



BEAR THE TINKER

Loss of a Timeless Treasure

By Lorraine Payette

First the sound of a horse's hooves clapping rhythmically on the road, the creak of caravan wheels, and a lusty voice singing:

"I wish I lived in a caravan,

With a horse to drive, like the pedlar man!..."

Then from the mist, a sight so welcome yet unexpected – a gypsy caravan pulled by a docile and compliant beast. Seated at the reins, a giant of a man who has stepped straight out of the mid-eighteenth century, a full blown tinker of dreams and crafter of words who will stop to sing and play, joke and share a tale with all wherever he might be found.

Maurice Joseph Leger was born in Scoudouk, NB, on December 20, 1954. A

child of the solstice, there was something mystical about him from the very beginning. A soul displaced in time, he spent much of his childhood alone in the woods. When he did associate with people, someone would always say, "The bear has come out of the woods." The name stuck, and he became known to all as Bear.

"Bear knew as a child that he was set apart from others," said his wife, Annie Haggerty of Lansdowne.

Bear lived a quiet life as a member of modern society, fitting in as best he could, until he came across an article in National Geographic from 1972 about gypsies and Appleby Fair. He knew he had found his niche, and started building his first gypsy caravan.

It wasn't long before he became a fixture on the roads in New Brunswick. Casting off the twentieth century, he immersed himself in the time and life for which he had truly been born. He was now in every sense a 1740s travelling tinker, merrily wending his way from town to town plying his trade and singing happy songs to Callum, his horse and favourite traveling companion. People would stop him along the road, sitting with him or inviting him into their homes to play one of his many musical instruments, sing a song or tell a tale.

One fine day, a fair damsel came into Bear's life. Enchanted by her grace, beauty and intelligence, he asked her to join him on his life's journey and she accepted.

"Bear and I met by chance in St. Andrews,"



Left pg: Playing the uilleann pipes in Delta. Unlike traditional bagpipes, a bellows pumped by the elbow fills the bag with air and allows the pipes to be played.
Clockwise: Bear enjoying the music of a young violinist at the Thousand Islands National Park; A trip by buck carriage along the open road; Playing the bodhran at a gathering at Dreams In Motion in Gananoque

said Haggerty. "I was driving to the east coast with my parents on vacation. Mother spied a caravan down a driveway just ahead of the oceanside campground. Bear was spied along the shore grazing Callum, a lad on his back, clearly the gentleman of the caravan. So the adventure began.

"I did travel with him for a week, to be sure a treasured time. He came to stay nine years ago..."

A single horsepower caravan travels at 5-mph, fast enough to get the tinker and his lady where they need to go, but so slow as to suspend time. Wherever they went, enchantment went with them, and people kept coming to touch and to taste that time gone by.

What had worked so very well in New Brunswick didn't seem to have the same appeal in Ontario however. People were more self-centered, closed away from that which is not part of their everyday lives. Bear struggled and, when he had to enter the hospital for open heart surgery, he had to give up Callum and the open road.

"It must have been excruciating selling

Callum, who was very much a part of his life and had been for ten long years," said Haggerty. "He had trained him from an 18-month-old colt. Callum was very much a companion animal – they had been through so much together living that lifestyle."

Although Bear tried other things after giving up Callum, nothing truly worked for him. He had lost his heart, and succumbed to cancer in St. Mary's of the Lake Hospital in Kingston on September 1, 2013 at the age of 59.

"Bear was the epitome of a Renaissance Man who, by choice, traveled from fair to fair with his horse and caravan," said master storyteller, Deborah Dunleavy of Brockville. "A few years back he delighted the members of the 1000 Islands Yarnspinners one evening with some of his tall tales and delightful music. He will be missed."

Traces of Bear can still be found. If you check the internet, you will see a video here, a quote there, some pictures. A self-taught musician, he played a multitude of instruments – flute, bodhran, guitar, bagpipes, violin and accordion – and sang beautifully. He produced a CD of songs

which he sold from the caravan.

"As 'the bard' his storytelling was a natural gift and his knowledge of early histories and folklore extensive," said Haggerty. "His voice was rich, powerful, and beautiful. He held a small library of early Celtic songs and music in his personal repertoire. When he performed, he interspersed stories with song, engaging listeners, young and old, with his amazing presence."

His mission in life was to live a simple and upright life, then sit by the fire at day's end and spin the tales that keep the magic alive.

"Bear was a philosopher of sorts, who was deeply curious on many things. He quietly conveyed a message, stood to his beliefs and convictions and was 'not pleased' at the price of progress," said Haggerty.

So as the day closes, stand for a moment in the stillness, watch and listen. When the sun drops below the horizon and the moon begins her rise, see if you can still hear a horse drawing an eighteenth-century caravan and the tinker singing his merry song. **LH**