

# DIG-SONGS: PARODY, CARICATURE, AND REPORTAGE ON AN ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE

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In the summer of 1975, Gordon Craig and a fellow student composed several songs while on an archeological dig on Cape Breton Island. It should come as no surprise that archeologists and archeology students have their own folksong traditions. Indeed, because of the nature of their research, this group is more likely to have their own well-developed song traditions than other academics.

Every summer archeologists supervise digs in which university students and professors excavate selected sites. This activity often involves camping in isolated areas, and much of their work consists of digging and scraping, usually with the kind of painstaking and tedious slowness which can be truly mind-numbing.

Their communal living and work, as well as the manual labour in which they are engaged, are conducive to creative expression. In relieving the tensions of living in close quarters under somewhat uncomfortable conditions, and in easing the monotony of the dig, folksong composition functions very well, as Gordon explained:

Well the thing is you're on the dig and you start off in the first of summer, and there might be three other people on the dig who know each other well. The rest of the people are strangers to everybody. But there's one thing about working on a dig is familiarity. You become so familiar with everybody, because it's not the type of job where you can't talk. Because you're there. I'm working here; someone's working there. And we're all in this one area. And you're just doing work; you know, little bits of work all day. And so after three or four weeks, everybody gets to know each other really well. Singing becomes the pastime. And everybody just started roaring off songs all the time.<sup>1</sup>

Gordon was born in 1955 in Louisburg, Nova Scotia. He and his hometown friend, George, worked on such a dig, and were among the more prolific song composers in the group. In most cases, the songs which they composed were conscious parodies of popular tunes, and arose, quite spontaneously, out of the work-situations at the dig. Gordon described two impromptu parodies which grew out of a particular incident:

There's a lot of dig-songs which we make up. There was one, you know — are you familiar with the musical *Oklahoma?* (MT: Yeah.) You know the song, "Poor Jud Is Dead?" (MT: Yeah.) Well one day George and I were working — and this was the first assignment — we were working in this one trench, and we were there for two and a half weeks. It was the longest anybody had been in trench

<sup>1</sup>This and all other quotes by Gordon are from an interview with him conducted by Michael Taft, in St. John's, Newfoundland, 27 November 1975; Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, 76-197, C2241. All names have been changed because of the satirical nature of the material.

yet. And we were pretty well getting to the bottom, you know. And we were at the bottom, and the site-assistant came over, Phil Harrington, and I said to Phil, "Phil, is this really the end?" And so Phil started singing Bob Dylan's song, you know, "Can This Really Be the End?" And so he said, "Take it down another five centimetres just to make sure," he said, "and we'll close her off." And then George and I were really disappointed. We had to leave, because, you know, it was a really nice dig. Nobody could see us; we were over our heads. So [laughs] George, George was just there one day and he started singing "Poor Jud Is Dead." No reason at all. He was just singing it. And the next thing we knew, we were both singing "Our Dig Is Dead" to the air of "Poor Jud Is Dead." And you know there's all kinds of — (MT: Could you sing that, or do you remember how it goes?) I can't remember all the words. All I know is like

Our dig is dead, our poor dig is dead  
Let's gather 'round and [laughs] cry.

You know, there's a lot of references to people besides.<sup>2</sup>

It is significant that Gordon could remember only fragments of the many songs which he and George made up that summer. These songs, by their very nature, were closely tied to the dig context, and were only meaningful within that special situation. Once the summer was over and the group disbanded, the incidents on the dig, which had drawn the group together into a cohesive unit, lost much of their significance. The songs were made up spontaneously to fit specific situations, and once those situations had passed, the songs were quickly forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

There is one song, however, which has achieved some permanence in Gordon's memory. Again, it is a parody of a popular song; it occurred spontaneously; and it referred to a particular situation. The occasion of its composition is typical of dig-songs, as described by Gordon:

I mean there was not much to do when you're just digging all day in the dirt (MT: Right.), and so this day we were there, and George started singing "With Me Gloves In Me Hands and Me Hat on One Side." (MT: Oh right, yeah.) And the next thing we knew, we were singing "Aunt Martha's Sheep." And the thing was, it wasn't much good, because it wasn't original. And we were usually making up original songs. So we just started changing the verses around. (MT: You knew all the verses to "Aunt Martha's Sheep?") Well we didn't know them all. We just knew the first one and the last one, sort of thing. And we knew separate lines that were thrown around. And so we started singing "Aunt Martha's Sheep," but we started changing it around, and putting different words to it. And eventually we started coming up with all these

<sup>2</sup>"Can This Really Be the End?" refers to Bob Dylan's song, "Memphis Blues Again," on *Blonde On Blonde*, Columbia C2L-41/C2S-841 (Nashville, 1966); "Poor Jud Is Dead" refers to "Pore Jud Is Daid," from the stage musical, *Oklahoma!*, by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, II, first performed 31 March 1943; originally recorded by Alfred Drake on Decca 23286.

<sup>3</sup>Edward D. Ives discussed this phenomenon in *Lawrence Doyle: The Farmer-Poet of Prince Edward Island: A Study in Local Songmaking* (Orono: Univ. of Maine Press, 1971), pp. 250-51.

verses, and we decided we'd put some order to them and put them together. And so eventually we got them all stuck together.<sup>4</sup>

Although Gordon was able to sing the song to me, there were still six or seven stanzas which he could not remember. In addition, there was one stanza which he refused to sing, because it was particularly derogatory towards a member of the group. The 'fragment' which he did sing, however, seems quite complete in itself as a narrative:

Come gather all around us and we'll sing to you a jig  
About the boys in 2L who almost lost their dig.  
It happened on a summer's day out in Bigot's Yard —  
We managed to save the artifacts but somehow lost the card.

We didn't mean to lose the card, it happened by mistake —  
A wind came off the ocean and up went Carrie Blake.  
She landed head-first in the dig and overset the tray —  
We picked her up and helped her out and she went on her way.

Now it was later in the day going strong for two,  
Harry Kelly came over the hill talking about his brew.  
The way he went on about it, you'd think it was out of style —  
When we looked up from the dig, me boys, we saw Don Taggart smile.

Don Taggart said, "Your dig, me boys, I really don't want to wreck  
But I got a tray without a card and I thought I'd come over to check.  
You see that this is Friday and I want to get to the Bay —  
If everything's not in order, then I may not get me way."

Don looked down into our dig and saw a faience plate,  
He said he had another piece, he thought it was the mate.  
In fact the piece in question was from the mysterious tray —  
"Ha ha," Don laughed and chuckled, and then went on his way.

"Come back here now Don Taggart, what was that chuckle for?"  
He said, "You are the culprits that I've been looking for."  
"You should have looked a bit harder, it's not a faience plate,  
No longer laugh, no longer cry, it's just a piece of slate."

Then Don replied with mighty haste, he knew it all the time.  
"A finer bunch of diggers a fellow couldn't find.  
If everyone were as good as you, me troubles would be through."  
"If we get any clues on the card, Don, we'll be sure to let you knew"  
[sic].

The moral of the story is don't never lose your card  
Especially if you're working out in Bigot's Yard  
For if it's not Don Taggart, the assistant's on your back —  
Remember to watch your artifact card and keep your spoil-heap slack.

<sup>4</sup>The songs "With Gloves In Me 'And and Me 'At on One Side" and "Aunt Martha's Sheep" were recorded by Dick Nolan on *Fisherman's Boy*, RCA Camden CAS-2576 (St. John's, 1972). Printed texts of both songs may be found in *The Ninth Edition of Newfoundland Songs* (St. John's: Bennett Brewing Co., 1974), p. 14 and pp. 38-39. Both were popular in the Atlantic Provinces.

Gordon explained the narrative of the song point by point:

- Line 2: A-1 is the site-designation number that we were working in. We were working at the time in 2L, and we were working in a separate lot 80, and we were in level B . . .
- Line 3: Bigot was the Commissaire d'Bigot. He looked after all the money for the French in Canada. He sort of stifled it all into his own pockets all the time. He's a real crook. We were working in Bigot's property, excavating his stables.
- Line 4: Now the important thing about the whole song is as you're going down through the different levels in the soil, each different stratigraphic level has an assigned number. So when you find artifacts in that level, they went to a tray, and you get a card which goes into that tray. And for all purposes this is really important, because the whole point of the thing is so that ten years from now, or whenever from now, an archeologist can look at this artifact, this potsherd, and then look at the number on to it, 2L80B, and he can place it in time and space. Because he knows exactly where it came from. A big problem this summer — it happened three or four times — where there was some kind of discrepancy, people would lose their cards. The wind would blow them out or something would happen.
- Line 6: . . . we were trying to figure out this, this, [pause] she's [Carrie Blake] the site field clerk, and she keeps time and everything like this. And she's a really nice lady, but she only weighed about fifty, sixty pounds. She was really, really skinny. I mean unreal. And we were trying to fit her into the song. We didn't know how we were going to do it. So we just started thinking around, and all of the sudden we got it, you see. We got that verse. It just came; it was OK.
- Line 10: Harry Kelly, he's the archeologist from the other crew. And to come to us he had to come over a hill. And he was over one day and he was telling us about this home-brew he was making. Because he was really into making beer.
- Line 12: . . . Don Taggart, he was the head lab man, he looked after all this. It was his responsibility. So whenever there were no cards came, he had to come out, and he had to look around, and he had to do all kinds of things to try to figure out, "Now where did this come from?" And he'd show everybody this pile of artifacts . . . And Don is really a good head, and he laughs a lot, see. There's a lot of references to him chuckling and laughing . . .
- Line 15: . . . and he's always talking about Glace Bay, where he has all kinds of good times at the taverns and pubs and stuff. And this episode did happen on a Friday, so Don came over and he had the tray with no card. Had some faience into it. And he saw something in our dig which looked like a piece of faience, you see.
- Line 17: Faience is a very fine ceramic material. Something between, let's see, it's a lot more finer than earthen ware, but yet it's not as refined as porcelain. (MT: I see.) It's sort of an in-between type thing.

Line 22: Don recognized this piece of faience that was in our dig, and immediately tied it in with the piece that was in the tray. And so, immediately we were the culprits of the whole thing, which was wrong of course.

Line 23: And so then we just turned it around to show him that it wasn't a piece of faience. It was a piece of slate.

Line 25: And then to cover up his mistake — because he's really respected for knowing all these things — we had it in the song — this didn't happen in real life — admitting that he knew it all along. He was just testing us out, sort of (MT: [laughs].)

Line 26: And then he congratulated us on being good diggers. And so he was on his way, you know.

Line 29: And then there's the moral to keeping the spoil heap slack and watching your cards. Oh the spoil heap is what you dig up in your dig, and you got to keep this stuff, this pile, very low, like one shovelful at a time, sort of thing.

It is quite natural that one well-known Dick Nolan song would lead to another, but, in this context, it is also quite natural that a popular song would be followed by an impromptu parody. Such was the singing tradition at this dig. Why one particular song should lend itself to parody more than another, however, is a complex question. When I asked Gordon why "Aunt Martha's Sheep,," was parodied, rather than "With Me Gloves In Me Hand," his reasons were two-fold: the rhythm of the song and the associations which the theme of the popular song had with the event described in the parody:

We started off making a parody "With Me Gloves in Me Hand," that song, but it was too slow. Like we wanted, like the song was sort of — we were singing as we were trowelling, and there was sort of a rhythm going (MT: Oh I see [laughs].) you see. And, and we couldn't — we were sort of getting off base. Like we were trowelling, and you were sort of trying to trowel to the tune of "With Me Gloves In Me Hand," sort of. We just couldn't do it. And we just sort of broke right into "Aunt Martha's Sheep" . . . And then there was sort of like a double meaning to a lot of it with somebody being tricked. (MT: Yeah.) A culprit, you know, who evaded the law, 'cause in the song, those guys actually did lose the card, you know. They really are guilty, but they weasel their way out of it. Like Don Taggart becomes the Mountie, the artifact card becomes the moose or the sheep or whatever it was. So this sort of fitted in.

(In the popular song, some men steal a sheep and, when a Mountie interrupts their feast, they tell him they are eating moose. They invite him to join their feast, which the Mountie does, thus becoming the unwitting dupe of the thieves.)

It is quite likely that this was the most inspired dig-song which Gordon and George composed that summer. They planned to present the song to the others in the group at the end-of-the-summer party, and, therefore, they tried to include, within the song, references to members of the crew. It is for this reason that the song remains in Gordon's memory, for the performance went beyond the initial, spontaneous context of the dig site.

As it happened, the song had its public debut prior to the party, as Gordon explained:

... one day we got sent to the lab, because it was raining, and we sang it in the lab that afternoon. Being sent to the lab is sort of the only pleasurable thing that a lot of people look forward to, because you didn't do anything when you went to the lab. It was just the sort of thing to keep you busy. You just sort of washed artifacts and everybody was there. People from other crews as well. And there's a lot of competition between crews, too really competitive. And we gave out our song, "Aunt Martha's Sheep" ... And there was a party at George's, one night, and we gave it full blowing that night.

The song, then, had at least four performances in different contexts: the spontaneous composition, the lab performance, the crew-party performance, and the big end-of-summer party performance.

In each of these contexts the song functioned differently. At the dig, it was a way of relieving the monotony of the work. In the lab it also had this function, as well as a competitive function, in which Gordon and George attempted to assert the superiority of their crew over the others; the song was, in a sense, a crew-anthem in the lab context. At the crew party, the song functioned to help maintain the cohesiveness and solidarity of the crew:

Everybody heard it, and everybody really, you know [enjoyed the song], because everybody that was there was associated with the site. And so whereas it won't mean anything to a lot of people, like to yourself (MT: Yeah, right.) or somebody else, you know. But to us people it was sort of an in-joke, or every bit of it was in-jokes, so to associate with every line of it.

At the end-of-summer party, the song not only functioned to present the crew as a cohesive group, separate from the other archeological crews at the party; but it was also used, as in the lab context, to compete with the other crews.

The song would seem to have a further function as well: At an archeological dig, there is a definite work-force hierarchy of supervising archeologists, site-assistants, and workers. The members in this hierarchy are clearly marked by academic status — professor, graduate student, undergraduate —, and by job-assignment — analyzing, overseeing, digging. Because of the meticulous way in which the excavation must be conducted, mistakes in procedure are especially noticeable, and, because of the close working conditions, it is difficult or impossible to conceal one's errors from the rest of the crew. Thus, one is constantly being tested and observed.

In contrast to the rigid structure of the scientific procedures, the informal living conditions of the camp make it difficult to maintain any kind of social hierarchy; that is, undergraduates, graduate students, and professors are all thrown together in a communal-living situation. The conflict between the highly structured work and the very informal lifestyle must create a certain tension within the group. The very person who has pointed out your stupidity at the dig may be sitting across from you at the dinner table.

The song would seem to relieve these tensions. The diggers are able to criticize or make fun of their superiors through the sanctioned activity of dig-song

compositions.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, in the song by Gordon and George, the supervisor is made to appear foolish, and an archeologist from another crew is ridiculed for bragging about his home-brew. The song, then, is a mild satiric protest song, although it by no means should be compared to the more serious protest songs of union workers or political activists.<sup>6</sup>

The protest function of the song is tempered by its other function of group-solidarity. In contrast to union song composers, these workers are in sympathy with their employers, and, although they may criticize them, they will also defend them as members of the crew against other crews. The dividing line between protest song and anthem may be quite thin, however, as Gordon's refusal to sing one stanza indicates. Yet Gordon claims that crew members accepted their caricatures with good nature and there was no resentment against the composers. It may well be that, whereas derogatory remarks of the type made in Gordon's 'censored' stanza were acceptable when sung within the group, they were unacceptable when voiced to someone outside the group, such as myself. It would seem that the caricatures in the song function especially well in creating both group-solidarity and group-exclusivity. Not only do they act as in-jokes, which are quite meaningless to outsiders, but they create a double standard of acceptable private criticism, as opposed to unacceptable public criticism.

Bearing this protest-anthem duality in mind, it becomes clear that the function of the song as reportage is of secondary importance. Although this song is obviously a narrative, it differs considerably from locally composed ballads which report an interesting event. The event in this song is the loss of a tray card, and according to Gordon, a specific incident was being referred to (it happened on a Friday). But Gordon also said that this type of accident occurred several times, and must have been considered an occupational hazard by the group. There was, in other words, nothing particularly unusual about the loss of a card.

This event, then, is not important in itself; rather it is important as a vehicle for parody and caricature. Because of this, Gordon and George were not interested in reporting the facts as they occurred. For example, they were determined to put Carrie Blake somewhere in the song. Her bizarre 'accident' was, in Gordon's words, "hypothetical": "Like she's really, really skinny and I mean a gust of wind — working right on the ocean where we were — would, could knock her over." The exaggeration of this woman's thinness was of greater importance than the historical truth of the account.

Likewise, Gordon admitted that Don Taggart did not pretend to be testing the diggers, when he made a mistake: "this didn't happen in real life." It may also be assumed that the 'bragging' caricature of Harry Kelly, and the 'chuckling' image of Taggart were also not necessarily a matter of reportage. Taggart's archeological error was exaggerated for the purpose of sanctioned ridicule and criticism allowed in dig-song compositions; the bragging and chuckling images were in-jokes, which could be understood only by members of the group.

<sup>5</sup>Edward D. Ives discussed the function of local ballads as an outlet for dissatisfaction in *Larry Gordon: The Man Who Made the Songs* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1964), p. 182.

<sup>6</sup>For an interesting study of the evolution of the protest function in the songs of workers, see P. G. Shiriaeva, "Poetic Features and Genre Characteristics of the Songs of Russian Workers (Pre-revolutionary Period)," *Sovetskaiia etnografiia* (1969); rpt. & trans. in *Anthropology and Archeology*, 14, Nos. 1-2 (1975), 71-95.

In studying singers of traditional ballads, Halpert wrote: "There can be no doubt that here verisimilitude is a very high aesthetic quality."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, other scholars have concentrated upon the historical value and 'truth' of locally composed ballads.<sup>8</sup> It is clear, however, that in the context of the archeological dig, the relief from the monotony of the work, as well as from the tensions of the job, and the need for protest, as well as for group-solidarity, give parody and caricature priority over any accuracy in reportage. Vansina wrote that testimonies primarily told for the sake of artistry, and only secondarily for the sake of history, are unreliable and distorted in terms of their truth value,<sup>9</sup> and this would seem to be the case with dig-songs.

This dig-song, then, is not only interesting in itself, but it is also a peculiar example of a narrative song which hardly functions as a narrative. Its intent is to parody and caricature, rather than to inform.

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<sup>7</sup>Herbert Halpert, "Truth in Folk-Songs: Some Observations on the Folk-Singer's Attitude," in *Traditional Ballads and Folk-Songs Mainly from West Virginia* by John Harrington Cox, ed. George Herzog & Herbert Halpert (1939; rpt. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964), pp. xix-xx.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Peter R. Aceves, "The Hillsville Tragedy in Court Record, Mass Media and Folk Balladry: A Problem in Historical Documentation," *Keystone Folklore Quarterly*, 16 (1971), 1-38; Daniel G. Hoffman, "Historic Truth and Ballad Truth: Two Versions of the Capture of New Orleans," *Journal of American Folklore*, 65 (1952), 295-303; D. K. Wilgus and Lynwood Montell, "Beanie Short: A Civil War Chronicle in Legend and Song," in *American Folk Legend: A Symposium*, ed. Wayland D. Hand (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), pp. 133-56, and "Clure and Joe Williams: Legend and Blues Ballad," *Journal of American Folklore*, 81 (1968), 295-315.

<sup>9</sup>Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), pp. 81-83.

*Résumé: Michael Taft décrit la manière de composer des chansons parodies ordinairement en usage parmi les étudiants en archéologie lorsqu'ils font l'excavation d'un site sur leur terrain de travail. Alors qu'ils utilisent comme modèles des chants populaires, ils incorporent dans leurs couplets des incidences et références ayant trait à leurs compagnons de travail.*

## NOTE

In transcribing the speeches from his tapes Mr. Taft was careful to include every "um" and "er" and repeated words. This made for rather awkward reading so with his permission the obvious hesitations and repetitions have been edited out, but no changes have been made in the wording.

— Editor

## ERRATA

— In the 1976 issue of the *Journal* Wendy Wickwire's name was misspelled on page 1.

— In Jay Rahn's article, "Test Underlay in Gagnon's Collection of French-Canadian Songs," on page 8 the paragraph beginning "Another possibility for feminine lines consists in. . ." should continue: "the last syllable being shorter than the penultimate syllable," not "the penultimate syllable being shorter than the last syllable." On page 12 in the paragraph beginning "This brings us. . ." the fifth sentence should read: "And in songs with compound metre, alternations among 3-8, 6-8 and 3-4. . .," not "3-6, 6-8 and 3-4. . ."