William “Billy” Bell (1887-196?) was a woodsman and lumber mill worker who was born in Prince Edward Island, Canada, and traveled to Maine in his 20s looking for work. Like thousands of other young Maritime men, Bell sought good-paying jobs in the woods across North America that were available from Maine to Minnesota, from Newfoundland to northern Ontario.

Bell lived in Brewer, Maine, on the Penobscot River--made famous for its riverdrivers that chopped and sawed trees along the West Branch of the Penobscot River in northern Maine and hauled them through the deep snow on large horse-pulled sleds. They then yarded them along the banks of rivers and lakes. In the spring, as the ice melted, the logs were rolled downstream, sometimes creating log-jams that river-drivers with spiked poles or peaveys had to pick at to get the logs moving again. When the logs arrived in Old Town and Bangor, the men sorted them into booms (holding areas marked off by chained-together logs). The logs owners were identified by unique markings on the logs that lumbermen had made with their axes. They then could sort the logs and send them to the proper sawmill. Lumber was then loaded onto ships and sent to other parts of America to build homes and buildings in her cities and towns.

As the need for lumber waned, a new process for making paper using wood was developed and enterprising lumber mills (such as the Eastern, in Brewer) built large pulp digesters and paper making machines. They hired many men both to work in the woods cutting wood, bringing it downstream and loading it in the yard. Others worked to load pulp digesters and run the paper machines. Women were hired in the office and to sort paper and package it for sales. Eastern built company housing and a community grew up on Brewer around the mill. There, Bill Bell and other immigrants from the Maritimes would settle into company-built homes near the mill. Along with their labor, Bell and his cohorts brought with them traditional singing and song-making styles that previously traveled to the Maritime Provinces with immigrants from Ireland and Scotland. Many of the tunes that would underpin the songwriting of these creative men were traditional Irish or British tunes. The singing of traditional songs was part of the tradition of the céili—a gathering of friends for conversation (craic), music and dance that took place generally at someone’s home (or in a lumber camp in this case). As Bell explained, “If he could sing a song he sang it. If he couldn’t, he played the fiddle, and if somebody else couldn’t sing or play the fiddle, he’d get up and stepdance. And everybody had to do his bit” (“Drive Dull Care Away,” Institute of Island Studies, PEI, 1999: 17).
Folklorist and University of Maine Professor Edward D. “Sandy” Ives had become interested in traditional songs from Maine after he himself had sung folksongs at summer camps in Maine as a way to enhance his university salary in the early years of his career. People would ask him if he knew some of the woods songs. Intrigued, he began to look into what had been published about them. Ives began his research on the traditional music of the Northwoods of Maine and the Maritimes first by reading what had been published by Doerflinger (“Shantymen and Shantyboys,” 1951), and Barry, Eckstorm and Smyth, (“Minstrelsy from Maine,” 1927 and “British Ballads from Maine,” 1929). He was especially interested in the satirical song-maker Larry Gorman (who he learned about from reading “Minstrelsy from Maine”). Ives thought there might still be people who remembered some of Gorman’s songs, so he put a notice in the “Bangor Daily News” asking if anyone knew songs written and sung by Gorman. Bell’s sister, Jeanette Shields, saw the notice and contacted Ives, telling him that her brother knew Gorman and knew some of his songs. Shields then brought Ives to Bell’s home.

Ives found Bill suffering from asthma, as he put it, he was “hoarsed up” but in spite of his protestations, sang for Ives the entire “The Cumberland’s Crew.” Ives wrote that this was his first taste of a Come All Ye and of real traditional singing that he had experienced, and while he had heard many wonderful things since that evening, none had been more wonderful than that experience with Bell.

The Cumberland’s Crew’s eight stanzas tells the story of the sinking of the Union sloop-of-war “Cumberland” by the Confederate Merrimac off the Virginia shore in 1862. Although it wasn’t a Gorman song, it was a song commonly sung by both Maine and Canadian woodsmen. But Billy Bell didn’t disappoint. He also contributed to Ives’ quest to learn about the well-known satirical song-maker Larry Gorman. Bell had purchased a copy of Gorman’s popular song “Prince Edward Isle Adieu” (although the authorship of the song remains a question).

Bell was the first of many PEI singers that Ives would meet. His first meeting with Bell set him on a path to document the occupational songs and culture of the 19th and early 20th century lumber era in Maine. Ives published several books about the songs and songmakers including: “Twenty-One Folksongs from Prince Edward Island,” 1963; “Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs,” 1964; “Lawrence Doyle: The Farmer Poet of Prince Edward Island,” 1971; numerous issues of “Northeast Folklore,” and many journal articles. He would found the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History at the University of Maine (now housed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress), the journal “Northeast Folklore” (1958-2015), and the Maine Folklife Center (https://umaine.edu/folklife/).

While Ives was primarily interested in traditional songs and song making (“Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker,” University of Illinois Press, 1978), his research resulted in a deeper understanding of occupational songs, songmaking and the creative process, the lumbering history of 19th century Maine, and the impact of the traditional culture of Prince Edward Island on that history. Ives compiled a collection of oral histories and songs at the University of Maine that has been described by the council of Library and Information Resources as “perhaps the finest regional archive of its kind.” The collection has been used by academics and students from many disciplines, including historians, folklorists and anthropologists, by writers and film makers and family members seeking copies of recordings of their loved ones. The entire collection was digitized and transferred to the Library of Congress where it now resides with copies at University of Maine’s Raymond Fogler Library Special Collections. And it all began with Ives’s interview of Billy Bell.

Pauleena MacDougall is Director Emerita of the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine. She served as director of the Maine Folklife Center from 2008-2016 and as associate
director from 1992-2008. She received her Ph.D. in American History in 1995 from the University of Maine. She has authored of numerous books and articles and edited the journal “Northeast Folklore” from 2000-2015.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.