

The Black Fly Song

1. 'Twas early in the spring when I decide to go
For to work up in the woods in North On-tar-i-o
The unemployment office said they'd send me through
To the Little Abi-tibi with the survey crew

Chorus:

And the black flies, the little black flies
Always the black fly, no matter where you go
I'll die with the black fly a-picking my bones
In North On-tar-i-o-i-o, in North On-tar-i-o

2. Now the man, Black Tobey was the captain of the crew
And he said, "I'm gonna tell you boys what we're gonna do
They want to build a power dam and we must find a way
For to make the Little Ab flow around the other way"

Chorus

3. So we survey to the east and we survey to the west
And we couldn't make our minds up how to do it best
Little Ab, Little Ab, what shall I do
For i'm all but goin' crazy on the survey crew

Chorus

4. It was black fly, black fly everywhere
A-crawlin' in your whiskers, a-crawlin' in your hair
A-swimmin' in the soup, and a'swimmin in the tea
Oh the devil take the black fly and let me be
Chorus
5. Black Tobey fell to swearin' 'cause the work went slow
And the state of our morale was gettin' pretty low
And the flies swarmed heavy, it was hard to catch a breath
As you staggered up and down the trail talkin' to yourself
Chorus
6. Now the bull cook's name was Blind River Joe
If it hadn't been for him we'd have never pulled through
For he bound up our bruises, and he kidded us for fun
And he lathered us with bacon grease and balsam gum
Chorus
7. At last the job was over, Black Tobey said, we're through
With the Little Abitibi and the survey crew
'twas a wonderful experience and this I know
I'll never go again to North Ontar-i-o
Chorus

This is one of Canada's most iconic folk songs. "The Black Fly Song" was originally believed to have been written by Wade Hemsworth in 1949 while he was visiting Northern Ontario with an Ontario Hydro survey party to study the feasibility of a dam on the Little Abitibi River, which flows north towards James Bay. However, in a 1996 interview, Hemsworth explained that, though the song recounts that experience, he actually wrote it while on a survey expedition in Labrador.

It was recorded by Pete Seeger, Bill Staines and Brian Bowers.

I think it was Bill Staines who used to test the state of inebriation of the audience by getting them to sing along on the chorus. If all they could manage was "i-o-i-o", they were pretty drunk.

For some reason this song always brings to mind "Drill Ye Tarriers", also in this section. I think it's the similarities of the work crews and some phrases of the tune.