

Shanty Boy of the Big Eau Claire

As sung by
John Christian
08-27-1940 Coloma, WI

The Shanty-Boy on the Big Eau Claire
This young and artful maiden den of noble pedigree
Her mother kept a milliner shop way down in Mosinee
She sold waterfalls and ribbons and imitation lace
To all the high-toned people in this gay and festive place

1. Come all ye jolly shanty boys, come listen to my song.
It's one I've just invented, it won't detain you long.
It's about a pretty maiden, a damsel young and fair
Who dearly loved a shanty boy upon the Big Eau Claire.

The image shows a handwritten musical score on aged paper. The title is 'The Shanty-Boy on the Big Eau Claire'. The music is written on a single staff in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The lyrics are written below the notes. There are some handwritten annotations in blue ink, including 'Pickety' at the top right and 'Her' above the first line. The score consists of four lines of music with lyrics underneath.

Verse 1.

Come all ye jolly shanty boys, come listen to my song,
It's one I've just invented, it won't detain you long.
It's about a pretty maiden, a damsel young and fair
Who dearly loved a shanty boy upon the Big Eau Claire.

Verse 2.

This young and artful maiden with a noble pedigree,
Her mother kept a milliner shop way down in Mosinee.
She sold waterfalls and ribbons and imitation lace
To all the high-toned people in this gay and festive place.

Verse 3.

This shanty boy was handsome, and a husky lad was he,
In the summer time he tail-sawed in the mills of Mosinee.
And when the early winter came and blew its biting breeze,
He worked upon the Big Eau Claire, chopping down pine trees.

Verse 4.

He had a heavy mustache and a curly head of hair
A prettier man than he, never saw the Big Eau Claire.
He loved this milliner's daughter, he loved her long and well,
Till circumstances happened and this is what befell.

Verse 5.

The milliner said a shanty boy her daughter ne'er should wed,
But Sue, she did not seem to care for what her mother said.
So she packed her ribbons up and went and hired a hack,
And opened out another shop way down in Prairie du Sac.

Verse 6.

Here she caught the scarlet fever and lay a week or two,
In a suburban pest house in the town of Baraboo.
And often in her ravings, she tore her auburn hair,
And talked about the shanty boy from off the Big Eau Claire.

Verse 7.

The doctors tried but all in vain her helpless life to save,
But soon by them it was pronounced, she must go to her grave.
When the tidings reached the shanty boy, his business he did leave,
His emotional insanity was fearful to perceive.

Verse 8.

He hid his saw in a hollow log and traded off his axe,
And hired himself for a sucker on a fleet of Sailor Jack's.
He prayed that death would come and end his woe and grief,
And grim death took him at his word, and furnished him relief.

Verse 9.

For he fell off from a rapids piece at the falls of Mosinee,
Thus ended all his fearful love with all its misery.
Now the bold Wisconsin river rolls its water above his bones,
His companions are the cat-fish, and his grave a pile of stones.

Verse 10.

And now this should be a warning to all you maidens fair,
To take no stock in shanty boys from off the Big Eau Claire.
But seek for solid comfort and bliss without alloy,
And play your points according, for some one-horse farmer boy.

Transcription and lyrics from the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection.

Critical Commentary

Transcriptions by Peters, p. 132, and HST

HST notes:

In the Professional Papers series:

From W.W. Jamieson, age 85, Poynette, 1941.

In the summer of 1940 John Christian of Coloma sang this fragment:



*The mill'ner broken hearted
Her shop was going to rack
She talked strong of leaving
The city of Fond du Lac
But her piller is haunted
By his bright auburn hair
And the ghost of this young shantyboy
From the Big Eau Claire.*

Shortly before leaving for the recording trip in the summer of 1941, in the hopes of finding one of the old lumberjacks who could sing the complete song, I quoted Mr. Christian's fragment in a radio broadcast over W.H.A. The next day the following letter was received:

W.H.A. Madison, Wis.

I have been working to get the Shanty Boy song for the last 10 years and have got it now just as I used to hear it sung 40 or 50 years ago. If you will tell Miss Thomas to come up here I will let her copy it.

W.W. Jamieson

Poynette, Wis.

Most anyone in Poynette can tell you where we live for I have been here for nearly 86 years.

Mr. Jamieson objected strenuously to the versions of the song which referred to the "city of Fond du Lac" because, as he said, "This is a song about the Wisconsin River and Fond du Lac isn't even on the river. The girl opened out her shop in Prairie du Sac, that's where it was." I agree that the weight of evidence was in favor of Prairie du Sac especially since when she took sick with the scarlet fever "she lay a week or two, in the suburban pest house in the town of Baraboo." Mr. Jamieson wasn't a singer; he had tried in vain to find "one of the boys" who used to sing the song.

The geographic discrepancy stems from the omission in Mr. Jamieson's version of a few of the original verses. It was Sue's mother who moved the milliner shop to Fond du Lac, evidently to take her daughter away from the shantyboy. Sue however, was not content "and when brown autumn came along, and ripened all the crops, She went way out to Baraboo and went to picking hops."

Editor's notes:

This song was written by Billy Allen in 1875 or 1876 (Rickaby 203). Rickaby received the text from the author, and Peters later transcribed another of Rickaby's informants (Mathilde Kjorstad-Myer) singing the song.

Sources:

Peters, Harry B., ed. *Folk Songs out of Wisconsin: An Illustrated Compendium of Words and Music*. Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1977.

Rickaby, Franz, collector and editor. *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-boy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.

K.G.