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# Shall I Sing You a Ghost Story: The Nature and Purpose of Ghost Songs in Maritime Communities of Northern New England and Atlantic Canada

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SHALL I SING YOU A GHOST STORY: THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF GHOST  
SONGS IN MARITIME COMMUNITIES OF NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND AND  
ATLANTIC CANADA

by

Richard A. Blake

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

ENGLISH

Approved:

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2019

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ABSTRACT

Shall I Sing You A Ghost Story: The Nature and Purpose of Ghost Songs in Maritime  
Communities of Northern New England and Atlantic Canada

by

Richard Blake, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2019

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Department: English

This paper discusses the nature of maritime ghost stories when they are put forth in musical narrative. The focus is on the answering of two main questions; (1) What happens to the story of a historical supernatural event when it's put to music? (2) What changes can happen when such a folk song crosses regional boundaries?

The "Ghostly Crew" is a folk song that deals with a historic haunting of a ship in George's Bank off the coast of Maine that happened because of an accident involving the collision of two vessels during a storm, causing one of them to sink to the bottom. The first known version of it dates back to 1874, eight years after the event in question is said to have occurred. Following this many versions have arisen in the regions of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Massachusetts, and Maine. Each of the musicians who took up this song have added their own personal twists to it when presenting it to their audiences.

Eleven versions of the song are analyzed, discussing semiotic variation in their use of season, numbers, and time. There is also research into audio sources where the

style of presentation can change the mood and understanding of the song to a given audience. Looking at the historical event and the different versions of the song one can see how much the story has changed in order to fit the needs of the singers whether it be with the number of sailors involved with the haunting of the ship, the time of day it took place, or the time of year that the ship headed out on its tragic journey.

(45 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

### Shall I Sing You A Ghost Story: The Nature and Purpose of Ghost Songs in Maritime Communities of Northern New England and Atlantic Canada

Richard Blake

This paper will be discussing the nature of maritime ghost stories put forth in musical narrative. There are two questions that I will be endeavoring to answer. 1) What kinds of changes can occur to a ghost story when it is put into a song and 2) How would the understanding of a folksong's story change when it crosses boundaries from one place to another? More specifically it will discuss those changes when crossing provincial or national boundaries. The investigation into these questions will involve the use of several written and audio sources. The written sources include titles like the books *Maritime Folksongs* by Helen Creighton and *The Folklore of Maine* by Horace Beck. These books each include a different version of the song. Beck's book also includes a description of the historical event of which the song is based.

To get a true grasp of language and meaning with tone it is essential to hear how one sings a song in the present day along with any older recordings of the same song. The audio sources will be online sources off of sites like Youtube and Memorial University of Newfoundland's Folklore Archives. The song is sung in different tones, some at faster paces than others. Most of the versions are accompanied by music, but one is sung acapella. Of the audio recordings the acapella version will receive extra scrutiny as it would be more in sync with how the song originally sounded. Songs that were designated in what is called the fo'c'sle tradition on a ship had no accompanying music.

An important thing that will be noted is how superstition helped to determine a sailor's actions and rituals at sea. Many rituals and taboos exist to those at sea in order to ward off evil and bad luck. In discussing the song I will also analyze how these beliefs affected maritime music. Then endeavor to find any hidden meanings within the language that might differ from the layman's interpretation of what the sailor's song is telling us.

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You May smile if you mind to, but perhaps you'll lend an ear;

Like men and boys together, looking back fifty years.

Who've sailed upon the ocean in a summer's pleasant day,

Likewise in stormy weather when the howling winds do rage.

(Lovewell)

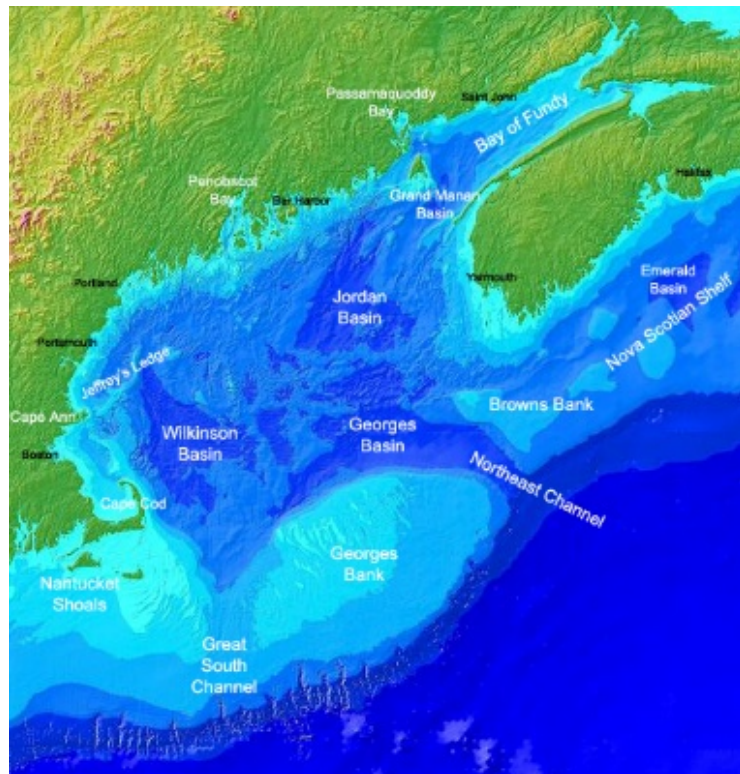
## INTRODUCTION

Stories and music have been part of maritime culture going back many centuries. The stories and songs of the fishermen can encompass almost any subject from love, piracy, pranks, sex, murder, and a whole slew of other topics. The purpose of them can be creation of a rhythm to synchronize labor, to entertain those on board, to terrify an audience, or to maintain discipline with the sailors. (One should always keep in mind that not all sailors on these ships wanted to be there. Many of them were pressed into service). The music that one hears on a ship can create the atmosphere for which it will be famous. Many songs are the product of a specific ship or crew that can be carried off to other crews and locations, or die a death of indifference if not passed on when a crew is separated.

The song "The Ghostly Crew" is based on a historical event that happened in an area called George's Bank between Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. During a powerful storm, the schooner named the Charles Haskell was driven by wind and storm into the side of another schooner named the Andrew Jackson (or Johnston), driving the other schooner beneath the water and killing everyone onboard. The next time the Charles Haskell sailed through the same waters, it is said that the dead crew members from the



Andrew Jackson climbed out of the water and took control of the ship and sailed it around the waters until a lighthouse's light shone upon them. At that point the ghostly sailors returned to the sea. Afterward the owners of the ship could never get any sailors to crew the ship again. This song is well known in the areas of New England in the United States and the Maritimes in Canada.



*Figure 1. An overview of the Georges Bank Area*

## BACKGROUND

Maritime culture in the areas of northern New England and the Maritime Provinces of Canada have a common origin, and because of their close proximity they have continued to share many cultural traits. Common cultural origins and use of the same language

maintained their shared traditions even after the American Revolution and further episodes of friction between the two nations. They share several common aspects. They have the same kinds of ships, the same crew organizations, and the same folk beliefs, just to name a few. Commerce was a strong binding force between the two nations that merchants wished to continue when fighting would cease. Politics tended to cave to economic pressures with progression of time.

Historically, the areas we know today as Massachusetts and Maine were connected politically under a common umbrella of Massachusetts. The Puritans who crossed the Atlantic to settle what became the Massachusetts Bay Colony also expanded its influence into the area we know today as Maine. The early colonists started in the areas of Plymouth and Boston to expand westward and finally northward to the lands of Maine. The expansion was the result of merchants seeking new markets and pathways to those markets. This joining of the lands of Massachusetts and Maine lasted for centuries until 1820, when it received separate state status almost forty years after the American Revolution. Granted with Maine and Massachusetts there were some regional differences to be considered, but those who settled both state lands still had a common cultural heritage.

The Maritime Provinces of Canada (New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island) weren't added to the authority of Britain until after a number of wars were fought between France and Great Britain. Six wars between the two countries crossed the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and resulted in Britain's acquisition of the provinces by the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. The lateness of this acquisition to the empire made the region different from the already existing thirteen colonies that would

make up the United States. The connection to Britain was too recent, and the people still considered themselves primarily British and loyal to the crown. There were other native elements in these lands as well that made things differ from the people of the thirteen colonies. The Maritime Provinces found themselves fighting on opposite side during the American Revolution and later the War of 1812, but when friction died down, commerce between them would return. Despite there being cultural differences between the people on each side of the national boundaries, many ideas remained the same. Not just with the customs sailors shared, but the way in which they told their stories to pass them on to others. In this way the telling of a historical narrative can take the form of a legend as it is told from one person to another.

Thus would appear to be the case in this song. The historical event addressed in “The Ghostly Crew” became a legend before it became a folk song. As Jan Brunvand explains:

Legends...are like the myths in that they are stories regarded by tellers as true, despite being partly based on traditional motifs or concepts. Unlike myths, however, legends are generally secular and are set in the less remote past in a conventional, earthly locale. Legends are sometimes referred to as folk history, although history is soon distorted by oral transmission. (Brunvand 158)

Brunvand goes on to say:

Rumors, anecdotes, and legends alike are concerned with remarkable, even bizarre, events that are that allegedly happened to ordinary people in everyday situations. These reports and stories are recounted, usually in conversation, as a way of explaining strange things that occur--or are thought to have occurred—and they are passed on in order to warn or inform others about these unprovable events. (158)

He then points out that when telling such tales, they are often preceded by validating formulas like “This happened in our neighborhood” or “I heard this from a friend of mine who knows the person it really happened to” (159). Historical events, mixed into legend form, can then find themselves intermingled with already existing ideas of how the world works. Sailors are a group that hold many of these kinds of ideas to heart.

When one looks at the common folk beliefs of American and British sailors, one could argue that most of these beliefs are shared cross-culturally by sailors from many different nations who regularly interacted with each other. The sailors’ belief in the appearance of certain bird species at a given time being a good or bad omen (depending on time of day or season of the year) is a good example. This belief is common in nearly all western maritime cultures. Then there’s the example of a red sun setting in the west or a red sun rising in the east designating good or terrible weather on the horizon. But there is something about the people who share a common origin and a common language that can keep a common idea between them almost identically. One such piece of culture in this realm are the ballads that were sung by the sailors on their ships, in the taverns, or other places where they would congregate.

## THE HISTORY OF *THE GHOSTLY CREW*

“The Ghostly Crew” (also known as “The Ghostly Sailors”, “The Ghostly Fishermen”, “Twelve Ghostly Fishermen”, and “The Spirit Song of Georges Bank) is a traditional style ballad that commemorates a historical event that took place in 1866 and resulted in a haunting of a ship ever after (so one version says). The ship was then left to rot on the wharves (Beck *Folklore of Maine* 203). Other versions say that the ship wasn’t left to rot, but was sold to a Captain Hayden out of Nova Scotia and never returned to Georges again (Creighton *Bluenose Ghost* 116). With that version the haunting happened once and the ship was sold to someone who would take it out of the area because nobody in the region could be convinced to crew that ship.

Horace P. Beck in his *Folklore and the Sea* puts it like this: The “Ghostly Fishermen” recounts the “living proof that drowned men will board the vessel from which they were lost when next she visits that fatal spot” (Beck 165).

In describing the song, Edith Fowke, editor of *Sea Songs and Ballads from Nineteenth Century Nova Scotia*, says the following:

This is an unusual Canadian ballad that is very well known along the east coast. It is inspired by a real sea tragedy which is linked with a sailors’ legend, and is one of the very few native North American ballads that has a supernatural theme. (Fowke 97)

While the North American trend may be to steer away from the supernatural with the songs that arrive from England, one might point out that unlike many ghost songs this one originated in the New World and thus had little reason to eliminate the supernatural. Examples of this are the ghost ships of the Young Teazer that met a fiery end off the coast of Nova Scotia in 1813 and the Princess Augusta (later dubbed the Palatine after the passengers on the ship) that wrecked on Block Island, off the coast of Rhode Island in 1752 (Jeans 298). Both ships are purported to be among those that occasionally return to haunt the seas. They are both said to return as glowing apparitions on the water called the Teazer Light and the Palatine Light. The first tending to be visible in the areas around Halifax, Nova Scotia and the later mostly only visible off the coast closer to Block Island where a lighthouse is located. Ghostly lights are a favorite theme in maritime folklore, serving as a means of interaction between humans and the supernatural. They are mysterious, mostly unexpected, and open to interpretation to the prejudices of those who see them. These lights are difficult to comprehend; those standing on the shore see it shining in the darkness. The popularity of these themes in legend makes the shift to the musical form of “The Ghostly Crew” an interesting case study.

The historical account of the event is discussed in only a few places. This is the account of the event given by the ballad collector Helen Creighton:

The Charles Haskell, a fine new vessel, sailed out of Boston and was one of three hundred anchored on Georges on March 7, 1866. A hurricane and blinding storm set in. Vessels were huddled together and were torn from their anchorage. During the hurricane all hands were on deck. At one

o'clock at night one of the other ships, a schooner, got adrift and out of control. She was like a runaway and was being hurled by the storm directly towards the Haskell. In order to save herself, the Haskell's rope was cut, but she was then so storm-driven that she was completely at the mercy of the wind. Another craft lay in her path and she ran through it like a cheese, standing the shock herself without losing a rope yard. Thus the Charles Haskell unwittingly transferred to the Andrew Jackson of Salem what would have been her fate. (Creighton, 2009 p. 116)

Creighton gives a fairly detailed account of the event with basic information. We know the names and styles of the ships, we have a general idea where it takes place (regionally anyway), the general sequence of events, and for what it's worth, we know the port of origin of the two ships involved. What she doesn't give is the number of sailors involved with either ship. The song would imply that at least with the Andrew Jackson there were twelve sailors who went down with the ship.

Here is the purported historical account given by Horace P. Beck:

In the 1870's there was a practically new schooner out of Gloucester named the Haskell. This particular night she was lying at anchor with a fleet of vessels on George's when a gale sprang up. The Haskell gave a vicious surge, parted her ground tackle and fell off to leeward. Behind her, and also at anchor, was the Johnston. The Johnston yawed and before anyone aboard either vessel could raise a hand the Haskell went aboard her amidship. Practically cut in half, the Johnston went down with all

hands while the Haskell drifted away to leeward practically unharmed. The foregoing are the facts in the case. The remainder of the story, which is still told, is legendary. (Beck, 1957 p. 203)

A main aspect of Beck's tale that differs it from Creighton's account is that he gives a number to the sailors on the ship. When discussing the ghosts arising from the sea here's Beck's account:

The next time the Haskell went out to George's she anchored and during the mid-watch twenty-six wet and dripping shades climbed silently over her rail. One went aft to her wheel. Others stood by her halyards. The rest unwound ghostly fishing gear and stood, all wet and silent, by her rails fishing for spectre fish. (203)

The "Georges" references in these accounts is George's Bank (the edge of which is where George's Shoal resides), an elevated section of sea floor that juts up between Cape Cod, Massachusetts and Cape Sable Island in Nova Scotia. Geologically this elevated shelf was part of the North American continental mainland as recently as 12,000 years ago. This makes the waters as shallow as 20 feet in some areas (Georges Bank Face Sheet). It measures 150 miles in length to 75 miles in width. Its close proximity to the shelf of the Gulf of Maine are part of what affects the deep sea currents of the nearby waterways. It is a regular shipping area between the United States and Canada. Due to its elevated sea floor the water currents are different from that of nearby areas of the Atlantic Ocean. Those who sail these waters may notice the difference.



It is these varying currents that making fishing there different than elsewhere. Some fishermen consider this differing current as making it easier for them to catch fish.

To quote Mark Alan Lovewell:

For those of us who fish in small boats...we like to go where there are shoals to catch fish. The current brings the bait fish into an area that the bigger fish can feed. So on a small boat, you can see and feel the movement of the currents moving lots of water over sand bars and shoals. It is a cool experience.

He then continues:

But out on George's Bank, the experience is magnified...In a larger scale...all this water that is moving in the ocean, encounters constrictions way below. The water has to go somewhere so it moves quicker and seems more active.

A different kind of fishing experience is found here. The fish are more easily captured in the spot with the larger numbers swarming around in schools. There may not be more fish numerically throughout the Bank, but they did merge together in larger groups. Any sailors who travers those water ways would know about this and work it into their regular routes.

The description of the waterway explains the different feel of the Bank from other areas where fishing is done. Most of those who bring us their versions of the “Ghostly Crew” are/were familiar with the atmosphere there. They would understand what folk narratives and terms meant to the locals and perhaps why certain phrases were used. My research into these trends and how singers/collectors felt about the song will start with an analysis of the five audio versions of the song I’ve collected.

### STYLISTIC VARIATIONS

The following five artists have their own versions of the song that have been recorded. I have them listed here along with the form that each of them takes with instrumentation or the lack thereof:

Alan Mills (The Ghostly Sailors)-Accordion

Lovewell (The Ghostly Crew)-Guitar, harmonica

Houlihan (The Ghostly Sailors)-Acapella

Murphy (The Ghostly Fishermen)-Acapella

Bok (The Spirit Song of George’s Bank)-Acapella

Lovewell and Bok have the two most recent versions, and as of the time of this writing they are both still alive and actively singing their song. These two singers do have some major differences in the words used in the song that I will discuss later other than just the different titles they use or maritime terminology. It is important to remember that the words themselves are important to these singers to portray to the audience what they want them to get out of it.

Besides the variation in words, there is also a variation in tone that each singer can portray. With the examples of Lovewell and Bok, one notices Bok's slower more solemn tone implying a kind of deep contemplation in acapella when telling the story, while Lovewell's version has its faster tempo accompanied by guitar and harmonica. Lovewell's song thereby reflects one thinking about a frightful episode, but not necessarily something as important or others to be deeply concerned with. Bok's tone suggests a more solemn event and provides a warning to those who scoff at such things. Bok did have a good understanding of the story behind this song, that when terrible things happen at sea other terrible things can surface to emphasize that tragedy to those who experienced it, whether it was intentional or not.

Alan Mills's accordion-based version has what one could call a carnival tone; one could imagine people dancing to this kind of a tune. Listening to the melody, the idea of it carrying potential scary lyrics wouldn't come out until the arrival of the fourth stanza, where the narrator "felt a chilling dread as if he heard one calling from the dead." That kind of tune could make one think that the story was satirical. The words "You may all smile if you want to, but perhaps you'll lend an ear" and "just wait till I am done" have a different meaning in this context. Do we understand that the singer is expecting a laugh out of the tune when it's done? "You may smile" could then mean that he wishes the listener to smile, and when the ghosts appear, we shouldn't be concerned with any frightening things since it's all in good fun. "Wait till I am done" might then be just a filler for a halfway point of the song, rather than a plea to not depart in the middle of the song.

When Morris Houlihan sings the song, his acapella and rolling voice have a sadder kind of resonance. From this style of singing one could get the impression that the narrator is just singing this to himself upon reflection, whether he has an audience around him or not. The word “you” in the song would contrast with this idea, but perhaps one starts to sing a song and forgets the audience in remembering an event; the words could be flowing, but have a different meaning to the singer than the written words would suggest. When a singer is then seen as drawing upon reflection, one can assume that embellishment wouldn’t be part of this telling. This is completely different from what one gets when listening to Lovewell, Bok, or Mills.

#### SYMBOLISM IN *THE GHOSTLY CREW*

Moving from the style of the music to the content of the song, we can see still more variations. Sailors were interested in portraying certain ideas with this ballad, and they did it in a variety of ways.

A basic working premise (which I believe experience well illustrates) is that folksongs tend to exist most readily in high-context groups, those groupings that most scholars recognize as ‘folk groups.’ These are not large national or racial groups usually, but the intensely felt groupings in which we spend the most intimate parts of their lives; family, occupation, age, gender, neighborhood, religious, and ethnic groups. (Toelken 30, 1995)

Symbolism in music is often a cause for how a story can change. The symbols that go into songs with grave topics are chosen to meet the needs of the singer to the audience. This will be the case whether or not the story begins as a written piece before being sung. The object of a ballad is to strike a chord with the audience; with the wrong audience symbolism can get lost to those outside the culture the song was created in. Sailors would catch each of these allusions found in these songs that connect with their prejudices, fears, and other motivations in life.

A good example of the significant impact that traditional folk beliefs can have on the lives of sailors is illustrated in a story in Patrick B. Mullen's book *I Heard the Old Fisherman Say*. A sailor is sitting on deck of a ship as it heads south when a storm comes up. The story goes like this:

There's one particular guy I'm talking about, his name is Salty Carl. He's from Brownsville. I'm sitting back on the deck one day; we were running down south, and uh-he's sitting back there sewing net, and he came on back there, and he's standing on the hatch, and he looks at me and says, "Have you completely gone crazy?" I said, "What do you mean gone crazy? I don't understand what you're talking about." And it was rough, you know, a southeaster was blowing. And he said, "You've whistled in the wind. And if you hadn't whistled, this wind wouldn't a blowed." And he turned around and went back to the dock, and I got fired." (p. 3)

These beliefs are so strong that a sailor's decision, especially a captain's decision, can cause drastic changes in the way in which a ship is managed. The symbols then make themselves apparent in seamen's stories and songs.

There are several different kinds of symbols that one finds in the *Ghostly Crew*. There is symbolism with the season (time of year), the symbolism of weather (which can correlate with the season), the symbolism of numbers, and the symbolism of light vs. darkness just to name a few). A sailor's beliefs, especially one who's been at sea for many years, are deeply entrenched. While a superstition might be disregarded as foolish, the same sailor would still believe many other ideas shared by other sailors. Hence the phrase: "I'm not much easier frightened than most other men" from Beck. (Every version of the song has some form of this line). We can either see this as bravado to make sure the audience understood this wasn't being made up, or the sailor was kidding himself about his own superstitions.

#### SYMBOLISM OF THE SEASON

Starting with the season, it's important to note that not all versions of the song give an actual time of year for the incident. Helen Creighton in *Bluenose Ghost* does give us a date of March 7, 1866, technically putting it within the season of winter, though the end of March is when spring begins and at this time in March people are less likely to attribute this with winter weather or the symbolic dark foreboding the season of winter maybe bring to such a story.

Things then returns us to the version of the song laid out by Beck. "When the deck that September came sailors one by one" This version out of Maine places the time

of the event in Autumn. Unlike spring, Autumn, weather wise, and symbolically, can add a darker feel to the telling of a ghost story. March could be considered perhaps before the start of the hurricane season, while in September that season is drawing to a close. If this is before the start of the hurricane season, then what of the notion implied that the ship sailed out in the month of March into the storm that had driven them back toward the shoals? That would put a damper on the notion of it being a hurricane, but simply a bad storm. The song doesn't say what they exactly called the storm or why they were anchored there. We get it from the historical accounts, which are few.

Among the folk beliefs of the sailors there are many beliefs that fall into the category of cosmology, of which weather is one aspect. In *The Study of American Folklore*, Jan Brunvand has this to say:

Such cosmic phenomena as tides, winds, rainbows, and the movement of the heavenly bodies have long been studied and regarded as possible portents, often of wars or of natural disasters. The more unusual the phenomenon, the more likely it will be read as an omen. (Brunvand 315)

Terrible storms are not a rare occurrence in the waters of George's. Whether spring or fall terrible storms can happen. The cosmology here would center around the timing of the storm and what that storm had done to both the "Johnston" and the "Haskell." If one historical account is to be believed, then the Haskell had cut its own ropes in order to avoid being struck by another ship coming at them, only to find themselves smashing into the Johnston and killing them. If there is a sense of fate to be considered, was the

cosmological power meant to send the people of the Haskell to the bottom only to take out another ship? Or was there merely some sacrifice that fates felt had to be made, therefore the Haskell avoided their and the Johnston took the necessary sacrifice?

Weather and time shows that nature is a fickle mistress, and nobody knows that better than the sailors at sea during any season.

### SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS

Right o'er our rail came climbing, all silent, one by one

A dozen hardy sailors, just wait till I am done;

Their faces pale and sea-worn, all ghostly through the night,

Each fellow took his station as if he had the right. (Harry L. Marcy)

The above quote from Marcy's version, the oldest version of the song we have, and it is likely the first version to come out, as its year of origin, 1874, is just eight years after the event is purported to have taken place. That being the case, Marcy surely should have known that actual number of sailors aboard the ships. Would such an author then alter the number for any reason? Symbolism and rhythm could be two important driving forces.

The historical account of this event by Beck gives the number 26, not 12, as Marcy says. There are several possible reasons for the change. When singing a song it is much easier to throw in the words 'a dozen' than twenty-six. But symbolically, the number twelve can serve another purpose. Twelve gives a sense of completeness to any group being brought together. Some well-known examples are the twelve apostles of



Jesus, the twelve signs of the zodiac, and the twelve years in the cycle of the Chinese calendar. Twelve is clearly an appealing number to maintain in aesthetic representations, but adding just one more number becomes problematic. Thirteen is the number one gets when adding Jesus to his twelve apostles, leaving twelve holy people and one bad apple (Judas Iscariot, not to be confused with the other Judas mentioned in that number that we hear almost nothing about).

One other instance where the number twelve asserts itself when the number thirteen could also easily apply is the example of the twelve signs of the zodiac. Most westerners could tell you what their zodiac sign is according to the modern day system. They all begin on the 23<sup>rd</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup> of the month and then end on the 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> of the next month. The zodiac signs arise from the constellations the sun passes through in a given time of year with the earth's orbit. This even number of thirty days, of course, does not represent the actual number of days in which the sun is placed within a constellation, but everyone likes evenness and normalcy whenever possible. One other thing one would notice if tracing the zodiac through the constellations is that there are actually thirteen constellations the sun passes through in a given year. The constellation that people have decided to overlook is that of Ophiuchus (the serpent bearer), situated between Scorpio and Sagittarius. In order for this group of constellations to be considered complete without excess, there need to be twelve of them and one ejected.

Remember that the original number of sailors on the ship was said to be 26. Some simple math will tell you that 26 is 13 times 2. Were the creators of this song considering this when they chose the number of “dripping sailors (Creighton, Ives, Beck, Bok, Mills)”, “ripping sailors (Fowke)”, or “ghostly seaman” (Murphy), “hardy fishermen”

(Lovewell) “hardy sailors” (Laws, Marcy) that “came silently one by one”? Whoever Marcy’s source was didn’t enlighten us about this. The fact is that the number changed when it was put to music, and the number had to have a meaning sailors—and singers—would appreciate.

The other number of significance in the song comes in the first stanza. In Marcy’s original version it says:

You may smile if you’re a mind to  
But perhaps you’ll lend an ear,  
Like men and boy together,  
Well nigh for fifty years.

(Marcy)

Fifty is another number of significance for symbols. It is a number of sacredness, of grace, and new life. It is referred to many times in the Bible in relation to Moses when he received the commandments from God, it is the number of days between the Passover and Pentecost, it has a couple references associated with Elijah and his associates, and for the Israelites the fiftieth year was one of Jubilee. In these regards fifty tends to have a positive note associated with it. Unlike the other numbers mentioned it holds ritualistic significance. Thus the example of days between Passover and Pentecost and that number of priests assembled to send Elijah away on the fiery chariot. This would be in contrast to examples with the number forty.

Two versions of the song, both out of Maine, give the number as forty years. They would be Beck and Bok:

Smile if you've got a mind to,  
Or perhaps you'll lend an ear  
For men and boys together,  
Nigh onto forty years.

(Beck 204)

The number forty can be added to our symbolic numbers. The Folklorist Alan Dundes has the following to say about it:

Forty is the traditional ritual number of the Middle East signifying “a lot of.” That is why the children of Israel were obliged to wander in the wilderness for forty years. This is why the children of Israel ate mana for forty years. That is why Jesus “was there in the wilderness for forty days tempted of Satan. (Dundes *Holy Writ as Oral Lit*, Kindle. loc. 296)

These Middle Eastern symbols, of course, are taken up through religious historical connections from Judeo-Christian origins. Along with those mentioned above, we could add raining falling from the heavens for forty days and forty nights in the time of Noah, Moses spending forty days on Mt. Sinai before returning with the Ten Commandments, and Goliath taunting the Israelites for forty days before facing David on the battlefield. There are more, but this should suffice where it relates to the number and Middle Eastern ideology.

With this kind of reference to symbolism, forty could possibly give a more negative feeling on the mind of the narrator of the story than the number fifty. “Looking back forty years” could say that of all the things he’d seen that this was the most terrifying. This was the climax, though it is impossible to know when in that forty years the event took place. With the Biblical references we can note that at the end of the timespan of forty days or forty years that something more positive, or at least less strenuous, would follow. It will be seen later how this event shaped the narrator’s view on ghosts in general.

#### SYMBOLISM OF TIME

It happened on the grand-dog watch

I felt a chilly dread,

Come over me as though someone

Was calling from the dead.

(Lovewell)

Along with numbers, the timing of an event can have great significance. Most versions of the song state that the “chilling dread” came over the narrator at the “grand-dog watch” or just the “dog watch.” The term “grand-dog watch” designates a specific time of the day (or night in this case) for an event to happen. The term dog-watch, as a nautical term, is a period of time between the hours of 4 and 8 PM. In the past it is believed that it referred to a time period that lasted through the night, but the timing had changed over the centuries. What is meant by “grand-dog watch” then is also uncertain.

The origin of the designation of dogwatch has a few different possibilities. According to the Oxford English Dictionary besides the times of 4-6 or 6-8 PM (16:00-18:00 or 18:00-20:00 by nautical terms), there is the colloquial term defined as, “Any period or shift of late or early duty; a group of people who undertake this.”

Bok simplifies this concern by saying, “When in the darkness of my watch I felt a chilling dread,” making it clear that it was night time (and also implying that the narrator was the one who was on the lookout when the event happened. Fowkes, Ives, and Beck also use words indicating darkness rather than a watch time. Other accounts showing that the narrator was the one on watch come from Beck, Greenleaf, Houlihan, and Murphy. Some do say “our” to indicate the watch, but that could simply be referring to the ship and crew, not that the narrator was on watch duty.

Another theory about the dogwatch deals with the notion of the night being the period when only dogs remained awake. In some places it is believed that it is a translation of a Dutch or German term that crossed over into general maritime usage. Therefore are they specifically talking about dogs, or might sailors have some astronomical in mind? For centuries sailors had used stars in which to navigate the seas. The brightest star in the sky, and therefore the one they’d find most significant as far as folk beliefs go, is that of the star Sirius in the constellation Canus Major. Being the brightest star in the sky it would be the brightest in the constellation. For that reason it has been referred to as the Dog Star. Sirius is bright enough that at times it can even be visible in the daytime. If at times visible in the day, depending on where one was, perhaps the star was visible during the Dogwatch between the hours of 16:00 and 20:00. Every source one goes to find an explanation of dogwatch admits that other than the

modern understand of the term the origin is clouded in mystery. One should ask the singers, then, if there is meaning that is to be found in the song.

What we should then consider is that when it comes to symbolism and supernatural events, we can take either the literal translation and understanding that is to be found in a modern day dictionary, or we can consider perhaps the older, more colloquial idea. Ghost stories in general tend to have spirits making themselves known at night, especially with a recent rising of the dead. While any experienced sailor would know what was meant by the grand-dog watch or the dog watch, some versions just emphasize the darkness and remove the nautical designation of the original story, perhaps indicating a shift in audience, from those who would be expected to know the term to those who wouldn't. Ives's version out of Prince Edward Island says, "Twas on those dark night watches I felt a chilly dread..." and Fowke out of Nova Scotia, "It was in the grim dark watches I felt a chilling dread..." Both use dark watches to emphasize the time. Both are also out of Canada, though from different provinces. Fowke's version, however, uses several other sailor's colloquialisms that make one wonder how the dogwatch part got removed.

The timing of the ghosts' departure is also at times a symbolic element. One version of the ballad by Patty Murphy (from Newfoundland) gives a time designation for when the ghosts returned to the sea:

Oh, we cruised around those foggy banks

For the space of that long night,

And rather than I'd say so

Till the day has shown its light.

(Murphy)

All others identify the light of a lighthouse being the precursor to the return of the ghosts to the sea. Lovewell specifies a specific lighthouse “Cape Pogue Light” near the island of Martha’s Vineyard, where he did most of his performances. In Fowke’s book of ballads, he identifies which light was supposed to be involved: “The story was that as she was returning from George’s Bank on her next trip she was boarded in the night by the ghosts of the drowned men, who left her as Thatcher’s Island light came into sight” (Fowke 98). Thatcher Island is another island off the coast of Massachusetts, this one close to St. Ann.

#### NARRATIVE VARIATION

But everyday people usually do not feel the inclination to amass variants of an interesting story going around; if they hear of other versions they assume the one they heard from their own trusted friend is likely to be more reliable than others. (Barre Toelken

*Dynamics of Folklore* p. 319)

When a song tells a story, it is often the singer who designates its meaning. Why did the singer choose to sing that song, and why did he/she sing it in that particular way? With the example of the “Ghostly Crew,” the audio versions each have their own unique features. Of the five audio versions two of them are sung acapella, while the other two are

accompanied by music. Being of the ballad tradition one could assume that these songs were first sung without the accompanying music, as the two older audio versions attest.

I began with words from the version sung by Mark Alan Lovewell. Of the versions of the song chosen he is one of two people living today I've found who sing their own versions. He is also the one who I was able to communicate with about why he sings the song and why he uses the version he does. In his case, as a folk musician, he encountered it by looking for songs about George's Shaols. He had sailed through the waters there several times and noticed the differences, therefore looked for something that would best correlate with his own experience. One of the major differences he personally put into the song had to do with the lighthouse the sailors encountered that brought an end to the ship's haunting:

They all moved together  
Till land did heave in sight,  
Or rather, shall I say it,  
We saw Cape Pogue Light.

In Marcy's original text this part reads:

They moved about together  
Till land did heave in sight,  
Or rather, I should say so,  
The lighthouse threw its light.



Lovewell chose the name of a specific lighthouse that he was familiar with near his home on Martha's Vineyard. Cape Pogue lighthouse is encountered when sailing south through George's Strait on the way to this Massachusetts island. Those familiar with the area would know about that lighthouse. This is also the only instance in the songs collected where the lighthouse is named. Otherwise there might be a sailing direction, but not always. As already stated, the other place where a specific lighthouse is named is in the description of the story in Fowke's collection who is quoting older sources, one of them is name Thomas Randall:

...'W.H. Smith told me (April 1940) he well remembered the 'Ghostly Sailors' being sung aboard Nova Scotia vessels in which he sailed. He could not remember the schooner's name, but she was a Gloucester vessel. She ran down another vessel on George's Bank and sank her with all hands. The story was that as she was returning from George's Bank on her next trip she was boarded in the night by the ghosts of the drowned men, who left her as Thatcher's Island light came in sight. The crew left the schooner as soon as she got home and the owners could never get anybody to go fishing in her. (98)

Patty Murphy, one of those mentioned out of Newfoundland, gives a different explanation for why the ghosts left. He says:

Oh, we cruised around those foggy banks  
For the space of that long night,  
And rather than I'd say so  
Till the day has shown its light.

If it is the coming of dawn that ends it rather than the view of a lighthouse, then this haunting could have lasted quite longer, depending on when one places the “grand dogwatch” or “dogwatch” and how long it might have taken the sailors in the other versions to see the lighthouse’s light. It shouldn’t take long for a ship sailing from George’s Bank to sail to a lighthouse location. One could just assume they weren’t necessarily plotting a course, therefore time doesn’t matter, and it is a song about a ghost story and logic doesn’t have to apply. It should be important, though, that we consider besides the variables of light and darkness that one older version in Newfoundland emphasizes night and day.

There is another difference of some significance to those who wish to understand the feeling of the narrator in the song. What one is feeling or what leads up to the ghostly encounter can be seen as either a kin to something or have a direct encounter to it. Just before the ghosts show themselves on deck Marcy says the following: “I felt a chilly dread come over me as though I heard one calling from the dead.” Lovewell’s version says “I felt a chilly dread come over me as someone was calling from the dead.”

This slight difference should be seen this way. “As though someone was calling from the dead” implies that this feeling is coming over the singer, in anticipation of something. It is stated as simply a feeling and not an actual voice. When the singer says,

“As someone was calling from the dead” the implication is that the narrator hears an actual voice. The dread hits him on the “grand dog watch” because of the sound of the voice. As the song states in the next stanza the ghosts may come “silently one by one” as Lovewell says, but first someone was calling from the dead. A voices resonating out of the darkness, but no words are mentioned to go with it. It is a slight alteration, but it also leaves to the imagination of the listener what the voices was saying if the ghosts themselves were silent once aboard ship.

The final stanza of the song is fairly uniform throughout each of the versions. It is where the narrator explains the effect that event had on him and that his life as a whole has been changed. There are a couple differences worthy of note, for it is here that the different singers’ attitudes to the event is given. Marcy, being the oldest, should be the first considered:.

Those were the same poor fellows,  
I hope god blest their souls  
That our old craft run under  
That night on Georges Shaols.  
Well, now my song is ended,  
It is just as I have said  
I do believe in spirits,  
From that I’ll not be led.

Here Marcy, of Massachusetts, declares the narrator’s belief in spirits and cannot be dissuaded from that belief. He knows what he knows from first-hand experience. Those

who've listened can "smile if (they've) a mind to", but the account will not change. The way that his version of the ballad ends is different in the sense of belief in spirits. His words say that he believed in spirits, but doesn't indicate that he hadn't up to that point.

Lovewell, our other Massachusetts source, has a slightly different way it ends with a different meaning. Unlike Marcy, and every other singer, he doesn't acknowledge the Charles Haskell's culpability in sinking the Johnston (Jackson). There the narrator's reaction is one of shock and not understanding why these ghosts would plague this particular ship;

Those were the poor fellows,  
Oh god bless their souls,  
That I once went fishing with  
Upon George's Shaols,  
Well, now you've heard my story,  
And it happened as I said  
I do believe in spirits,  
And it's from them I feel unled.

Along with the shock of the encounter he feels that it has driven him astray from something. This is a case where he acknowledges no fault to the Haskell, just a recognition of the people whose ghosts boarded the ship. There is no indication about what his feelings were about ghosts before this event occurred.

The majority of the versions emphasize how it was this event that caused their belief in spirits.

I do believe in spirits

Since that time aney way (Fowke) Nova Scotia

And I never believed in spirits

But forever will again (Murphy) Newfoundland

I have believed in spirits

From that day until this. (Bok) Maine

For I believe in spirits,

Since that time anywhere (Beck) Maine

I do believe in spirits

From that time and today (Ives) Prince Edward Island

I do believe in spirits

Until this very day (Creighton) Nova Scotia

I do believe in spirits,

From that I'm to be led (Laws) USA

I have believed in spirits

From that day until this (Greenleaf) Newfoundland

I do believe in spirits

Until this very day (Mills) Canada

I never believed in spirits

But I always will again (Houlihan) Newfoundland

From this list only Laws continues the idea of Marcy, which surprises us since the two versions are almost identical (with the exception of the last two lines). Laws version “From that I’m to be led” leaves one somewhat confused, unless one takes the language of maritime culture into account. Basically the meaning is the same when considering this. These words aren’t to be taken literally, that the narrator is expected to be led away from his story at some point in the future. The meaning would be that this is his story unless someone could, very unlikely, convince him of some better explanation.

But then how did this notion come about that it was this event that caused them to believe in spirits? Murphy’s version, as well is Houlihan’s, directly says that he never believed in spirits until this event. While Marcy and Laws accounts imply that his belief in spirits likely existed before this event took place, contrary to the comment that “I’m not much easier frightened than most other men.”

## CONCLUSION

In looking for symbolism with any song one would look for it in sections as a whole, or possibly within the fragments themselves. In the different versions of this song the symbolism tends to lay within segments that add up to a whole, but without which the symbolism is non-existent. Arguing the point on symbols within fragments we have the following by Thomas A. McKean:

...in recent years, some scholars have argued that “fragments” don’t exist as such and each verse couplet, line, or even phrase should be considered as a signifying unit in light of its own cultural evocations of meaning, implication, and connotation. The song-melody, performance, and text, of whatever length-combine to involve the listener’s intellectual and emotional armory in the act of conscious or unconscious understanding.  
*(The Flowering Thorn 10)*

Therefore the line “You may smile if you mind to” holds its own implications, regardless of what may follow. “But wait, I’m not done” makes a clear point that from here on is the most important part. Later I will discuss these two lines where addressing potential scoffers.

Beginning: You may smile if you mind to

Middle address: But wait, I’m not done

From the earliest version from Marcy to the latest from Bok and Lovewell, it is clearly important to the singers to maintain the audience's attention throughout the song, so that none leave (or stop paying attention) before hearing the whole story. "You may smile if you mind to, but perhaps you'll lend an ear", is an invitation to listen to an unusual story. The song is a ghost story that the speaker or singer wants to convey to anyone who would hear it. Until one gets into the song it would be impossible to know if the singer was intending to be serious or humorous with such an introduction.

It is almost at the halfway point that it is made clear that this is a ghost story. With the exception of Greenleaf, everything after this point emphasizes what would be the scariest part. In most versions the next stanza is where we get the short description of the ghostly fishermen (crew) that comes aboard, after explaining the ghosts' first actions.

Their faces pale and sea-wet, shone ghostly through the night (Bok)

Their faces pale and sea-worn, ghostly through the night (Lovewell)

Their face shone pale with seaweed, shone ghostly through the night  
(Greenleaf)

Their face being pale with seaweed shone ghastly through the night  
(Murphy)

Their faces pale and sea-worn, all ghostly through the night (Marcy,  
Laws)

Their faces pale and sea-worn, shone through the ghostly night (Mills)

Their faces pale and sea-wet, shone ghostly through the night (Beck,  
Fowke, Ives)



Their faces were pale and sea wan, shone through the ghostly night

(Creighton)

After calling upon the audience not to leave, the narrator jumps right into what was seen on the decks. Once the ghosts were there the crew were obviously stunned to see it. We don't hear if any of the crew of the ship attempted to take control of the ship away from the ghosts, or if they just stood and watched until the dawn or a lighthouse drove them back into the sea.

Ghostly and ghastly, though similar sounding, have quite different definitions. Something being ghostly suggests transparent nonsubstantive beings; something ghastly is either truly frightening or extremely unwell (we'll assume that the unwell definition isn't the intended use here). Beginning on the grand-dog watch the figures appeared, most versions of the song saying they were "shining" emphasizing that this is happening at night. The ghosts were clearly there and couldn't possibly be mistaken for anything else. These are things shining on the deck that shouldn't be there, terrible to look upon.

Maritime culture in North America has many common elements, whether it be in the Maritime Provinces of Canada or the northern states of New England that are drawn from common British origins. The close proximity added an extra element that helped to maintain these common elements despite the differences made by other points of regional variation. The dominance of the English language helped to maintain that connection.

The manner in which the Maritime Provinces became part of the British Empire has a good deal to do with the outlook that the Canadian provinces had that differed from the older colonies to the south. Being the prizes of war between the British and the

French (with perhaps the exception of some regions of Newfoundland) the cultural differences are clearly present, and the much later colonists from the Old World maintained many stronger ties to the Mother Country.

The “Ghostly Crew” is an example of how history can be portrayed when the sailors choose to tell a story through their songs. Simple things like numbers of sailors can be altered from the historical account to fit the needs of the musician, thus 12 instead of 26 for the number of sailors, or the choice between forty or fifty to designate the amount of time the narrator had spent at sea. There is then the time of year whether it be March of the historical account or September as chosen by one of the singers. There is also a point of time like the grand-dogwatch for the event (despite the historical account never mentioning the time) and then the time of dawn for when the ghosts departed compared with the shining light of a lighthouse. One version of the song specifically names a lighthouse that this happens at to suit the singer’s purpose, but then one historical record mentions another one.

The five audio version researched give different impressions to those who hear it. They demonstrate the different atmosphere and sometimes meaning that it brought to a song simply by a change of melody or tone of the singer. The story put to song changes again simply by the tone of melody that is put to it. The haunting is a solemn event, something in reminiscion of days gone by, or a strange entertaining story for an audience to consider if they perhaps should “lend an ear”. The choices made with these melodies aren’t a reflection on the places they were found, but a choice given a singer’s needs. It considers the questions: “Who is your audience, and what do they want?”

While some of these songs are derived from the homeland where they crossed the ocean to reach the New World many common songs arose on the North American continent, giving them features unique to this side of the world. Some researchers found that when songs with supernatural elements originated in Britain and crossed the Atlantic the spectral elements were often eliminated. As seen with this example music originating in America can break that trend. Though a matter of common sense to people today, those who've studied these things in the past have tended to think differently on the matter.

Songs like "The Ghostly Crew" originated in North America where the two lands of Canada and America converge. The close proximity of the regions the song is found in as well as the location of where the event sung about took place make for good breeding grounds for its preservation and expansion. It would appear that on regional grounds a few distinctions can be found, as with the use of forty years with the Maine sources as opposed to fifty by the others. Other distinct differences like the direction the ship sailed by the ghostly crew or whether there was an actual sound of "one calling from the dead" seem to be choices of individual singers rather than any particular pattern. The explanations of Mark Alan Lovewell make that apparent.

Crossing from history to music, as symbolic necessity finds its way in, the changes are many, if not always noticeable to everyone. As stated, to the everyday listener what they hear first is the real version while everything else is a variation. In this way we can then say that regional variation exists in the minds of those encountering their first singer of the song.

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