

“The Suncook Town Tragedy”— Mabel Wilson Tatro of Springfield, Vermont (July 1930)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Josie Langmaid



Original recording



Helen Hartness Flanders

At first it seems like the most unusual subject for a song. Nevertheless, the brutal abduction, rape, murder and decapitation of a 17 year-old girl while on her way to school one day in 1875, would go on to inspire one of America’s most poignant and resonating folk ballads. The victim, Josie Langmaid, has come to be known as New Hampshire’s Murdered Maiden and the story her death, as related in music, has come to be known as “The Suncook Town Tragedy.”

Actually, as a type of song, “The Suncook Town Tragedy” is far from alone. It is illustrative of a sad, dark, fascinating subgenre of the American songbook and of American folklife: the “murder song.” Other titles in this oeuvre include “Little Mary Phagan,” which detailed the 1913 killing of a 13 year-old girl, and “Little Marian Parker,” which recounted the kidnapping and subsequent murder of 12 year-old Marion Parker from Los Angeles. These sad songs, in their day, served a variety of purposes: as tribute, as musical expression, and—as with much folk music—as oral history, a way of documenting the events of a specific time and place and passing it down through the generations, an effective method of communication and transmission before the widespread use of other documenting media.

Often though, as these songs got created and then spread, truly via word of mouth, from performer to performer, the facts embedded in them got embroidered or misinterpreted. Sometimes they might even be used to rewrite history or to sway opinion or launch a new mythology. That is certainly a claim that can be leveled against “Little Mary Phagan.” “Suncook,” in contrast, though keeps pretty close to the truth in its lyrics: it was on Josie Langmaid’s way to school that she disappeared; it was her father and brother, along with concerned townfolk, who originally went searching for her; and it was a French drifter named Joseph LaPage who killed her and was later hanged for his crime. If anything, the ballad is a bit simplified and certainly somewhat sanitized compared to the real story, as there is no mention of her sexual assault or of the horrifically bloody crime scene at which she was found.

The narrative of the poem/song, in its nine AA-BB schemed stanzas, is remarkably straightforward and linear in its storytelling; almost every line/lyric moves the narrative forward. Each line also seems to further draw its audience in. Its opening line (“Come all young people, now draw near”) is a gentle invitation for a story, yet its exclusivity to children signals that it will also too, soon, be a warning.

Then, to truly relate its tale to its listeners, in its seventh and eighth lines, it also climbs into the mind of the murdered victim (“And many the time that road she passed/But little thought she it would be her last”). The names of a few local landmarks, easily known to any in the area, are also clicked off to add to its sense of proximity, even urgency (“It was at the foot of Pembroke Street”). (Locale is also reiterated later with its mention of Concord--where Langmaid’s killer was tried--and mention of New Hampshire is made via the term “The Granite State.”) The song’s climatic mystery and decent into despair--“But when the shades of night drew near/Her darling child did not appear”—arrives almost immediately thereafter. Yet, even with that precipice, the line that follows next is still jarring: “Her head was from her body tore.”

The song’s third-to-last verse, recounting the killer’s (“this monster’s”) capture and imprisonment, is, surprisingly, left somewhat ambiguous. “But found at last to his mistake”: does this imply that the killing of Josie Langmaid was accidental? Certainly the existing evidence does not suggest this. In reality, LaPage had killed before (and probably would have again). And, early in the song, his killing hand is described as “skillful.” Or does the term “his mistake” refer to his eventual apprehension by the authorities? LaPage still had in his possession a blood-stained coat. That and a telling footprint left at the scene were the two items which eventually helped lead to his suspicion and arrest.

In the song’s final two verses, before we leave the town of Suncook and the tale of Josie Langmaid behind, the killer’s eventual trial, denials (though he did later confess) and sentencing (the death penalty) are all related and an uneasy peace has once again been restored to the region.

Interestingly, in the song, LaPage is mentioned by name, though, throughout, Josie Langmaid’s name is not. Such omission continues the way that, culturally, we tend to know the names of murderers (from Jack the Ripper to Richard Speck) but seldom the names of their victims. The song’s role as parable and cautionary tale is also revisited in its two final lines: “For we must all examples make/Till crime shall cease in the Granite State.”

Though pieces like “The Suncook Town Tragedy” were, in many ways, the height of localism in American music, they tended to migrate based upon the power of their melody and their infamous subject matter. This explains how prolific performing amateur Mabel Wilson Tatro of Springfield, Vermont, came to perform the song and how renowned folk recordist Helen Hartness Flanders came to capture it—as one of her first recorded titles--in July of 1930.

Known as one of the Northeast’s most tireless “song catchers,” for decades Flanders traveled the back roads of New England ferreting out and committing to cylinder, then disc, then tape, previously undocumented musical numbers, ballads, gospel tunes, stage songs, children’s songs and folktales, preserving both their music and the stories they told. Originally conducted under the auspices of Vermont’s governor John E. Weeks, Flanders carried out her work from 1930 to 1960. Her collection eventually came to number in excess of 4,000 recordings. Today, they are housed at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. Though certainly able to stand on its own merit, the addition of “The Suncook Town Tragedy” as a selection to the National Sound Registry, in 2004, was intended to be representative of this landmark body of work.

Just as the words, and sometimes the meaning, of these oral tradition narratives can be altered or changed over the years, so too can the treatments and performance methods of the song. While Tatro’s celebrated version of “Suncook” has a bit of melody to it, the majority of its readings have a disaffected, even flat, manner to them, one perhaps more in keeping with its somber subject matter. In its performative duality, “Suncook Town Tragedy” mirrors the contemporary folk standard “Darcy Farrow” (itself a sad, albeit fictional, death story) which has also been interpreted a variety of ways—as a pseudo-sing-along to a more quiet lament especially in the renditions of John Denver and Nanci Griffith. Similarly, Joni Mitchell’s folk-influenced “Woodstock” (also inspired by a real-life event) has found itself performed as both a rabble-

rouser (as in Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's version from 1970) and—as in Mitchell's own version—as a more contemplative plea.

As dark and morbid as “The Suncook Town Tragedy” is, as noted before, songs retelling such sordid tales are not unusual. Even today, popular songs based upon real-life crimes still make it onto the albums of various artists and, from there, sometimes onto the national airwaves. Most of them, interestingly, are told from the perspective of the killer or killers with Bruce Springsteen's spare “Nebraska” (1982) (inspired by the 1959 Starkweather killings) and the Boomtown Rats' compelling “I Don't Like Mondays” (1979) (inspired by the Brenda Ann Spencer shooting rampage of 1979) being two prime examples.

In the ways just mentioned, and other far less well-known expressions, music, today, is still being used to entertain and to educate and document both people and events. It continues to serve, as the “Suncook Tragedy” did, and as ancient stone tablets once did to for now-dead civilizations, as both time capsule and mile marker. It is evidence of a people, the ones who wrote them and the ones, like the Murdered Maiden, that they were about.

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