

The Woods Music and Dance Camp Lake Rosseau, Ontario

Jean Mills

Everyone kept telling me I had to go to *The Woods*. It was 1997, and I had just moved from eastern Ontario to Guelph. The song circle I had hooked up with in Kitchener was packed with people who not only had been to this annual musical happening, but couldn't stop talking about it. In fact, Jack Cole had founded the Old Chestnuts Song Circle based on his experiences at—you guessed it—*The Woods*. The phrases "I learned this one at *The Woods*..." and "All you *Woods* people will know this one..." crept up frequently in the course of an evening's singing. All right, already! What is the great attraction of this music camp?

I was not completely unaware of the source of all the excitement. In the early 80s I had been living in Toronto and had read about a summer music camp held just north of the city. Called *Mariposa in the Woods*, it was a residential music and dance camp devoted to classes, workshops, concerts, dances, special events and musical fun, with a strong emphasis on building a brief, participatory musical community. I remember reading that I could learn to play autoharp and fiddle, which, along with the *Mariposa* connection, made it clear to me just what kind of music we were talking about. My interest was piqued, but life intervened, and *Mariposa in the Woods* faded from my agenda.

Flash forward to the summer of 1999. I am sitting in the dining/concert/dance hall of Rosseau College School in the Muskoka region of Ontario listening as the instructors of the seventeenth annual *Woods Music and Dance Camp* give a brief outline of what they will be offering in their courses and workshops during the five days ahead. Guitar, fiddle, dulcimer, banjo, clogging, songwriting, traditional singing styles.... The list of musical learning opportunities is overwhelming. Later, I will find myself standing in front of the huge schedule posted on the wall, trying desperately to decide if I can take classes in Newfoundland traditions, and fiddle, and dulcimer, as well as songwriting. (I can't, unless I clone myself.) For now, I just listen—I'm in a bit of a daze, I admit. Singer Jean Hewson and fiddler Christina Smith from Newfoundland, performing duo Arnie Naiman and Kathy Reid-Naiman (*AKA Ragged But Right*), singer/songwriter Bob Franke, traditional American ballad singer and collector Jeff Davis, and dance caller/collector/performer Jim Morrison are all offering a small taste of what the week's musical menu will of-

fer. Members of the organizing committee, including Grit Laskin, Eve Goldberg and Sue Goldberg, will also be instructing or leading workshops. When Jim Morrison starts clogging while playing his fiddle, I look around the room and wonder "Why is everyone smiling?" I am in agony! There's just too much choice here. I want to do it all!



Christina Smith with a new fiddler
photo by David Joyce

But the *Woods* is like that, I found. As a first-time participant, I was unprepared (despite thorough briefings from my veteran *Woods* colleagues) for the constant barrage of choice: Take this course or not? Go to this workshop, or that one? Jam with the guys in front of the dining hall, or go down to the dock and see what musical moments might be happening there? Join the song circle in the Perry Building or the instrumental jam in the Log Cabin? Dine on vegetarian or meat lasagna? Go to bed and

get some sleep, or stay up for just a bit longer and jam with those fiddlers?

Fortunately, the organizers of the camp supply a clearly-laid-out schedule to guide campers through the maze. Breakfast is at 8:00 am in the dining hall (which also triples as concert hall and dance hall—and this year had to serve as the campfire circle as well, thanks to an inconvenient evening rain shower.) The first hour-long class is at 9:00 am, and this is one of two classes that campers stick with throughout the week. In the classes, the instructors share their own field of expertise. For example, I attended the "Newfoundland Traditions" class, led by Jean Hewson and Christina Smith, and learned, among other things, about the importance of a good cup of "tea" (add an ounce of something stronger, wink, wink). Christina shared her experiences of travelling to outport villages where everyone lugs his own chair to the church hall for a concert. Jeannie seemed to know everyone who had ever sung or written a song in Newfoundland. An hour was too short.

After a brief break following the morning session, the entire camp assembles in the hall for "community time," a sing-ing session led by two or three of the instructors or organizing committee members and focussing on a theme, such as "Songs of the Spirit" or "Songs with No Redeeming Social Value." We then set up the tables, transforming the hall into a dining room again and swapped our musical life stories over lunch. Shortly afterwards, the second class begins, followed by a selection of hour-long workshops that address different topics each day: gui-

tar tricks, cowboy songs, vocal harmony, duelling banjos. Then, for a few hours before supper, *Free Time*.

However, Free Time was never free. It was full to the brim with music: sharing songs or ideas, practising for tomorrow's class or the performance circle, jamming. For some, I imagine, there was sleeping, too. For me, it was a never-ending musical roller coaster. One afternoon I did retreat down to the sunshine on the dock for a few hours, but somehow a dulcimer ended up on my lap, and that was the end of that escape attempt! I didn't complain. My friend James brought a canoe on the top of his car, and it stayed there for the whole week, never testing the waves of Lake Rosseau, because James was just too busy with his banjo and everything else camp had to offer.

After supper, a camper's performance circle is held in the aptly-named Log Cabin. Here, campers have an opportunity to experience the joys of performing in front of an audience in a completely supportive and relaxed atmosphere. At least, that's what I was told. I found it harrowing, to say the least, and I wasn't even performing solo! This was no fault of the audience, who were unfailingly enthusiastic in their reception. Later we all return to the hall, where each evening featured a concert by one or two of the camp's instructors.

The concerts were not only entertainment of the highest order, they were also sources of inspiration and, quite plainly, musical education. The art of songwriting, or the origins of Appalachian ballads, or the history of dance—these were just a few of the topics that emerged from the performance stage in the course of a typical evening. And, if that wasn't enough, as soon as the concert ended, we pushed the chairs back and the dance began: contras and squares, with careful, patient instruction for the beginners and a band made up of teachers and the occasional camper. I've heard that in other years the band has had a revolving membership, made up of anyone who knows the tunes and, more importantly, can keep up.

By now the moon would be up, the stars out and the crickets and frogs singing. What better time for a song circle? Even before the dance ends, campers are taking up their positions in the room designated for the singaround. Others tote instruments over to the Log Cabin for the jam session, which this year var-

ied in nature depending on who was assembled. On one memorable night, I fell asleep to the lullaby of the Log Cabin crew singing and playing gospel tunes.

The nights, I fear, got shorter and shorter as the week went on. But, strangely enough, very few campers missed breakfast. The five days passed so quickly that sleep became a nuisance in the quest to soak up as much music as possible in the short time available. So, no matter how late that song circle or instrumental jam stretched into the night, we all found ourselves in the dining hall next morning, bleary-eyed, perhaps, but downing our breakfast, ready to tackle it all again.

Eventually the week had to end. The last evening was declared "Christmas in Ontario," so that various instructors and campers could entertain us with a mummies' play, rewritten and revamped for the crowd. The beginner fiddle class joined the band on stage and led everyone in the traditional Newfoundland mixer called "The Kissing Dance." (Yes, the name is very indicative of what happens!) The final dance, song circle and spontaneous musical events rolled on into the night. Next morning was the Campers' Concert, a final performance circle in which classes, groups and individuals showed off what they learned, or even what they had started to learn, during the week. A final lunch, a shared community closing—this year Bob Franke offered thoughtful words of advice to people re-entering the real world after a music camp: Resist the urge to hug the clerk at the corner store—and everyone cleared out and headed home.

Of course this summary can't begin to capture the spontaneity, the warmth, the general mood of excitement and goodwill that fill these five days. Someone's song in Community Time will have the whole room laughing uproariously or summon tears. A performer's words of explanation about his music will bring a moment of illumination, or raise a hundred questions. The Woods bills itself simply as "an experience of music and community". It's that, and much, much more. I know I'll be going back.

Contact information in case people want to find out more about the camp (Woods Music and Dance Camp, c/o Laskin, 18 Simpson Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M4K 1A2; (416) 461-1864). We also have a web site: <www.mgl.com/~jhcole/thewoods/>

See also page 75 of this issue for more details!



Jean Mills on the dock
photo by Robin Jones