

# Shantyman's Life

As sung by  
Henry Humphrey  
08-27-1940 Hancock, WI

The Shantyman's Life

The shan-ty-man's life is a wear - Ri - some one, Though some call it free from  
care. 'Tis the wind-ing of the ax from morn-ing till night, In the mid-dle of the for-est  
drear. Whilst ly-ing in the shan-ties bleak and cold, Where the win - ter - y wind doth  
blow, As soon as the morn-ing star doth ap-pear, To the wild woods we must go.

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(Henry Humphrey)

## Verse 1.

The shantyman's life is a wearisome one,  
Tho' some calls it free from care;  
'Tis the winding of the axe from morning till  
night,  
In the middle of the forest drear.  
Whilst lying in the shanties, bleak and cold,  
Where the wintery wind doth blow,  
As soon as the morning star doth appear,  
To the wild woods we must go.

## Verse 2.

Transported we are from the pretty maidens  
fair,  
On the banks of the Wisconsin stream,  
Where the wolves and the owls with their  
terrifying howls,  
Disturb our nightly dream.  
About three in the morning, or early, cook  
cries,  
"Boys 's the break of day."  
When broken slumber thus we pass,  
The long winter's nights away.

Verse 3.

It is then in the spring double hardships thus  
 begin,  
 The waters are piercing cold.  
 Our limbs are almost froze, and dripping wet  
 our clothes,  
 Our oars we can scarcely hold.  
 But the rock shoals and sand give employment  
 to all hands,  
 Our well-banded raft for to steer.  
 O'er the rapids thus we run, to us it seems but  
 fun,  
 We'll void of all slav'ry's fear.

Verse 4.

Had we ale, wine or beer, our spirits for to  
 cheer,  
 While in those woods so wild,  
 Or a glass that had been shone while here in  
 the woods alone,  
 'Twould shorten our long exile.

*Transcription and lyrics from the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection.*

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### **Critical Commentary**

Transcriptions by Peters, pp. 81–82, and HST.

#### **HST notes:**

In the Professional Papers series:

*Sung by Henry Humphries [sic], age 75, Hancock, 1940.*

*Since routine life in any of the lumber camps was much the same before the coming of electricity, the songs of the shantyman's life carried by lumberjack singers from camp to camp as they followed the course of the lumber industry. There is enough similarity in the tunes of the collected versions to lead one to believe that some stock Irish tune was employed by the composer of the song, but it suffers from the singers' inability to tune their voices to the delicacies of an old modal melody. In the minds of many a lumberjack singer, the melody is merely something on which to hang the words.*

*Mr. Humphries' song has been collected by Rickaby in Minnesota, in Wisconsin by Beck, in Michigan by Gardner and Chickering, and by Barry in Maine. The stream, in the Maine version, is called the Bonne Chère. It is so named in the version which Rickaby collected from George M. Hankins of Gordon, Wisconsin, who had learned it from another shanty-boy, Jim Graham, Menominee, in 1876. In the version Rickaby collected in Bemidji, Minnesota, the stream is the Wisconsin; in Gardner and Chickering's version, the Susquehanna.*

*The Shanty Boys and the Pine (Shanty Boy's Song) (Shantyman's Life)*

*Rickaby collected a version known as Jim Porter's Shanty Song. It takes its specific title from the final stanza which reads,*

*"But if you doubt a word of it, go as Jim Porter's crew.*

*For it was in Jim Porter's shanty this song was sung with glee.*

*So that's the end of me shanty song. It was composed by me."*

*As Rickaby points out, however, this is no proof of its origin for such a stanza is easily adapted to fit any crew.*

Version C sung by Charles Ring, age 63, Hayward.

Mr. Ring went to work in the woods, when 13, driving oxen. He also called this song the Shantyman's Life. He said his mother taught it to him and that it was written on the St. Croix River. His version parallels Mr. De Noyer's in text and melody.

Sung by Emery De Noyer, age 63, Rhinelander, 1941.

This song is generally known as The Shanty Boys and the Pine, but Mr. De Noyer called his version The Shantyman's Life.

Beck states that this song is sung in Michigan from Lake Huron to Lake Michigan. He has collected the versions which name Lockwood's, Murphy's, Porter's, Francisco's, Dorcey's, Gilbert's, and Robertson's Camp. As well as Robbins' hotel as the place where the song was composed. Mrs. Isabel Ebert collected a version from James Fliegel of Lake Tomahawk, Wis., which names the place of origin as Mike Dolan's shanty.

#### **Editor's notes:**

Gardner and Chickering give other sources, one of which "carries the song back to 1857": Shoemaker, Henry W., *Mountain Minstrelsy of Pennsylvania*. Third edition of North Pennsylvania Minstrelsy, Revised and Enlarged. Philadelphia, 1931.

Alternate titles/related songs: "Shanty Boy and the Pine," "Shanty Boy's Song," "Pinery Boy," "The Dreary Life."

#### **Sources:**

Doerflinger, William Main, coll. *Shantymen and Shantyboys: Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman*. New York: Macmillan, 1951. Words similar, tunes have some similarities

Gardner, Emelyn Elizabeth, and Geraldine Jencks Chickering, collectors and editors. *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan*. Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1967. Reprinted from original, c1939.

Larkin, Margaret, coll. and ed. *Singing Cowboy: A Book of Western Songs*. Piano arrangements by Helen Black. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931. "The dreary life" is similar, about cowboys rather than shantymen

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, coll. and ed. *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-boy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.

Sandburg, Carl. *American Songbag*. New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927. Words very similar, tunes have some similarities.

K.G.