

## STOMPIN' TOM IN HEARST by Ernie Bies June 8, 2016

Tom's been everywhere man, but did you know he was in Hearst before he was Stompin' Tom?

The first volume of his memoirs, entitled "Stompin' Tom, Before the Fame", covers the first thirty-one years of his life from Skinner's Pond to his first big break on the Hank Snow Show.

He was a travelling troubadour having spent 15 years criss-crossing Canada, singing for beer and sandwiches and writing Canada's small town history through his songs. While Hearst did not get a song he did include Northern Ontario towns in his classic song "I've Been Everywhere"

"...Ansonville, Kirkland Lake, Cochrane, Kapuskasing, Hearst, Geraldton, Beardmore and the Lake Head"

The winter of 1953 found the seventeen year old Charles Thomas Connors hitch-hiking through Northern Ontario. Travelling with his buddy Steve Foote, he played his guitar and entertained at



*At seventeen, near Hearst, Ontario.*

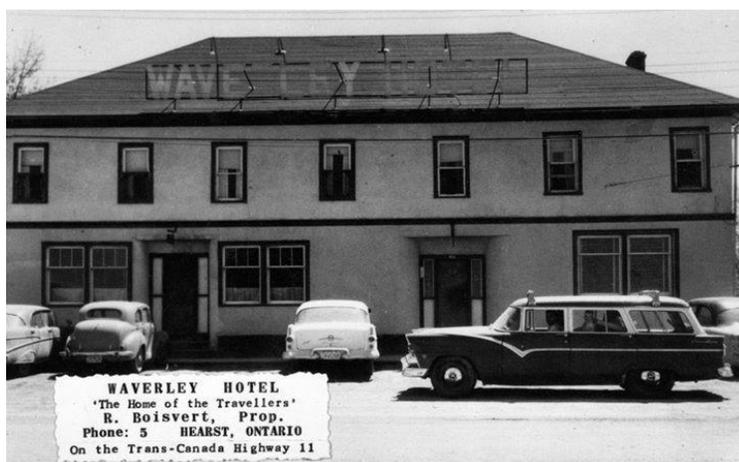
parties and bush camps scrounging for meals and a place to sleep. Long before he became famous as Stompin' Tom, and before his buddy Steve had some minor success as Stevedore Steve, they found themselves in Hearst on more than one occasion. Their destination in 1953 was Alberta but they found themselves stranded in Sault Ste Marie Ontario. Unable to proceed west due to road construction, they decided to hop the Algoma Central train to Hearst and try their luck on Highway 11. With the help of a friendly yardman they were soon on their way north to Hearst. When the train slowed down they jumped off thinking they were at the end of the line, only to find themselves in the middle of the bush. They were still one hundred miles from town when they came across a railroad gang and were told it was three days till the next train. Their hopes of getting some work and food were dashed when the

foreman said he didn't want them around and ingloriously chased them down the tracks with a shovel. They walked for four and a half days, missing one train that was going too fast. Their only company on the walk was a bear, a couple of moose and some small animals. All they had to eat was a package of Freshie that Steve had pocketed along the way. When they finally got to Hearst they tried unsuccessfully to gain work for a meal, but the town cop put the rush on them saying there were enough bums in town and that they should leave. There were only three or four houses along the western highway and after the Cowie Cabins at Valentine Creek there was nothing for 100 miles. They knocked on a few doors and lucked into a meal and a chance to rest and clean up. Then they hitchhiked to a logging camp about fifty miles west where Tom sang a few songs for food before getting a ride to Longlac. They had been on the road for almost a year and were still a long way from Alberta but eventually did make it. The book is filled with colourful stories of his Western experiences.

A couple of years later Tom and Steve found their way back to Hearst courtesy of a couple of bush workers who took them straight to a hotel (probably the Waverly Hotel or the Windsor Tavern) where he sang a few songs over several draught beers. Their benefactors went next door and booked a couple of cheap rooms above a Chinese Restaurant for the four of them to share. A lady cashier took their money and they signed their names and went back to the hotel for more beer. Their plans went askew when the bush workers boss suddenly appeared and ordered them back to camp immediately, leaving Tom and Steve with a couple of bucks on the table but no keys for the rooms next door and no proof of the earlier arrangement. They decided to bluff it out and went next door to eat with the money they had scooped off the table. After a couple of hot hamburgers Steve went to ask for the room key only to find that the cashier was



*At nineteen.*



now an old Chinese man who did not know about the prior arrangements and refused to give him a key. Steve lost his cool and grabbed the fellow by the shirt but he broke away and ran for the kitchen. The restaurant was arranged with a row of booths against each wall and a double row of booths in the centre, with big swinging kitchen doors at the back. Steve and the cashier did a couple of Keystone cops loops of the restaurant around the booths and through the kitchen with Tom sitting in a booth and

laughing hysterically along with a few other patrons. Then the old fellow grabbed a meat cleaver and turned the tables. Now Steve was leading the race trying to avoid the cleaver. After a couple more laps Tom pulled Steve into his booth and blocked the angry Chinese man who still wanted a piece of Steve. Tom convinced the man to go and call the police and then hustled Steve out and down an alley where they took refuge in someone's wood shed a few blocks away.

The story in the book is a lot more colourful with some language that may not be considered politically correct today but it is vintage Stompin' Tom. The restaurant could have been the Windsor Cafe which was adjacent to the Windsor Tavern, or the Hearst Grill, across the street from the Waverley, which was later bought by Eddie Denomme and converted into the Northway Restaurant and Smoke Shop.



Tom and Steve were back on the road heading west again before daybreak rather than chance meeting the cop who had run them out of town a couple of years earlier. A month later they were back in Calgary continuing their Western adventures but his greatest successes were in Ontario over the next twenty years. His first break came in 1964 at the Maple Leaf Tavern in Timmins when he found himself a nickel short of a beer and agreed to sing a few songs to pay for it. These few songs turned into a 14 month contract at the hotel, a regular radio spot on CKGB in Timmins, record deals and regular engagements at the famous Horseshoe Tavern on Queen Street in Toronto. His penchant for keeping time by stomping his foot gave him his new nickname and he had to bring a small plywood board to stand on to avoid wear and tear on the stage. He made many appearances in Northern Ontario towns like Hearst, Kapuskasing and Ansonville throughout the 1960s, often writing songs between shows in his hotel room.



*Steve pickin' while I provide some casual rhythm. Late 1950s.*

High Grader readers will remember Julie Latimer's story from the Spring, 2013 issue entitled "Kap, Reesor Siding and Stompin' Tom". He was playing in Hearst and at the Radio Hotel in Kapuskasing when he researched and wrote this song about the Reesor Siding Tragedy. The locals in Kap threatened him with bodily harm if he sang the song but he persisted. Once they realized that the song was not blaming anyone but it was simply an account of the tragedy they became enthusiastic fans and packed the house for every night of his three week engagement.

Acknowledgements: Story and photos courtesy of Stompin' Tom Before the Fame, by Stompin' Tom Connors, 1995, 525 pages.

Hotel photos courtesy Alan Jansson "Old Hearst"

