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Old Horse or The Sailor's Grace

Robert French

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Song: "Old Horse" or "The Sailor's Grace"
Singer: Robert French
Town: Westbrook, ME; recorded in Franklin, ME
NA 331 CD 6 Track 11
Collector: Sister Poulin
Date: March 10, 1962
Roud: 18904

"**Old Horse**" is an old sea song (dating at least back to the 1830s, and probably long before that) that expresses sailors' dissatisfaction with the quality of their food. On a sailing vessel, the best meat was separated and served to the captain and officers, leaving the crew with very low quality food. Ships' salt beef was known as 'salt horse' because it was rough and barely edible. Before being cooked, it was soaked on deck in the "harness cask" (the term for the covered tub that held salted provisions for daily use). Before eating particularly atrocious servings of meat, one of the crew traditionally held the meat up and recited or sang this verse, also known as "The Sailor's Grace" (of which there were many variations). The earliest printed version of the song appeared in Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s personal account of his time at sea in 1840. The version printed there - first in 1840 - was almost identical to the one heard here.

The song is most noteworthy because it may have originated in Maine. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm and Mary Winslow Smyth, in their collection *Minstrelsy of Maine*, presented a vigorous argument for Maine as the point of origin. Even if the song did not originate here, the Maine version certainly spread around the world. This version stands out because of its inclusion of Saccarap' (or Saccarappa - now Westbrook) and Portland, and the industrial connection between the two towns. Paving blocks were cut in Saccarappa, at one time a considerable industry, and hauled by horses to Portland to be loaded on sailing vessels. The song's critique is based on the idea of a tired horse, worn down by hauling bricks between the towns. "Old Horse" made its way into the Maine woods (where Robert French learned it) and around the globe on sea vessels. And it was not only sung by American sailors, as Eckstorm and Smyth included an anecdote about a British sailor singing this song on the Pacific coast. Richard Henry Dana also provided evidence of its distant travels as he heard it while sailing from Massachusetts to San Francisco.

"Old horse, old horse, what brings you here,
From Saccarap' to Portland pier?"
"I've carted stone for many a year,
'Til now worn out by sore abuse,
I'm salted down for sailors' use.
Between the mainmast and the pumps,
I'm salted down in great big lumps;
They curse my eyes and pick my bones,
And throw the rest to Davy Jones."
Poor old horse!

Sources: Eckstorm, Fannie Hardy and Mary Winslow Smyth. *Minstrelsy of Maine: Folk-Songs and Ballads of the Woods and the Coast*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927, 223-26; Dana, Richard Henry, Jr. *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative*. Scituate, MA: Digital Scanning, Inc.,

2001, 338; Eloise Hubbard. *Folk Songs of Old New England*. New York: MacMillan Co., 1939, 142-44 includes this Maine version as learned in Massachusetts; and Doerflinger, William Main. *Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman*. New York: MacMillan, 1972 which includes "Old Horse" with a chorus as the "E" version of "Blow the Man Down" (21-22) and "The Sailor's Grace" (160).

Maine Folklife Center