

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Dr. Edward D. Ives Papers

Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History

1-1960

The Life and Work of Larry Gorman : A Preliminary Report

Edward D. Ives

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/ives_papers



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dr. Edward D. Ives Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

WESTERN FOLKLORE

A REPRINT FROM

VOLUME XIX · *January, 1960* · NUMBER 1

PUBLISHED FOR THE CALIFORNIA FOLKLORE SOCIETY BY THE
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES

WAYLAND D. HAND, *Los Angeles*, EDITOR
R. D. JAMESON, *Las Vegas, New Mexico*, BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
BARBARA ALLEN WOODS, *Kingston, Rhode Island*, INDEXER
MRS. BYRD HOWELL GRANGER, *Tucson*, NAMES AND PLACES
ED CRAY, *Los Angeles*, FOLK SONG DISCOGRAPHY

EDITORIAL BOARD

GUSTAVE O. ARLT, *Los Angeles* C. GRANT LOOMIS, *Berkeley*
AUSTIN E. FIFE, *Los Angeles* ARCHER TAYLOR, *Berkeley*

REGIONAL EDITORS

HAROLD W. BENTLEY, *Salt Lake* FRANCES GILLMOR, *Tucson*
MODY C. BOATRIGHT, *Austin* THOMAS M. PEARCE, *Albuquerque*
BERTRAND H. BRONSON, *Berkeley* HENRY A. PERSON, *Seattle*
ARTHUR L. CAMPA, *Denver* S. J. SACKETT, *Fort Hays, Kansas*
AURELIO M. ESPINOSA, *Jr., Palo Alto* JAMES N. TIDWELL, *San Diego*

WESTERN FOLKLORE (formerly *California Folklore Quarterly*) is published quarterly by the University of California Press for the California Folklore Society. Each volume contains approximately 300 pages; articles are printed in the field of folklore in conformity with the principles laid down in the objectives of the Society. Contributions will be accepted from all sources, not solely from professional folklorists. Editorial matters should be taken up with Professor Wayland D. Hand, University of California, Los Angeles 24. Books for review should be sent to Professor R. D. Jameson, New Mexico Highlands University, Las Vegas, New Mexico, and folk song records to Ed Cray, *Western Folklore*, University of California, Los Angeles 24. Matters having to do with names and places should be sent to Mrs. Byrd Howell Granger, University of Arizona, Tucson.

Authors alone are responsible for the contents of their papers. All manuscripts, including footnotes and quoted materials, should be double spaced. Titles of books and journals (but not of monograph and memoir series) should be italicized; titles of articles, chapters of books, poems, reports, etc., should be placed in quotation marks.

Western Folklore is sent gratis to all members of the California Folklore Society. Membership in the Society is \$4.00 a year, payable in advance. For the benefit of students, a special annual rate of \$2.00 is in effect. Applications for membership will be received by the Secretary-Treasurer, California Folklore Society, University of California Press, Berkeley 4, California. Individual numbers of the quarterly will be supplied at \$1.25. All back issues are available to subscribers on microfilm or in xerograph facsimile copies from University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan; most are in stock at the University of California Press.

Members of the California Folklore Society who also belong to the American Folklore Society are eligible to receive the benefits of the joint membership on payment of the \$9.00 fee. Remittances for both organizations should be made to the California Folklore Society.

The Life and Work of Larry Gorman: A Preliminary Report

EDWARD D. IVES

LAWRENCE GORMAN, "The Man Who Makes the Songs," was born in Trout River, Lot Thirteen, on the west end of Prince Edward Island in 1846.¹ As a young man he worked on his father's farm, in the many shipyards along the Bideford and Trout Rivers, as a fisherman, and as a hand in the lobster factories along the shore from Cape Wolfe to Miminigash. Up to about 1885 (age forty), he spent many of his winters in the lumberwoods and his springs on the river drives, mostly along the Miramichi River in New Brunswick. Then he would usually return to "The Island" in the summer. About 1885 he moved permanently to Ellsworth, Maine, bought a house there, was twice married, and worked in the woods and on the drives along the Union River. In the early 1900's he moved to South Brewer, Maine, just across the Penobscot from the great lumber port of Bangor. Here he worked mostly as a yard hand for the Eastern Corporation, a paper mill. He died in Brewer in 1917 and now lies buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Bangor.

All through his seventy years, wherever he went he left behind him a trail of stories, songs, and consternation. Let us sample a few of his songs. From Prince Edward Island comes "The Gull Decoy," a song Larry made up about a fellow he had fished with:

I raised my children to my own notions,
The eldest of them I called him Mick;
I always intended to give them tuition
To curse and swear and to cuff and kick.

The other day we got in a tussle,
'Twas then his mettle I thought I'd try;
But he knocked me down and he did me guzzle
And chewed the thumb off the Gull Decoy.

From the Miramachi comes "The Scow on Cowden Shore," named for the Southwest Boom Company's big scow, which hauled rock and timber to repair the boom blocks (cribwork piers), and which was apparently working out from Cowden's shore at the time Larry wrote the song.

¹I should like to thank the Coe Research Fund Committee of the University of Maine for its three generous grants which have allowed me to study Gorman more fully than I ever could have had I been dependent on my own funds. This paper was first read at the Annual Meeting of The American Folklore Society in Chicago, December 29, 1957.

My name is Larry Gorman,
 To all hands I mean no harm;
 You need not be alarmed
 For you've heard of me before.
 I can make a song and sing it,
 I can fix it neat and bring it,
 And the title that I'll give it
 Is "The Scow on Cowden Shore."

I have got many's the foe
 And the same I well do know
 So amongst them all I go
 And it grieves their hearts full sore.
 For I know that they could shoot me,
 Crementate or prosecute me,
 But they kindly salute me
 Round the scow on Cowden shore.²

And from Ellsworth, Maine, comes "Billy Watts":

For forty-odd years I've been known in this place,
 And the name that I go by is "Old Dirty Face."
 I never once washed it but once in my life,

And that was the first time I went courting my wife,
 Derry down, down, oh, down, derry down.

When I get to Ellsworth I must have a wash,
 My face it is covered with gurry and moss;
 I'll bottle the water to poison the botts—
 Now what do you think of your friend Mr. Watts?
 Derry down, down, oh, down, derry down.

Gorman is reputed to have had a nasty gift for spontaneous rhyming. A man he was working for asked him to say grace in the company dining hall. Larry looked down at his plate and said,

"O Lord above, look down on us,
 And see how we are forgotten;
 And send us meat that is fit to eat,
 Because by Christ, this is rotten!"

I am not the first writer to notice Gorman. Holman Day used him as a character in that very bad novel, *King Spruce* (New York, 1908), where he shows him as a wiry little scrapper who punctuated his cudgel blows with verses. Eckstorm and Smyth spoke of him and published a few of his pieces.³

² From the singing of the late Fred McMahon of Chatham, New Brunswick, for the Lord Beaverbrook Collection of New Brunswick Folksong.

³ Fannie Hardy Eckstorm and Mary Winslow Smyth, *The Minstrelsy of Maine* (Boston, 1927), pp. 111-113, 114-120, 126-128, 140-144.

Louise Manny of Newcastle, New Brunswick, who wrote the first article about him,⁴ said, "He was undoubtedly the greatest woods balladist that ever lived."⁵ Doerflinger, in his excellent book, devotes many pages to Gorman and his songs and speaks of him as "doubtless the greatest of all song makers of the woods."⁶ Beck speaks of him as "a man who cannot be left out of any discussion of woods singing,"⁷ while some years earlier Eloise H. Linscott wrote that it was said "that nearly all good tunes and woodsmen's songs were made up by Larry Gorman, one of the most famous of the fighting lumberjacks of Maine."⁸ Thus, through both the written word and tradition, the legend of Larry Gorman has grown apace until he has become a sort of archpoet of the Northeast lumberwoods, and the author of almost every song from "The Jam on Gerry's Rock" to "The Red Light Saloon."

We have, then, a man whose reputation is considerable but about whom we know very little. The way has been well prepared for a complete study of the man by the many references to him and the occasional publication of parts of his life and work in studies of a more general nature. Through over one hundred interviews with people who knew Gorman or knew something about him, through hundreds of letters from these and other informants, through a careful study of what songs I have determined are his, and, finally, through a first-hand knowledge of the places where he lived and worked, I have tried to gain as complete an understanding of the man as is possible at this late date. The search has been interesting, exasperating, disappointing, and enlightening. What I have found is not always what I wanted to find or had been led to expect I would find. In fact, so much of what we now know of Gorman is to some extent misconception that we can get a good picture of him if we see what he was not before we try to say what he was.

First, Larry Gorman was not what could be called a "typical woodsman." Insofar as that term has any meaning, it is not an accurate description of him. He was not a drinker, for one thing. He would drink, and occasionally got drunk, but he was not given to the legendary down-river binges so dear to the heart of Stewart Holbrook. Neither was he a fighter, but rather he was a very mild, peaceable man who had learned to settle his differences in another manner. One man told me the following story:

One time in Ellsworth I saw Larry getting a terrible tongue-lashing from a fellow he'd songed. That man called him all sorts of fearful things and all but threatened to kill him. Larry just stood there, not blinking any more than a toad, until the fellow was finished. Then he just walked away.

⁴ Manny, "Larry Gorman—Miramichi Balladist," *Maritime Advocate and Busy East*, XL (October, 1949), 5-15.

⁵ From a letter to the Charlottetown (P.E.I.) *Guardian* (no date).

⁶ William M. Doerflinger, *Shantymen and Shantyboys* (New York, 1951), p. xiv.

⁷ Horace P. Beck, *The Folklore of Maine* (Philadelphia and New York, 1957), p. 245.

⁸ Linscott, *Folk Songs of Old New England* (New York, 1939), p. 235.

The fact is he was never very strong or able. He was long, lean, slow, and awkward, traits which not only made him a poor fighter but also an indifferent woodsman and river driver. In the woods he was never anything but a swamper, and on the drives, while he could go on logs, he was only a dead-water man, and even there, Joe McIntosh of Ellsworth recalls seeing Larry fall off a log, climb up on the bank, and fall right over backwards again into the water. "And I never saw anybody else do quite that," he added.

Joe, who had driven with Gorman for many years on the Union River, did not feel that Larry was a great singer either: "He wasn't the kind of singer you'd go out of your way to hear," he said, and others seem to agree that, though he knew a lot of songs, he was only a fair singer. There were great singers in the woods, but Gorman was not one of them.

One of the most pervasive of the misconceptions about Gorman is the one of his universal popularity in the lumbercamps. As Doerflinger says, "the news that he was working in a camp was enough to make shantyboys for miles around decide they wanted to join the same crew."⁹ Most of the statements I have collected show that he was not always well liked by the men with whom he worked. There is even a report of a crew in New Brunswick that simply would not go to work unless the foreman made Larry stop his song writing or get out of camp. (He left camp, by the way.) He was the sort of man who would come into a camp and before long he would have a song about everyone in it, and very few of Larry's songs are exactly flattering. About the most encomiastic statement I have heard about him was that people "liked him well enough." At any rate, there is no reason to assume, either from reports or from deduction, that he was a great drawing card in the camps.

It has been said that employers feared, or had reason to fear, Gorman,

⁹ Doerflinger, p. 213.

THE KANSAS FOLKLORE SOCIETY

The Third Annual Kansas Folklore Society Conference will be held Saturday, April 2, 1960, on the campus of Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. An all-day program is planned with emphasis on utilization of folklore by teachers in the public schools. William E. Koch, president of the Kansas Folklore Society, and Mary Francis White, secretary-treasurer, are in charge of the program and local arrangements. Both are members of the Department of English at Kansas State University.

because if he "songed" them, characterizing them as hard driving skinflints, they might find it hard to get men. Eckstorm and Smyth felt that woods poets in general were men of influence in this way and that Larry's song on the Henrys of New Hampshire had done "in the way of keeping good men from going to New Hampshire to work is hard to estimate."¹⁰ It is extremely hard to estimate the effect of a song—on this point Eckstorm and Smyth are absolutely right—but I have never found a woodsman who admitted steering clear of any operation because of anything Gorman said about it in his songs. Herbert Rice of Bangor and John and Peter Jamieson of East Bathurst, New Brunswick, had all heard the song on Henry and Co., and yet they went to work for them. Roderick McDonald of Ellsworth never had any trouble getting a crew even though Gorman had "songed" him several times (he did not even fire Larry). So, while it would be nice to be able to say that Larry Gorman was a strong social force working to better the woodsman's lot, it is more likely that he disturbed the labor market very little.

Gorman never seems to have been a propagandist, hired or otherwise, for anyone either. Horace Beck is quite right when he says that lumbermen did not hire singers to entertain the men, but I have no evidence that suggests that Larry was a notable exception who "came to spend a considerable portion of his time writing songs for the company paper" of the Great Northern Paper Company or that "These songs did much to enlist labor for the company."¹¹ He died four years before the publication of the first Great Northern company paper I know anything about; the *Northern* first appeared in April, 1921, and was discontinued in October, 1928. Gorman's role with the Great Northern was hardly "unique"; he may have hired on as a woodsman or a driver from time to time, but if he ever paid Penobscot waters more than cursory visits he has left no record of it beyond the songs "The Hoboes of Maine" and, perhaps, "The Boys of the Island" (if indeed he wrote the latter song at all).¹²

Finally, I would like to qualify a statement made by Doerflinger: "Yet if more orally circulated songs—widely circulated ones, too—were composed by any other folk-song maker on this continent than have been traced on good authority to Larry Gorman, the fact hasn't yet been reported."¹³ Doerflinger is just about right; many of his songs are still in tradition, but they have not achieved wide circulation. They are remembered locally: Union River songs stayed pretty well in the Union River valley, for example. There are exceptions, but none of Gorman's songs have achieved the wide circula-

¹⁰ Eckstorm and Smyth, p. 113.

¹¹ Beck, p. 245.

¹² Eckstorm and Smyth, pp. 118-120, 140-144. See also Doerflinger, pp. 218-219.

¹³ Doerflinger, p. 213.

tion of W. N. Allen's "The Banks of the Little Eau Pleine."¹⁴ Even in Maine, Gorman had a rival in Joe Scott, five of whose songs—"Ben Deane," "Guy Reed," "Howard Carey," "The Plain Golden Band," and "The Norway Bum"—have had a much wider circulation than anything of Gorman's here in the Northeast.¹⁵

Now, if Gorman was not a hard-drinking, two-fisted, golden-voiced bushman, the delight of the men and the despair of the operators, why is he important? First, he is important because he was so well known. His neighbors and companions may not always have liked him, but they remembered his songs and sang them. He made songs that caught on and went into oral tradition, albeit a limited tradition. There are several explanations for this fame. For one thing, the songs he wrote were so personal, bearing so clearly his individual stamp, that they stayed associated with his name. He did not follow the more traditional patterns like the "come-all-ye," which would tend to obscure the author behind standard devices and morality. Interestingly enough, many people remember him but have forgotten his songs. On the other hand, Joe Scott, who wrote "come-all-ye's" is almost forgotten but the ballads he wrote are still being sung. For another thing, the very personal, satirical, invective quality of Gorman's verse attracted attention to the man. Larry was apt to song anyone around at the slightest pretext, and, as I have said, his songs were apt to catch on. He was a man to watch out for; one could laugh at him or beat him up, but either way, Larry Gorman attracted as much attention to himself as to his songs.

Second, he is important because of the many people who, as they say, "made up songs," he was easily the best. Occasionally a man like "Beaver Jack" McInnis would turn out a piece that could claim rank with Gorman's, but Gorman consistently turned out "corkers." I can offer one partial explanation for this: he worked at it full time. Others were teamsters or drivers first, poets second in off hours; Gorman was a poet first. There are stories of Larry at work suddenly stopping, staring off into space, and even walking away from the job, hands behind his back, head down, step measured. His song-making was by far the most important thing in his life.

Third, he is important because he can give us a wonderful picture of the times. Gorman had a very keen eye for detail and loved to create poems out of lists of household effects, and he had a knack for catching a personality in a few lines. Songs like "Donahue's Spree," "Yeo's Party," and "The Champion of Moose Hill" are spirited pictures of the entertainments of the

¹⁴ See Franz Rickaby, *Ballads and Songs of the Shantyboy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1926), pp. 25-34. This ballad is well known in New Brunswick. Incidentally, Charles Gorman, Larry Gorman's nephew, who lives in Burton, P.E.I., sang me an excellent version of this song.

¹⁵ See my article, "'Ben Deane' and Joe Scott: a Ballad and its Probable Author," *Journal of American Folklore* (forthcoming).

last part of the nineteenth century. "The Winter of Seventy-Three" is a wonderfully detailed picture of life in a New Brunswick lumbercamp on the upper Sou'west Miramichi, and "The Hoboes of Maine," as Mrs. Eckstorm has pointed out, is a masterpiece of its kind.

Finally, the story of Larry Gorman is interesting for its own sake. A rolling stone out of a family of thirteen; a soft-spoken, well-mannered man who could turn and cut the hide off anyone whom he felt was belittling him; a mill hand and swamper who always wore gentlemen's gloves and carried a handsome cane to Mass on Sundays and wished to be called Mr. Gorman—he was truly one of a kind, and it is hoped that the full story of his life and works will be, to alter slightly Virginia Woolf's metaphor, a looking glass at an odd corner.

University of Maine

CALIFORNIA FOLKLORE SOCIETY

The ninth annual meeting of the California Folklore Society will be held at the University of California, Santa Barbara, April 22-23, 1960, it has been announced by Hector Lee, Executive Vice-President of the Society. Dorothy L. Westra is chairman of the program committee and Winston A. Reynolds heads the committee on local arrangements. Both may be reached on the University campus at Goleta, California.

NEW MEXICO FOLKLORE SOCIETY

The fifteenth annual meeting of the New Mexico Folklore Society will be held Saturday, May 14, at Taos, New Mexico, it has been announced by Mrs. Eve Ball, President. Named to chair the program is Mrs. Guadalupe Vaughan. The committee on local arrangements is headed by Jenny Wells Vincent, Taos, Vice-President of the Society.