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Notes on North Country Folkways¹

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A LION does not write a book. The broken trail of the people must be followed by signs of their myriad folk experiences in story, myth, legend, proverb, reflecting their common struggle to survive; in the abandoned spore of old newspapers; in folk say, marking the rituals of homely living, birth, death, harvest, planting—the embroidery on the pillow, the democracy quilt. These signs are not to be found easily or read lightly, measured like rock, estimated as metal. Folkways are malleable. They disappear as inland rivers do, and reappear to flood a continent. They are submerged by time, shadowed by events, by sudden jets of power changing into their opposite—a new harvest coming with a new tool.

In the North Country inventions, philosophy, new roads, new tools opened the horizon of man's brain. Vast areas stretched on the map unknown to man, and he asked, "Who works there?" Tradition was broken, truncated; relationships, fragmentary. The new man was a green tendril, a bag of memories, an old woman's fragmented dementia, a child's horizon madness, a buck and wing, a young girl with a harp, pictures in a rawhide trunk, songs of nostalgia.

The mechanics, the lumberjacks, the lakemen, rivermen, woodcutters, plowmen, hunkies, haynocks, whistlepunks, the women beating the chaff from the threshed grain, the roof-raisers, the cradle-makers, the writers of constitutions, the singers in the eve-

¹ This essay is based upon extracts from the author's forthcoming book, *North Star Country*, which is to be issued by Duell, Sloan, and Pearce as a volume of the *American Folkways Series*, edited by Erskine Caldwell. *Ed.*

ning along unknown rivers, the stonemasons, the quarrymen, the high slingers of words, the printers and speakers in the courthouses, the lawmakers, the carpenters, joiners, journeymen—all kept on building. Every seven years they picked up the loans, mortgages, the grasshopper-ridden fields, the lost acres, the flat bank accounts, and went on, started over, turned a new leaf, worked harder, looked over new horizons.

Human history is work history. The heroes of the people are work heroes. On the frontier of the North Country work was celebrated as the genius of the country.

I love the banging hammer,
 The whirring of the plane,
 The crashing of the busy saw,
 The creaking of the crane,
 The ringing of the anvil,
 The groaning of the drill,
 The clattering of the turning-lathe,
 The whirring of the mill,
 The buzzing of the spindle,
 The rattling of the loom,
 The puffing of the engine
 And the fan's continuous boom—
 The clipping of the tailor's shears,
 The driving of the awl—
 The sounds of busy labor
 I love, I love them all.

I love the plowman's whistle,
 The reaper's cheerful song,
 The drover's oft-repeated shout,
 As he spurs his flock along;
 The bustle of the market-man,
 As he hies him to the town;
 The holler from the tree top,
 As the fruits come down,
 The busy sound of threshers,
 As they clean the ripened grain,
 And the husker's joke and mirth, and glee,
 'Neath the moonlight on the plain,
 The kind voice of the dairyman,

The shepherd's gentle call —
These sounds of active industry,
I love — I love them all.²

In the building of the North Country in fifty years there was work enough for a continent of men, new tools to be made of wood, iron, and later of steel, bridges to be built, miles of roads on buffalo and Indian trails, canals to be dug, trees felled, bonanza wheat to be threshed, ore wheelbarrowed to lake ships — all to be done in the space of a few years by two-handed, two-legged, heart-dynamoed man, with his shoulders, elbow grease, his bantam earth-spanning legs, and the queer skull piece that keeps his backbone from unraveling.

A Minnesota newspaper sent out a call: "Wanted in Minnesota. Twenty thousand feeble-bodied scalliwags . . . to hoe corn, and cultivate muscle, and twenty thousand able bodied men . . . to bring them along in litters. . . . One hundred and twenty thousand pairs of decayed lungs and old boots wanted immediately to be revamped with double uppers, and have souls put in them. Also, two hundred thousand wrecks of constitutions . . . whether shaken to pieces by fever and ague, or the abolitionists, to be repaired on the electric anvil of Minnesota's steel blue sky." In addition the editor wanted "two million sheep . . . and as many horned cattle as can be got . . . to crop the twelve million acres of grass that annually rot" in Minnesota. And he called on "all the above, except the lawyers . . . to bring along at least one woman each, to do the cooking, and sew on the buttons."³

Workers were shanghaied from New York boats, and others were driven west by soup lines and depressions.

There was much talk, as there always is in a new country, where a new man, with a new tool, in a new horizon, carries on monologues with himself and talks up in the evening, congregates after labor, picks out new speech from new racial combinations, from new work, from a wilderness silence, talking bolder than he sometimes feels.

² *St. Anthony Express*, May 31, 1851.

³ Reprinted from the *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul) in the *Mower County Mirror* (Austin), May 19, 1859.

Words are freed with other freedoms. The talk goes on across the fence, in the field, in the blacksmith shop, before the winter hearth—of apples, babies, crops, politics, prices, freedom.

Poems are sung, coming out in the long evening after labor, added to up and down the river, carried farther west, passed around on a far swinging horizon, in a lyric wilderness.

I love my pick and shovel,
I'll paint the handles red,
For without my pick and shovel
I couldn't earn my bread.

You'll be in despair when you wake
Tomorrow in the morn,
But a few days of labor left
And your winter's stake all gone.⁴

Some sailors got shovels and others got spades,
And more got wheelbarrows—every man to his trade;
We worked like red devils, our fingers got sore
And we cursed Escanaba and her damned iron ore.⁵

Voyageurs, hunters, trappers, traders, frontiersmen did not care for the wheelbarrow, the pick, and the shovel. In a new country in a very few years roads had to be built, thousands of ties cut and laid for the railroad, millions of trees felled and floated down the rivers. Sawmills piled towns under sawdust as boards were planed for barns, houses, and fence posts. One guy said he cut enough timber in one year to build a privy six feet high and six feet wide reaching from Saginaw to the other side of the Erie Canal.

The great crust of iron in the ranges of the Mesabi, the Vermilion, the Cuyuna, had to be shoveled, lifted, hauled to Two Harbors and Duluth, loaded into boats, shoveled into the holds, unloaded at the other end of the journey, by hand, shoulder muscle, the small of the back, the loins, the leg muscles, working ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day.

Thousands of men had to be taken from the immigrant ships,

⁴ From an old song of the Great Lakes area, still heard around Duluth.

⁵ A loading song still sung on the Great Lakes. Recorded by Walter Havighurst, in *The Long Ships Passing*, 212 (New York, 1942).

from the eastern depressions, from the lines of the hungry in the boweries already created by industry; some shanghai'd in the night, thrown into river and lake boats to work on the Sault locks, which had to be finished so that the iron ore could get to the East, to the opening cities of Cleveland and Pittsburgh.

There were Germans, Scandinavians, Cornishmen, Croatians, Finns, Slavs, Russians, Irishmen; hundreds of thousands of them without women, home, or children, ready to migrate from Germany, Ireland, the Balkans, to work in the iron pits, on the railroads, in the wheat fields; to go back in the fall to the Gateway, Minneapolis' hiring center, for a job in a sawmill or in the woods. There had to be thousands of migrant workers with only the back, the naked hands to sell. "Beasts," they were able to name themselves; "timber beasts," the woodsmen said.

They were the handlers of tools and the makers of new tools—the pick, the shovel, the ax, the peavey, the donkey, the awl, the gimlet. They were the handlers—the diggers, the road and rail builders; including gandy dancers, tie cutters, and timber beasts; the bull buckers and bull cooks and punchers; the cat skimmers, the boomers, powder monkeys, whistlepunks. They called themselves sawdust eaters, river hogs, boomers, and bloomers, inkslingers, bulls of the woods, scissorbills.

They were of many races, with names like McDonald, Chisholm, Stewart, McHalle, Mackay, Boles, Jacob, Tract, Munch, Perin, Gehegan, Hanna, McGillicutty, Hanson, Swanson—names you can now read on the country tombstones. They made new languages as well as new tools and industries; they spoke out of the long hours with the hand calloused and smoothed on the peavey, the ax, the pick, and shovel; out of the new experiences of accident, fire, sickness, cold, plague, and colossal work.

New names, verbs for action were made. The Cornishmen (called the Cousin Jacks, probably from Cussin' Jacks for their meaty, salty vocabulary), with their sharp Celtic minds, brought new and old words in their hats. They said that the ore was "hungry"—meaning poor; spoke of a "brave, keenly lode," and the "grass captain," and the "surface boss." They brought their "crib" with them—

meaning lunch, called a section hand a "navvy," and had their "dish o' tay" after work. They called the waste "deads," named the shaft mouth a "collar." A "touch pipe" was a rest, and they became famous for their "taty paasty Cornish cream," and said when you were pixedated you were "picky loaden."⁶

The timber workers made up words with the flying chips. They named themselves the "flunkey," the "cookie," the "gyppo," "fink" — a word forever in our language, and one we needed. A "powder monkey" was a dynamiter; "Bible pounder" — a street-corner preacher; "sky hooker" — top man on a sleigh; a "stiff" — anyone without a white collar; a "chisler" or "bindlestiff" — a loafer; "brains" — the office man; an "ax-handle hound" or a "scissorbill" — a poor logger or a dumb one who will not join the union.⁷

They named the machines they worked with: a "cat," was a tractor; a "donkey," a small engine which yards and loads; a "hootnanny," a device to hold a crosscut saw while sawing a log from underneath; and the saw itself was a "Swedish fiddle." Then they named the experiences, the actions. "Give her snoose," meaning more power; "driving the pitch," to drive logs as long as you can see them; "carrying a balloon," taking your blanket with you; "got her made," meaning a stake for the winter; "mix me a walk," make out my time; "put on the nosebag," to feed; "timberrrrrrr!" — the cry when the tree is falling, to warn other workers. To "Saginaw" a log is to retard the large end, and to "St. Croix" it is to help the small end gain. The "wobbly horrors" were what employers got in a strike; "the long green" and "hay" for money have become part of our language; a "widow-maker" is a tree blown down by the wind, which might fall on a man; "snoose," is snuff; "Scandinavian dynamite," a plug of chewing tobacco; the "bull pen," a jail for drunks; "packing a card," belonging to a union.⁸

They were walkers, and still are — the long country-bred walkers,

⁶ Heard by the author among Cornish miners in Michigan and northern Minnesota. Havighurst lists some of these expressions in *The Long Ships Passing*, 210.

⁷ The writer heard these expressions in use among St. Croix Valley lumbermen.

⁸ These expressions are used by lumbermen and by field workers who were members of the Industrial Workers of the World, commonly called the I.W.W., an organization founded at Chicago on June 27, 1905. Many of the expressions were heard by the author. They appear frequently in *One Big Union Monthly* and the *Industrial Pioneer*, periodi-

vest songs became the songs of the itinerant worker generally as he moved from job to job, from camp to camp, from farm to farm, walking, catching the highballs.

The sun is bright, the skies are blue,
 Honey, I'd like to stay with you,
 But there ain't no work for me to do —
 My private car is waitin'.
 Your kissin's sweet as new mown hay,
 Your smile is like a sunny day,
 But, honey, I must be on my way —
 My private car is waitin'.
 I'd like a house near a shady tree
 An' a bunch of kids upon my knee,
 But honey, the good life ain't for me —
 My private car is waitin'.

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There ain't a thing on earth I got,
 Even if I had a six-foot lot —
 They'll give me that when I'm left to rot —
 My private car is waitin'.

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Just call it quits and say goodbye
 You'll get another man — and I —
 A bunch o' stars in a jungle sky —
 My private car is waitin'.
 My car has a roof an' a slidin' door.
 Oh Lord, when I lay on that hard, wood floor,
 Way down in the guts of me I'm sore —
 My private car is waitin'.
 Honey, some day the time will come
 When a workin' stiff don't have to bum
 An' a man's a man, not a jungle crum —
 My private car is waitin'.¹⁰

And this one:

You advertise in Omaha,
 "Come, leave the valley of the Kaw,"
 Nebraska calls, "Don't be misled,
 We'll furnish you a feather bed."

¹⁰ Irene Paull ("Calamity Jane"), "Song of the Transient Worker," in *We're the People; also Ballads by the Workers*, 73 (Duluth, n. d.).

Then South Dakota lets out a roar,
 "We need ten thousand men or more.
 Our rain is turning, prices drop,
 For God's sake, save our bumper crop!"

In North Dakota, I'll be darn,
 The wise guy sleeps in a Hoosier barn,
 The Hoosier breaks into his snore,
 Then yells it's quarter after four.

Oh, harvest land, sweet burning sand,
 As on the sun-kissed field I stand,
 I look away across the plain
 And wonder if it's going to rain.
 I vow by all the brands of Cain
 That I will not be here again.¹¹

What sextant can be used to shoot the sun of a people's migration, what spirit levels found to make their work live and hold? What instrument charts the course of the creation of a nation, struggling for birth, the rising wave of many classes, nationalities, complex strains, beating the pattern, shifting like a reflection of antagonisms, despair, hope, belief, mounting chaos moving toward disaster and growth?

No map sent on buffalo hides to Louis XIV to show the new empire was as momentous as the varied faces of men and women who flooded with hopes the new country, unmarked history in their blood, the eye adjusting to space, disaster, to the amplitude and prodigality of the prairies, to extremes of weather, to plenty and poverty, feast and famine. The map was sometimes lost, the face obscured, the song left on the wind of a prairie fire. But sometimes the story told at evening was held in a man's heart for the span of a life, and released at some sudden spurt of memory, to recall lone women talking when the loon cries, the projected lineaments of the human face, the large barn, the fields of corn — a new poem and a new speech.

¹¹ This parody on "Buelah Land" was heard by the writer in the Dakota harvest fields. Other versions known as "Nebraska Land" and "Dakota Land" are sung to the tune of "Sweet Genevieve." See Botkin, *Treasury of American Folklore*, 313.



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