

Roll the Cotton Down

1. Way down south where I was born

Roll the cotton down

We'd pick that cotton on a summer's morn

Oh roll the cotton down.

Roll the cotton (roll the cotton Moses)

Roll the cotton (oh roll the cotton down).

2. Way down south before the war

Roll the cotton down

We'd have great times on the Mississippi
shore

Oh roll the cotton down.

Roll the cotton (roll the cotton Moses)

Roll the cotton (oh roll the cotton down).

3. When sun don't shine, then the hens

don't lay,

Roll the cotton down.

If the picker don't work, then the boss

don't pay,

Oh roll the cotton down. ...

4. Now Curly goes on the old ran-tan,

Oh Curly's just a Down-East man.

5. Roust 'em up from down below,

and haul away for your Uncle Joe.

6. Wake up you bitch and let us in,

Wake up you bitch we want some gin.

7. A big wind blows from the west-nor-west,

I know a little girl who's gonna get no rest.

8. One more heave and that'll do,

Roll the cotton down

For we're the bullies for to kick her through

Oh roll the cotton down

Roll the cotton (roll the cotton Moses)

Roll the cotton (oh roll the cotton down)

This version is on [Graeme Knights'](#) CD *Sorrows away*

If anyone finds a cheery, syncopated, online version that's more than 4 verses long as this please let me know.

Jim Mageean (Shanty Jim) sings:

3. When the work was over at the close of day
Then you'd hear them banjos play.

4. But now no more them banjos play
For the good old times have passed away.

The [Portsmouth Shantymen](#) sing:

1. Way down south where I was born
Way down south around Cape Horn

2. Way down south around Cape Horn
Wish to God you'd never been born

3. We're bound away to Mobile Bay
We're bound away at the break of day.

Image found at [wareham-whalers.org.uk](#), section
"What are shanties?"
original source unknown as yet.



Notes:

Said to be as **topgallant halyards** (Doerflinger), and **capstan and windlass** (Hugill),

Other names: Roll the cotton, Roll the cotton down,

Doerflinger, William Main, 1994, *Songs of the Sailor and Lumbermen*, writes:

"This shanty probably originated with the Negro longshoremen of some southern cotton port. As sung at sea, however, it was not a straight Negro shanty. In the renditions that I have heard, at least, its solos reflect the life of the white sailormen who migrated each winter to Mobile and New Orleans to stow cotton.

"They jammed the bales into place in tightly packed holds by means of big jack-screws. Heaving on the levers of the screws was back-breaking labor. Describing the cotton-stowers of Mobile Bay in the late 1840's, Charles **Nordhof** writes in *Nine years a Sailor* (1957):

"Cooped up in the dark and confined hold of the vessel, the gangs tug from morning until night at the screws, The perspiration running off them like water, every muscle strained to the utmost.

"But the men who follow the stevedoring prefer it to going to sea. They have better pay, better living, and above all are not liable to be called out at any minute in the night to fight the storm or, worse yet, to work ship against a head-wind.

"Their pay is two dollars per day, and their provisions furnished. They sleep upon the cotton bales in the hold.

... Those we had on board drank more liquor and chewed more tobacco than any set of men I ever saw elsewhere. ... Altogether I thought theirs a rough life, not at all to be envied."

In the spring, when the loading season ended, the men would ship in a cotton carrier to Liverpool or some other favourite port. Then they happily blew in this season's wages. All this is reflected in the shanty."

Notes on the words

Down-east man - a sailor on a Down-Easter ship. A **Down Easter** was a square-rigged merchant vessel combining large carrying capacity with a relatively sharp hull. They got their name from having been built in Maine, downwind and east of all the

major East Coast ports, and were being used largely for the California grain trade (1865-1890).

Roll the cotton down - screwing cotton down?

Wareham-whalers.org.uk, *What are shanties?* :

An important period was the growth of the cotton trade around the confluence of the Mississippi, the Ohio and Missouri rivers and Mobile Bay. It was here that the sailors developed the new skill of cotton '**Hoosiers**', down in the holds of their own ships. There they worked side by side with the Negroes stowing bales of cotton, known as '**Screwing Cotton**', by forcing the bales into every corner.



Waldo J Curtis, from an old catalogue, American Library of Congress, **Simple Screw Cotton Press** via [wikimedia commons](#)