

Loss of the John Harvey and Union of St. John's

By Maureen Chafe

In 1994 I began researching the folk music traditions of Conception Bay North,

Newfoundland. My original purpose was to document folk songs from oral tradition in this small section of Newfoundland's east coast. After two months in the region, I had more than enough material to satisfy the requirements for the thesis that I was writing to finish the M.Mus. program at the University of Calgary. I was amazed at the quality and quantity of 'authentic' folk music that I found there. This initial visit whetted my appetite for more. I have since made numerous visits to the area, tape recorder in hand, in search of more songs.

Newfoundland folk music and lore is rich with songs and stories concerning ships and life on the sea. The two songs that I have chosen to include here are stories about the loss of ships and men's lives to those infamous storms that rage the North Atlantic. The first, *Loss of the John Harvey*, recounts the fate of a schooner that sailed the Atlantic Seaboard in the early Twentieth century. The second recollects the tragic story of the *Union*. This vessel capsized in a storm and was subsequently boarded by the crew of another ship, who found a number of men killed.

Stories concerning the fate of the schooner *John Harvey* and its crew are known on the South Coast of Newfoundland both in story and song. The only other recorded variant of this song that I know of can be found in Kenneth Peacock's *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*. Peacock collected it from Kenneth Pink of Rose Blanche in 1959. The historical facts of the shipwreck are the same, but the melodies used by each singer differ greatly. Al Stacey sang this variant of *The Loss of the John Harvey* for me on November 8, 1994. Mr. Stacey learned the song from his Grandfather.

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Two Newfoundland Folk Songs:

Loss of the John Harvey

As sung by Al Stacey, Carbonear, 8 December, 1994

1. The wind it blew from the East-South-East,
O the worst storm of the year,
The *John Harvey* sailed from Gloucester
To the island of St. Pierre.*
2. She was loaded deep with lumber,
And loud the storm did roar,
On the tenth of January,
The *John Harvey* went a-shore.
3. The captain, he gave orders,
The vessel to dismast,
For the boats were frozen to her deck,
And the sea swept fore and aft.
4. Said Captain Kearly to his men,
"Boys I see it is no use,
I'm afraid that we're all doomed to die,
Near the shores of Gabarus. **"
5. The young John Keeping, a rope he took,
And he tied it 'round his waist,
Said he, "I'll swim to the nearest shore,
And that icy foam he'd face."
6. Bitterly cold was the winter night
As the sea rolled mountains high,
All bruised and battered by the waves
Was the brave Belloram* boy.
7. He was bruised and battered by the waves,
"Till at last the shore he reached.
Then with his badly frozen hands,
Made the line fast to the beach.
8. The crew of the *Harvey* got on shore,
There were six of them all tolled.
They owed their lives to God above,
And the sailor boy so bold.
9. Foote and young John Kippen,
We laid them down to rest,
They thought upon their home and friends,
And the ones that they loved best.
10. They knew their time was drawing nigh,
And in the prime of youth,
Gave up the struggle for their lives,
Near the shores of Gabarus.
11. The survivors walked to some fishing shacks,
That stood upon the shore,
Much tired by their heavy boots
And the oilskins that they wore.
12. They had no match to light the fire,
O how awful was their plight,
As they struggled for existence
On that stormy winter's night.
13. But help soon came from Gabarus,
And then the tale was told,
If the wreck of the *John Harvey*
And the sailor boy so bold.
14. We followed the caskets to the train,
As the tears fell from our eyes,
When we thought upon the noble deeds.
Of the brave Belloram boys.
15. Come all ye bold young sailor boys,
Think of those two noble youths,
Who died far away from their native homes,
Near the shores of Gabarus.

* *St Pierre is one of the French islands off the South coast of Newfoundland.*

* *Belloram is in Fortune Bay, on the south coast of Newfoundland.*

* *Gabarus is on the east coast of Cape Breton Island.*

The Union of St. John's



Union Of St. John's

*As sung by Jack and Tom Kehoe,
Red Head Cove, 11 November, 1994*

1. You stay on shore with your handsome girl,
Telling to her fond tales,
While the hardest work that ever you did,
Was to reap in your own cornfields.
2. 'Twas on the fifth of November boy,
When a blinding storm hailed,
It was under a three reef forsail, me by's,
It was on a lee shore we did lay.
3. The captain gave his orders,
And orders we must obey,
He said "you better go forward me by's,
Your forsail to lower away."
4. We tried to reef our mainsail,
But that could not be done.
'Twas under a three reef forsail me by's,
Three leagues to the sea she did run.
5. Again she gently rises,
Which caused all hands to say,
"God bless our noble vessel me by's
See how she is heading your way."
6. At three o'clock in the morning,
We received a dreadful shock,
We spied a craft on her beam-ends,
A mile below Bellow's rock.
7. We boarded the wreck in the afternoon,
What a dismal sight to behold,
To see four seamen tied to her mast,
Five more in her cabin lay cold.
8. They are the hardy young seamen,
That ever the sun shone on.
A widow will weep for her husband by's,
A mother her darling son.
9. She is the *Union* from St. John's,
Right well I know her name.
And every night when I lie on my bed,
I can hear the young widows complain

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On November 11, 1994 I was fortunate enough to be in the home of Jack Kehoe and to hear him and his brother Tom piece together this old song that they learned from their parents. The *Union of St. John's* originated as an American Broadside ballad, perhaps as far back as the 1820's. The fifteen original verses can be found published in *Minstrelsy of Maine: Folk Songs and Ballads of the Woods and Coast*.

In the 1850's *The Union* was one of the best-known songs in Maine, but in 1927, the authors of *Minstrelsy of Maine* found that it was no longer in oral tradition. They write: "Of all the songs we have tried to find, none has been so hard to recover as this of the *Union*." Laws includes this song in his *Native American Balladry* (dD32), he does so only in the appendix under the designation "ballads contributed to collectors without evidence that they are still being sung." In Newfoundland, however, there is record of *The Union* in oral tradition many times in the Twentieth Century.

There is some confusion over whether the vessel hailed from St. John's, Newfoundland or St. John, New Brunswick. Lehr writes "The ship could possibly have been from Newfoundland since there were two (and possibly more) wrecks recorded of ships named the *Union* from Newfoundland around that time." The place where the shipwreck occurred is also in question. In the Kehoe variant given here and in Peacock it is Bellow's rock. In another Newfoundland variant it is 'Mount Bernard Rock' and the original broadside is 'Mount Desert Rock'.

Kenneth Peacock collected *The Union* from three separate locations in Newfoundland between the years 1952 and 1958. Anita Best collected it in two different places in 1976 and 1980. In Maine it was often sung at lumber camps where "the soloist took the song while the crew, after every stanza, came in on a rousing chorus of *The Union of Saint*

John, my boys, The Union of Saint John." There is no indication of this performance practice in Newfoundland.

A beautiful recording of this ballad sung by Newfoundland singers Anita Best and Pamela Morgan can be found on "All the Best: Folk Music of St. John's, Newfoundland" Pigeon Inlet Production PIPCD-7322.

Folk music traditions appear to be alive and well in Conception Bay North, Newfoundland. There remain advocates of Newfoundland's folk culture who sing and play music as they always have, developing in the wake of changing musical climates, but never disappearing. It will be interesting to note whether these two songs of tragic shipwrecks will remain in oral tradition in the future.

Looking for . . .

We're looking for several persons whose articles were published in past editions of the *Journal*. We have since lost track of them.

If anyone of our readers can supply contact information, such as a current postal address, or a current email address, we would be most grateful.

Hugues-Jocelyn Cano, *Journal* Vol. 18 Jennifer J. Connor, *Journal* Vol. 14 C. J. Hendrickson, *Journal* Vol. 10 Miles Krassen, *Journal* Vol. 2 Robert Paquin, *Journal* Vol. 8 Anthony Proracki, *Journal* Vol. 2

You can reach us at our general postal address, Box 4232 Stn C, Calgary, T2T 5N1; or by email to John Leeder: leeders@nucleus.com.