

The E.C. Roberts (Red Iron Ore)

When the iron mines of Michigan's Upper Peninsula were in operation, much of their output was shipped through the port of Escanaba, Michigan, on the northwest shore of Lake Michigan. Sailing ships were the main carriers for this trade during the period between the U.S. Civil War and the 1880s, when steam began to take over. This song tells of a trip by the *E.C. Roberts*, an historical vessel, from Chicago to Escanaba, thence to Cleveland. Although the *Roberts* wasn't the fastest ship afloat (and suffered taunts from crews of other ships because of that fact), she managed to make a fast voyage and outdistance her rivals, through a combination of good seamanship and taking risks in adverse weather.

"Death's Door", also known as "Porte des morts", is the strait linking Lake Michigan and Green Bay, between the mainland and Washington Island.

"Skillagalee" is Île aux Galets. I haven't been able to locate the North Passage and the Dummy, in an admittedly cursory investigation. The other place names can readily be found on modern maps by anyone who wants to trace the *Roberts'* voyage.

This version was sung to Edith Fowke by Stanley Bâby, one of Edith's prolific informers. Mr. Bâby was born and raised in Port Huron, Michigan, and moved to Canada at a young age. His father, a steamboat captain, had served under sail as mate on the *E.C. Roberts*, so "this is naturally a favorite song with him". It can be heard on the LP *Songs of the Great Lakes*, Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4018, available on CD from Smithsonian Folkways, www.folkways.si.edu. The lyrics below, with minor edits, are as printed in the liner notes of the LP. [John Leeder]

The E. C. Roberts

Anon

Voice

Come all ye young fell-lows who fol-low the lakes, In ir-on ore ves-sels your liv-ings to make. I shipped in Chi-ca-go, good-by to the sho-re, Bound for Es-can-a-ba and red ir-on ore, Der-ry down, down, it's high der-ry down.

Come all ye young fellows who follow the lakes,
 In iron-ore vessels your livings to make;
 I shipped in Chicago, goodbye to the shore,
 Bound for Escanaba and red iron ore,
 Derry down, down, it's high derry down.

'Twas the month of September, the seventeenth day;
 Two dollars and a quarter was all they would pay;
 And on Sunday morning from the North Branch did take,

The schooner *E.C. Roberts* out into the lake.
 Derry down...

The wind from the sou'west it blew a fresh breeze,
 And down through Lake Michigan the *Roberts* did sneeze,
 And down through Lake Michigan the *Roberts* did roar,
 And on Wednesday morning she sailed through Death's Door.

The *Roberts* she sailed 'cross the mouth of Green Bay,

And from her cutwater she dashed the white spray;
We rounded Sand Point and our anchor let go,
We furled our canvas and then went below.

Next morning we hauled alongside the *Exile*,
And we were made fast to an iron ore pile;
They let down their spouts and like thunder it roared,
And they emptied their pockets of red iron ore.

Some fellows got shovels and others got spades,
And some got wheelbarrows, each man to his trade;
We looked like red devils, our hands they were sore,
And we cursed Escanaba and red iron ore.

The tug *Escanaba* she towed out the *Minch*;
The *Roberts* they thought they had left in a pinch;
They gave us three cheers as they passed us by;
“We’ll meet you in Cleveland next Fourth of July.”

Through Louse Island Passage it blew a fresh breeze,
Past the Foxes, the Beavers and Skillagalee;
We flew by the *Minch* just to show her the way,

Red Iron Ore

During the 1970s I developed a shorter version of the song for performing with Claddagh’s Answer. I omitted some verses, dovetailed some others and made a couple of deliberate changes. I thought modern listeners might confuse Thunder Bay, off the city of Alpena, Michigan, with the modern city of Thunder Bay, Ontario, which did not exist under that name in the *Roberts*’ day. Replacing “Thunder Bay” by “Saginaw Bay” does not do a great deal of

Come all you young fellows who follow the lakes,
In iron ore vessels your living to make;
We shipped in Chicago, goodbye to the shore,
Bound for Escanaba and red iron ore,
Derry down, down, it’s high derry down.

’Twas the month of September, the seventeenth day;
Two dollars and a quarter was all they would pay;
And on Sunday morning the *North Branch* did roar,
The schooner *E.C. Roberts* out into the lake.
Derry down...

The wind from the sou’west it blew a fresh breeze,
And down through Lake Michigan the *Roberts* did sneeze,
And down through Lake Michigan the *Roberts* did roar,
And on Wednesday morning we passed through Death’s Door.

Next morning we hauled up alongside the *Exile*,
And we were made fast to an iron ore pile;
They let down their spouts and like thunder it roared,
And we emptied their pockets of red iron ore.

Some fellows got shovels and others got spades,

And she ne’er hove in sight until off Thunder Bay.

’Cross Saginaw Bay the *Roberts* did ride;
The green rolling billows passed by her smooth side,
But straight for the river the *Roberts* must go,
And the tug *Kate Williams* she took us in tow.

We went the North Passage; oh Lord how it blew!
And all ’round the Dummy a large fleet hove to;
The night it was dark; Old Nick it would scare,
But we hove up next morning and for Cleveland did steer.

And now we’re in Cleveland, made fast stem and stern,
And over the bottle we’ll spin a good yarn,
And Captain Harve Rummage should oughta stand treat,
For getting in Cleveland ahead of the fleet.

And now my song’s ended and I hope you won’t laugh;
Our bags are packed up and all hands are paid off;
Let’s drink to the *Roberts*; she’s stout, staunch and true,
Not forgetting the brave lads comprising her crew.

violence to the geographical record. Also, Mr. Bâby’s second verse, third line, didn’t quite make sense to me, so I postulated a tug named the *North Branch*, a not unlikely name, as the Chicago River has a North Branch. More recently, I’ve started doing the song again (having developed a satisfying banjo break) and have added back a couple of verses where the story seemed to call for them. Other minor changes are due to fallibility of memory over the years.

And some got wheelbarrows, each man to his trade;
We looked like red devils, our hands they were sore,
And we cursed Escanaba and red iron ore.

The tug *Escanaba* she towed out the *Minch*;
The *Roberts* they thought they had left in a pinch;
They gave us three cheers as they passed us on by,
Saying, “We’ll see you in Cleveland on the Fourth of July!”

We went the North Passage; oh Lord how it blew!
And all ’round the Dummy a large fleet lay to;
We flew by the *Minch* just to show her the way,
And she ne’er hove in sight till off Saginaw Bay.

And now we’re in Cleveland, made fast stem and stern,
And over the bottle we’ll spin a good yarn,
And Captain Harve Rummage, he oughta stand treat,
For getting to Cleveland ahead of the fleet.

And now my song’s ended and I hope you won’t laugh;
Our voyage is done and all hands are paid off;
We’ll drink to the *Roberts*; she’s stout, staunch and true,
Not forgetting the brave lads comprising her crew.