



## **Acadia – Of History, Heritage, Harbours & Herring**

**by Marc Mathieu**

The Acadian people, it has been said, constitute the first truly French-Canadian nation. During the early 1600s, settlers from different parts of France joined Samuel de Champlain's journey across the Atlantic to establish the first European colony in North America in a region named **Arcadia** by an Italian explorer during his passage 80 years earlier. **Acadia** (without the 'r'), or **l'Acadie** as the French named it, came to designate the present day regions of Canada's Maritime provinces.

Shortly after arriving, and despite ongoing French-English rivalries for dominance, the immigrant population began to prosper and multiply, eventually settling throughout the Atlantic regions. While most inland dwellers were farmers, the coastal inhabitants thrived as off-shore fishermen of the abundant stocks teeming the surrounding waters. Due to geography and economics, Acadians for years lived in isolated groups, having little if any contact with the outside world. They consequently were able to develop a unique way of life which found expression in their own language, customs, beliefs and music.

The adage saying that “Acadians are born with songs in their veins and music in their fingertips” is well proven by the instrumental and vocal heirlooms left by previous generations. Acadians loved music and enjoyed singing, a great asset to carry forward the songs, stories and legends passed on by their ancestors. It was also a means of expressing the events and range of emotions felt and experienced during the good times of prosperity as well as the hardships, including their deportation in 1755 by the British.

Amazingly, after being exiled and dispersed following the takeover of their homeland, the Acadians managed to retain much of their identity. Acadian heritage is still very clearly alive in their descendants today, even though many were integrated into other cultures and societies in such far away places as Louisiana. The ardent deportees who were so eager to begin a new life, and who eventually found their way back to their former homeland, as well as the Cajuns in Louisiana, are classic examples of how this idiosyncratic and resilient culture managed to flourish for more than four centuries.

### ***About the song...***

Many Acadian songs, as is typical in many other cultures, allude to daily activities and chores, love, death and past experiences. “**Partons, la mer est belle,**” which literally translates to “**Let's leave, the sea is calm,**” is no

exception, as it embodies the reality of a common Acadian livelihood, namely off-shore fishing, certainly not an easy occupation, and one that often ended in tragedy.

Little, if any, accurate documentation is readily available on the actual origins of this waltz-like song that tells of a young man heading out to fish at night, leaving behind his lonely mother widowed by the death of his father at sea some time earlier.

A variation of “Partons” appeared in a 1910 publication in western France – thus far, the earliest printed copy. Keeping this in mind, one could reasonably assume that this song had more than likely emerged some time earlier in that same country. Seemingly, this musical style was *'en vogue'* during the end of the 1800s indicating that it was likely composed during that period around the coastal regions of western France, where off-shore fishing was common. Since its author is unknown, it was possibly written by a fisherman mourning the tragic death of a relative or close friend. Afterwards, it may have commonly been sung by fishermen as a tribute to the victim as they headed out to sea to set their nets.

Two Canadian songbooks – a 1920 printing located on Cape Breton Island and another dated 1921, discovered in Québec City – contain more recent variations of “Partons”, indicating that it was quite likely published after undergoing some lyrical alterations once it was transplanted to Acadia from France.

This endearing ballad was popularized in other French-speaking regions of Canada during the 1940's after Acadian folklorist Father Anselme Chiasson published it in his anthology of early and some mostly forgotten Acadian folk songs. Known and sung in many French-speaking countries worldwide as early as in the preschool years, “Partons” has been performed and recorded by francophone singers of all musical genres in Canada and Europe.

Writing English lyrics for “Partons” was a project I undertook during early 2005 after writing tablature for its future teaching during a Mountain Dulcimer Week workshop in Cullowhee, NC. Despite translating challenges encountered, I still managed to preserve the story line while keeping the verses in rhyme. I also matched my lyrics to the music to make them singable.

Personally, I'm very comfortable singing it in either French or English.

So why were these men heading out to fish at night? And what kind of boat equipped with sails could also be rowed by a small group of men? Curious minds wanted to know, therefore research continued...

Back then, the **dory**, which matches that description very well, was the vessel of choice. Affordable, easy to handle and able to carry a decent payload, it could sail quite speedily in a favorable wind. The dory pictured above on the left is most likely the type this young man and his crew guided away from the shore on that moonlit night. But what were they fishing for?

Turns out, as I learned from an Acadian gentleman, **herring** fishing is done at night. As darkness falls, herring leave deep waters to seek the shores; when attracted by light, they come up near the surface. A full moon was certainly to their advantage! As day begins to break, the herring return to deeper waters – hence the reason for their return to port.

Voilà! Now we can paint this portrait in our minds: a peaceful harbour – such as the one pictured at the top of the page – where just moments earlier, the weary mother awaited patiently on that dock to the right for her son's safe return, as he and his mates rowed their dory into the calm harbour. As the sun begins its ascent, each man is now safe inside his own little house, resting “after a long hard night, before the sun shines bright.”