of popular Valley literature.

As it turns out, Father Gravelle was wrong. There is a detail in *The Chapeau Boys* that shows the song couldn’t possibly have been written in 1870. That detail occurs in the third verse: “We boarded the *Empress* and sailed up the lake.” Gilles Seguin, an archivist at the University of Ottawa who has a passion for anything to do with the Ottawa River, has done copious research into the steamboats that used to ply the river from Lake Temiskaming to Lachine. Among his files there is the story of the *Empress*, gleaned from the federal Shipping Registers in the National Archives, and from crumbling, yellowed copies of the *Pembroke Observer* dating back to the 1860s, that proves the ship — a wooden paddle steamer — was built in 1876 (six years *after* Gravelle claimed *The Chapeau Boys* had been written) and sailed the Ottawa from 1880.

Seguin says the *Empress* ran only five years, but this short period wasn’t unusual. “Wooden hulled steamboats didn’t have much of a life span,” he says, “usually about seven years. The *Empress* lasted very well.” There are indications, he adds, that she was dismantled in 1890.

It doesn’t matter. With the *Empress* firmly placed on the Pembroke-Des Joachims run between the years 1880 and 1885, Chapeau tradition, Mrs. Houwen’s devotion to her father, and the late Pat Gregg’s say-so are all vindicated and upheld. This is the year to sing a happy 100th birthday to *The Chapeau Boys*.