

MY LIFE WAS NOT WASTED IN USELESS THINGS

by

Ernie T. Yardley

(ed. by George W. Lyon)

Among the attractions of folklore research, one of my favourites is that the activity provides the opportunity to meet some fascinating and vibrant people. After all, those people whom a researcher seeks out are those who have either filled significant parts of their lives with cultural activity or those in the audience or on the sidelines who've paid attention to what was going on. I've never had the opportunity to meet Ernie Yardley face to face, but I knew I liked him from the second or third letter he wrote, when he had gotten tired of being called "Mr. Yardley". "Call me Ernie," he finished off the letter, "or I won't write you again."

I'm not going to summarize Ernie's career, since he does such a good job of it himself, but I would add some comments about one of the groups he played with, the CFCN Old Timers. As Ernie tells you, the group was founded by Si Hopkins in 1927, and, with various changes in personnel, it lasted until 1981. It was one of the longest-running programs in the history of radio, outlasted only by the Grand Ol' Opry. Among the various comings and goings of players in the group, the Old Timers existed in two incarnations: that led by Hopkins, and that led by accordionist Tony Neidermayer, who took over the group in 1940. Ernie played in both aggregations.

George W. Lyon

I'll give you the history of myself as I remember. I was born in England in the year of 1903 and came to Canada in 1910, age 7. I had public school education and left home at 14, as my step-father and I didn't see eye to eye. He complained that I always had my nose in a book when I was home. So I left before I was thrown out. I passed Grade 8 into 9 with honours. I still read a lot of books, at least ten a month. That gave me my education, that and practical things. I taught myself, and I also taught myself quite a bit of electronics. I did most of my own work on my transmitter and talked to

Australia, Japan, some South Americans and a lot of American stations. Seems funny to look back on all I did without any tuition. I got to the top of my trade as a bricklayer and was internationally known for my banjo playing. I may not have a formal education, but I know a hell of a lot about anything you can name. I'm a good electrician, plumber, tinsmith, and was good as a lumberjack. I also ran a steam engine at threshing time. I still could get into the cab of a steam locomotive and wheel it away. I am not bragging. I am just saying what I know. I had a lot of bumps in my life, too.

I worked on farms and ranches and then went home, made peace of a kind with the old man, and went as an apprentice bricklayer.

I travelled all through the U.S.A. and got down to El Paso. My pal and I decided to go to Mexico and see what it was like. We were there about four months, and I learned a lot of Spanish words and phrases in that time. I learned enough to ask for most things I needed. I could never get used to Mexico's sweet cigarettes. Came back home, and I fought fire at Grand Forks, B.C., in 1925.

Got back to Calgary and back to my trade as a bricklayer. I travelled and worked at various jobs in between building, as brick work was seasonal in those days. Maybe a person would get three months' work in the year, and the rest of the time if you didn't rustle, you could go hungry. I ran an elevator in the McLean Block in Calgary and was houseman in the pool hall in the basement of the same building.¹

It all started at Lake Louise. We were building additional storeys to the hotel. I caught cold; it was 50 below zero, and we were laying brick in a heated cover.² I had pleurisy and pneumonia. On the way home, I stopped at Webb's music shop on 17th Avenue and bought a \$6.00 ukelele. I taught myself to strum it and learned the chords. That started me in the musical do at the Hitching Post theatre with Wilf Carter and a black man by the name, I believe, of Arnold Biggs. Myself singing with uke, Biggs stepdancing, and Wilf yodelling. I went the first time on a dare, and a bet of five bucks. That was the real start of the music. When I think back, it seems almost unbelievable that I had the nerve to go ahead and teach myself to read, write and play.

When I was about 19, I was able to buy a banjo in

the window of the Western music store. \$177.50. A book of banjo instructions came with it. I asked all over town where I could get a teacher and came up empty. In four months I could play the chords to most sheet music, which gave the names of the chords on top of the notation.

I danced to Ma Trainor's music when I was 16, and when I was at the dance I used to watch the banjo player, and I said to Ma, "I wish I could play the banjo like that."³ Over 25 years later, I was playing for her at a dance in the Crowsnest Pass, and she turned on the piano stool and said, "You're the best banjo player I ever played with." Sure made me feel good.

I could not get a job with an orchestra, so I practised with a few friends I knew. We made up a four-piece band: Harry Kelly on sax, Bert Bealing on drums, Red Kneeshaw on piano, and myself, banjo. One night I received a phone call, and this person asked if we would play for a dance after a whist drive in the Blythe Hall on 9th Avenue East. I called the boys, and they said, "OK," so that Saturday night we played the dance. After the dance was over and we were packing up, this man came up to me and asked if we would like to play for him in the Sandstone Hall on 8th Avenue East, over the English Shop in those days. I asked him who he was, and he said his name was Fred Hopkinson, and he could offer us five nights a week at \$5.00 per man and \$6.00 for the leader. I said, "Give me a written contract for 13 months, and it's a deal." So we had a steady job with him; later he shortened his name to Hopkins. We played Sandstone Hall for eight months, and the hall was condemned for dancing. My band broke up and Red and the boys got other work. Hopkins asked me if I wanted to play with a band he was making up. I said, "OK," and the Old Timers was born.

I am the only living member of the original group that formed the CFCN Old Timers: Si Hopkins, accordion, Stuart Young, drums and sax, Jack Sinclair, violin, Bill Tritter, piano, and myself, banjo and guitar.⁴ Previous to the Old Timers, CFCN had an old time music program called "Tom Smith and the Kid". Tom Smith was an old time fiddler. He and his son put on a program of old time square dance music. But the program did not last long.⁵

We barnstormed all of southern Alberta and arrived home to play the dance in the Elks Hall on Saturday

night and, of course, Friday night on CFCN. Then Hopkins got a real good accordion player, Lawrence Eidland, and then he got Pappy Watts, a wonderful addition to our group. He could play anything, and he took over piano, as Bill Tritter quit.

It was at Fred's house at rehearsal time that I first called him "Si". We had the "Si and Ebenezer" radio program on, and we were waiting for it to finish, as Peggy, Si's first wife, liked it. I turned to Fred and said, "Say, Si, why don't you and Lawrence really put on a good old accordion duet on our next program?" And the thing just stuck hard as glue. So he was "Si" from then on.

I played an S.S. Stewart guitar when I sang popular songs opposite Wilf Carter. He sang cowboy songs and I sang the pops for 13 years on the radio and in the halls we played in all over Alberta and into B.C. Also I played a mouth organ on one or two songs, and the jew's harp, maracas, and a lot of different things for effects.

Si died of liver trouble. He drank a bottle of gin every day, besides a lot of beer. His second wife was Blanche, and he had a son by her. He had no children by his first wife. Their divorce broke up the dance at the Elks Hall, as they ran it in partnership. She had a man friend standing by. So that left Fred to go East and bring back Blanche.

We had a lot of mail every week, as we played request numbers in those days. Our mail was real heavy at times, but we enjoyed playing the requests. And some were quite funny. One person in Los Angeles wrote in a request, and she thought Calgary was an outpost of the Hudson's Bay Co. Another request and a message up in the North - the daughter was having a baby, and her mother and dad were on their way and expected to reach them by the time the baby arrived. They were travelling by dog team and had to travel two weeks to reach the daughter. They made it, too, we were told later. So we had some interesting moments.

When touring B.C. in 1939, we played Proctor on the lake. We learned that the community hall had bought a huge radio with lots of power, just to get the Old Timers on Friday nights.⁶

Si sometimes played the banjo-mandolin in a square dance, but not always. The banjo-mandolin is tuned like

a violin, and Si played the violin most of the time in the square dances, and he played the accordion all the time in other music. He and Lawrence Eidland were background for the rest of us when we had no piano. Very few pianos were kept in tune in most country halls. The halls were only heated just the night of the dance.

Finally I got married and settled down to my trade and the music. My wife was a pianist in an orchestra in Vulcan. I was down there to work on the hospital. She was in the bank called Frank Bird and his Red Birds. He later came to Calgary and had a band in the Palliser Hotel, succeeding Ma Trainor, who had that job previously.⁷ She quit, and Frank took over, and he played there for some time, and then he died suddenly, and I don't know who was there after that. Mart Kenny came to Calgary from the coast and couldn't make a go of it.⁸ His band went East and made good. We closed Mart down at Chestermere Lake.⁹ We played a little country schoolhouse three miles away, and the schoolhouse was overflowing; they were dancing outside on the dirt in the yard. We did the same to the Silvertone Seven, another band from Vancouver which could not make a go of it in Calgary. We were playing Black Diamond, and they were playing Turner Valley.¹⁰ We were playing to large crowds and making good money. Ma Trainor was doing well with her Calgary Hill-Billies. We had some slack times, too, and at one time I played in four bands.

I also had my own band for a while, and I called them the Troubadors [sic]. We had a uniform: white shirt, black bow tie, cream pants and black cummerbund, black and white shoes. We were playing five nights a week, so we sure dressed up. Bert the drummer had a scene on the drum and flashing lights, and I had the same on the banjo. It really looked nice, and in those days it cost very little to rig out like that.

The Troubadors played for jitney dances at Sylvan Lake:¹¹ played three numbers of 4 or 5 minutes each, cleared the floor and then repeated it, from 9:00 until 1:00 in the morning. The money rolled in, and I was stuck with Si in Calgary. My contract with him backfired on me. So I had to turn the band over to Jack Eaton, piano. Jimmy Ostrom took my place as banjoiist. They made a lot of money, and if they had kept the Troubador name they would have done well after they were through at Sylvan Lake. They played at the Lake from the 24th of May until September 15th. Rent did

not start until June 15th, so they had over two weeks free to get settled into the routine of clearing the floor quickly, etc. They used two long ropes to circle the crowd and lead them to the exit area. The report came to me that their take each week exceeded \$150.00 per man after paying floor men and ticket sellers. When they quit in September, they changed the name to The Calgarians. The big money went to their heads, and they booked places and asked high admission. Went broke and quit. They did not give me a dime. I should have got 10 per cent agent's fee, but I was having marriage trouble and never thought of it till too late. As The Troubadors, the were thought to be an American band, they were so good.

The Depression had just started, and I was trying to find work at my trade, with not much hope.¹² I had to rely on the music for the next few years. We were making fair money playing, as much as \$70.00 some weeks and not less than \$23.00 bad weeks. I went contracting with two other bricklayers and went broke. Then I joined the Commissionaires as a security guard, as I had served in the Army in World War II. I was with them 8 1/2 years. A sax player named Tom Smith¹³ phoned me and asked if I would like to play banjo in his newly-formed band, so I went for a rehearsal and met the best lady piano player I had ever heard. True class and correct chord harmony. Really a treat to listen to. Her name is Nina E. Kendyfore, and we became good friends and are to this day. I knew Tom from way back, as I used to meet him on some of the streams we used to fish.

In 1962 Tom died of a heart attack, and Nina took over as boss. She took over the hall as well, the Al Azhar Shriners' Temple, on 17th Avenue and 4th Street SW. We played every Saturday night for ten years. Then the Al Azhar was closed for dances, and we just booked odd jobs around. Then Nina took a holiday to the coast, and when we got back she retired from her job at the Colonel Belcher Hospital and bought a house in B.C. and moved there. I asked her if she would rent me the suite downstairs, and I retired also.

By the way, February 5th 1989 I made it to my 86th birthday. I quit drinking and quit smoking three years ago. I am not afraid of death, as when we are born we are condemned to death. It has to come to all in time. I have had the satisfaction of giving pleasure to a lot of people in my 43 years as an entertainer. My life was not

wasted in useless things.

NOTES

¹ 109 8th Avenue SE. In 1925, the Elks Club was also located in the basement of this building. By 1930, the club had its own hall, at 114 7th Avenue SW, where Hopkins and his first wife ran their dances. Fraternal and social groups have obviously been important in the history of music in the western provinces.

² In July 1924 the Chalet Lake Louise, a C.P.R. hotel like the Banff Springs, though never as magnificent, was severely damaged by fire. It was rebuilt on a somewhat grander scale (and renamed "Chateau Lake Louise"). "During the winter the structural steel was encased in a canopy of wood so that work could continue in the most bitter period." -38-9, Jon Whyte and Carole Harmon, Lake Louise: A Diamond In The Wilderness. Banff: Altitude Publishing, 1982.

³ Mrs. John F. Trainor was musically active in Calgary and region from ca. 1912 until the middle 1940s. I've been unable to find much information about her music or career, though I get the impression that she offered a somewhat more urbane fare than did the Old Timers.

⁴ Ernie has a copy of a brief, tantalizing recording of this group made by Cal Trainor (Ma's nephew) from a broadcast in the winter of 1930-31. The group is vigorous and skillful, a blend of old time fiddle music, pop music and jazz that hasn't been heard in Calgary for years. Items on this (unfortunately damaged) recording: "Officer of the Day", "Sinclair's Jig" (said to be a composition of the fiddler), "Fisher's Hornpipe" and "Way Down South".

⁵ Scottish fiddler Tom Smith and his son, who broadcast on CFCN from 1924 to 1927. Some Calgarians



An early 1930s version of the CFCN Old Timers. Left to right: Elmer Peck (bass), Eric Watts (violin), Doug Croysdale (guitar and cowboy songs), Si Hopkins (leader, accordion), Bill Tritter (piano), Ernie Yardley (banjo and popular songs), Roy Watts (guitar), Doug Moody (violin). Photo courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

count this direct predecessor as part of the Old Timers' broadcast history, which would give the Old Timers a longer lifespan than the Grand Ol' Opry (at least until the Calgary program went off the air). In fact both Smiths were in the Old Timers under Neidenmayer's leadership, as was Nan Tingle, Smith's daughter, who was pianist with the group for many years.

⁶ Many sources attest that in houses and halls throughout the region people danced to Old Timers broadcasts.

⁷ This would have been a high class engagement. Henderson's Calgary Directory, vol. 25 (1930), p. 41, boasts of "the Hotel Palliser, one of the finest hostelieries on the continent."

⁸ Kenny was one of the major big band leaders in Canada, probably the biggest name in the West. Note the interaction among performers of various idioms – big band, old time, country and western. The latter are usually referred to as "cowboy songs".



Ma Trainor at the piano with the Calgary Hillbillies. Don McKay, Calgary's first media mayor (or "huckster", as one informant termed it), is identified on the original. Photo courtesy Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

⁹ Chestermere Lake is a suburb of Calgary, now largely residential, but primarily a recreation spot earlier in the century.

¹⁰ Black Diamond and Turner Valley are small towns near each other, a few miles south of Calgary.

¹¹ Another waterside resort. Sylvan Lake is halfway between Calgary and Edmonton, just west of the town of Red Deer.

¹² Henderson's Calgary Directory variously cites Yardley as musician, bricklayer and "foreman, Poole Construction" between 1935 and 1950.

¹³ It's unclear whether this is the same man as the fiddler who worked with the Old Timers.



The CFCN Old timers in 1953. Left to right: Tony Neidermayer (leader, accordion), Lint Saddler (bass), Max Morgan and Don Thomas (announcers), Ernie Yardley (banjo), George Fitzsimmons (violin), Nan Tingle (piano). The fancy shirts were made for them as a promotion by a local Singer dealer.