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129 Jay Street  
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518/346-7008  
Fax 518/346-6617  
Email: [info@nyfolklore.org](mailto:info@nyfolklore.org)  
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# “The Wreck of the *Julie Plante*” and its Offspring

BY STAN RANSOM

First came across this song in the 1990s, when local bookstore owner Larry House sent me the words, as published in Plattsburgh’s *Press Republican* newspaper. I was motivated to look up references to this French-Canadian ballad, which led to the discovery that it was the second poem in a book, *The Habitant*, written by Dr. William Henry Drummond in 1897. He called it “The Wreck of the *Julie Plante*. A Legend of Lac St. Pierre.”

## THE WRECK OF THE *JULIE PLANTE*:

A LEGEND OF LAC ST. PIERRE  
by William Henry Drummond, MD  
©1897

On wan dark night on Lac St. Pierre,  
De win’ she blow, blow, blow  
An’ de crew of de wood scow “Julie Plante”  
Got scar’t and run below—  
For de win’ she blow lak hurricane  
Bimeby she blow some more,  
An’ de scow bus’ up on Lac St. Pierre  
Wan arpent from de shore.

De captinne walk on de fronte deck,  
An’ walk de hin’ deck too—  
He call de crew from up de hole  
He call de cook also.  
De cook she’s name was Rosie,  
She come from Montreal,  
Was chambre maid on lumber barge,  
On de Grande Lachine Canal.

De win’ she blow from nor’-eas’-wes’,—  
De sout’ win’ she blow too,  
W’en Rosie cry, “Mon cher captinne,  
Mon cher, w’at I shall do?”  
Den de Captinne t’row de big ankerre,  
But still the scow she dreef,  
De crew he can’t pass on de shore,  
Becos’ he los’ hees skeef.

De night was dark lak’ wan black cat,  
De wave run high an’ fas’,  
W’en de captinne tak’ de Rosie girl  
An’ tie her to de mas’.  
Den he also tak’ de life preserve,  
An’ jomp off on de lak’  
An’ say, “Goodbye, ma Rosie dear,  
I go drown for your sak’.”

Nex’ morning very early  
‘Bout ha’f-pas’ two—t’ree—four—  
De captinne—scow—an’ de poor Rosie  
Was corpses on de shore.  
For de win’ she blow lak’ hurricane,  
Bimeby she blow some more,  
An’ de scow bus’ up on Lac St. Pierre,  
Wan arpent from de shore.

## MORAL

Now all good wood scow sailor man  
Tak’ warning by dat storm  
An’ go an’ marry some nice French girl  
An’ leev on wan beeg farm.  
De win’ can blow lak’ hurricane  
An’ s’pose she blow some more,  
You can’t get drown on Lac St. Pierre  
So long you stay on shore.

I now have the complete works of Dr. Drummond, including a signed first edition of *The Habitant*, with extra illustrations, and have also visited his home in Brome, Canada, a stop made during a visit to do storytelling at the nearby Brome Storytelling Festival. The most interesting account was given by



The scow schooner *Alma* depicted here is the same type of ship as the *Julie Plante*. *Alma* was constructed in 1891, transferred to the National Park Service in 1978, and designated a National Historic Landmark in San Francisco in 1988. Public domain photo, [www.nps.gov/safr/learn/historyculture/alma.htm](http://www.nps.gov/safr/learn/historyculture/alma.htm)

# The Wreck of the *Julie Plante*

William Henry Drummond

Stan Ransom (c) 2016  
Transcribed by Shirley Baird

Em F#m Em

On wan dark night on Lac St Pierre de wind she blow blow blow An' de

7 Em Em Em G

crew of de wood scow Ju lie Plante Got scar't and run be low - For de win' she blow lak

12 D Em F# Em F#m

hur ri cane Bime-by she blow some more An' de scow bus' up on Lac St. Pierre

17 Em

Wan ar pent from de shore

his wife, May Harvey Drummond, who detailed the history of the song in a biographical sketch in the first pages of the 1908 edition of Drummond's book, *The Great Fight*.

William Henry Drummond was born April 13, 1854, near the village of Mohill, County Leitrim, Ireland, also noted as the birthplace of the blind Irish harp player, Turlough O'Carolan. After about seven years, his father, an officer in the Royal Irish Constabulary, and his wife and family moved to Canada. When his father died after a few months, his mother was left to face the New World with four boys aged five to 11. Young William left school, studied telegraphy, obtained an appointment, and became an expert telegrapher. He was located at L'Abord-à-Plouffe, a small village on the banks of the Rivière des Prairies, at the back of Mount Royal, at that time a great center of the lumber trade. He came in contact with the *habitants*, or local

inhabitants, and the *voyageurs*, and listened to their tales. According to his wife's unpublished biography, Gédéon Plouffe, one of the older inhabitants, had entreated William to stay off the lake because of an approaching storm and told the tragedy, retold later as the "Wreck of the *Julie Plante*" on the "Lake of Two Mountains." William heard the older man recite the words, "An' de win' she blow, blow blow!" which rang in his ears so persistently that in the dead of night, unable to sleep, he "sprang from his bed" and wrote the poem about the wood scow *Julie Plante*. He couldn't find anything to rhyme with "Lake of Two Mountains," so he changed it to "Lac St. Pierre," just below Montreal. Drummond thought little of the poem at first, telling it to those who would listen; he sent a copy to the *Montreal Star* in December 1886. It became popular as a song in the lumber camps and spread from person to person. His wife, May Harvey Drummond,

is quoted as saying the poem was first written about 1879.

Following this time, Drummond returned to school, then to McGill College, and on to Bishop's Medical College, graduating in 1884. He moved around the Montreal area with his medical practice, finally ending up in Knowlton and the Broome area for four years. He met May Harvey in 1892, and they were married on April 18, 1894, and then lived in Montreal on Mountain Street. Drummond started writing and reciting poetry about this time, to excellent reception. Many of the pieces in *The Habitant* were written in his Montreal home. He sent his verses to Putnam Publishing Company, who brought out *The Habitant* in 1897 to a great response from the public. Curiously, he received letters from some outraged members of the public for including "*Julie Plante*" in his book, as they had been singing it for many years!

Other books followed. *Phil-o-rum's Canoe and Madeleine Vercheres* in 1898, *Johnnie Courteau and Other Poems*, in 1901, *The Voyageur, and Other Poems*, in 1905, and *The Great Fight*, in 1908. He received numerous honors, including being elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom in 1898, and receiving the degree of LLD in 1902 from the University of Toronto. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage on April 6, 1907, and was laid to rest on the side of Mount Royal.

According to Jay Johnson, author of "The Age of Brass: Drummond, Service, and Canadian 'Local Colour'": "Drummond developed the *habitant* dialect into a conventional, highly formalized poetic medium which he could manipulate with great skill..." Drummond remarks that he has "the habitants telling their own stories in their own way, as they would relate them to English-speaking auditors not conversant with the French tongue." His point of view was sympathetic, and he is quoted as remarking, "I would rather cut off my right arm than speak disparaging of the French-Canadian people."

Correspondence with the Great Lakes Shipwreck Society brought forth an array of sunken boats, which may have prompted the initial story of the tragedy. The *Emily*, sunk in 1830, was thought to be a vessel that could have led to the story of the *Julie Plante*. The scow schooner, built in 1826, was lost on Lake St. Clair December 15, wrecked in a gale, with the loss of seven men. Lake St. Clair is a fresh water lake located between Lake Huron and Lake Erie.

Another scow schooner lost on Lake St. Clair was the *Jules La Plante*, lost in the 1800s, with only one man saved. Lee Murdock and other major folksingers say the boat sank in Lake Ontario. Some versions add "Off Grosse Pointe" to the Lak San Clair location. Most versions mention the archaic French-Canadian unit of measurement, "one arpent from the shore," either the side of one acre, or 560 feet.

The poem passed into folk culture in Canada. The song is sung in Canada, and visitors from Hemmingford, Quebec, have told me they were required to memorize and recite

the poem in elementary school. School music instruction books list "*Julie Plante*" as "a good song for students to sing."

Early on, an article in the 19th century *Harper's Magazine* entitled "A Family Canoe Trip" quoted the song. It was sung by Mr. A. W. Craig of Port Henry, NY, at the American Canoe Association meeting and was later adopted as the Club Song by the Association.

In September 1886, the poem appeared in the Winnipeg newspaper, *Siftings*. As a song, the words and music were included in *The McGill University Song Book* in 1896.

Franz Lee Rickaby included a fragment in his *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-Boy*, in 1926. E. C. Back, in his 1941 *Songs of the Michigan Lumberjacks*, reported that he had heard it from at least nine lumberjacks in Michigan and Wisconsin, some changing the lake to Lak San Clair. *The McGill Song Book* version is similar to the one sung in Manitoba by Rev. C. W. Gordon (Ralph Connor) in 1885.

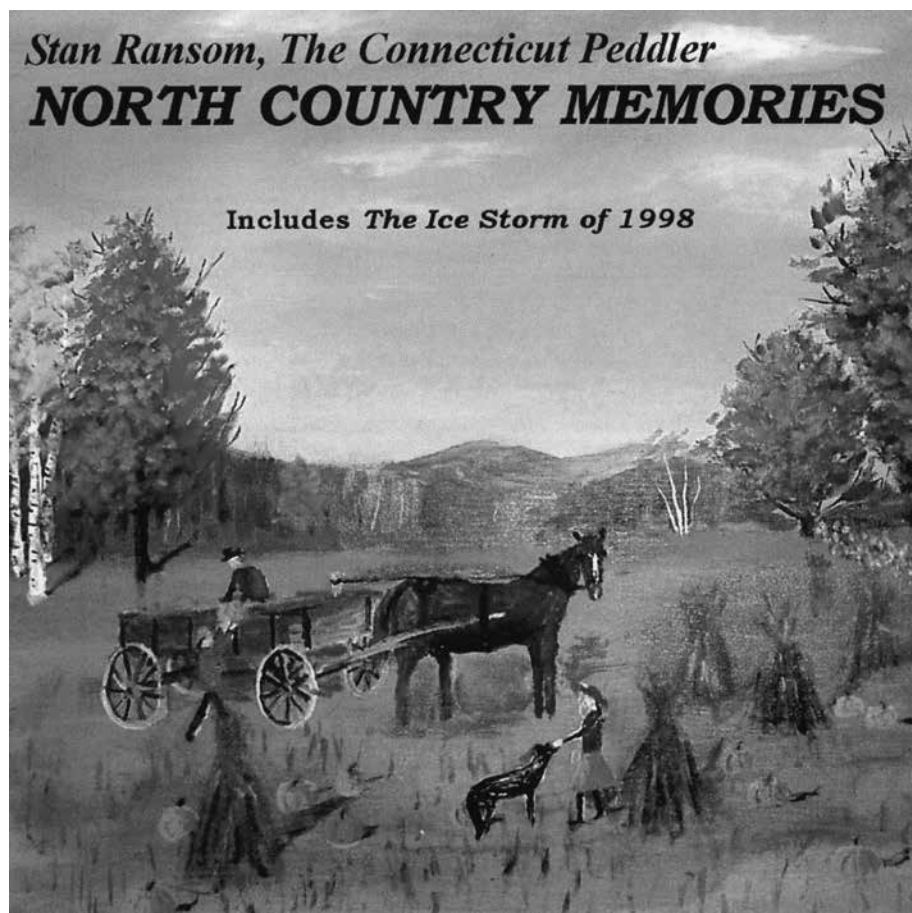
The poem was set to new tunes by H. H. Godfrey (1899), Herbert Spencer (Delmar 1907), and Geoffrey O'Hara (Ditson 1920) in choral and solo voice versions.

According to my good friend, Gordie Little, a local radio personality, writing in the *Press Republican* in 2002, Edith Fowke included the song in her *Folk Songs of Canada* book, and noted that "French-Canadian shanty boys found a tune to fit it and carried it to many widely scattered lumber camps." Gordie's fellow announcer, Chet Bosworth, recorded it in the 1970s and played it from time to time on Plattsburgh's local WIRY radio station.

Gordie also mentioned that in 1929, Daniel T. Trombley, from Isle La Motte, VT, writing as "Batiste," borrowed the song, with credit to Dr. Drummond, and changed the name of the lake to Lake Champlain. He published it in his book, *Poems of Batiste, Whoa! Bill*, in 1929. From thence, it became popular all over the North Country. Colleen Pelletier, the Plattsburgh Public Library reference librarian, remembers her family singing it and reciting the refrain.

Nelson Eddy, the "American Tenor," sang it on his radio program on May 26, 1945, and recorded it on an album of eclectic songs.

Geoffrey O'Hara, born in 1882 in Ontario, composed music for it, and recorded





it on a wax cylinder. James (Jimmy) Rice recited it in 1922 in Montreal on 78 rpm under His Master's Voice, No 216383-A, Berliner Gramophone. Contemporary recordings available on amazon.com include *Back to Back* by Mustard's Retreat; *The Recruiter... Free Rum Ain't Free*, by The Whiskey Bards; *Mason Street Sessions*, by Blue Water Ramblers; *Old Dogs, New Tricks*, by Sportive Tricks; and *Old Timers*, by Neil Woodward. Neil's recording of 1999 featured the song done in old-timey fashion with banjo. His rendition uses "Lak St. Clair," "Grosse Pointe," and "ten acres from the shore." All the above, except the O'Hara version, can be heard on YouTube under the song title.

British composer Howard Blake (he did *The Snowman* music) composed catchy music for the five-minute animated film, *Wreck of the Julie Plante*, directed by Steven Weston, produced by Taylor Grant, and issued by Flying Horse animated films in 1985. The song features Barry Dransfield playing the violin and singing the words. Norman Blake played the piano accompaniment. A delightful film, it can be seen on YouTube. Norman Blake also composed music for five singers and piano, Opus 416 in November 1990, and also Opus 244 in January 1984, available at the publisher, Highbridge Music Ltd, London. This animation film is in The Analog Archive (YouTube) and was included in the 1991 Animation Film Festival.

Finally, I supplied the poem with my composed music and recorded it in 2005 on my CD, *North Country Memories* (available in the NYFS gallery store, <http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html#nocountrymem>). I sing it annually at every Battle of Plattsburgh

celebration around September 11th for the benefit of the Canadians in attendance.

"The Wreck of the *Julie Plante*" is now firmly established in Canadian and American folklore and literature. We North Country residents can all recall and recite with satisfaction the final transferred line, "You can't get drown on Lake Champlain, So long you stay on shore." ▼

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Stan is a retired Library Director of the Huntington, Long Island, and Plattsburgh Public Libraries and the Clinton-Essex-Franklin (CEF) Library System in Plattsburgh. He plays hammered dulcimer, guitar, mandolin, and autoharp in New York and in Canada. He is a professional musician and professional storyteller. Performing as Stan Ransom, the Connecticut Peddler, he has 10 CDs, mostly traditional and historical, with some original songs and tunes. He specializes in the traditional music of Long Island, the Adirondacks, and the North Country, as well as the Battle of Plattsburgh, Civil War Songs, and North Country Christmas songs. He researches New York State local history for songs and tunes, sometimes creating a song where one is needed. He delights in performing for public libraries, historical events, and Head Start sites. He works to encourage imagination in children, as an antidote to their digital life. He is the editor of two editions of the life and poems of Jupiter Hammon, first Black poet published in the US, and has established October 17, Hammon's birthday, as Black Poetry Day, nationally. Stan's latest CD is *Down the Saranac*, released in June 2016, a hearty compilation of amusing and historical songs and tunes featuring the City of Plattsburgh and Clinton County (available at [www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html](http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html)). Photo by Sharon Bandhold.





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