

# GREATEST BALLAD-SINGER OF THEM ALL

"A BEARD gives character to a face," Burl Ives is reported to have said. "No one will challenge you if you look them in the eye over a beard. And women simply love them." Burl Ives, whom Carl Sandburg calls "the greatest folk-ballad singer of them all," is one of the most unusual bearded characters who ever stumbled on to the concert stages of America and the world with a Spanish guitar in his hand, a six-shooter in his belt and a cowboy hat on the back of his head. He has been singing the songs of the American people for most of his life, but times have changed since he tramped around the countryside with a banjo and the words, "Burl Ives, the Vagabond Lover," painted on it. Nowadays he is accepted as a concert artist of high quality, and one who has done much to preserve songs and ballads which might otherwise have disappeared.

Recently an organisation called Encyclopaedia Britannica Films Ltd. persuaded him to make a comprehensive set of recordings which would put down permanently the results of his lifetime's research into American folk-lore. These six folios, comprising 122 songs and ballads sung by Ives himself, with brief comments on the background of each of them, have become available to the NZBS, and will be broadcast in coming weeks from a link of the VC stations under the title *Historical America in Song*. There are 12 programmes in the series, with additional background material written by Cecil and Celia Manson, and the first broadcast will be heard at 9.30 p.m. on Monday, August 6.

Ives has made his selection from the best and most enduring tunes that still survive, from earliest colonial times to the present day. All the songs and ballads are authentic, and they include those most representative of each period. Some are sung in traditional style without accompaniment, and others to the music of piano or guitar. They include the first songs conceived in colonial America, and the first folk-tunes of American origin: the songs of

the Revolution and Civil War, songs of lumbermen, ballads of railroad builders, cattlemen, hoboes, and so on.

Yet whatever their national origins, the songs that Burl Ives sings are popular in every land where the English language is spoken. When he toured England in 1952 he had "a sensational success," and said afterwards that he found audiences in the British Isles more easily moved than those in America and more ready to participate in his songs. In 1952 he also toured Australia and New Zealand, and again his popularity was a tribute as much to the world-wide enjoyment of folk-music as to his own robust personality.

Like many of the songs he sings, the troubadour is a product of the American Mid-west, where he was born in Jasper County, Illinois, in 1909. He was named Burl Icle Ivanhoe Ives, and although he doesn't know why he was given his unusual first name, he once remarked that "Webster's Dictionary says it's a knot in a stick of wood. That suits me all right." He has an American ancestry dating back to the 17th Century, and is a descendant of farmers and an "occasional preacher" of English stock on his father's side, and of Kentucky Irish on his mother's. His parents were tenant farmers whose arduous existence never interfered with their singing, and with their six children they were known to their neighbours as "those singing Iveses."

Burl Ives gave his first public performance at an old soldiers' picnic. He was only four, and his song was the old ballad about that notorious bad girl "Barbara Allen." He learnt many of his songs from his grandmother, Kate White, who smoked a stone pipe, chewed tobacco, and looked, in his opinion, as though she had stepped from an Elizabethan print. "I don't remember when I started singing ballads," he says. "There wasn't any beginning. Ballad singing has been going on ever since people sang at all. It comes up like an underground stream and then goes back again. But it always exists."

As a boy Burl Ives wanted to be a preacher, but he "never did take to



BURL IVES

"A beard gives character to a face"

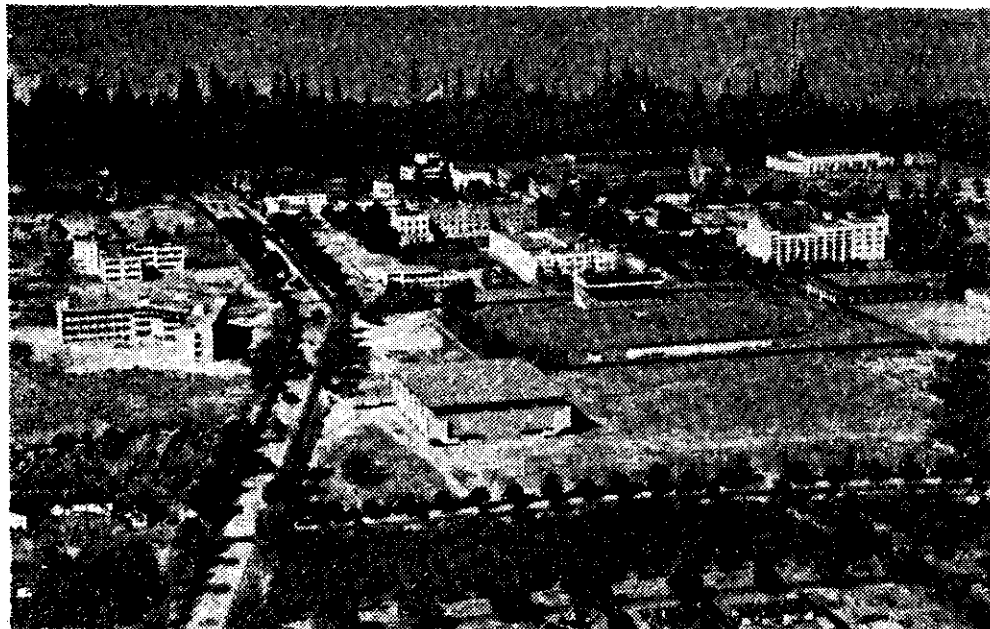
studies," and in 1929 he set off on his first cross-country trek with the banjo. He dates his serious start in collecting folk-music from his meeting in the 1930s with Mrs. Clara Bloomfield, who aroused his interest in the great music and literature of the past. "I believe she has been the most important single

influence in my life to date," he says. He made his debut on the stage in 1938, and has since appeared in a number of plays and films, his first film being *Smoky*. For a while he had his own radio show, *The Wayfarin' Stranger*, and after war service he appeared in *Sing Out, Sweet Land*, an historical pageant of American music which led one enthusiastic reviewer to say, "The theatre probably can offer nothing finer than Burl Ives singing 'Big Rock Candy Mountains,' or the 'Blue Tail Fly.'"

The six-foot, 20-stone balladeer never sings Negro spirituals because, he says, he has never heard a white person "give to a spiritual what it deserves." He considers hillbilly music synthetic—"It's written in New York by guys who never saw a hill."

The songs he sings in *Historical America in Song* include many that he recorded for the United States Library of Congress. He divides them into six main groups. First are "Songs of the Colonies," covering the period before the Revolution when there was little difference between songs sung in the colonies and those of the mother country. These include such ballads as "Barbara Allen," "Edward," "Foggy Foggy Dew," and "Turtle Dove." From the Revolutionary period he selects some of the first truly American folk songs such as the "Ballad of the Tea Party," "Yankee Doodle," "Yankee Man o' War," "Skip-to-my-Lou," and "On Springfield Mountain." From the Civil War period come songs like "Old Abe Lincoln," "John Brown," "Dixie" and "The Battle of Bull Run."

He then turns to salt-water ballads and chanteys such as "High Barbaree," "Haul Away Joe," "Shenandoah" and "Hullabaloo Baley." In "Songs of the Frontiers" he includes songs about ox-wagons, Indians, cattle drives, homesteaders, and other popular tunes sung by the western pioneers—"Chisholm Trail," "Brigham Young," "Ox-Driving Song" and "Sioux Indians." Finally in "Songs of Expanding America" he describes the life of a growing country in railroad songs, hobo ballads, cowboy songs, bad-men songs, and prison songs. These include "Streets of Laredo," "Jesse James," "Billy the Kid," "Patrick on the Railroad," "Cotton-Eye Joe," "Midnight Special" and "The Boll Weevil."



JUST received is this picture of the campus and buildings of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, where visiting athletes are being housed during the Empire Games. Details of the broadcast of the closing ceremony from Commercial stations will be found on page 18