

Don Messer: Pioneering Fiddler From The Maritimes Part 2

By Tim Woodbridge

As described in the previous installment, when Don Messer was 16 he went to Boston, where his Aunt Mary ran a boarding house. According to biographer Johanna Bertin, he did well for himself, eventually becoming an assistant manager of a store in the Woolworths chain, with prospects of assignment to a store of his own. On the other hand, his long working hours made for a lonely existence, and Bertin notes, his work visa was running out and he would soon be faced with deciding whether to seek U. S. citizenship or to return to Canada. Bertin surmises that the onset of the depression and early signs of hard times may also have been a factor in his decision to return home to Tweedside in 1929.

Once home, he found employment with the Canadian Pacific Railway where two of his brothers were engineers. On his days off, he found himself once again in demand for dances, weddings and parties. While this sufficed for the short term it did not advance his ambition to earn his living as an old time fiddler. Along with his enhanced technical skill, musical knowledge and expanded repertoire, he had also left Boston with a keen appreciation for the importance of the new medium of radio and saw in radio the means by which he could market himself.

Fortuitously, Messer's married sister, Jannie, was living in St. John where CFBO, then the only station in New Brunswick, had recently gone on the air. Don arranged to live with her; and his brother-in-law persuaded a local fish wholesaler to sponsor a 15 minute live performance on CFBO. The response was favorable, and other sponsors were recruited.

Messer soon realized that he would need additional musicians who combined talent with reliability, and were up to dealing with the stress of live broadcasts, long days and nights and touring. St. John provided a substantial talent pool and over the next several years he tried out numerous musicians searching for the right mix. In 1934, things stabilized somewhat with the addition of Duke Neilsen, a multi instrumentalist who usually played bass, 13 year old Ned Landry on harmonica and Charlie Chamberlain, vocal and guitar. By this time, Messer groups of varying and sometimes unwieldy size were performing as the New Brunswick Lumberjacks.

That same year CFBO became a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) affiliate as CHSJ. The station hired Messer to do a 15 minute show every other week during the national broadcast time, which gave the Lumberjacks exposure across Canada and adjacent parts of the United States. Eventually the program expanded to a daily 15 minute show, with a half hour on Saturdays.

The Lumberjacks garnered further exposure with a New Year's Eve, 1935 performance in Boston. In 1936 and 1937 the New Brunswick Department of

Natural Resources hired them to play for the New England Sportsmen's Show in Boston where New Brunswick officials could pitch the attractions of New Brunswick as a destination for affluent fishers and hunters. The Lumberjacks were heard on local radio and on the CBS network. They successfully auditioned for NBC but were unable to take up an offer for a daily show because of union opposition.

1937 also saw the issuance of Messer's first recordings when the Lumberjacks cut several sides, including Billy Wilson's Clog, which accompanies this article. The performance was recorded in Montreal, probably via telephone line, from a radio broadcast originating at CHSJ, and was released on various labels of the Compo company. This dub comes from an LP reissue, Apex AL 1609.

I have no information as to Messer's source. Curiously, when he published it in a 1942 collection, it was as "Clog In C Major". The Fiddlers' Companion (<http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers/>) lists a number of more or less related tunes under the title "Rustic Dance-Schottische [3]" and linked titles, including Ed Haley's Parkersburg Landing and Narmour & Smiths' Limber Neck Blues. None of the listed tunes are a particularly close match and it may be that all of them, including Billy Wilson's Clog, represent different takes on some earlier but unidentified source.

According to Neil Rosenberg, the prominent 5 String banjo work is by Vern Doane, playing a No. 9 Tubaphone.

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about the author

When I was about six, my family moved from New York City to Oak Ridge, Tennessee. In short order I found live hillbilly music on station WNOX in Knoxville and the recorded variety on one of the area's early FM stations in Lenoir City. I was hooked. Starting with a \$10.00 guitar, I tried my hand at a variety of stringed instruments over the years, including the fiddle. Back in the 60's I was introduced to the fiddle traditions of Quebec and the Canadian Maritimes, and to their many talented practitioners.