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# Manitoba Bluegrass Vinyl Heads East

By John Sawatzky (from October 2024 Dill Pickle Rag)



Mervin and Nettie Penner of Steinbach, MB have been avid bluegrass fans for over 70 years. Both having been born and raised in southern Manitoba, they did not have much opportunity to attend bluegrass festivals to see the “big stars.” So, in their married years they traveled extensively to the southern states and attended many festivals, including several trips to Bill Monroe’s Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival in Indiana.

Mervin began collecting LPs at the age of 17 and by his late 80s he had accumulated 648 vinyl albums. Many of these included complete discographies from several artists, with styles ranging from Flatt and Scruggs to The Lonesome River Band, and Bela Fleck. This extensive collection was impressively documented in Mervin’s own handwriting, comprising twenty-nine pages.

At their current stage of life, Mervin and Nettie had been looking to transition from their own house into a seniors’ complex, and this large collection could not be accommodated in their new living space. After much deliberation, Mervin had resolved that he may have to part with the collection he dearly loved and rightfully proudly and highly valued.

Given the efforts he had put into building the compilation, Mervin was looking for someone to take it all. So he contacted Tim Verwey to see if MOBS could assist. Tim posted the information on the MOBS Facebook page and although there were several inquiries, no one was willing to take on the whole collection. Almost!

Jeff McRae from Nova Scotia has been a MOBS member for several years and played banjo with



CSI whenever he was in Manitoba. After seeing the Facebook post, he expressed sincere interest in the collection as he too had been gathering bluegrass LPs for a few years. Bluegrass records in good condition are hard to find, and Jeff had many notable albums still on his wish list. Surely a treasure trove of this size would tick a few boxes?

I took Jeff to meet the Penners and discuss the collection. With tastes and influences ranging from first generation, traditional artists to modern, contemporary, and progressive sounds, Jeff appreciates all forms of bluegrass and quickly recognized a kindred spirit in Mervin. *“Like Mervin, my collection is all about listening value, not dollar value. While there are several rare, hard to-find LPs here, I really just want to listen to them! There’s nothing like the original cuts, and the mixes used on vinyl just aren’t the same as digital music.”*



After a good visit and discussion of what they both would like to have happen, Mervin graciously allowed Jeff to take this collection back with him to Nova Scotia.

When not cataloging his new collection, Jeff, as President of The Downeast Bluegrass & Old Time Music Society, is largely involved in organizing the Annual Nova Scotia Bluegrass & Oldtime Music Festival - Canada's oldest Bluegrass music festival. He also plays bass with Common Ground, a newly formed band in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia.

After some quick "LP math" (in the Canadian Tire parking lot) examining dimensions, average thickness, and weight, we were off to find the best containers to safely transport these gems. Carpet underlay was determined as the cushioning of choice to ensure the collection would remain in its remarkably good condition in flight. Next came the task of sorting and packing in my garage-turned-sorting-station. While familiar with the list, Jeff was like a kid in a candy store as he examined each album. While there were plenty of exclamations including "OH MY!" and "NO WAY!", one LP stood out.

Widely recognized for being a landmark album in Bluegrass music, the debut, self-titled, 1975 album, "J.D. Crowe and the New South" featuring a young Ricky Skaggs, Tony Rice and Bobby Slone - more often referred to by its registration number, Rounder 0044 - made Jeff's eyes jump out. This wasn't just any copy of "double-oh four four," but a rare version of the original album cover depicting Crowe's hand still in the form of a certain gesture he had made to Slone during the album photo shoot.

The story goes, after developing the film, the New South band and Rounder officials realized that photo was the only one where all 4 members were smiling, and with publication deadlines to meet, it was sent to print. Naturally, the gesture was quickly noticed by some eagle-eyed fans who took offense with the "scandalous" finger, and the cover was promptly replaced with an updated photo of the band, sans gestures. Jeff had previously purchased what he thought would be a copy of the "finger

album" online but was disappointed to receive the replacement version. "I'll have to be sure both get a spin," He joked. "It's just really cool to have these pieces of Bluegrass history."

Congratulations Jeff. Enjoy the listening!

Photos:

*The Penner's plate*

*Jeff with the two 0044s*

