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## ACROSS THE ISLAND

### Brooklyn Trio Recall History

By NEIL A. MATHESON

I TALKED last week with the Brooklyn Trio, one of the Island's best known musical groups.

Willard Bruce and Johnny Bears, Brooklyn and Malcolm (Mack) Munro, Whim Road have been singing together for perhaps 37 years now, and they must have performed on at least 7,000 occasions, one estimate suggests.

Prior to their debut as a trio there had been two duets, Willard and Johnny sang in one, Mack and Lloyd Nicholson, a neighbor, formed the other. That was back in 1927.

For a year or so the four men sang as a quartette.

The trio began to sing after Mr. Nicholson went to the United States.

Mr. Bears thinks they started in 1930 and their first start was at a young people's meeting, Christian Endeavour, at Kilmuir Hall. The hymn was "Jesus Savior Pilot Me".

The others are not so sure and lean more to 1931 as their first effort. Willard recalls singing "Let Him In" at a young people's rally in St. Peter's. It was one of the group's favorite hymns for some time.

### Cats 'Climb Up The Walls'

I ASKED the trio if they can read music and that provoked one of the many humorous stories of the night. They do read music and Johnny and Willard learned from Lauchie MacKinnon, Brooklyn who ran a singing school in 1927 and 1928. He was a brother of Mack MacKinnon who was well known in Charlottetown music circles until his death some years ago.

Johnny recalled Lauchie would take us out to the cow stable where he had the musical scale – the notes- on a chart on the wall. He would take each boy out separately to sing the "Do, Re, Mi" etc. and have him go up and down the scale. "We were shy, you know" Johnny observed.

This prompted Willard to tell me that Lauchie's father wrote a song about the singing school development, especially about the cow stable part. "He put the song to music and sang it once for us", Mr. Bruce recalled.

"I don't remember the words but I recall two lines of one of the verses":

"The cows were jumping in their stalls,  
The cats were climbing up the walls."

To hear Willard tell the story in his deep bass voice, and his broad Scottish accent was a real riot. All of us, including several visitors, burst into loud laughter.

Johnnie recalled one singing pupil – I'll leave him unnamed – who couldn't go up the scale. "You couldn't get him from one note to the other if you tried for a week", the likeable Brooklyn man recalled. "He'd start at the 'Do' and he'd have the same note when he finished."

### Sang 'All Over The Place'

WILLARD AND Mack noted that once they had got started, they sang at churches and concerts all over the place.

They sang at the Burns Concert in Montague every year but two since 1931. Illness in one of the families wiped out the two concert appearances referred to.

Burns Concert was the big entertainment event of the year when I was a boy. The trio agreed that it was in their time as well.

They practiced a great deal at first, but in recent years practices are almost non-existent, I gathered. Their large repertoire of sacred and secular songs can fit into almost any occasion.

The trio sang at an "Amateur Night" program at CFCY back in 1936. They won the first award, but never did receive the award itself.

About 1949 the Trio sang in the Music Festival and received high marks, and unusually warm comment from adjudicator, David Oucheterlony, Toronto. I recall this man as an unusually severe adjudicator when he came here first.

### Praise Was Warm

THE TORONTO man told the Trio their singing compared favorably with anything he had heard in Toronto. "He gave us a great lift", Willard observed and Mack and Johnny agreed.

The trio has performed from Souris to Summerside. A few days ago they had a request from Alberton but turned it down owing to the distance, they told me.

They have sung for the most part in churches, "pretty well all over Kings and Queens County".

For many years they travelled by horse and sleigh – winter roads were not plowed until the mid or late 1930s(?).

This brought to mind the time they were coming from Montague one night they had been singing there. Just after they had gotten into the sleigh a snowstorm started.

### Thrown Into Snow

COMING UP McGowan's hill in Kilmuir, they were snuggled down under the horse rugs – there were no parkas in those days – there was a big side-hill drift and Willard and Johnnie were thrown out into a snow bank as the sleigh overturned – Mack lives in a different direction.

Johnnie had the reins and his horse pulled him up the hill as he slid on the snow, he told me.

Once they drove 15 miles to Cardigan for a concert and came home in a driving rainstorm. The horse was punching through the road all the way, they remembered.

Once Johnny and Willard were singing "Will Ye Gang Awa, Jamie?" in a Burns Concert in Montague. It was a comedy number and Willard was dressed as the girl.

"He made a darn fine looking girl too", Johnny added. "My partial plate fell out on the floor and I was terrified for fear Willard would step on it. So I kept pushing against him all the time to keep him away from the plate," Johnnie told me.

Losing a denture can be embarrassing, but after their number was over, Johnnie found that the audience thought it was all part of their act.

Willard, the man with the deep bass voice, and the broad Scotch accent, had been singing falsetto. He had a wig of binder twine, Johnnie told me. "He was a blonde that night."

Once Bears stepped too close to the edge of a platform, his foot went over and he plunged to the floor, but just managed to keep from falling flat on his face. Again the audience thought it was part of the act, though nothing could be farther from the truth.

Johnny sings high tenor, Mack sings second tenor and Willard bass, but they are a versatile group, each can and does take solo parts, and the melody at times. Johnny is the soloist of the group and frequently appears in this capacity.

The Brooklyn Trio sings without accompaniment and they blend their voices most effectively. They started to sing without accompaniment when they had difficulty getting organists at various places, and they often could not bring their own.

### Tea Was Too Hot

THE TRIO had many interesting experiences, some of them humorous. Once they drove a long way with horse and sleigh on a really cold night. They were half-frozen when they arrived. The hosts had made hot tea to warm them up.

Each man grabbed for a cup and each took a big mouthful. But the tea was so hot it burned their mouths seriously. "Our mouths were white for a week", they told me. It was no fun harmonizing that night.

"One of the most enjoyable trips we've had came when we sang at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Dominion church", they told me.

Walter Shaw – he was Premier at the time – invited us and afterwards we had lunch at the Shaws' beautiful 'Strathnairn' home. It was really enjoyable, they told me.

Before I leave this talented and friendly group I want to thank them for dedicating a number to the memory of my Margaret. I was not in the room at the time and did not know about it until Marion told me about it on the way home.

### 'The Christian's Good-night'

IT'S THE very beautiful "The Christian's Good-night" and I felt somehow as I listened to the tape that this talented Trio had put an extra bit of feeling into their rendition. Many, many thanks Willard, Mack and Johnny, it will always remain one of my most treasured keepsakes in memory of the beautiful lady who brought so much happiness into my life for so many wonderful years.

My thanks also to Martin MacPherson, who recorded the number and gave me the tape, also to Mrs. Bruce for her warm hospitality. I had supper there and later enjoyed a tasty lunch with the rest of the group.