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Searching for the Tune the Cow Died On

BY DAN BERGGREN

“Do you know the tune the cow died on?”

That’s what 89-year-old Cecil Butler asked me during a visit to his home in the winter of 1975–76. I wasn’t sure whether he meant a song by that name or a tune so lethal that it caused a bovine death. “That was your Granddad’s favorite song,” he continued, clearing up one puzzle, but giving me good reason to go searching.

I should mention that Cecil and my grandfather Harry Wilson were longtime friends, neighbors on opposite sides of the same mountain. Cecil had even called and played fiddle for square dances in my grandparents’ home. “We’d have kitchen dances,” Cecil said.

After our visit, the first thing I did was ask my mother, Dorothy Wilson Berggren, if she knew of this song that her father apparently rated quite highly. “No, I don’t remember Dad ever singing. But his cousins Harry and Eloise—they knew hundreds of songs.”

My mother said they’d pick wild strawberries all day, then sing while hulling them on the screened-in porch at night. It was cousin Harry Suprenant who taught my mother, at the age of 10, “The Ballad of Big Moose Lake,” the Adirondack story of Chester Gillette murdering Grace Brown in 1906. This was the same story that Theodore Dreiser turned into *An American Tragedy* in 1925. It was a song of someone’s demise, but not a cow’s.

Continuing my search, I asked my Aunt Flora Wilson Whitty, who was quite the musician herself, if she knew “The Tune the Cow Died On,” or she’d ever heard my grandfather sing it. “No,” she said. “The only time I remember Dad singing was in the barn when he was milking the cows.”

While this sounded promising at first, it was just another dead end.

Over the years, I’ve come across the phrase, *What are you, the tune the cow died on?*—sometimes used to chastise a child for repeatedly asking for something, or to comment on any really bad or repetitive piece of music. Fellow musician John Kirk even found a tune by

this name in a collection of fiddle music rescued from the attic of a house in Saratoga County. “The Tune the Cow Died On” had been performed by C. Lockwood and his group from the mid-1800s to the early 1920s.

A decade later, Carl Sandburg waxed philosophical, when he wrote: “A man having nothing to feed his cow sang to her of the fresh green grass to come; this is the tune the old cow died on.”

As far as finding the song that amused my grandfather, it seemed that I had indeed come to a dead end, until one day when I was part of a mini-folk festival in western New York with the wonderfully knowledgeable duo of Jeff Davis and Jeff Warner. In the middle of their performance, there it was, in all its simplicity and humor: “The Tune the Cow Died On.” Jeff told me his parents, Frank and Anne Warner, who had been folk musicologists, collected the song from Lena Bourne Fish (1873–1945) in East Jaffrey, New Hampshire. I was momentarily disappointed, thinking this might not be the same song that my Grandpa enjoyed back on the farm in northern New York. Then, I learned that Lena was born in the Adirondacks in the Clinton County town of Black Brook, about 70 miles north of the Wilsons and Butlers in Essex County.

Today, you can go to the Library of Congress online archives and find this song with an 1880 copyright and a promotional banner across the top of the sheet music that boasts, “The Funniest Song Ever Published.” John F. Perry & Co. was the publisher taking that credit, with words by George Russell Jackson and music by “Eastburn,” a pseudonym for Joseph Eastburn Winner, who also wrote “Little Brown Jug.”

It’s been a great pleasure to share this song over the years and to picture Grandpa with a

*Farmer John from his work came home one summer’s afternoon
And sat beneath the maple tree to sing himself a tune
He sang till the cows came running up and around him formed a ring
For never before had farmer John attempted for to sing
Hi fol der ray do – so sang farmer John
Hi fol der ray do – it’s the tune the cow died on
Well, the oldest cow that the farmer had tried to join the song
But she could not strike the melody though her voice was loud and strong
The farmer laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks so rosy red
The cow got mad that she could not sing and so she fell down dead
Hi fol der ray do – so sang farmer John
Hi fol der ray do – it’s the tune the cow died on
The farmer had an inquest held to see what ailed the cow
The jury sat, the verdict gave, I mean to tell you now
They said that the cow would be living yet and chewing her cud with glee
If farmer John hadn’t sung that song beneath the maple tree
Hi fol der ray do – so sang farmer John
Hi fol der ray do – it’s the tune the cow died on*

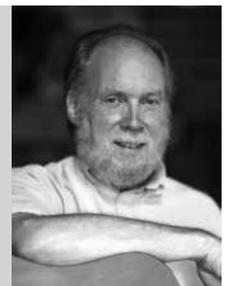
twinkle in his eye, leaning into a cow with his calming voice at milking time. Today, I could gladly answer Cecil, “Yes, I know that song!” and then sing it for him. But now there are so many more questions: Why did Cecil ask me? Did he want me to sing it for him? Did he think I should know it? Why did he think it was Harry’s favorite? Did he hear him sing it or mention it? And if it was indeed Harry’s favorite, why? How did he first hear it? And why did it strike his fancy? I can only imagine. ▼

To hear Dan Berggren’s version of “The Tune the Cow Died On,” follow this link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiSoucsQBms

Recorded live at the historic Caffè Lena in Saratoga Springs, Dan’s latest CD, *Dan Berggren in Concert* is available at www.berggrenfolke.com and at New York Folklore.

Dan Berggren’s roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was

a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit www.berggrenfolke.com to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



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