

IS THERE AN ALBERTA FOLK MUSIC?¹

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A number of occupations are especially conducive to the development of a folk-music tradition: for example, lumberjacks, railroaders, miners, voyageurs, cowboys and homesteaders. Aggregations of men involved in these activities tend to develop folk-music traditions which typically borrow heavily from older forms and eventually evolve into distinct musical traditions (Fowke, 1970 is a particularly good example of this). It follows that regions with such occupational groups should be fertile grounds for the folklore collector.

Viewed from this perspective, it is somewhat surprising that very little English-language folk music has been uncovered in Alberta. English-speaking peoples in this part of Canada show considerable populations of cowboys, homesteaders, and railroaders. As these are "folk-music prone" groups you would expect some folk-music tradition in this region. However, a review of the available resources suggests that very little material has been documented. This paper will explore the apparent lack of folk music of Alberta and argue that there is an untapped folk-music tradition in that province.

A number of sources converge on the popular view that Alberta does NOT have an English-speaking folk music. A review of the published works of Canadian folk music reveals no collections dealing solely with Alberta. Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia have localized collections in print or on record while Alberta does not. Considering available recorded archives (field recordings, collection tapes, etc.) an Alberta collection has yet to be found. While some work has been done,² there is no record of substantial scholarly activity orientated toward Alberta English-language folk music. The Glenbow Foundation, in its systematic documentation of Alberta's heritage, has failed to uncover any major collections of folk music materials. All of these negative findings seem to reinforce the "man in the street's" view that Alberta does not have a viable folk-music tradition.

Several reasons have been advanced to account for this state of affairs. In his *History of Music in Canada*, Kallman (1960) states:

The documents so far inspected contain many references to instruments, few to folk singing . . . The conditions of pioneer life on the prairies were not conducive to the preservation of folk song, chiefly because settlements were too isolated and settlers were of different national origins. The production of original folk song in the west has been small (p. 159).

Other forces may also have inhibited the development of an Alberta music. The relatively short presence of English-speaking peoples on the prairies could be a contributing factor. Presumably it takes time for such a tradition to develop, and Alberta just has not had the time. It is also possible that the lack of geographic boundary between the Canadian and U.S. prairies facilitated

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²There have been some published documents (e.g., Weiss and Archer), but these do not represent sustained programmes.

North/South population movement and set the scene for a "cultural override," which could inhibit the development of an indigenous folkway. The lack of documented materials, *along* with these factors, appears to offer very strong support for the argument that Alberta does (did) not have a folk-music tradition.

There is another possibility. As there has been no long-term systematic collecting in Alberta, it remains plausible that the material exists, but has not been uncovered yet. To support this hypothesis various collections will be culled to determine if hints of an Alberta folk music emerge, several folklore sources will be inspected to discover if an oral tradition was in evidence in the province, and commercial cowboy music will be explored to discover if it may have derived from a folk tradition.

Survey of Existing Collections³

One indicator of an active folk-music tradition is the migration of songs to other geographic regions. A case in point for Alberta comes from Sandburg's classic collection of American folk songs. In discussing "The Tenderfoot," Sandburg notes: "Text and tune are as sung by Norman Byrne of the University of Oregon, as he learned it in Alberta, Canada" (p. 274).

Glenn Ohrlin was a working American cowboy when he began to sing and collect cowboy songs. His participation in rodeos brought him into contact with several Canadians, from whom he learned some interesting songs and poems. His collection *The Hell-Bound Train* includes "Pete Knight" (pp. 82-83), "Chuck Wagon Races" (pp. 213-16), "The Days of the Past are Gone" (p. 217) and "Canuck's Lament" (pp. 218-19). Each of these has clear Alberta referents. For example, the second verse of "Chuck Wagon Races" reads:

We wreck them, yes a plenty, these wagons are not toys.
They're a little rough on horses and mighty hard on boys.
They come out just a-skidding and a-rolling mighty fast.
Usually away up in the lead is the big guy, Ronnie Glass.

Even today, the name Glass is newsworthy during the Calgary Stampede, indicating the Alberta source of this anonymous poem. The "Canuck's Lament," written by J. K. Trout, then of Black Diamond, Alberta, mentions Kesler and Vold who are established names in Alberta ranching. Ohrlin's source was Jack Lauder of Innisfail, who wintered in Arkansas. It is intriguing that this American-based collection should uncover materials that clearly relate to Alberta.

Edith Fowke's books also reveal a number of songs with clear Alberta referents. Among these are: "The Alberta Homestead" (Fowke and Johnston, 1967), "Alberta Homesteader" (Fowke, 1973), "Alberta Land" and "Ballad of the Frank Slide" (Fowke, Mills, and Blume, 1965). Fowke also mentions reports of hearing classic cowboy songs in Alberta. For example, with reference to "Blood on the Saddle," she writes "However, it is not a modern song, for Dr. E. A. Corbett remembers a cowboy called Oklahoma Pete singing it on the Cochrane Ranch west of Calgary back in 1905" (Fowke and Johnston, 1954, p. 101). The emergence of American cowboy songs in Alberta is not surprising (see Fowke, 1962 for a detailed discussion), and further underscores the potential for an Alberta tradition.

The Glenbow Foundation is dedicated to the preservation of Alberta's historical heritage. While it has not uncovered any major collections of folk

³In any survey the possibility of omissions exists. if you know of any materials I have missed please let me know.

music, several interesting song fragments are in their archives. A notebook found in the effects of R. H. Given contained a number of songs composed by a Mountie, G. J. Crofton, while stationed near Cypress Hills (c. 1894). Titles included: "Oh Gay is the Life of a Gallant MP," "Waiting for the Mail," "B Troop on the Jump," "We're Seated Alone in Our Shanty of Logs" and "Did You Ever Shoot the Goose," all set to existing tunes.

Another fragment emerged in the reminiscences of J. O. McHugh, an Alberta rancher. The tune for the "Two-Bit Cayuse" has been lost, but the words remain (Fowke, 1976, pp. 235-36). The reference to the Bow River in the second verse indicates its Alberta heritage:

But 'twas down on the old Bow River
In the year of nineteen-one
When I was twisting bronchos
For F. A. McHugh and Sons

Folklore and Folk Verse

Herbert Halpert collected tall tales in Alberta during the Second World War (see Fowke, 1976, pp. 171-89). Here we encounter several colourful local yarn spinners (the McDougalls) and an active oral tradition of these materials, particularly among the guides in the Rockies. "Each man that tells a story adds a bit of his own, or forgets to tell a bit, therefore gives the story a little different twist" (Fowke, 1976, p.175). Combined with the existence of a colourful local vocabulary (see J. D. Higinbotham's section in Fowke, 1976, pp. 243-51), the scene appears to be set for the emergence of a folk-music tradition. Several song sheets published by the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies (e.g., 1935) suggest that a musical tradition did exist⁴ (see also Carter, 1961 for a discussion).

There also appears to be a tradition of "folk verse" in Alberta. In discussing the Canadian cowboys he had met, Ohrlin indicates: "They also seem strong on partying, giving toasts and poems, and generally enjoying themselves" (pp. 213-14). Laurie Ricou has been collecting prairie poetry and has found a number of Alberta poems that have narrative and melodic qualities. For example, Barney Halpin wrote several satirical poems about ex-Premier William Aberhart, nicknamed Pulpit-Pounding Bill, which are clearly singable:

Poverty amidst the plenty
Was his favourite Sunday theme.
"Trust in me and God and Manning
And just listen to our scheme."

It appears that the poem was a vehicle for expressing folk themes in Alberta.⁵

Commercial Music

The sources reviewed thus far indicate a potential for a folk-music tradition in Alberta. Not only are the social forces fostering an oral tradition present, but casual collecting has revealed some interesting fragments and materials.

⁴Several suggestions of active song traditions are reflected in song sheets such as: Alpine Club (Wates), service clubs (Hutchcroft), Girl Guides, political parties, and unions. Again, if you have access to any of these materials I would appreciate hearing from you.

⁵John Day of Alberta Parks and Recreation indicates that the *Edmonton Journal* frequently published "song-poems" of this nature.

Of course, the one major piece of evidence has yet to be found: the corpus of collected and documented material. The important question to be considered is: "Where did this material go?" If the tradition is alive and vital, it seems likely that it would have surfaced regardless of systematic collecting. Yet it does not appear to have emerged.

One possible answer may be found in some of the commercial music that has come out of Alberta. It is possible that the Alberta folk music was transformed and presented as commercial cowboy songs. Once this occurred, folklorists and folk song collectors would not be particularly interested in collecting, as the material is already available in "hard (wax) copy."

One song clearly represents the transition from oral tradition to the commercial sphere. In fact, this one song is almost a mini-history in Alberta folk music. "The Little Old Sod Shanty" is a homesteading song that emerged in the United States (Sandburg, pp.89-91). The refrain tells of living conditions on the prairie:

The hinges are of leather and the windows have no glass,
The board roof lets the howling blizzards in,
And I hear the hungry Kiyote as he slinks up through the grass,
Round the little old sod shanty on my claim.

Fowke and Johnston (1954, p. 90) indicate that this song emerged in Alberta with minor localization. The line "I'm as happy as a clam in the land of Uncle Sam" was replaced by "But I'm happy as can be, for I'm single and I'm free."

Weiss found a greatly transformed version of this song, under the title of "The Mansion by the Bow." Apparently living conditions on the prairie had improved by the time this variant was composed:

You will love those Evans' red-heads, Ruth, Cathy, Brian and Ted.
You'll be welcome in this mansion and you'll surely be well fed.
You'll get a wee wee droppie and a little trundle bed
In this rustic rough board mansion by the Bow. (p. 42)

The jump from the folkways into the commercial world occurred in an interesting manner. The first hint of this is found in some Wilf Carter tunes. Specifically, a slightly modified version of the tune for "Little Old Sod Shanty" became the chorus for the "Calgary Roundup" (Carter, 1938, p. 34, B-4989). This tune now reflects the shift from homesteading to the glitter and excitement of the Calgary Stampede.

We're a jolly bunch of cowboys, we hope you are the same
We have no fear; the laws we never heed,
So gather in the circle and sing this roundup song —
We're heading for the Calgary Stampede.

For such a jump to have occurred, the original tune must have been available, prior to the composing of the "Calgary Roundup." Not unlike Woody Guthrie, Wilf Carter probably composed this tune, not aware that his version was so similar to the traditional tune.

Fowke (1962) cites another example of the emergence of a traditional song into the commercial domain. According to her informant, "The Dying Outlaw" was being sung before the First World War (Fowke et al., 1965, p.139). The theme is the traditional cowboy motif of the "Streets of Laredo":

Oh bury me on the lone prairie
Where the hooves of the horses shall fall,

Where the echoing tread falls over my head
And a cowboy will carry me on. (p. 141)

Around 1940 Wilf Carter recorded a tune called "The Two-Gun Cowboy" (B5871) which is very similar to Fowke's version. The refrain in "Two-Gun Cowboy" leads off as "Say let me lie on the lone prairie" and is otherwise identical to the early form. In the early version the cowboy's doom was sealed by a "red-coated foeman" (i.e., a Mountie) while in Carter's version a "red foe" (i.e., an Indian) was the villain. Not only does this change indicate a rationalization about cowboy life but also it suggests some interesting changes in the folkways of the '30s (see Rogers and Rosenberg, for a discussion of these processes).

These two examples show that songs in Alberta were converted into commercial songs as Country and Western music exploded in popularity. It should be noted that borrowing tunes and words from an existing tradition has always been an aspect of folk music. The only real difference between Wilf Carter's transformations and those occurring in older oral traditions is that there is a hard copy of Carter's versions available. I have argued elsewhere that access to original versions, from which performers learn their material, is a very important factor in our study of oral tradition (Rogers and Rosenberg). Hence, we should not devalue the contributions of performers like Wilf Carter. In fact, as a folk poet in the tradition of Woody Guthrie, Carter has provided some excellent documentary and comments on his times. For example, in his "Hobo's Song to the Mountie," (1938, B4988) he pinpoints one of the major aggravations of the depression:

Our country is so rich we go hungry,
With wheat and flour piled galore,
And people wondering what's all the trouble,
Why depression keeps knocking at our door. (p. 25)

His ballads about Albert Johnson and the Moose River Mine Disaster also attest to his contributions to the folkways.

This discussion of commercial music suggests an active folk-music tradition in Alberta before the transformations into the commercial sphere. When we combine this conclusion with those garnered from inspection of available songs, archives, folklore and folk verse it appears that Kallman may have overstated when he said that life on the prairies was "not conducive to the preservation of folk song." It is possible that Alberta does - or at least did - have an active folk-song tradition. All of the indicators reviewed above support this contention. As indicated earlier the only thing missing is the corpus of documented materials. Perhaps some of the songs published by Wilf Carter (1935, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1944) and other Alberta commercial artists (e.g., Stu Davis, 1948; Alberta Slim, 1947; Stu Phillips, 1967) constitute part of this missing corpus. However, the major component of an Alberta folk music lies untapped by virtue of a lack of systematic and long-term collection programmes.

Some Conclusions

The major conclusion to be drawn is the need for such collection programmes in Alberta, and to the extent the pre-Wilf Carter era is of interest, such field work should begin as soon as possible. Potential informants are ageing and will probably be difficult to find as newcomers converge on this province.

The collection procedures will require special care. Wilf Carter had a massive impact on Alberta: his songs are revered and considered "the best possible" by a lot of prairie folk. Hence, attempts to get informants into the pre-Wilf era will meet with some resistance. After all, who wants to hear that old stuff when Wilf's music is available? Beyond this, the field worker will have to have a thorough knowledge of the commercial music. When investigating an informant's repertoire, the collector will have to be able to guide the informant, using the commercial music as bench marks. The evaluation of material as it emerges also requires knowledge of the commercial domain, as well as a working knowledge of American cowboy songs and of Eastern Canadian materials. These special needs and approaches to collecting may be partly why the Alberta folk music has not emerged in the non-systematic music collections. Alberta could use a professional folklorist who would address himself to these issues.

From a more academic standpoint, folk-music in Alberta may provide some unique and interesting opportunities. The relative youth of Alberta may make it a useful place to study the interaction between traditional and commercial musical forms. The media have had a massive effect on the folkways. Some researchers prefer to view this as an annoyance, and orient their work toward musical traditions that were developed prior to the media's emergence (see Dundes). An alternate view is to consider the media as one of several forces that have shaped the folkways, and to study the impact of this force.

There has been a gradual shift in emphasis in ethnomusicology over the past few years. Initially, observed changes in folk-song text were the focal point of analysis. Recently, however, folklorists have begun to show concern for why textual variation occurs. For example, Wehse argues convincingly that the reasons for textual change are the critical point. Simply observing and categorizing a textual change does not constitute enough understanding to permit inferences about the culture and traditions that a set of folk songs represents. To this end, Rogers and Rosenberg have developed a model of the psychological processes involved in the learning of the folk song. If the processes, social pressures, normative rules, and individual performers are understood, textual variation in folk song can provide a powerful analytic tool. This approach indicates that the processes of change are the focal point.

In the Alberta context, this move to a process-view has a number of implications. The emergence of Wilf Carter heralded a shift from a traditional to commercial musical form. Some intriguing questions arise if we begin to shift from a process perspective. What social forces facilitated the emergence of this commercial form? Why did acceptance of this new form wane in the '60s? How did the folk performer adapt to this change? Have Wilf Carter tunes re-entered oral tradition? All of these questions are answerable, with considerable research, in Alberta.

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Résumé: *Le Professeur T. B. Rogers parle de l'absence d'une collection de chants folkloriques Canadiens-Anglais en Alberta et fait un relevé des chants de cette Province lesquels sont mentionnés en d'autres collections à l'extérieur de l'Alberta. Si, en cette Province, il existe une riche tradition de contes d'une longueur remarquable, de poèmes et de musique commerciale, le Professeur Rogers croit que beaucoup de chants de l'Alberta n'ont jamais été recueillis. Il parle de l'urgence d'un projet de collection intensive et de l'étude d'une interaction de musique commerciale et traditionnelle en Alberta.*