

## Sixteen Rocks

(tune: "Sixteen Tons"; Merle Travis, 1947 ©American Music Inc.)

(Sheffield University geology field trip, Weymouth, Easter 1957,  
by student collective including Bill Sarjeant, Dave Spalding)

1. Some people say a man is made out of mud,  
A geologist's made out of muscles and blood,  
Muscles to wield that hammer a bit,  
Blood to flow from the thumb when it's hit,

*Chorus:* You dig sixteen rocks, and what do you get,  
Another day older and dirty and wet,  
Professor don't you call me, cause I won't go,  
I got enough rocks, I don't want any mo'!

2. You go out in the morning when the sun doesn't shine,  
That thing you can't see is a fine anticline,  
You search for those fossils till you're worn and pale,  
Just one graptolite in an acre of shale.

3. If you see us coming, better step aside,  
You count as a fossil just as soon as you've died,  
One blow of the hammer and you're in the sack,  
We'll put you in a showcase when we get back.



Bill Sarjeant and Richard Johnston confer  
CSTM AGM, Calgary 1990

photo by GWL

## Bill Sarjeant A Four Decade Contribution to Folk Music

Lois A. Wooding

One can't help wondering what mysterious force of serendipity brought three folk music enthusiasts, from different, distant homelands, to the same university department in Saskatoon, Canada. But that is what happened in the early 70's when Bill Sarjeant, from England, Hugh Hendry, from Scotland, and Jocelyne Legault, from Quebec, joined the Geology Department at the University of Saskatchewan. Little did they know that they would form the basis of a folk group that has survived twenty-five years and shows no sign of immediate demise.

Bill Sarjeant had no formal musical training as a child, but through contacts during his student days, he was introduced to skiffle, jazz and folk music. There were many folk music clubs in Britain at the time, and Bill became a frequent visitor to local venues, where he heard, and met, many of the leading performers of the time. Not content to be just a member of the audience, Bill taught himself to play the guitar, performed with The Bol Weevils, a Sheffield group led by David Spalding, and had a brief association with The Sheaf River Jazz Band.

For geologists, even those in academic areas, field work is a major component of the job, and a guitar can be a cumbersome piece of extra baggage for someone already hung about with picks, shovels, rock hammers and quantities of rock-encrusted

fossils. Bill solved this problem by switching from guitar to harmonica. He was not exactly new to the instrument; in fact his first harmonica could rightly be referred to as one of the "spoils of war." In 1943 his father found an old Hohner harmonica lying by a dead German officer on the battlefield, and he brought it home for Bill as a souvenir of the war. Rust eventually rendered this instrument unplayable and shiny new C and G replacements became Bill's musical companions on his many travels.

During these early times, music was an outlet that helped offset the tension of Bill's personal life. His undergraduate and graduate studies were finally behind him, but there was the strain of launching an academic career. There was also a failed marriage, which weighed heavily upon him. In 1965 Bill met Margaret Crowe. It was a chance meeting in a restaurant. The recognition of Bill's Sheffield University scarf began a conversation that led to marriage in 1966, and with the redoubtable "Peggy" at his side, Bill's career began to show great promise. He became Assistant Lecturer, then Lecturer at the University of Nottingham, and spent a year in the States as Visiting Professor at the University of Oklahoma. While there, he had some exposure to country and western music, before returning to his

lecturing position in Britain. His involvement with folk music continued. As well as performing, he began to write articles, joined the London Singer's Club, and resumed his membership in the Nottingham Cooperative Folk Workshop, serving as President for a period of time, during which he successfully steered the club through some difficult times which threatened its demise.

Bill had, by then, acquired a great deal of knowledge about traditional music, along with an impressive collection of books, records and tapes on the subject. Having become used to associating with British performers and international artists alike, it came as something of a shock to find, when he arrived to take up a post with the University of Saskatchewan in 1972, that folk music in Saskatoon barely existed. It was among his immediate colleagues that he found the means of continuing his musical interests. Jocelyne Legault and Hugh Hendry began singing together in 1971, shortly after their arrival in Saskatoon. Bill joined them in 1972, and with the exception of a solo performance at the Indian and Métis Centre in 1973, he worked with the trio, performing at private functions, and singing circles. It was not until October, 1975, that the three made their public debut as the Traditional Folk Trio, at a WUSC concert held at St. Thomas More College. As the 70s drew to a close, public interest resulted in more outlets for folk music, and expanded performance opportunities. An article Bill contributed to the *Folk Review* brought a response from Edith Fowke, the distinguished folklorist and folksong collector. Edith visited the group in Saskatoon, and through her they were introduced to the young Canadian folksinger Paddy Tutty, who at that time lived in British Columbia. Bill later shared a billing with Paddy at the newly formed *Cafe Domingo*, Saskatoon's first folk club. Bill and Hugh, as members of the Friends of *Cafe Domingo*, did several Sunday night performances at the club, and The Trio also performed as featured guests.

Career opportunities in eastern Canada meant that Jocelyne had to leave the Trio, but they had already been joined by Sarah Williams and with further additions to the ranks, the title of "Trio" became redundant. It was during a 1980 recording session for CJUS-FM Radio, that Bill suggested the name *Prairie Higglers*, a reference to a British folksinging association, The Higglers International. This group was in the habit of proclaiming weekend "Higgles" at various country pubs. Folksingers and musicians from all over the British Isles would converge upon the chosen site to sing, play, and drink the pub dry. The *Prairie Higglers*, though always appreciative of a "wee drop," have not,

to date, aspired to emulate this particular aspect of their British counterpart's reputation.

Fourteen people can now claim the distinction of calling themselves Higglers. Recruitment, for the most part, has come from the university community. All tend to be characters in their own right, the common ground being a willingness to find time in their extremely busy lives to participate in the joy of making music. Changes in personnel expanded the group's repertoire, and varied the instrumentation, and the group continues to perform, mostly for private functions, but also at festivals and concerts, with occasional appearances on local television. Since the untimely death of Hugh Hendry in 1994, Bill has become the sole survivor of the original group. He is, in fact, the Higgler's motivating soul. "Higgling" requires time and a fair degree of dedication. Group practice takes place once a week, more frequently prior to performances, but much of the onus is on the individual to research and prepare material, before presenting it for the group's consideration. Practice sessions, hosted by the members on a loose rotational schedule, are concentrated and intense. This is offset by the post-practice tradition of savouring a pint of good ale, sampling an exotic cheese or two, and telling yarns, Bill being a master in all three categories.

These after-practice sessions also provide a convenient time in which to arrange programmes for upcoming performances. On the off-chance that a future archivist might unearth

copies of "Higgling" programme notes, this might be an opportune time to explain what otherwise could prove to be unfathomable notations. In 1971, Bill was given a diary, a small tome measuring 11.5 x 7.5 x 2.5 cm, which lay unused for some time. Bill is not sure when he began filling it with song lyrics. Almost every page is now covered in Bill's tiny, cramped, almost illegible handwriting. There are words to over three hundred songs, many of which were gathered through personal contact with folksingers all over the world, and may not be recorded in any other reference. When this well-thumbed, oft-referred-to treasure began to show serious signs of disintegration, Bill decided the task of transcribing the contents was too daunting, and opted instead to have it rebound. One wonders what the bindery must have thought. But they were up to the challenge, and it now sports a bright orange cover, which serves the dual purpose of securing the pages, while making it highly visible and less likely to be misplaced. There is absolutely no organization of the material in the diary, therefore programme notations referring to Bill's songs all have date references, which occasionally creep into the general commentary at concerts. At Christmas shows,



*The Prairie Higglers, 1980: Sheila MacKenzie, Bill Sarjeant, Sara Williams, Hugh Hendry (seated)*

*photo by David Mandeville*

for instance, announcing April 2<sup>nd</sup> or August 23<sup>rd</sup> can generate puzzled looks from members of the audience unfamiliar with this particular Higglers idiosyncrasy.

The Prairie Higglers are a democratic bunch; they have no star or lead performer. Programmes are arranged in a manner that features members equally, while at the same time striving to achieve a balance between songs and tunes. Bill's strong bass voice is a valuable anchor for harmony singing. In solos the voice can be tender, or passionate, but seems particularly well adapted to boozy British ballads, which he sings with obvious relish. The two harmonicas purchased in Britain have now been joined by a complete set of Chromonicas, giving Bill the ability to cope with the full range of accompaniment possibilities.

He is also proficient on a tunable drum, among other percussion instruments. The drum had its origins in the former East German Republic, but was purchased in Ottawa. Perhaps one of Bill's greatest assets to the Higglers is his ability to subtly challenge individual members to do more than they would ordinarily have considered themselves capable of. Those who accept this challenge usually find greater enjoyment in the music, and their expanded performance skills benefit the group as a whole.

Bill is an inveterate collector, and many of his collections warrant their own individual articles. His stamp collection for instance, and his enormous library, much of which has now been donated to the University of Alberta. Other collections are less conventional, like beer bottle tops, and an extraordinary array of quite peculiar musical instruments, and if you ever have occasion to watch one of his slide travelogues, try counting the number of shots depicting trams, trolley-busses and butterflies. His collection of musical references, records and tapes is another case in point. Between 1977 and 1982, Bill ran a series of three radio programmes on the University of Saskatchewan's now defunct radio station, CJUS-FM. All the material for these programmes, *A Song For All Seasons*, 1977-1978 (27 1.5-hour broadcasts); *The Folk Song Sampler*, 1978-1979

(19 1-hour broadcasts); *The Folk Singer*, 1981-1982 (52 1-hour broadcasts) came entirely from Bill's own music collection. This was a single-handed attempt by Bill to acquaint the Saskatoon community with the breadth and scope of folk music which, as he quite rightly points out, covers every aspect of human life. All three series have since been rebroadcast, some more than once, and all have enjoyed positive feedback from the listening audience. The original tapes are now on loan to the University of Alberta, and much of the personal material he drew upon has been donated, or promised to, the University of Calgary. With a music reservoir such as this, it's no wonder the Prairie Higglers can come up with some quite original material.

Bill's contribution to folk music has not been confined to the local scene. He is an ongoing contributor to various folk music publications (see appended list), from 1985 to 1986 he was Vice President of the Canadian Folk Music Society, and from 1986 to 1989 he served as its President. The society has since been

renamed the Canadian Society for Traditional Music, and Bill continues to serve as archivist, overseeing its collection of records, books, tapes, and journals, and their repository at the University of Calgary Special Collections Library.

As daunting as Bill's efforts have been in supporting and furthering the cause of folk music, it is but one of

many interests that occupy this amazing man. Professor, researcher, amateur naturalist, conservationist, historian, award-winning writer of academic texts, author of fantasy fiction, authority on the mystery-writing genre, it goes on and on, and he's a darn fine badminton player to boot! Knowing Bill is an experience. I have been a Higglers for the past seven years, and it has never, ever, been dull. Preparing this article has only heightened my appreciation of Bill's accomplishments during his four-decade association with folk music in both Britain and Canada. He is generous to the extreme and makes his knowledge available through his collections, his continued publications, and, if you are lucky enough to catch a performance, through



*The Prairie Higglers, 1995: Bill Sarjeant, Hugh Hendry, Chris Meek (seated), Lois Wooding, Kashle Rae*  
photo: David Mandeville



*The Prairie Higglers, 1999: Chris Meek, Cling Hawker, Joe Mink, Lois Wooding, Bill Sarjeant*

photo by David Mandeville

Bill himself, on stage with The Prairie Higglers. Offstage, The Prairie Higglers can be heard on a double tape featuring music from the early years. The tape, produced by Bill and Neil Hendry, was a tribute to Hugh, and all profits were donated to the Hugh Hendry Memorial Scholarship fund. The tapes sold well, and the few that remain can be purchased by contacting Bill or the CSTM Mail Order Service. Currently the group is preparing for upcoming engagements and exploring the possibility of producing a CD. The fact that The Prairie Higglers have managed

to achieve such longevity is largely due to Bill. His easy manner soothes moments of artistic temperament, and he generally manages to get a chuckle out of even the tiredest Higgler who comes to practice stressed and jaded after a difficult day in the university trenches. Music trends come and go, but an audience appreciative of traditional music never seems to disappear, so it seems likely that The Prairie Higglers will continue to perform as we head into a brave new millennium. This will certainly be the case if Bill Sarjeant has anything to do with it.

## Folksong Publications by William A.S. Sarjeant

*B* indicates book reviews, *J* indicates music reviews

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*J* North of South. The Cochrane Lake Sessions. *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* 33.4: 36-37.  
*B* John Glatt. The Chieftains: The authorized biography. *Bulletin* 33.1:33-34.  
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*J* Raspberry Jam. Band in the Park/Innocent Bystanders. *Bulletin* 32.2: 28-29.  
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*J* Kindred Spirits. Canadian Harmony. *Bulletin* 31.2: 37.  
*J* Ceard. Home Brew. *Bulletin* 31.2: 38.  
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*J* Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Calgary Branch). The Mountain Road. *Bulletin* 30.2: 44.  
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*J* Moira Cameron. One Evening as I Rambled. Ceilidh Friends. Yellowknife Evening. *Bulletin* 29.1: 47-48.  
*J* Jiggery Pokery. Songs and Ceilidh Tunes from England. *Bulletin* 29.4: 35.  
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*B* Paul Oliver. Blues fell this morning: meaning in the blues. *Folk Music Journal* 6.2: 246-50.  
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*J* Eileen McGann. Elements. *Bulletin* 23.1: 16-17.  
*J* Archie Fisher. Sunsets I've Galloped Into... *Bulletin* 23.1: 18.  
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*B* Warren Fahey. Eureka: The songs that made Australia. *Folk Music Journal* 5.3: 373-74.  
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*J* Joyce Sullivan and Charles Jordan. Folk Songs of Canada. *Canada Folk Bulletin* 3.2: 24-25.  
*J* The Singing Miners of Cape Breton. The Men of the Deeps and The Men of the Deeps II. *Canada Folk Bulletin* 3.1: 26-28.  
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—courtesy Lois Wooding