

## “The *Clifton’s Crew*”—Patrick Bonner (June 1960)

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Essay by Laurie Kay Sommers (guest post)\*



*Pat Bonner*

“The *Clifton’s Crew*” is a fine example of a locally significant Great Lakes disaster ballad, sung by the composer and recorded as part of folklorist Alan Lomax’s pioneering 1938 folksong collecting trip through Michigan and Wisconsin. It also represents a folksong genre of interest to folklorist Ivan Walton, compiler of an unsurpassed collection of Great Lakes maritime lore and song. Walton introduced Lomax to Patrick Bonner and to his home community, the ballad-rich Irish American enclave of Beaver Island, Michigan.

Patrick Bonner was born on Beaver Island, the largest island in Lake Michigan, during the island’s heyday as “America’s Emerald Isle.” The youngest child of Irish immigrants, Pat grew up listening to first- and second-generation islanders who continued the musical traditions of their native Rutland and Arranmore Islands but also learned American ballads and tunes. Like many rural folk of the era, Beaver Islanders made their own entertainment. During Pat’s formative years, islanders held song competitions between rival saloons across the harbor from each other. According to Walton:

“and by daylight the next morning neither had sung the other down.” During the long winter months frequent dances were held in the village of St. James and in the farm homes, and, while the fiddler rested, or when the others got danced out, they would frequently spend the remainder of the night singing. Some individuals sang at their work or wherever they were--in a lumber camp bunkhouse, at the wheel of a Great Lakes schooner, in their fields, in their homes, or in any of numerous gathering places.

Pat Bonner spent his life on Beaver Island, combining the traditional island occupations of farming, logging, and sailing. The latter jobs were fertile sources for both song transmission and for new songs about the life of a lumberjack or a Great Lakes sailor. Pat received his first fiddle at age 12, had a decent tenor voice, and a fine ear for music and poetry. For over 60 years he

entertained his neighbors with songs, ballads, and fiddle tunes at dances, picnics, weddings, and house parties.

Patrick Bonner is known today both because of his musical talent and because he was at the right place at the right time. Beaver Island during the 1930s became a mecca for two important twentieth-century folklorists and ballad collectors: Ivan Walton (1893-1968) of the University of Michigan and the nation's preeminent collector of Great Lakes folksongs; and Alan Lomax (1915-2002), collector, radio host, writer, record producer, impresario, ethnomusicologist, and arguably the most famous American folklorist of his era. In 1932, Ivan Walton made his first trip to Beaver Island in search of what he termed "the songs of the schooner men," an endeavor that became his life's work. Walton found a rich trove of remembered song among aging former sailors who, like Pat Bonner, had plied the Great Lakes during the golden age of sailing ships in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1932, Bonner told Walton:

I used to know hundreds of them songs--me memory's getting bad now, but when I was on the boats we made up songs about the ships, and most everything that happened. Sometimes we were near two weeks on way down to Chicago, and that was all the amusement we had.... We just made them up as we needed them. You know a real Irishman can make up a song about anything.

During the late 1930s, Alan Lomax was a young Assistant in Charge at the Archive of Folk-Song, Library of Congress. He and his father, John Lomax, were working to identify regional American folk music traditions for print and broadcast. In August 1938, Alan began his only folksong collecting trip in the Upper Midwest, beginning in Detroit and ending at Odanah, Wisconsin. In just ten weeks he recorded more than 120 performers, from Serbian epic singers in Detroit to balladeers on Beaver Island to Ojibwe fiddler Joe Cloud in Odanah. Lomax's Michigan field trip was part of the Archive of Folk-Song's quest to create a national folk music collection. During his Michigan trip Lomax consulted with Walton, one of the important regional collectors of the time, who accompanied Lomax to Beaver Island and introduced him to musicians there, including Patrick Bonner.

Bonner was an exceptional fiddler, but it was his singing that first drew the attention of Walton and Lomax, who were particularly interested in the great occupational ballad traditions of which Pat was a part. Beaver Island proved a rich source for the collectors. There were songs about lumbering, love, and sex; songs from the Old Country; and songs about sailors, sailing ships, and disasters on the Great Lakes. The delighted Lomax spent six days recording on the island with his Presto Instantaneous Disk Recorder. He wrote his boss, "Battery difficulties, but no trouble finding songs. The only trouble with these Irish is that they take more treating [liquor] than any group I've struck. It may be that I'll need another \$50 advance." Bonner was not the most prolific of the island balladeers recorded by Lomax; that honor goes to the redoubtable John W. Green, who knew several hundred songs--many of them with roots in Ireland, Scotland, and England--and was the island's most recorded singer. Bonner, however, had a better voice, and he also had composed an interesting Great Lakes disaster ballad with links to Beaver Island: "The *Clifton's* Crew."

Disaster ballads initially had been adapted to the Great Lakes from the tradition of saltwater sailors; later, tragedies on the lakes spawned their own song tradition. Beaver Island disaster ballads recorded by Lomax and Walton--such as "The *Clifton's* Crew"--never had wide circulation or popularity elsewhere, but they offer an interesting example of composition and origin. Often, we don't know who wrote a ballad, since its origins are lost through time and oral transmission. In the case of Beaver Island, which had an exceptionally rich and well documented ballad singing tradition, Lomax and Walton recorded several locally composed songs directly from the men who had originated them, or from those who had first-hand knowledge of a song's origins.

Lomax recorded Bonner's performance of "The *Clifton's* Crew" on August 24, 1938. It was one of four songs about the *Clifton* written by Beaver Islanders, among them "The '*Clifton*' Tragedy" by Peter Kenneth Gallagher, brother to the *Clifton's* captain, Emmett Gallagher. Bonner's song, however, is the only one actually recorded. The tragedy had taken place on September 22, 1924, when the whaleback steamer went down in Lake Huron with all hands lost. According to Glen Hendrix's "Songs of Beaver Island," from the "Journal of Beaver History" (1980), "It is thought that her self-unloading boom broke free and swung over the side, rolling the vessel and causing her cargo of stone to shift. The combination of shifted cargo and the weight of the boom hanging over the side then capsized the *Clifton*." The crew included four Beaver Islanders: Captain Emmett Gallagher (known by the nickname "Emmett Salty"), second mate Anthony McDonough, and wheelmen Joe Scheid and Peter Burns.

Bonner made up the song shortly after the accident. As a former lakesman, he had personal experience with the perils of the Great Lakes. The text—really a lengthy poem of 18 and one half verses—uses typical conventions of the disaster ballad, with speculation about the accident and the last thoughts of the doomed men, and reactions of family and friends. Bonner's text also has a religious bent, based in the Catholic faith of the predominantly Irish-heritage islanders. The tune is likely taken from another ballad familiar to Bonner that matched the meter of the lyrics; he did not read music. In a short interview that follows Lomax's recording of the song, Bonner states he had not often performed it, and never off Beaver Island. The lyrics, therefore, reflect little of the workings of oral tradition.

This is the only known recording of "The *Clifton's* Crew." Bonner begins in the middle of his poem, leaving out the first eight stanzas that provide more details about the vessel and its fate. Lomax recorded the song twice. The second recording is incomplete, ending with a skip of the recording needle, and has issues with recording speed, but it does include the final stanzas. Its lyrics:

"The *Clifton's*" Crew" by Patrick Bonner

Her captain Emmett Gallagher, a man so brave and young,  
At his parents' home they now must know the tidings of their son.  
It is now the pangs of sorrow will pierce a mother's heart,  
As she learns his doom has come so soon, her boy from her must part.

'Twas but a few short weeks before when Emmett he had said:

“There is a place out in Lake Huron that will not give up its dead.  
It is called a sailor’s graveyard,” those words he was known to say,  
As he stood out on the *Clifton’s* deck, he showed them where it lay.

We had there three more friends of ours, who are in his company,  
Brought up on Beaver Island and had followed up the sea;  
‘Twas Anthony McDonough, Joe Scheid and Peter Burns,  
We hoped to meet them back again and wished their glad return.

Young Anthony, a mate on board, he has sailed the ocean blue,  
He had come back to the Great Lakes and had joined the *Clifton’s* crew,  
To be among companions of his early boyhood days,  
He was doomed like many more on board to fill a sailor’s grave.

Among our four companions on the *Clifton* that were drowned,  
Joe Sheid he was the only one of them was ever found.  
Their lifeless forms in silence now are drifting far and wide,  
‘Til they waste away from day to day and wear with time and tide.

Their fathers they will not forget that day so sad and long,  
When their thoughts were of the *Clifton* and their dear boys that are gone.  
Also, their sisters they will weep and mourn their brothers dear,  
Whose smiles they’ll never more behold, their saddened hearts to cheer.

Our homes have not beheld the like since many years before,  
Not since the steamer *Vernon* sank out off Wisconsin’s shore.  
As some may hold in memory still and some were then not born,  
Who perished on the *Clifton* in the darkness and the storm.

There are three of them ‘tis sad to say no mother’s home have they,  
They are gone before their children and are long since laid away.  
They say there is a Mother who has seen through many storms,  
And has prayed for those who called to Her in danger and in harm.

She is our blessed Mother as the holy people say,  
Is called the Queen of Heaven and had sorrow in Her day.  
She has listened to many midnight prayer from many a sailor boy,  
And with God has blessed those hidden graves; they now in peace may lay.

‘Tis well for us to think upon the words that God has said,  
As are told from out the Scriptures, we should not forget the dead.  
You may kneel at your bedside when the quiet shadows fall,  
Then in your prayers remember those who were once among us all.

And ask that we may gather with the angels in their flight,  
And [not] forget the steamer *Clifton* and that dark September night.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.