

Johnny Come down the Hilo

1. Well I never seen the like since I bin born,
A [railroad navvy] with his sea boots on.
When Johnny come down the Hilo,
poor old man

I'll wake 'er, I'll shake 'er,
I'll shake that gal with the blue dress on!
When Johnny come down the Hilo,
poor old man

2. Who's been here since I been gone?
Pretty little gal with a josey on.
When Johnny come down the Hilo,
poor old man

I'll wake 'er, I'll shake 'er,
I'll shake that gal with the blue dress on!
When Johnny come down the Hilo,
poor old man

3. She's a Down East girl with a Down East
smile,
For a dollar a time and it's all worthwhile.

4. Well Down-East girls they dress so fine
They ain't got Jesus on their mind

5. Well I don't care where in the world I go,
I can't get away from the calico.

6. Well my wife died in Tennessee,
And they sent her jawbone back to me.

7. So I hung that jawbone on a fence
And I ain't heard nothin' but the jawbone since.

8. Hand me down my riding cane
I'm goin' to see my Sarah Jane.
When Johnny come down the Hilo,
poor old man

I'll wake 'er, I'll shake 'er,
I'll shake that gal with the blue dress on!
When Johnny come down the Hilo,
poor old man.

This version by **Ken Schatz & Richmond Tavernacle**
Choir at <https://youtu.be/Y3OaTC43BHs>

Kimber's Men sing different verses at
<https://youtu.be/v3Jl1EJWVLU>

Notes

A **capstan** shanty

Alternative names: Johnny come down the Hilo,
Johnny come down to Hilo, Johnny walk along to Hilo,
Johnny come down the backstay, Poor old man

About the words

Railroad navvy - also sung as big buck navvy, big black sailor, big buck nigger or railroad nigger.

Navy - or navigator, was first used for a worker who created the navigation canals in the 18th century, then used for those who built the railways. Find out more about them at the [Railway Museum](#).

Hilo - Hilo is on the island of Hawaii, but some suggest that this song is referring to the island of Ilo or the port of Ilo in Peru.

Josey - I've no idea but it also occurs in the [Refrain of the Red River Plantation](#).

Down-East man - a sailor who sails on Down-Easters. These are square-rigged merchant vessels with a large carrying capacity and a relatively sharp hull. They got their name from having been built in Maine, which is downwind and east of all the major East Coast ports; down-easters were being used largely for the California grain trade 1865-1890.

Calico - did the ports of Maine export calico?

Who's been here...? was originally answered with "Big buck nigger with his seaboots on"; compare [The Hogs-eye Man](#).



Portrait of a Black Sailor (Paul Cuffe?)
Painting by an unknown author, c 1880,
in the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#),
via [wikimedia](#)

Jim Mageean, 2021, *Heave Away*, booklet and CD wrote:

This shanty has taken words from other shanties such as "Poor Old Man" (also known as [Dead Horse Shanty](#)) and "The girl with the blue dress" and put them to an Irish tune.

Stan **Hugill**, 1994, *Shanties from the Seven Seas* :
The tune is Irish in origin and the wording is a mixture of Negro catch-phrases, of lines from Negro and nigger minstrel ditties, and odd bits from other shanties.