

# Voices

Spring–Summer 2017  
Volume 43: 1–2

The Journal of  
New York Folklore

Bill Smith:  
Evolution of an  
Adirondack  
Storyteller

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Crossing Cultures:  
Sicilian and Scottish  
Family Portraits

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Racquette River  
Dams: Oral History  
Project

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The Poetry of  
Everyday Life

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Fingernail  
Fiddle Making

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Food as  
Family History



# From the Director



Cutting federal funding for the arts and humanities will hurt everyone. The impact won't be short-term. There are many arguments for continuing support for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), two federal agencies slated for elimination in the President's 2018 budget and crippled in his recommended 2017 budget. As someone involved in the arts for my entire life, I am alarmed by the shortsightedness of this action.

Government dollars carry extraordinary weight, even if actual amounts are relatively small. NEA and NEH each have been supported recently at the modest level of \$148 million, *only 0.004 percent (four thousandths of one percent) of the annual federal budget*. Trump proposed to cut this small amount by an additional \$15 million for the 2017 fiscal year and totally eliminate the agencies in 2018! At less than 1 percent of the budget, eliminating NEA and NEH will do little to reduce our nation's deficit. Rather, it will result in a loss of revenue to communities.

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Even though \$148 million is a small percentage of the national budget, the effects on our communities are wide ranging. The grants provided by the National Endowments to cultural agencies of all sizes allows them to invest in the cultural lives of their communities and to nurture creative activities for people of all ages. Organizations and individuals in New York receive support—directly from the Federal Endowments or indirectly through grant support from Humanities New York or the New York State Council on the Arts. With grants from the Endowments matched dollar for dollar, NEA and NEH grants invite further investment in

communities by corporations and private citizens. As stated by Janet Brown of Grantmakers in the Arts: "Since the inception of these agencies [NEA and NEH], private foundations have supported arts and culture knowing they were acting in tandem and as a 'business investor' with the federal government" <<http://www.giarts.org/blog/janet/preserving-soul-america>>. As recognized by private foundations and other granting organizations, government support for the arts leverages other public and private investment. Economic development through the arts is also strengthened by direct public participation. Cultural activities engage residents and visitors alike; *a dollar invested by NEA, for example, generates four additional dollars through private investment and tourism*, as arts and culture audiences buy tickets, go out to dinner, browse retail establishments, and enjoy our communities' downtowns.

In New York State, federal support of the arts and humanities has a direct effect on all of our communities. Although New York City is often viewed as the "Arts Capital of the World," communities *throughout* the state benefit from federal support. A quick look at 2016 grants for arts projects throughout the state indicates that every county and congressional district of New York has benefitted from the NEA. As executive director of the New York Folklore Society, the statewide service organization for folk and traditional arts, I am most knowledgeable of grants that benefit the heritage of New Yorkers. Here are a few of the 2016 Folk Arts grants:

- The Erie Canal Museum, Syracuse (Onondaga) received support for a tour of live traditional arts performances, staged on a refurbished barge traveling the Mohawk Barge/Erie Canal, traversing New York, and providing performances and other programs.

- Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education supports traditional arts and culture activities in schools, working directly with educators and teaching artists and impacting communities and arts education throughout the state. In 2018, Local Learning will work with western New York schools, with themes of "sense of place" and the environment.

- The Iroquois Museum, Howes Cave (Schoharie) will offer a series of public demonstrations and workshops focused upon arts of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy.

- Long Island Traditions (Nassau/Suffolk) and the New York Folklore Society (Schenectady/Montgomery/Schoharie/Greene) are collaborating to explore the effects of weather events impacted by climate change. Individual responses to Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy are being collected through oral histories. Two resulting exhibitions and programs will be mounted concurrently and shown in partnership with the Long Island Museum and Schenectady County Historical Society's Mabie Farm.

- Staten Island Arts (Staten Island) is documenting the working waterfront, exploring the borough's rich occupational history and lives of those who live along the waterfront.

- Hamilton County and their county historian received support from NEH for public forums and programs on the occasion of Hamilton County's Bicentennial.

- Historic Hudson Valley (Ulster) received support for public programs on Washington Irving and the Art of Storytelling.

Direct support to artists is an important role of NEA, providing awards and fellowships for writing, lifetime achievement, jazz, and folk and traditional arts. National Heritage Fellowships recognize and honor masters of folk and

*continued on page 48*

***"Just as America values its national parks for all to enjoy, our history, culture, and art are no less valuable to Americans. They are the soul of our nation and the conscience of our people. The elimination of these federal agencies would send the message that Americans don't care about their history, their culture, and their art."***

—Janet Brown, President & CEO, Grantmakers in the Arts,

[www.giarts.org/blog/janet/preserving-soul-america](http://www.giarts.org/blog/janet/preserving-soul-america)

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Cover: Bill Smith in his dooryard with an Adirondack ash splint pack basket he made and uses in the woods, 1995. Photo by Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY Archives. Read "The Evolution of an Adirondack Storyteller," beginning on p. 3.

# From the Editor



The Smithsonian's 1986 Festival of American Folklife launched my career. In my first paid job as a folklorist, I was hired as an Assistant Program Coordinator for the program, "Rice in Japanese Folk Culture," curated by Alicia Maria Gonzalez of the Office of Folklife Programs.

Now in its 50th year, the Folklife Festival remains a premier international exhibition of living cultural heritage, presented annually for two weeks around the Fourth of July on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Attracting over a million visitors yearly, the celebration is the largest annual cultural event in the nation's capital.

Some 30 years ago, I was part of the team that created a temporary Japanese village on the National Mall. It ran from the village rice paddy, through a collection of craft workshops and performance stages for music and dance, cooking, and children's activities, to the Shinto shrine at the end of the lane—all populated by guest artisans and performers from Japan.

We were actually allowed to build a rice paddy on the National Mall (under the watchful eyes of the National Park Service). Here, performances of traditional music and dance with ritual rice planting welcomed visitors, as did a 13-foot tall rice straw effigy, erected to ward off sickness and evil spirits at the village entrance.

In shops along the village lane, visitors met Japanese artisans working on crafts: rice-straw boots, candles, and raincoats; umbrellas of split bamboo and rice paper held together with rice glue; bamboo winnowers and baskets; clay jars for storing rice and wood barrels to hold rice wine; resist-dyeing with rice paste; papier-mâché with rice glue for dolls and masks depicting characters in folk drama. Performers danced, sang, and played traditional instruments. Others cooked and shared children's games. This was cultural exchange up close and personal.

This life-altering job grew out of an internship while I was a doctoral student at George Washington University. I worked on the photo text panels that complemented the living, performative presentations of the festival. It was a practical application for my studies in folk culture and Japanese literature, and my "seriousness and exactitude" were noticed.

In this first job, I could share my love of Japanese culture acquired in Tokyo (1983–84) while teaching conversational English



"Tokyo Todd," a departing gift from a Japanese friend.

to corporate management. It was a means to immerse myself in a culture so different from my own. The ever present aroma of a simple dashi broth. Water spilling over the rim of a cedar hot tub, as cherry blossoms petals began to fall.

In Japan, I was introduced to a reverence for age, custom, and tradition. I saw the government actively supporting the nation's artistic heritage with the honorable title, "Living National Treasure," the highest award given to Japanese artists, charged with passing on the traditions to future generations.

Over 30 years later, I remain grateful for this early opportunity. A government-supported program set me on a path that continues to help my patrons appreciate the diverse cultural heritage of upstate New York and beyond. Let's hope government programs like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, partnered with non-profit organizations and private corporations, continue to support new generations of educators, ever striving to break down the barriers separating people all over the globe.

Todd DeGarmo

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# Voices

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# From Trapper's Cabin To Festival Stage:

## *The Evolution of an Adirondack Storyteller*

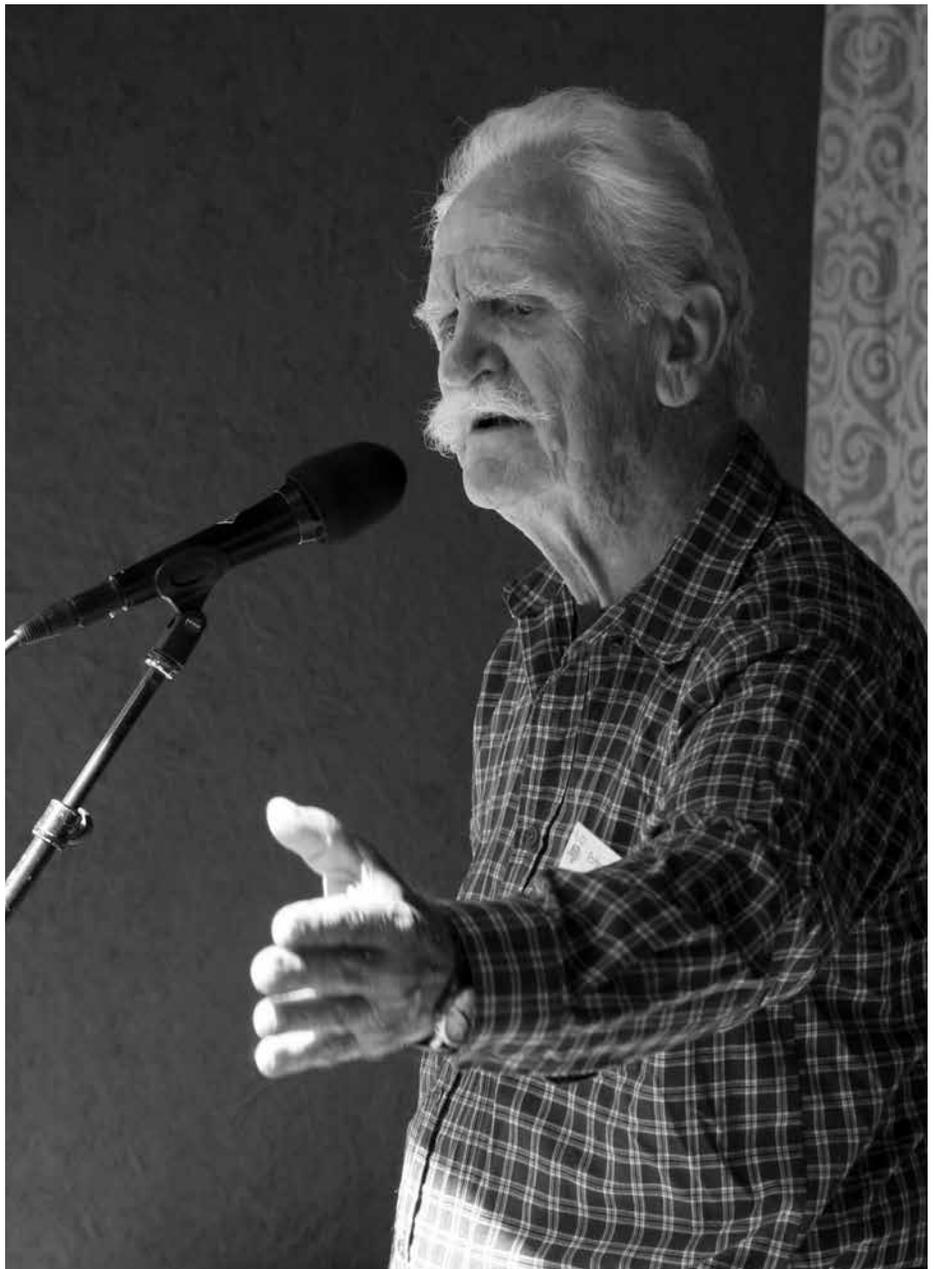
BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

[*Author's Note:* This article is based on research for a paper presented by the author in a session called “Storytelling at the Crossroads of Community and Commodity,” for the American Folklore Society annual meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on November 8, 2014.]

*I've always told stories since I was a kid, because I liked to show off, and I had brothers that were comical and, of course, I would mimic some of their foolishness . . . My mother would sit around and tell us about this and that, something funny that had happened way back, you know . . . and my father, he'd tell all these stories about logging camp and all that, and he had some stories about the devil. He was scared of the devil . . . Old Morris Roach used to come to the house, and him and Dad would sit there and tell horse stories to each other all day long. In school, I was the class clown half the time, and then I got to work on construction and half of those guys . . . were storytellers. Somebody would tell you a story, then you would tell it to somebody else, and so on. Half of them, you couldn't repeat in public, but they were good stories, and they were told with the same kind of expressions and all that stuff that I do stories today with. And around all them hunters telling big whoppers, you know, and all them trappers. So my whole life has been around storytelling.*

—William B. Smith (interview with the author, April 19, 2003).

Now known widely as a gifted Adirondack storyteller himself, William B. “Bill” Smith is a native and lifelong resident of the place he calls the Featherbed, on the edge of wilderness in the northern foothills of the Adirondack Mountains in



Bill Smith performing at Old Songs Festival, Altamont, NY, June 28, 2009. Photo by Bill Spence, courtesy of Old Songs, Inc.



Bill Smith performing with “Woody” and a frog, his dancing limberjacks, at Indian Lake Central School, ca. 2005. Photo by June McKenney, courtesy of Bill Smith.

Colton, St. Lawrence County, in upstate New York. He grew up in an environment of men and women who were steeped in local oral traditions, and he eventually became well known in the Northeast for his personal reminiscences, tall tales, poetry recitations, and ballads performed on stages, from hometown senior centers to Adirondack great camps, and major folk festivals. This is the story of his evolution as a storyteller, from swapping tales with family and neighbors at the kitchen table to mesmerizing audiences in auditoriums far from his home.

Having celebrated his 80th birthday in April 2017, now is a good time to reflect on how this man of a very ordinary background, not unlike hundreds of others in his remote part of the world, has become, in his own lifetime, almost as much an icon of the Adirondack Mountains’ way of life as the guideboats, packbaskets, and outdoor wooden armchairs that bear the region’s name. He is a son of Roy Smith, a woodsman who hauled provisions into the

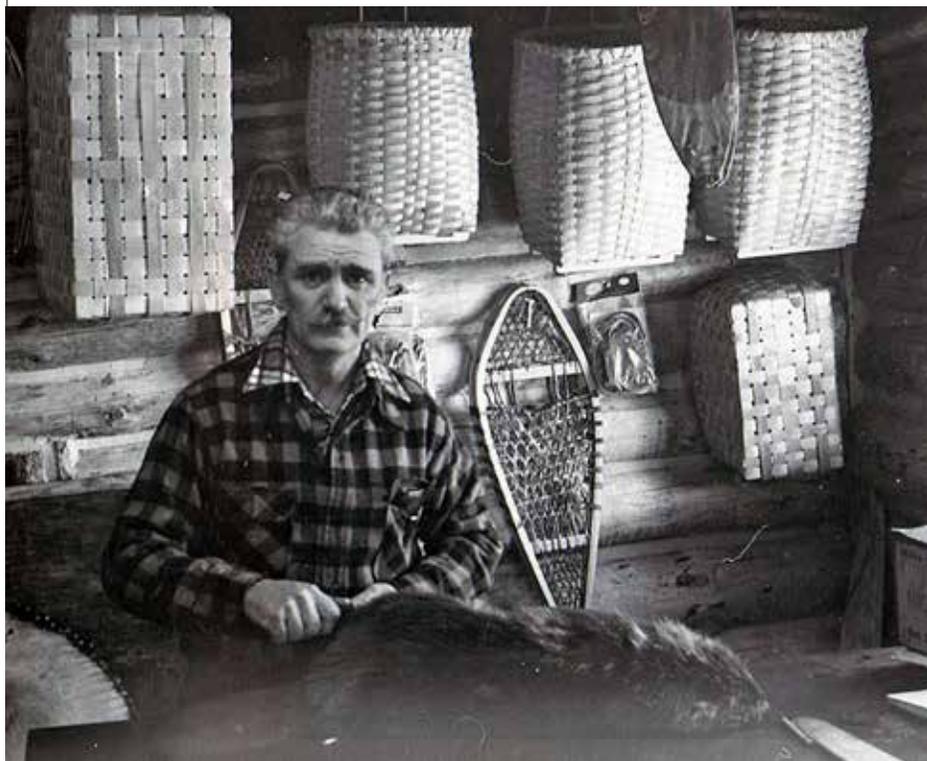
lumber camps of 60 or more years ago, and Emily Bicknell Smith, who raised 10 children and augmented the family income by boarding men who were on their way into or out of the lumbering operations.

The youngest of 10, for most of his boyhood, Bill was the only child at home, as his siblings were much older. He helped his parents on their subsistence farm, started his own trapline at age eight, and learned many of the skills of living close to the land. Over the following years, Bill first became known in his region for his interest in and mastery of many traditional skills: deer hunter, fisherman, trapper, guide, basket maker, rustic furniture maker, and snowshoe maker, among them. After school and work for a few years in construction, Bill opened a trapper’s shop, where he bought pelts from local men and boys, and sold supplies. Having learned the basics of traditional, hand-pounded, ash splint-basket-making from Mohawk Indian men who had stayed at the family house when he was a child, he took it up again and began selling his very sturdy packbaskets to trappers and hunters.

Author and longtime summer resident in the Adirondacks, Burton Bernstein

once said, “North Country people, especially, but not exclusively those over fifty, love to talk. Most of their talk is anecdotal and about the past. Recalling a person, a place, an incident, an emotion from some happier or sadder day has developed into a native craft, not just a device to escape the drab of winter or a tiresome chore” (Bernstein 1972, 68). Folklorist Robert Bethke added: “[Talk] binds people together, serving to define, reinforce, and extend relations.” Furthermore, “. . . yarns (often locally called ‘big stories’) celebrate memorable people and events and often such stories are the direct product of artistically structured, verbal ‘visiting’” (Bethke 1981, 140–143).

It was in this kind of environment that Bill Smith grew up. Between the men who stopped at the family house on the literal edge of “the Big Woods,” waiting for a ride into “camp,” and those loners and eccentrics who floated in and out of the family’s lives (what we would likely call “characters”), there were many lasting impressions made on young Bill. There was little else for entertainment than talking about their routine lives, their adventures, and the people around them. Bill says: “Front room,



Smith with beaver carcass and ash splint baskets in his trapper’s shop at his Colton home, 1978. Photo by Varick Chittenden.



Smith with stretched beaver pelts and beaver carcass, early 1970s. Photographer unidentified, courtesy of Bill Smith.

kitchen table, funerals . . . family reunions, all that. Whenever there was some people gathered up, there was a bunch of that going on . . . You heard lumberjacks tell stuff like that, and you heard hunters tell stuff like that. And working on construction, my god, every day you heard a story from somebody, you know?" (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

So, years later, once he started his fur-buying business and built a small log cabin near his house to be a shop for processing pelts and selling supplies, it became a natural gathering place where lots of talk about life and work in the woods took place. During that time, Bill also worked at Higley Flow State Park, near his home, where he was a caretaker and guided visitors on nature walks. At night, around campfires, he entertained campers with songs and stories of life in the woods. Having learned to love old-time music from his mother, he took up the

guitar as a teenager and sometimes played with local country bands for dances. After marrying young and giving up construction work to have more time with his young family, he completed his GED in 1976 (when he was almost 40), and was employed as an outdoor education teacher in a couple of local high schools for several years.

Typical of Adirondack men of his generation and before, he developed many skills just to survive. He often put them to good use to make a decent living, sometimes having two or three jobs at the same time. He recalls: "I put an ad up at each of the four local colleges, saying that I would guide students and professors into the hills and mountains for canoeing, hunting, fishing, or hiking. Much to my surprise, I got many interested people" (Ward, 1990, 101–102).

Bill's natural storytelling ability, sense of humor, and great knowledge of local nature and people attracted the attention of

outsiders, who first invited him to share his stories with local students and other audiences near home. Among his earliest public appearances was to demonstrate ash splint-basketmaking at the first Festival of North Country Folklife on the SUNY Canton college campus in 1978. The festival subsequently became an annual event and was moved to Robert Moses State Park on Barnhart Island, near Massena, where Bill appeared for many years. After the word was out that he was willing to tell stories, too, Bill became a popular entertainer for senior citizens groups, college classes, the Grange and hunting club functions, public libraries, and more. Soon he was traveling to meetings, museums, schools, and other sites all around New York State to perform, demonstrate, and share his contextual knowledge of Adirondack life.

Bill's conscious efforts at storytelling for real income actually began as a



Smith and Hamilton “Ham” Ferry during an apprenticeship at Ham’s Inn, Seveys Corners, 1988. Photographer unidentified, courtesy TAUNY Archives.

complement to his demonstrations of weaving baskets. In 1984, a local author observed: “Lately, he’s been thinking that he will build his collection of Adirondack tall tales and add storytelling to his repertoire of skills. Listening to him in his kitchen when he isn’t even trying hard, you know if he set his mind to it he could tell some whoppers that would leave your jaw slack in amazement” (Van de Water 1984, 16). An early contact with the Adirondack Museum—a first-rate regional museum, now known as Adirondack Experience, which interprets history and life in the mountains—resulted in nearly 25 years as an artist-in-residence there. From demonstrating pounding black ash logs into splints, through weaving a basket and its rim, it takes Bill about three days to complete a basket. Visitors to the museum would stop by his demonstration area, and Bill would fill the time while working by also keeping them entertained with personal stories and jokes. Subsequently, he was invited to do the same at Great Camp Sagamore, the restored and celebrated rustic camp once owned by the Vanderbilt family, now presenting traditional crafts demonstrators for summer tours and overnight guests. At first, Bill made and sold baskets; then he taught basketmaking at workshops and Elderhostels, performing stories and songs for evening entertainment. This close relationship has continued ever since.

In the early 1980s, North Country Public Radio (NCPR) hosted a monthlong

broadcast on NCPR. On one occasion, to add some regional flavor, Marnie asked Bill to join her on stage to tell a few of his own stories. Bill recalls: “Apparently, Marnie recognized me as a storyteller... And I knew quite a few of the old ballad songs, and that, which went along with it. So I became a ‘folk person,’ I guess, and a storyteller.” And, he adds, “[She] made sure I got to hear and watch the storytellers so I could better myself. I was pretty naïve. I didn’t know what was going on. I never tried to mimic them, or changed what I was doing because of somebody else. I think that had a lot to do with how I was brought up” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

festival of nationally well-known professional storytellers—like Jackie Torrence, Donald Davis, Michael Parent, and Jay O’Callahan—organized by local author Marnie Reed Crowell. They gave individual performances on the St. Lawrence University campus and in several local libraries nearby; excerpts of some were later

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were critical and fruitful for establishing Bill’s wider reputation as an iconic Adirondacker. In early 1985, a reporter for the *New York Times* made his way into the Adirondacks to start a series of features on local traditions and artists. It began with a front-page piece about Bill, with the headline “An ‘Old-Fashioned’ Man Keeps Adirondack Lore Alive,” describing both his basketmaking and his storytelling and including several compelling photos (Gargan 1985, A1).

The story got him lots of attention and requests to travel to demonstrate and tell stories well outside his home area. About the same time, the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) established its Folk Arts Program with public funds available, so that libraries, historical societies, arts councils, and schools across the state could apply for folk arts programming. Because of that funding, a new network of public folklorists also found Bill to be a valuable resource for their programming. His credentials as a traditional artist were unassailable, and he was an excellent presenter for the folklorists to offer to all kinds of audiences, from small children to seniors. He even found himself, in his fifties, going to New York City for the first time in his life, to perform for urban school children at the



Smith telling stories with the Liars Club at the Norwood Village Green Concert Series, with, left to right, Daddy Dick Richards and Chris Morley, n.d. Photo by Varick Chittenden.

staid New-York Historical Society and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, quite an experience for a native Adirondack man!

Later in the 1980s, Bill was awarded a NYSCA apprenticeship with acknowledged local storyteller Hamilton “Ham” Ferry, Sr.—a featured figure in Robert Bethke’s seminal discussion of oral traditions of the northern Adirondacks in his 1981 book, *Adirondack Voices: Woodsmen and Woods Lore*. From that experience, Bill observed Ham’s mastery of the anecdote

*Adirondack Stories and Songs*, which is still in print (Smith and Ward 1994).

During that same time period, Bill was discovering that he really could earn some money by making baskets and performing music and stories. He readily admits that NYSCA’s support of folk arts programming made a big difference in his family income during that time. He says, “I don’t think I ever asked for a job. I just got calls. People would tell someone in another school, and it just kept happening. And I went all over the

audiences about his life as a woodsman, about his family and work in the woods, about times gone by. Bethke has said, “Bill’s stories also tend to be about a past, if not gradually passing, way of life in his little neck of the woods. At least he puts a lot of emphasis on ‘back then’ rather than today... his audiences seem to find such things nostalgic, or maybe exotically different, from what they are familiar with. So that’s also part of the appeal” (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with author, September



Smith tells stories to a gathering at the former one-room schoolhouse at Cooks Corners, near his home, Summer 2003. Photo by Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY Archives.

and joke and the tall tale, of poetry recitation, and of timing and delivery. And in 1991, *National Geographic Traveler* published an extensive article about the great camps of the Adirondacks, with Bill prominently featured in the section on Sagamore (Brown 1991). By 1995, folklorist Vaughn Ward worked with Bill to compile and edit a collection of over 30 of his stories in a book titled *Tales from the Featherbed*:

state and other places in other states (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013). Requests for private appearances began as well—for private parties, after dinner speeches, corporate and sportsmen’s meetings, and private homes (the DuPonts and other wealthy Adirondack families, for instance).

Today, Bill Smith recalls that in those early years, he was often asked to talk to local

ber 2, 2014, Venice, FL). And college classes were interested in environmental issues and cultural history. The fact that he was an active hunter and trapper made for occasional tense moments, but Bill took those opportunities to talk about conservation, ecology, and economically depressed people providing for their families (including his own).

Tired of heavy construction and unsatisfied with being a school teacher, and with

# Bill Smith Tall Tales and True

Wednesday, Aug. 20<sup>th</sup> 7:00 pm

Bill Smith is the Genuine folk article. He tells stories from his experience growing up in a logging camp and farm in the Northern Adirondacks, and living here for - well, you guess how long.

\$9 non-members, \$7 members  
\$3 children  
\$20 non-member families  
\$15 member families



■ A ■ L ■ C ■ A ■

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Bill Smith poster advertising past performance, "Tall Tales and True" at the Adirondack Lakes Center for the Arts, n.d. Courtesy of Bill Smith.

some anxiety, Bill and his wife Sal decided to try earning their living making baskets and telling stories. They've told me since that, like a lot of other native Adirondackers, they always knew that if they had to, they could provide for themselves by raising their own food and doing odd jobs. While Bill had become comfortable with performing in more intimate settings with audiences familiar with his way of life and background, going onto a larger stage with experienced storytellers was a new challenge.

Bill now remembers his first such outing:

I think the first time I was in a big festival was in Charlottesville, Virginia [1985], went there when Michael Parent invited me. We stayed with Michael. There was Judith Black and Jackie Torrence, Bill Harley, and Jim May. Then

they had me stuck in the middle there, somewhere. I looked at it as an honor to be with those people. I wasn't afraid of them or anything. I don't think I knew enough to be afraid. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013)

In the 30 years since that festival, he's performed by himself or with others—sometimes repeatedly—at many of the prominent venues of the Northeast, among them Pete Seeger's Clearwater Revival Festival, the Old Songs Festival, the National Folk Festival in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the iconic Caffè Lena in Saratoga. He's also appeared at the Augusta Festival in West Virginia, Doc Watson's MusicFest in North Carolina, Jim May's Illinois Storytelling Festival and has been invited to several others.

To succeed as a festival circuit storyteller, Bill discovered that he had to work on his repertoire. In his earlier efforts, he had focused on local history and personal experiences, because that's what his audiences seemed to want. He had added a few humorous stories, mostly from his family, and inflated them to make them more entertaining. But he soon realized he had to create more and different material:

...because I needed a longer story. And you get such an amount of time on stage that you've got to fill, and if your stories aren't enough, they ain't gonna keep you, you know. You gotta have this certain—you're on for 45 minutes, usually, and you do that at a festival several times. And you can't just do the same stuff over and over again, so you've gotta have 20 stories to get through a festival, you know, with songs and stories and poetry. And that filled in the gaps. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

Because of the rugged Adirondack wilderness, the hard labor and isolation of woodsmen, and the hardscrabble existence for most who lived there, Bethke has observed that stories of all genres—personal experience, character anecdotes, encounters with "sports" and game wardens, tall tales—stress themes like self-reliance, skillfulness, resourcefulness, and quick-wittedness (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with the author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL). Conscious of these themes from his own experiences, Bill chose to retell familiar family and neighborhood stories, adapt stories heard from other tellers, or create new ones.

Of those most familiar—and among the first he polished into stories to perform for others—Bill says:

"Reverend Waterson's Woodpile" was absolute truth. People, everything in it, was true. That was one of my home stories that my mother always told about my father. And "The New Game Warden," with the venison in the stove, that was all true. "Ira Irish and the Bees," that was true. "The Dapple Gray Horse," my mother

told that to be true. I guess she probably picked it up from somewhere, because the same story is supposed to come from the Loomis brothers [a legendary notorious gang of outlaws in central New York in the mid-19th century] and something about they stole the horse or something and painted it up and that, but this story is different because I tell it the way my mother told it. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

While these and other stories that Bill tells are based on real people and real situations, he acknowledges that the truth may well have been stretched at times in the ordinary stories he'd always heard from the people around him. He also knows that his apprenticeship mentor, Ham Ferry, had made such exaggerations—tall tales—into an art form and mastered it, at least as far as the regulars at his Adirondack small bar were concerned. During his visits, Bill had carefully observed Ham's choices of topics, his sense of timing, his style of delivery, and his audiences'—the bar patrons'—reactions to the storytelling. In the time since, Bill has applied many of the techniques he learned from Ham to his own work and developed many more of his own. As such, tall tales have become his stock in trade.

Bethke has described the genre this way:

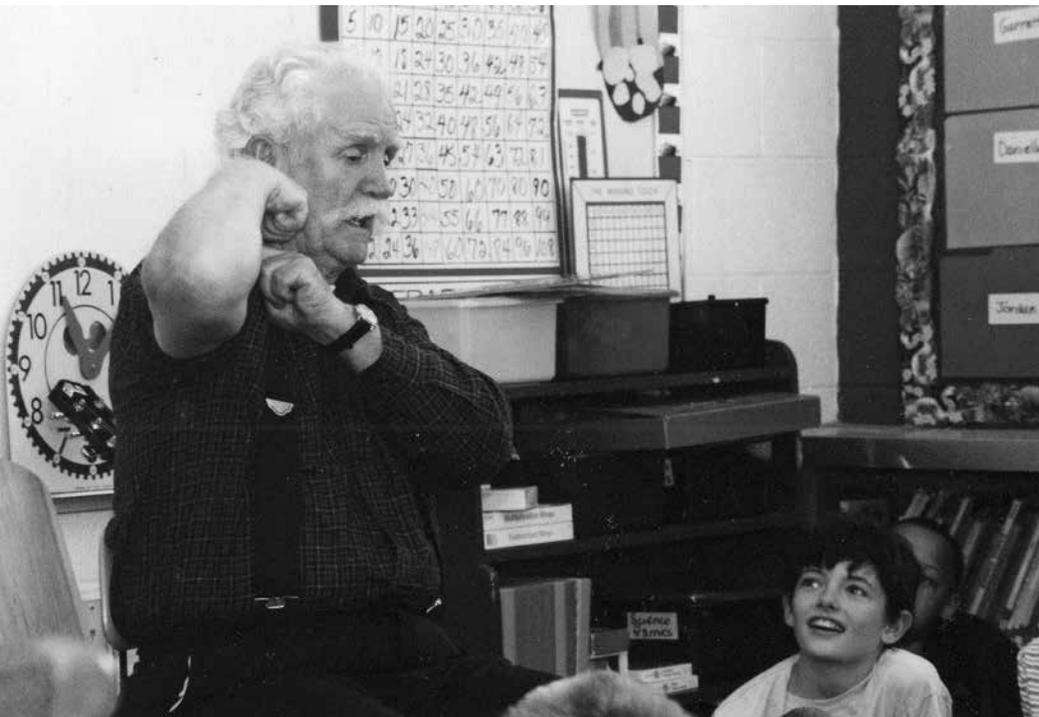
One story type favored in woodsmen circles throughout regional America is variously known as the humorous "lie" or "tall tale." In the Adirondacks, I have also heard them referred to as "big stories." The storytelling format typically involves a narrator beginning what, on first encounter, is set up as a personal experience account—plausible reminiscence related in deadpan style. As the telling progresses, the art of the genre begins to emerge; things become increasingly fantastic and incongruous. The story ends on a comic and often uproarious note. As a listener you've been hauled along, caught up in playful absurdity, and ultimately the victim of falsehood in fun. Arguably, the tall tale is the most venerable of artistically self-conscious story types in Northern New York; without question the tradition has deep roots and widespread popularity. (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with the author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL).

Vaughn Ward added: "The immense scale, the extremes of weather, the seriousness and danger of life in the New World seemed tall tales in themselves. The frontier, both marvelous and menacing,

was perfect soil for replanted big stories. Outrageous understatement was a kind of reverse bragging, a slow-talking bucking up in the presence of immoderate circumstances" (Ward 1990, 7).

Such stories came naturally to Bill, and he's most often promoted by his presenters as a master of the tall tale. One particular characteristic of Bill's stories has been his insertion of real people from his childhood as narrators or protagonists, whether there was a grain of truth in the story or not. He speaks of both his father and mother, the French Canadian Eddy Ciere [who lived with his family for awhile], Lanty Martin and his hounds, Will Newton, Howard Crossman, Wallace Vebber, and others whom he knew, playing on some of their eccentricities and qualities that make them both human and humorous. When asked why he's done that, Bill says he loved them all as real people and doesn't want them to be forgotten. One such story, since polished into a piece that he performs—about Ira Irish, one of those "characters" he remembers vividly from his childhood—he told me about in this way:

Old Ira Irish would come by the house with his stories about how he'd been to the moon and all that stuff, and how he got on a spaceship and went to the moon and all that, and I believed he could see into the future because all of his stories came true! And...Ira—I remember this, because I was there and heard it, and...he hadn't come in a long time and my father said, "Where you been Ira? I haven't seen you in a month!" "Oh," he said, "I've been up in Maine, lumbering, working in the woods up there." Of course, he never left this area, he couldn't read or write or nothing, but yeah—he knew all about spaceships and all this stuff. It's pretty interesting when you think about it! And...he said, "I've been up to Maine, lumbering in the woods up there. And boy," he said, "You've gotta see the machines they got up there," he said. "You can't even reach the top of the tires on them things, they're so big!" And he said, "They bend in the middle so you can get around the trees!" he said. And everybody laughed, and thought that



Smith performing his own story of "Uncle John's Muscle," Old Forge Central Library, n.d. Photographer unidentified, courtesy of Bill Smith.

was pretty neat, you had to bend it in the middle to get around the trees, and all this stuff. “Big blade on the front,” he said, “Shove them trees right up; hook right onto eight or ten trees,” he said, “snake ‘em right out all in one trip.” He described the color of the machine was a reddish orange and everything. He described a timber jack’s skidder, right to the number. And they hadn’t even been invented yet! (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

Many of Bill’s stories are traditional, and the sources may be impossible to find, but ideas occasionally also come from books and other storytellers. He’s adapted some, like “The Snake Bit Hoe Handle” from Richard Chase, “Ma and Percy” (originally, “The Plane Ride”) from *Bert and I*, or “The Pet Trout” from Ben Botkin’s 1944 book, *A Treasury of American Folklore*, which his daughter found at a yard sale and bought for a quarter. Traveling as he did in the 1980s and meeting all kinds of professional storytellers from various parts of the country, he heard many of their stories as well. While their styles of performing and their choices of stories were very different from his, some he took a liking to and considered adapting for himself. With a chuckle, he jokes, “I wasn’t above swiping somebody’s story and embellishing on it and telling it. Fair game, as far as I was concerned. And I think it is fair game. I still think it is. Others do it to mine!” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013)

Here’s an example:

When I was a kid, Chet Bice lived next door. And he was always carrying on about something, he always told about the “Gillagaloo Birds” and they were covered with “Goofal” feathers. And so, I—and I was down in West Virginia [Augusta Festival] and there was a guy down there, he said the hills were so steep where he lived, the birds had to lay square eggs so they wouldn’t roll off the mountainside. And so I brought that information home with me, and I made the story about the Gillagaloo birds and the Oo-ah birds. Now that you could tell the Oo-ah birds in the spring of the year, you’d hear their voices echoing



Always the outdoorsman, Bill Smith as a teenager with a day’s catch of fish, n.d. Photographer unidentified, courtesy of Bill Smith.

off the side of the mountain because they were laying those square eggs! And you’d hear, “Oooh, oohh!” And then you’d hear, “Aaahh.” And you’d know you’d just come by Oo-ah birds.” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013)

Some of Bill Smith’s stories are entirely original, at least as far as he knows. Having always been artistic (for fun, he’s written poetry, sketched line drawings, and carved in wood, for example), he’s sometimes been inspired to fashion new stories to perform. He’s created a series of tales about his real Uncle John (known for his physical strength) and Aunt Lillian (and her overzealous shows of affection when his siblings were young). Others were about Miss Corcoran, his favorite teacher (like the time during World War II when there was an air raid practice in their little school), or when Lanty Martin’s hounds licked the dinner plates clean before they went back into the cupboard.

As for the rest of his repertoire, he chooses to recite long narrative poems, like selections by Robert Service such as “Blasphemous Bill” or “The Passing of the Backhouse,” widely attributed to James Whitcomb Riley. This was an idea fostered

by Ham Ferry who had recited them for years to hunters, campers, and snowmobilers at Ham’s Inn. Remembering his early contacts with French Canadian woodsmen from nearby Quebec and his wife Sal’s family, Bill tells a few humorous poems and stories with the patois and accent he’s heard all his life. A more recent addition has been recited spoonerisms like “Rindercella” and “Pree Little Thigs,” which he first heard on radio shows and have become popular with his audiences, especially children.

A musician before he was a storyteller, Bill grew up listening to early country music on stations like WWVA and programs like the *Grand Ole Opry* and *Hee Haw*. Believing that such songs also tell stories, Bill regularly includes several in any performance, too. He sometimes includes traditional songs, like “Once More a Lumbering Go,” or “Cabbage Head,” which he learned from a favorite musician of his, Doc Watson; he’s adopted “tearjerkers”—his words—like “Wildwood Flower” or “Rosewood Casket” from the Carter family. He has also written a few of his own songs in a similar style, such as “Only a Housewife,” an adaptation of a poem written by his mother, and “Adirondack Memories,” which he calls his theme song. At last count, he has recorded over 110 pieces on 8 CDs but has numerous others in his repertoire and still adds new ones all the time.

As for his style of performing, he admits that he has learned a lot over the years. His old friend Marnie Crowell says that she never coached him, but they had long conversations about the nature of storytelling, polishing a tale, audiences, and more. They discussed how personal experience stories could become better if practiced and repeated (Marnie Reed Crowell to Folk Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, September 20, 1985). Bill himself observed that the professionals he met, like Michael Parent and Jay O’Callahan, had a beginning, middle, and end to their stories...and a punch line. He has told me that Jackie Torrence was “the best storyteller of the lot, her and Donald Davis. Donald Davis was more like me. His stories were

like my stories. They were country stories, about things that happened. He'd put a comical twist in it somehow or other" (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013). He also says:

I think a big change came when I met Utah Phillips. I met him later on, at the festivals, you know. He used humor and people loved it. I think I was impressed by him. I don't think I mimicked him, but I realized that people like that, as opposed to "this is the way we did it when I was a kid thing"...I discovered I get more work with the humor than I did with the history. People enjoy laughing and it's good medicine. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

Bill has adapted one Phillips signature piece—"Moose Turd Pie"—and he's often requested to perform it.

So what, if anything, sets Bill Smith apart from other professional storytellers?

A local newspaper reporter wrote: "Unlike some of his contemporaries, Mr. Smith has a traditional style, meaning he relates his stories as if he were having a conversation with the listener. Therefore, each telling may be a little bit different" (Ellen 1994, 12). By the time Bill was getting recognized as a storyteller beyond his own community, according to Joseph Sobol, "The 'ancient art of storytelling' was in the midst of a transformation, through the storytelling festival medium, from an art of front porches, parlors, and church basements to an art of auditoriums, microphones, and revival tents, with seats for three hundred, five hundred, eventually a thousand" (Sobol 1999, 111). Organized storytelling events, including the National Storytelling Festival (NSF) in Jonesborough, Tennessee, that has since become the gold standard for professional practitioners, were becoming more selective about who would be asked to participate. Star professional storytellers

drew large crowds and commanded fees accordingly. One exception—the celebrated traditional Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks—was featured at the NSF for many years, in part because he was so exotic for the audience to see and hear. Sobol said, "Certainly Hicks is an anachronism and an anomaly in many ways, a man whose speech and lifeways are a century removed from his audience's experience" (Sobol 1999, 112). Some would say that Bill Smith is equally colorful and out of the ordinary for an audience of school children, millennials, Adirondack tourists, or urban transplants today.

Coincidentally, about the same time that Bill was becoming recognized far beyond his hometown, John Vinton, a Brooklyn native and occasional Adirondack visitor with an academic background in music and theater, decided to study the literature of the Adirondacks and interpret it for vacationers in local communities. Calling



Smith performing in the game room for guests at Great Camp Sagamore, Raquette Lake, 1990. This image was part of an article by Dale Brown, "The Great Camps of the Adirondacks," which appeared in the *National Geographic Traveler* in 1991. Photo courtesy of the photographer, Kenneth Garrett.

himself “The Adirondack Storyteller,” Vinton perfected recitations of short works with regional content by numerous historical writers like Charles Dudley Warner, Philander Deming, Jeanne Robert Foster, and Irving Bacheller (Vinton 1991). He described his process:

The way I deal with Adirondack material may seem overly refined and technical to some tellers. However, my tastes have always been more classical than folk (to borrow a differentiation commonly used in music). I love the 19th-century English in many of my sources and retain as much of it as possible when I perform. However, the action passages usually get modernized with shorter sentences and modern words. I often play a character from the past or engage in multi-character dialogue. In these instances, I become a voice-actor who requires extensive daily voice work. (Vinton 1985, 17)

Vinton continued performing for audiences in local schools and other venues throughout the region for several years and acquired quite a following.

According to Ruth Stotter, a teacher of storytelling: “Unlike a traditional storyteller, who typically learns stories from, and tells stories to populations who share a cultural heritage, a nontraditional teller may appropriate stories found in published texts from cultures which neither the teller nor the audience have firsthand experience. Performance-oriented story interpretation is shaped by the individual teller’s personal taste. A story heard at a festival, even from a traditional teller, may go through idiosyncratic transformations” (Stotter 1996, 690).

By contrast, Bill Smith, who admires many of the professionals he has come to know, has observed: “Did you ever watch [some storytellers]? They sometimes get so prim and proper. They learned this story word for word, and they follow that like it was a song. And the words all have to match. I can’t do that with a story because I *talk* my stories. When you talk stories you can do anything you want with them. You can borrow some from somewhere else.

Do a lot of ad libbing. Play off the audience. Pick somebody in the audience and put them in the story, then take them back out again and put them back in their seat” (Bill Smith interview by Karen Taussig-Lux, September 25, 1995). Marnie Crowell adds: “Most fortunately, Bill recognized early on that what he had to offer the storytelling world was his repertoire of stories and songs from his backwoods childhood. He has not fallen into the trap of imitating the big name performers. Rather, these visiting storytellers have been delighted to meet Bill. In swapping sessions, they also let him know that his versions of the songs have their own validity and that his Adirondack tales are gems” (Marnie Reed Crowell to Folk Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, September 20, 1985).

The descriptor for Bill Smith that immediately was used by all of the people I have interviewed was “authenticity.” Not to demean other performers, but my sources suggest that he truly represents the culture from which he comes, wherever he is. Michael Parent spoke of his lack of self-consciousness, that “once he starts a story or a song, it’s just kind of flowing out of him and he’s not thinking about how he looks or that kind of thing.” He added:

Bill is one of those people who is the same guy when he’s singing a song or telling a story around home as he is on stage, and he can pull both of the things off. Over the years I’m sure he’s learned some stagecraft and some techniques and all, but basically I think that storytelling works the best when the storyteller gets the hell out of the way of the story, is just themselves on stage. I think that’s one of Bill’s strengths, really, that he’s really just himself and not trying to impress anyone... He’s just the same Bill Smith when he’s on stage or when he’s in his living room. (Michael Parent, telephone interview by author, August 18, 2014).

For most of his adult life, Bill Smith has had a shock of gray-to-white hair and worn a handlebar mustache. Photographers take to his rugged good looks and weathered

appearance and have used his image in numerous publications as the quintessential Adirondack woodsman. Even his clothing—Buffalo plaid shirts and jackets, wide suspenders and work pants, which you’ll often see him wearing on stage as well as on the street—fits one’s preconception of a lumberjack, but it’s no costume. Beverly Bridger, the Sagamore director, has said: “Bill plays a character but he doesn’t come on saying ‘I’m a character.’... He’s the old codger and when I first met him 25 years ago, he played the old codger because he wasn’t old enough, but now he *is* the old codger, so he grew into his role. And none of the rest of the storytellers has a persona like that. So he’s very different when it comes to that. I think he knows full well what he’s doing, but he’s probably 75 percent of that character anyway” (Beverly Bridger, telephone interview by author, July 24, 2014).

Unlike many of the storytellers he has met and performed with, Bill Smith has a reputation that could best be described as local or at most regional. He’s a devoted family man, with all of his four grown children and their families living nearby. While he’s driven thousands of miles some years, when he was doing at least 200 performances and demonstrations, he’s never flown and likely wouldn’t. He usually travels with Sal, his wife of 60 years, and he says, “Sal wasn’t gonna do any flyin’, unless she becomes an angel or somethin’” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013). She has always managed their household and takes care of the business end of things for his work. Word of mouth has seemed to serve them well. He’s never advertised and doesn’t have an agent, a brochure, or a website; he pays no attention to Facebook or any social media. Storytellers and presenters have told me that Bill surely could have had a national following and jobs much farther afield had he been willing to travel and make some other sacrifices.

Finally, since I’ve known Bill Smith for nearly 40 years and watched his career as an Adirondack storyteller go from his

trapper's cabin to festival stages, I've been curious to know how he's perceived by people who've studied the art form and artists who know his work. So I asked both folklorist Bob Bethke and storyteller Michael Parent the following question: "Where on a spectrum of 1 to 10, with Ray Hicks at number 10 and Garrison Keillor at 1, would you place Bill Smith?" Their responses were interesting.

Michael Parent has known Bill for about 35 years and has had a distinguished career as a professional storyteller with an international reputation. He told me:

I think Bill is closer to Ray Hicks. Garrison Keillor has a regular national platform with a large, devoted audience and a certain degree of fame. He has created a niche for his storytelling and is really good at it. But he's also limited to what he can do. If he doesn't do a piece on his Lake Wobegon each week, he'll be in trouble with his fans. Like Ray Hicks, people generally come to Bill, and his stories and language have stayed authentic. Bill has and uses his freedom to do whatever he wants... On your scale, I would rate Bill a 6 or 6-1/2. (Michael Parent, telephone interview by author, August 18, 2014).

Bethke, who did his doctoral fieldwork in the early 1970s, interviewing numerous elderly Adirondack woodsmen who had done the work and lived the life Bill talks about, takes a different view. His response:

Hicks specialized in passed down "Jack Tales," tellings of which he excelled by any measure. They were understood as long ago fantastic "fairy tales," the stuff of "could/would this be so?" Bill Smith, on the other hand, tells a variety of stories grounded in the historic past of the Adirondacks he knows, firsthand from youth. In this latter, Bill Smith connects more with Garrison Keller and his constructed, nostalgic, and local character-filled Lake Wobegon. (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL).

As it so often happens with traditions and tradition bearers in contemporary

life, there are so many outside influences and so many challenges to sustaining their culture. Is Bill Smith still a traditional Adirondack storyteller? Is he yet another performer telling stories out of their natural context? Or is he a hybrid who has adapted, keeping some aspect of our heritage alive for another day? As for me, Bob Bethke says it best: "Bill Smith not only epitomizes the heritage of Adirondack traditions, he is today New York State's best-known traditional storyteller. In repertory and honed performance skills, he represents a long line of Adirondack outdoorsmen oral storytellers inclined to narratives mixing local history and lore, humorous anecdotes, and tall tales—at that, stories that typically convey an 'insider's' identity, while often wryly observing encounters with 'outsiders'" (Bethke 1999). ▼

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Look for Bill Smith's CDs  
in the NYFS online store:  
[www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/  
music.html](http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html)

*Tales from the Featherbed* is also  
available in our online store:  
[www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/  
store/books.html](http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/books.html)

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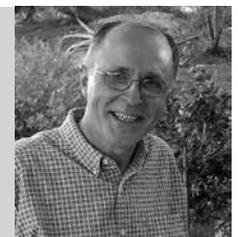
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Varick A. Chittenden is a North Country native, a resident of Canton, a folklorist, the founding director of Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), and Professor Emeritus of Humanities at SUNY Canton. Photo: James Murphy.



# Native Tongue: If Maps Could Talk

BY DAN BERGGREN

Previously, I explored stories of place names throughout our state here. Since so many towns, rivers, and mountains have names of Native American origin, they need their own column, and since this is a folklore journal, I'll begin with a tale.

## Oh, Those O-Names

Traveling across the state, I often notice an interesting name and seek out a local to tell me about it. In Binghamton, I got into a conversation with an elderly gentleman about nearby Owego, so similar to Oswego, Owasco, Otsego, and Otisco. He told me a story that went something like this:

When white explorers would come into a new area, they'd ask the Native population: what do you call this place? The answer would always be the same. All of these O-words were simply variations on the Native word for "camp" or "my home." It's like pointing to a Dodge, a Ford, or a Buick and asking the owner: what do you call it? I call it my car.

## Up and Down the Hudson

The Hudson River was named for Henry Hudson, the British explorer who worked for the Dutch. My filmmaker friend Patricia Lane, producing a project about the river, told me that long before the explorer sailed upstream, the Algonquin people called it Mohicanichtuck, meaning *great water in constant motion* or *river that flows two ways*. From New York harbor to Troy, this tidal estuary feels the ocean's pulse.

Not far from the Hudson's entrance into the Atlantic, there's a section of Brooklyn called Canarsie. That was the Lenape word for *fenced-in land*—where the Dutch grew tobacco, corn, and beans. Eventually, the original name Flatlands was changed to Canarsie in honor of the Native people. My dad grew up in nearby Flatbush and was familiar with a figure of speech not used much anymore. Whenever someone arrived at a place (or a point in a conversation) in a roundabout way, it was said they came "by

way of Canarsie." A couple of other Lenape words are Susquehanna, which means *oyster river*, and Lackawanna, *stream that forks*. The Scranton brothers, who mined coal and iron in Pennsylvania's Lackawanna Valley, established the Buffalo steel plant in 1902, and named the suburb Lackawanna. I came by way of Canarsie to share that with you.

*Beyond the pines* or *place of the portage* is what the Mohawk called Schenectady. Storyteller Joe Doolittle says, "If you're traveling down the Mohawk River from the West, it was where you could park your canoe and have the shortest walk overland through the pines to the Hudson River. . . .critical to early trade because the Mohawk River that flows through the mountains is the route west people could travel the easiest." Nearby Niskayuna means *extensive corn flats*; and Canajoharie means *pot that washes itself* or *washed kettle*, referring to a circular gorge in the Canajoharie Creek.

The territory of the Mohawk nation named Akwesasne is spread out on both the Canadian and American sides of the St. Lawrence River. A common translation for Akwesasne is *land where the partridge drums* because of the wildlife in that territory. Kay Olin, a Native storyteller, says it also refers to the sound of the rapids in the distant St. Lawrence. If the rapids sound like drumming, there's no reason the name can't mean both.

If you climb New York's highest peak, you'll see a plaque on top that reads in part:

1837 – MARCY – 1937  
ALSO KNOWN BY THE INDIAN  
NAME TAHAWUS MEANING  
CLOUD-SPLITTER

Tahawus, or *that which cleaves the sky*, carries the literal meaning of mountain, and the figurative—truth (nothing is higher or greater). In 1994, I wrote a song about truth; the chorus goes:

Tahawus, that's what the Natives called it.  
Tahawus, the highest of the high.  
A mountain that could split the clouds,  
the wind, the rain, and time  
And rise above the timberline.

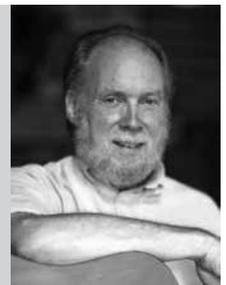
The writer Charles Fenno Hoffman, taken with the beauty of the Seneca language, thought the highest mountain should be named Tahawus, even though the word was not native to northern New York. By the time he suggested it, the mountain was already named in honor of then Governor Learned Marcy. While the mountain's official name stuck, a small mining town was named Tahawus, and over its lifetime has also carried the alternate names of MacIntyre, for the mine's owner, and Adirondac, a Native word for *one who eats trees* or a *bark eater*.

## A Few Short Stories

The river and the mountain range Allegheny (also Alleghany and Allegany) is a Lenape word, usually translated as *fine river*. The town, county, and famous institution called Chautauqua are named after the local lake shaped like *a bag tied in the middle* or *two moccasins tied together*. Onchiota, near Rainbow Lake in Franklin County, means *there is a rainbow*. Ticonderoga is *at the junction of two waterways*—Lake George and Lake Champlain. Long Island's Yaphank was originally called Millville, but was renamed after the Native word for *bank of a river*, because 13 other New York State towns were named Millville.

*continued on page 48*

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the US and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger



and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit [www.berggrenfolk.com](http://www.berggrenfolk.com) to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.

# People's City Report Card 2016

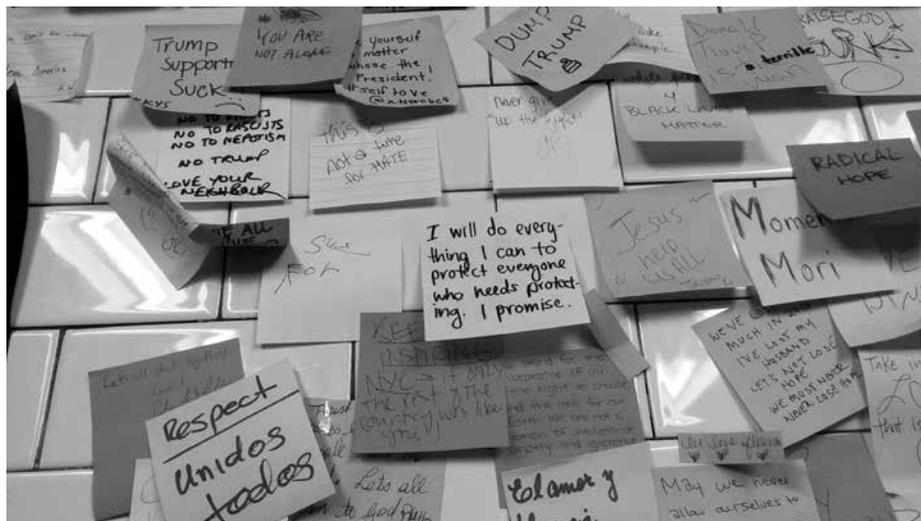
BY MOLLY GARFINKEL WITH STEVE ZEITLIN AND ELENA MARTÍNEZ

## COMMENDABLE

### Union Square Post-It Notes

Throughout our recent history, New Yorkers use words on walls in public spaces to express a variety of views and emo-

from hope and support of unity to mobilization and outrage. This project was begun by artist Matthew Chavez, who goes by the moniker Levee, as a way to vent emotion, which grew out of his earlier project, “Sub-



Union Square Post-It Notes. Photo by Elena Martínez.

tions—grief, protest, anger. There were the 9/11 memorials, such as the “Missing” posters and the tiles on a wall in the Union Square subway where family members could write personal messages to lost ones. In December 2016, displays included the “Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Illumination Against Gentrification,” a resistance art project that protests neighborhood gentrification in Bushwick by creating slogans out of strings of Christmas lights; and the construction wall turned Guerilla Gallery on 116th Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenues run by the Harlem Art Collective, where East Harlem residents used words and images to voice concerns over immigrant rights and the tragedy of the 43 students who disappeared from the Rural Teachers College in Mexico. For several weeks, in effort to give voice to the despair, anger, sadness, and for some, the excitement, of the outcome of the presidential election, Union Station subway station was turned into a forum. Several tiled walls were covered with post-it notes with messages and quotes, ranging

way Therapy”—a way to de-stress through conversation in NYC’s subways. The post-it notes began to go up the day after the election when he posted “Express Yourself.” At Union Station 10,000 messages were amassed. The post-it notes—quick memos in office settings—provided an ephemeral, cathartic release in a new context, and we are pleased that the New York Historical Society will be collecting and archiving the notes.

### Jim Power’s Mosaic Trail and the Alamo Reinstalled at Astor Place

In 2016, with the Village Alliance and City Lore taking lead roles, friends and allies rallied hard to help artist Jim Power restore his magnificent light pole mosaics, New York City’s longest-lasting guerilla art. Jim teamed up with Julie Powell to refurbish the poles, which were installed, now as totems, in the reopened Astor Place in November. Happily, seven of Jim’s poles will be permanent, vibrant features of the Astor Place landscape. On November 1, Bernard (Tony) Rosenthal’s beloved sculpture, “Alamo,” aka “The Cube,” was also reinstated at Astor Place after a two-year absence.

### Bronx Music Heritage Center’s New Home

The Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) is ready to begin building the Bronx Commons, an arts-based, mixed-use development project. The development, located in the Melrose Commons neighborhood of the South Bronx, on the west side of Elton Avenue, between East 162nd and East 163rd Streets, will house the permanent home of the Bronx Music Heritage Center (BMHC), including a theater, gallery, and classroom space. Their goal is to set aside some units for elderly musicians. The ceremonial groundbreaking took place on January 13, 2017.



Plan for the Bronx Common, future home of the BMHC. Photo courtesy of WHEDco.

## Designation of NYC's Historic LGBT Sites

In March, the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project nominated Julius' Bar to the National Register of Historic Places. Julius', which celebrated its 50th anniversary in April, is often referred to as the oldest gay bar in New York City, and is perhaps best known as the site of the April 21, 1966, "sip-in," a significant event staged to counter the illegality of serving a drink to a gay person in New York. In addition, this June, President Barack Obama declared the Stonewall Inn the country's first LGBT National Monument.

## Cultural Plan

In 2015, Mayor de Blasio signed legislation requiring New York City to generate CreateNYC, the first-ever comprehensive cultural plan for the city. In 2016, the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs launched a variety of opportunities for the public to participate in the planning process and offer feedback for overall issues to be addressed in the Cultural Plan. See <http://createnyc.org/show-up/>. We hope that CreateNYC reflects a nuanced, inclusive roadmap for the future of New York's cultural sector when the Plan is delivered to the Mayor's Office in July 2017. City Lore is seeking to ensure that groups that we call Community Anchors—religious institutions, small businesses, and social clubs—that serve as hubs for community-based arts, but operate largely outside of the philanthropic world, are included in the plan.

## MIXED

### A New Garden

In 1989, two weeks after the Central Park attack, Donald Trump spent a reported \$85,000 on advertisements in the city's newspapers, a headline of which read, "Bring Back the Death Penalty. Bring Back Our Police!" In the message, Trump wrote, "I ... hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes. They must serve as examples...." On Monday, November 7, 2016, the day before the presidential election, we spoke with the

father of one of the Central Park Five, teenagers who served five years in prison before they were exonerated, about his motivation to open a community garden in his native East Harlem. He did not talk about the case, or the boys' lost childhoods, or the miscarriage of justice. He spoke only about how he, his family, and community had to carve out safe space, a sanctuary, in their own city after being targeted and harassed.

### Gardens vs. Low Cost Housing

Time and again, New York City has proposed low cost or mixed-use housing on the sites of beloved community gardens. This year, the Elizabeth Street Garden between Spring and Prince streets is battling the de Blasio administration, asking them to select an alternate site for mixed-use housing and not to destroy or drastically diminish the beautiful garden, which is one of the few open spaces of parkland in Lower Manhattan. More than 5,500 letters have been written in support, and you make a donation to help save the garden at <http://elizabethstreetgarden.org/fund-the-fight/>. Funds will go to printing banners, protest posters, color copies, public relations, and legal advice.

### Street Vendors

Sean Basinski, director of the Street Vendor Project, says it's too soon to tell how street vendors fared in 2016. On October 13, the Street Vendor Modernization Act was introduced by City Council members. The Act would double the number of food cart and truck vendor permits over the next seven years. The city capped the number of permits at 3,000 in the early 1980s, but so many more have sought them, and many are on 20-year waiting lists. On October 27, the City Council Consumer Affairs Committee held an eight-hour hearing on the issue, wherein the Mayor effectively said that he did not know if the city would be increasing the number of street vending permits. According to Basinski, the City Council is ready to make this change for increased equity. However, businessmen like Donald Trump do not support the small vendors,

no less the idea of more of them. Basinski says that the change could and should happen as soon as possible, while the iron is still hot. For the moment, many vendors are afraid to work for fear that they might be arrested for vending without a permit and, under the new rules, deported.

## TROUBLING

### Trump Tower Barricades

The barricades, trucks, security guards, and bomb-sniffing dogs clogging Fifth Avenue between 56th and 57th Streets, the high-traffic area around Trump Tower, are costing the city nearly \$475,000 per day. Members of the press are quarantined in corrals across the street, and two lanes of Fifth Avenue traffic have been closed. On Monday, December 5, Mayor de Blasio asked the federal government to cover the total \$3.5 million burden that the city has incurred for protecting Trump's midtown apartment since election night. Taxpayers and city council members alike have signed and circulated a petition to charge the US government the estimated \$1 million-per-day fee of guarding Trump and his family in Trump Tower during his four-year term. Trump's decision to maintain his family's primary residence in New York threatens to undermine city's security, circulation, and economy.

### Sanctuary City

In November 2016, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio issued a statement in response to a Trump campaign promise to withhold federal funds from "sanctuary cities," cities that limit their cooperation with US immigration authorities seeking to hold illegal immigrants in detention. On November 10, de Blasio stated, "We are not going to sacrifice a half million people who live among us, who are part of our community." Sadly, the new federal administration has followed through on Trump's campaign pledge to deport millions of illegal immigrants. In early February 2017, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers swept through six states, arresting hundreds

of undocumented immigrants. Unlike the Obama administration, which focused ICE raids on undocumented immigrants with convictions of violent crime, Trump has expanded ICE's purview to round up undocumented immigrants who have ever been accused of any crime, even in cases where the charges remain unresolved. Immigrant advocacy group Make the Road New York has offered "Know Your Rights" trainings, but 41 arrests were made across the five boroughs during the week of February 6, 2017. Mayor de Blasio has reaffirmed his intention to embody the spirit of sanctuary for all of New York City's residents, and has stated that city officials and police will never ask for an individual's immigration status. However, he has also indicated that he will consider adding more offenses to the list through which the city cooperates with ICE.

### Federation of Black Cowboys

In the summer of 2015, the Federation of Black Cowboys, a group of African

Americans who have found a way to ride horses and keep Black cowboy traditions alive in New York City, put in a bid to renew their license for Cedar Lane Stables, the 20-acre, city-owned parcel that they and their mounts have maintained and called home since 1998. Historically, the Federation was the only organization to respond to the Request for Proposal (RFP) for the site, and have always won the bid by default. This time they were one of three bidders. In February 2016, they were informed that they hadn't made the cut. The experience of the Federation of Black Cowboys, as well as other sites City Lore has advocated for, makes it clear that most allocations go to large organizations and high bidders. In addition, the sites are often subject to blind bidding, in which current users have to bid to keep their space without knowing the bids of their competitors. Assignments for the use of city-owned property should be preceded by a survey to assess the value of the organization and the space to the community.

### Terraza 7

Terraza 7 is a bar and music venue located at 40–19 Gleane Street, near the Elmhurst/Jackson Heights border. Opened on June 20, 2002, Terraza 7 hosts live music five nights a week and features bands playing a range of sounds, from Afro-Peruvian, Afro-Colombian, and modern Latin jazz to bolero, salsa, timba, and jarocho. Part of Terraza 7's mission is to break the self-isolation and lack of political participation of immigrants within their local communities. Rather than merely recreating immigrant traditions, founder and owner Freddy Castiblanco maintains that, in order to empower people in diverse communities, Terraza should foster a dialogue among cultural memories, based on immigrants' places of origin and the cultural elements that exist in their new city. Yet Terraza 7's lease was up at end of 2016. For the moment, Castiblanco's landlord is waiting for a permit to demolish the building, so Castiblanco is operating month to month, but he will soon be forced to find a new home for the musicians and neighbors who have become his family. Castiblanco is currently searching for alternative venues, but finding the right space at a fair price is proving extremely difficult. He would ideally prefer to stay close to the Jackson Heights/Elmhurst community of which he has been a leading member for over 16 years, but the same sized space available for \$27,000 per month in Queens' 82nd Street Partnership Business Improvement District (BID) runs \$3,000 per month in Crotona. Relocating across the city may be Castiblanco's only real option. ▼



Federation of Black Cowboys. Photo by Molly Garfinkel.

Steve Zeitlin, City Lore's founding director, is interested in family stories, children's rhymes, subway stories, oral poetry traditions from around the world, and the poetry of everyday life. Elena Martínez, City Lore folklorist and co-artistic director of the Bronx Music Heritage Center, specializes in urban folklore, material culture, Puerto Rican culture and folklore, and Latin music. Molly Garfinkel, director of the Place Matters program, researches community and public history, urban traditions, and perceptions of space and place.

# Crossing Cultures

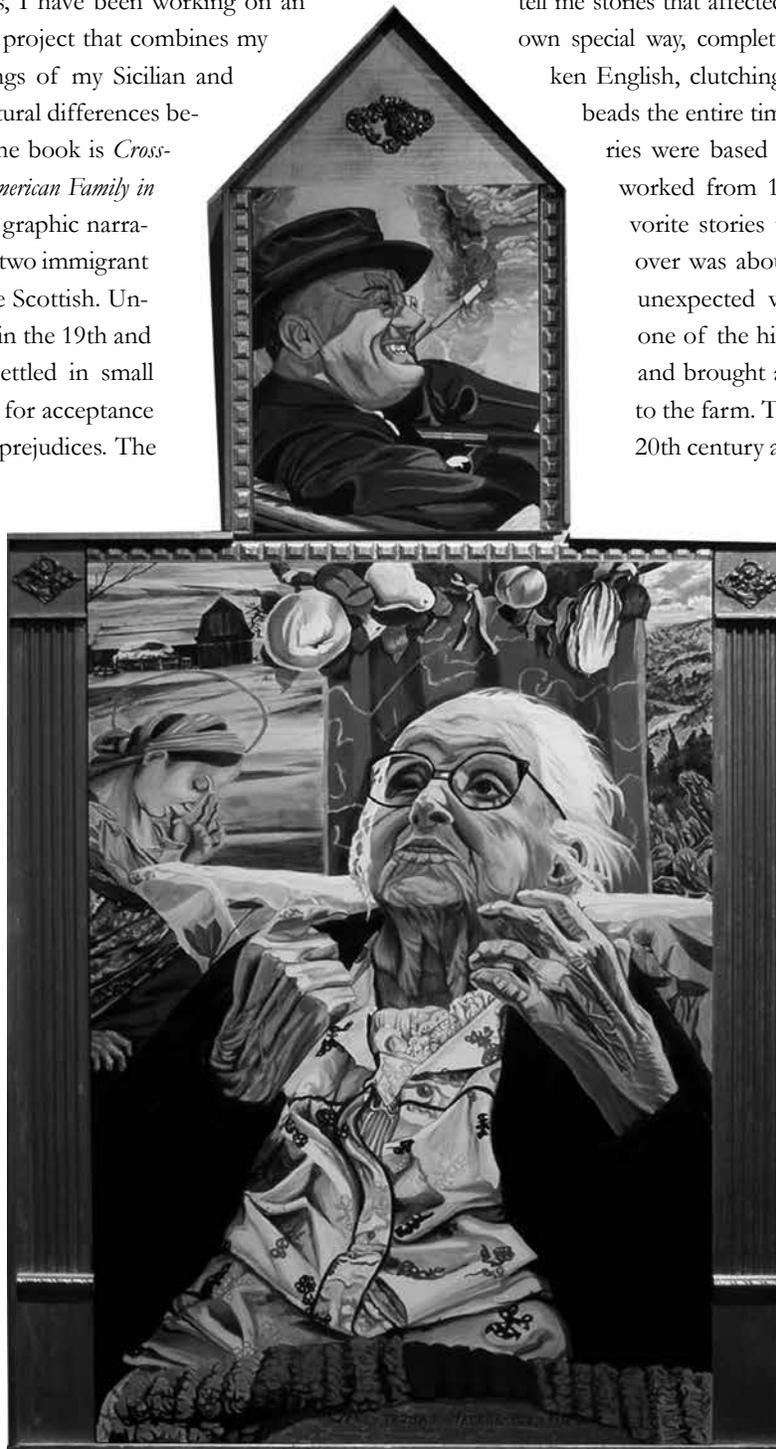
BY THOMAS J. MACPHERSON

For the past eight years, I have been working on an interdisciplinary book project that combines my egg tempera portrait paintings of my Sicilian and Scottish relatives and the cultural differences between them. The name of the book is *Crossing Cultures: A Sicilian and American Family in Western New York*, and it is a graphic narrative spanning generations of two immigrant families: one Sicilian and one Scottish. Unlike most Italian immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries, my family settled in small town America and struggled for acceptance while confronted with local prejudices. The research evolves around my Sicilian grandmother Calogera, the matriarch of the family, who was born in Sicily in 1893. I went to live with her and became immersed in the culture that her parents brought with them from the old country. However, along the way on the road to assimilation, much of our culture was lost due to the importance my family placed on fitting in and becoming American. As fortune had it, my research uncovered an oral history and many cultural beliefs that my grandmother shared with me as I grew up.

On Sunday afternoons after mass, I would listen to Grandma

tell me stories that affected her life. They were told in her own special way, complete with hand gestures and broken English, clutching her rosary and fingering the beads the entire time she talked. Many of the stories were based on life on the farm that they worked from 1915 to 1939. One of her favorite stories that she liked to tell over and over was about when the Gypsies made an unexpected visit to the farm. Apparently, one of the hired men got into a tough spot and brought a touch of drama and intrigue to the farm. Throughout the first part of the 20th century and even up through the 1960s,

groups of Gypsies would descend on the small towns in Western New York. Sicilians in particular were suspicious of them, probably due to unsavory encounters in the Old World, and so they were on their guard to protect their property, and in some cases, protect their families against kidnapping. As soon as a Gypsy was spotted walking the streets of town, word would spread like wildfire, and then everyone would be ever vigilant. One of my favorite stories that she told over and over was the story of when the Gypsies tried to kidnap the hired man. Grandma was making supper one day when



La Mia Vita, 2011. Egg tempera on panel. Photo courtesy of the author.



The farm horse that dragged Grandma, 1920s. Photo courtesy of the author.

she heard their dog barking. Grandma knew it had different barks for different situations, so she was able to tell if friends or if strangers were coming down the driveway. This bark was an angry bark, so she ran out of the house and saw the dog bolting out toward the road where she saw a carload of Gypsies trying to stuff the hired man into the back seat of their car. Grandma rang the dinner bell and Grandpa came running from the barn, saw what was happening, and ran toward the car. The dog had reached the Gypsies by this time and started biting them, and the hired man broke loose and ran toward the house. Since the Gypsies saw Grandpa running toward them and had the dog biting them, they took off in the car. Grandma said that their dog saved the hired man's life.

I asked, "Why were they trying to kidnap the hired man?" She replied, "That's what Gypsies do!" Her statement is a reflection of Grandma sticking to her convictions and beliefs from long ago and indicates that she was also not above holding onto stereotypes.

Another one of her favorite stories focused on the hardships they encountered. During the winter months, the only way they could get around was by horse and sleigh, since the town did not plow their road. One Sunday after they got home

from church, Grandma was holding the reins of the horse while Grandpa was unhitching it. Something spooked the horse, and it took off running through the fields with Grandma still holding onto the reins, bouncing up and down behind the horse as it fled. Grandpa and the kids chased after them, and after about a mile, the horse came to halt. When Grandpa and the kids saw them from the distance, Grandma was just lying on the ground. My aunt who was listening to the story told me that they thought she was dead, because she was just lying there and not moving a muscle. The next day she was so bruised and sore that she couldn't get out of bed to make breakfast, but she managed to get up later in the day to help out around the house. When I asked her why she held onto the reins and allowed herself to be dragged, as opposed to just letting the horse go, her response was, "He was the only horse we had. We would have been goners!"

Grandma was not the only person in our family who held onto the superstitions of Sicilian culture. Her sister Mary (Petrina) and brother-in-law Tony were also believers in the secret powers of the unknown that no one really understood, nor could they completely control. Grandma, Great-Aunt Mary, and Great-Uncle Tony represented a link to the culture and way of life

in Sicily. Grandma's brothers assimilated into American culture very quickly, mostly because they were men and had many more opportunities to become professionals and to move up the social ladder, even though they were Sicilian. But Grandma and Great-Aunt Mary remained *contadini* (peasants), steeped in southern Italian culture with their gender holding them back. Both factors conspired to keep them in very traditional roles as women. Grandma and Great-Aunt Mary, along with Great-Uncle Tony, carried with them a glimpse back in time to the life of the *contadini*, except in this country they were able to improve their circumstances and live a (generally) better life. They never totally integrated into American society, but were always in a world between two cultures. They watched television, rode in cars, and modernized their houses, but still clung to many Old World Italian beliefs, such as the idea that there was magic in religion and religion in magic.

There is a long tradition of blessing rituals, ancient pagan beliefs, and magical practices in southern Italy. Along with the cult of the saint, the immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno* (southern Italy) brought their occult beliefs and practices with them. Emigration could not help a person escape from the power of witches. Events and tragic circumstances that affected their lives, that even the police, the priest, or a doctor could not cure, required the help of a *strega* (a female magician) or *stregone* (male magician) to remove the evil eye, or *mal'occhio*. The evil eye could be a curse that a bad witch or an enemy casts upon someone, or one could be possessed by evil spirits just by walking down the street. When an evil spirit is cast out, *streghe* do not destroy it, but just send the evil spirit on its journey, and unload its evil on the rest of the world. To Americans, this appeared to be a ridiculous response to the events of life, but to the Sicilians, this was the only way they knew to how cope with unexplainable events. Each crisis was faced with the support and love of family and *paesani* (fellow Italian countrymen) and increased the sense of community.



The Marriage of Mary and Tony, 2012. Egg tempera on panel. Photo courtesy of the author.

It was through the experience of these traditions that I was exposed to the Italian side of our culture. My cousin Mike Cinquino told me the story how Great-Uncle Tony's sister, who everyone called Aunt Mananna (her real name was Marianna), performed the evil eye removal ritual on him. He had been sick for three days and was not getting any better, so Aunt Mananna did the ritual, and the next day he was "cured" and felt fine. This impressed him so much that he never forgot it.

I also experienced this belief in Italian folk medicine firsthand. I suffer from a foot malaise that I have had since I was very young, called dyshidrotic eczema. When I was 13, I had a bout that was so bad that my feet became infected to the point that I couldn't walk. At the time, doctors could not figure out what was wrong with them, so I suffered through frequent periods where my feet really bothered me. Great-Aunt Mary was very concerned, and one evening talked to my

mother about taking me to an Italian folk doctor or *stregone*.

The next day I was told by Mom that Grandma, Great-Aunt Mary, and Great-Uncle Tony were going to take me to a doctor in the nearby city of Batavia. They were sure he could help my foot condition. Above all, I was not to tell my father anything about where I was going, because he wouldn't have understood and would have caused trouble. My parents were having marital problems at the time, and he was still living with us in an apartment in Grandma's house. My father was also trying to convert my sister and me to become Jehovah's Witnesses, which was just increasing the tension and stress in the house.

So off we drove, with Grandma and me in the back seat, to a part of Batavia that was not familiar to me. Finally, coming to a block with old houses, we stopped at a run-down apartment house and went up to the second floor. It was dark and smelled old. Great-Uncle Tony knocked on the door and a short little man with an aquiline nose let us inside. We sat in his living room with Grandma sitting next to me on the couch. I was thinking, "What kind of a doctor is this guy? This looks like his apartment, not a doctor's office." Then Grandma told me that this was the man who could help me. The four of them started talking in Sicilian, so I had no clue what they were talking about, but I got the feeling that the conversation centered around my foot condition. The old man told me in a heavy Italian accent that doctors haven't been able to help me because they are not treating the right thing and that there were demons causing the infections.

Since I was brought up not to be superstitious by my parents, I thought the man was crazy. He bragged to me about all of the amazing cures he had performed on people, like mending broken bones that wouldn't heal. He told me I had to believe that he could cure me, and then Great-Aunt Mary asked me to take off my shoes and socks. He looked at my feet for some

time, turning them over, looking between the toes. With great ceremony, he gave them the sign of the cross while reciting some prayers in Sicilian, and then, to my complete horror, started spitting on them. By summoning the proper saint through prayer and incantations for each specific malaise, healers used tears and saliva as a way of conquering evil forces. Since a *stregone* cannot exterminate a spell, he lets his saliva send the evil forces on to their next stop. He repeated this ritual several times on both feet, and then he was through. My first reaction was to jerk my feet back, which obviously annoyed the *stregone*. He chastised me for not believing in his powers and told me there would be no hope for me if I didn't change my attitude. Grandma paid him and we left.

I was totally stunned by what had happened. Nobody had mentally prepared me for this ordeal, and as a typical 13-year-old, I felt incredibly embarrassed. I was thankful none of my peers lived in Batavia, so I could sneak in and out of the building without being recognized.

My mother was not particularly superstitious and spent her life trying to be more American than Sicilian. So, in hindsight, when she agreed to let me go, I knew she had lost faith in traditional medicine, and as a last resort, put her faith into a blessing ritual, hoping for a miraculous cure. I went back three times before I was able to talk her out of making me go back. She agonized the entire week trying to figure out a way of telling Grandma. I told her to tell them that my feet have never felt or

looked better than they do now, so I must be cured. For years, Great-Aunt Mary would ask me how my feet were and, of course, I always said, "Great!" Then she would tell Grandma what a good thing they had done for me. I realized that what they did, they did out of love.

In a bit of irony several years later, I did have another bout of this foot ailment, and this time I actually did go to a foot specialist in Batavia. When I got to the office and saw the name on the door, I realized it was exactly the same name as the *stregone* I had gone to a few years earlier. When the doctor came in the examining room, I told him that when I was younger, my Grandma had taken me to see an old man with the same name in an effort to find a cure for my foot ailment. His face turned red and he looked embarrassed. Then he got testy and told me that, indeed, that was his father. In the end, he couldn't help me either. I guess the family had no cures for feet.

More examples of how my family coped with living in an inhospitable environment can be found in my book *Crossing Cultures*. Their journey tells of these and other story of hardships faced by a family at the boundaries of Italian and American cultures, and examines the intersection with German and Scottish Americans, as the family married out of the circle of Sicilian immigrants. Alongside the history of my Sicilian family is the MacPhersons' journey to assimilation, which is a story unto its own, an establishment of a dominant culture to which the new immigrants had

to conform. These character studies are a compelling blend of oral history, direct observation, family photographs, original egg tempera and oil portrait paintings, and far-reaching historical events that shaped their lives in the 19th and 20th centuries. ▼



Professor Tom MacPherson, Program Director, is an artist and Professor of Art at SUNY Geneseo, affiliated with the Art History Department. Thomas MacPherson received a BA from the State University of New York–College at Oswego in 1973 and an MFA from the University of South Carolina in 1976. He has been a Professor of Studio Art at the State University of New York–College at Geneseo since 1985 and attained the rank of professor in 2003. Professor MacPherson has been a practicing artist who has worked in a variety of media, including watercolor, egg tempera, oil, and all of the printmaking processes and drawing media including silver point. His watercolors and prints have been widely exhibited in international, national, and regional juried exhibitions where they have won awards. Since 2006, he has been working on a large research project that traces the path of immigration to America of his Scottish and Sicilian family through his artwork and literary endeavors. This series of installations has been exhibited nationally from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland to Syracuse University to the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in New York City.



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# J. N. B. Hewitt: A Voice from the Sixth Nation

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Until their forced exodus from the south, the Tuscarora Nation was not part of the great Iroquois Confederacy. Only upon their arrival in 1722, were the Tuscarora allowed to locate among the Oneidas and given a space by the great council fire, as the Sixth Nation of the Haudenosaunee. Forced to relocate again after the American Revolution, they were granted land from the Seneca Nation in 1803. That western New York Tuscarora reservation, diminished when, in 1959, hundreds of acres were seized by New York State for a reservoir, still remains in what is now Niagara County.

The person who is the focus of this profile, John Napoleon Brinton Hewitt, while not a creative writer per se, did much to preserve the language and oral traditions of the Tuscarora and other Iroquois nations.

Born in 1859, on the Tuscarora Nation on the right bank of the Niagara River, Hewitt's ethnic background was mixed—like many Iroquois people of his day. Since descent among the people of the Six Nations has traditionally been reckoned maternally, it's not uncommon even today for Iroquois people to say they are full-blood Iroquois, as long as their line of maternal descent is unbroken.

Hewitt's father, David Brainard Hewitt, was of English and Scottish descent. When the young David Hewitt's parents died, he was adopted by a Tuscarora family and raised within their community. The woman David Hewitt married, Harriet Printup—J. N. B. Hewitt's mother—was an enrolled member of the Tuscarora Nation. Thus, J. N. B. Hewitt was Iroquois by birth.

Although both his parents spoke Tuscarora fluently, the language of their home was reportedly English, and he was homeschooled in English til the age of 11. Then the young John Hewitt began attending the reservation school. There, though instruction was in English, all his classmates spoke Tuscarora. He loved the sounds and rhythms of Tuscarora and his own fluency was established during those school years.

By the time Hewitt was in his early 20s, despite the lack of formal training beyond elementary school, he was one of the

most educated people in the Tuscarora community.

At this point, Hewitt was “discovered” by none other than Erminie A. Smith, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology. Called the “first woman field ethnographer,” Smith was active throughout her career (which ended too soon with her death at 50) in collecting Iroquois legends and publishing works on the Iroquois people. In 1880, she engaged Hewitt as her field assistant in putting together a Tuscarora dictionary. He quickly learned the mechanics of phonetic transcription, becoming so adept that when Smith died in June 1886, Hewitt was hired by John Wesley Powell, the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) head, to complete the dictionary (Rudes and Crouse 1987, xi).

Until his own passing in 1937, J. N. B. Hewitt was employed by the US government for 51 years, as a professional ethnologist. Although the number of publications, credited to Hewitt, is relatively small, the publications are deeply impressive for their close attention to accuracy and detail, reflecting Hewitt's lifelong commitment to collecting material related to the Iroquois. Quiet, studious, and unassuming, every year he spent as much time as possible in the communities of the Tuscarora, Seneca, Onondaga, and Mohawk nations, collecting texts that he would then pore over and analyze.

Hewitt's quiet intensity, never calling attention to himself, always burying his own identity in accurately recording languages and traditions that might otherwise not be preserved, may explain why he remains little known to this day. Some even suggested (with no awareness, it seems, of their racist assumptions) that Hewitt's small number of publications reflected a sort of Indian laziness on his part.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. According to Blair Rudes (and other more careful commentators), “a major reason why Hewitt did not publish more” was that he “was meticulous to a fault.” His many preserved manuscripts show neatly and legibly writing, with almost no errors. (Rudes and Crouse 1987, xi)

Further, much of Hewitt's work remained unpublished after his death, held in the BAE archives until the demise of that office, at which point the manuscripts migrated to the National Anthropological Archives. It's a tribute to how well he did his recording that, in 1987, the National Museums of Canada saw fit to bring out a 652-page, two-volume publication of his previously unpublished manuscripts of Tuscarora language and stories entitled *The Tuscarora Legacy of J. N. B. Hewitt*, edited by Blair A. Rudes and Dorothy Crouse.

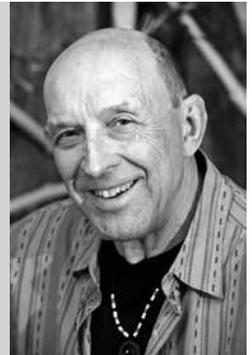
Perhaps, one day, a book may be written about this elusive, brilliant, largely self-educated man who was a true voice for his people. I would love to read it. Meanwhile, as probably Hewitt would have wanted it, we have his published work to treasure, especially the massive volume *Seneca Fiction, Legends and Myths*. Published in 1918, by the Bureau of American Ethnology, collected by Jeremiah Curtin and Hewitt, and edited by Hewitt himself, its 819 pages should be required reading for anyone interested in the traditional stories of the Haudenosaunee. ▼

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Joseph Bruchac is a writer, musician, and traditional Native storyteller whose work often reflects his American Indian (Abenaki) ancestry and the Adirondack Region of northern New York where he lives in the house he was raised in by his grandparents.

He is the author of over 120 books for young readers and adults, including the award-winning volume *OUR STORIES REMEMBER, American Indian History, Culture and Values through Storytelling*. Photo by Eric Jenks.



# Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!

BY LIBBYTUCKER

Of all the animals with ghostly resonance, cats are among the most powerful. Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Black Cat" recounts the horrifying death and reappearance of Pluto, a black and white cat. In Celtic folklore, the Cat Sith—large and black, with a white spot on its chest—haunts the Scottish highlands. Settlers in early America feared black cats, associating them with witchcraft, and believed that only silver bullets could kill them. No wonder the possibility of a feline ghost still makes some people nervous, even though cats are wonderful creatures. I have two cats and love them dearly.

A couple of years ago, my students and I had a strange encounter with a cat during a field trip to an allegedly haunted place on our campus. During my years of teaching folklore, I have led quite a few field trips of this kind. Even though the legends associated with such places tell of sudden deaths and hair-raising hauntings, the places themselves have tended to be disappointingly quiet. All of my field trips have taken place in the afternoon, some in bright sunlight. What self-respecting ghost would appear under such depressingly cheerful conditions? For years I expected nothing exciting to happen, and for years nothing did.

In the fall of 2015, I was teaching our English Honors seminar, a small class of highly motivated, successful students. After years of dedication to their academic work, those highly capable students expected to get excellent results, and they usually did. Maybe that was the reason why something unusual happened on the day we went down to the sub-basement of Old Rafuse Hall, an office building that once functioned as a dormitory.

Before we reached the sub-basement, we made a quick stop at the building's storage room, which was filled with random things used by students in past years. Old music stands, drum sets, boxes of costumes, piles of sports paraphernalia, and other objects attested to active student lives. Now all those objects lay limp and useless. In one corner of the room, we found an old-fashioned rocking chair. "Maybe the chair will rock by itself," a student said hopefully. It didn't, even when



they took turns sitting in the chair. As usual, nothing much was happening in the haunted spaces of this former residence hall.

Trudging down the stairs, some of the students complained that it was getting harder to breathe. "The air smells like burnt broccoli!" one said. Certainly the air seemed thicker, less pleasant to inhale. Nonetheless, we kept going. As we entered the sub-basement, we saw a door labeled "DANGER"—not exactly reassuring.

The first room we visited was the old laundry room. When the building was still a dorm, students washed clothes there late at night; some of them claimed to have seen demonic faces in the washing machines' glass doors. Since then the machines had gone somewhere else, taking their demon faces with them. We listened for a moment, trying to hear any unusual sounds that might be there, but heard nothing at all.

At last we reached the door of the incinerator room, which a past student or maintenance staff member had covered with the message: "Rumor has it that a ghost's haunt this room" [sic]. Unimpressed with this graffiti writer's grammar, my Honors students found the message to be nonetheless a little daunting. Surely nothing scary inhabited the room? "Stand back," I joked. "A few of you can come in with me, but the rest of you should wait."

Only three students followed me into the room, which contained a pile of trash and had dark, cryptic markings on its walls. "Here," I said, "is the incinerator—"

"MEOWWWW! HISSSSS!" A frenzy of

angry cat noises erupted around us. Claws scabbled at the wall as a cat got ready to fight—but no cat was visible. For about 30 seconds, we heard more scabbling, hissing, meowing—and finally silence.

"Professor Tucker, did you put a cat here to surprise us?" the student standing nearest to me asked. "Of course not!" I answered. We looked all over the room, checking behind the door and inside the incinerator: no cat. Then we went up to the floor above, searching for a lost feline. By now the students who had heard the cat looked pale and shocked; the others looked a bit worried, too. All of us were glad to get back outside into the fresh air.

Clueless about the source of the cat sounds, I told the students an academic legend I had learned a while ago. A biology professor who loved nothing better than dissection had happened upon a cat in her garden. "Hmm, a stray cat!" she gloated. "How lucky that I have some chloroform! Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" The next day she entered her biology lab with a big grin on her face. "I have a *special surprise* for you!" she trilled. "A cat wandered into my garden! Just for you!" Pale with shock, the students had no choice but to dissect the cat. Afterwards, they never felt the same about their professor.

Could this have been the cat that my students and I heard in the sub-basement of Rafuse Hall? Surely not! But to this day, I can give no good reason for the sounds of an angry cat that erupted around us in the incinerator room. All I know is that on a dark night—or even a sunny afternoon—in an unfamiliar place, you might want to think twice before calling, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



# You'll See Our Tracks:

## The Raquette River Dams Oral History Project

BY CAMILLA AMMIRATI

Arnold Wright was a hard man to find—or at least, a hard man to get on the phone. After several months of fruitless phone calls, though, a friend of his I'd already interviewed for the Raquette River Dams Project took me to meet him and his sons at their auto body shop down the road. Next thing I knew, Arnold was sitting me down in his kitchen, showing me memorabilia from his logging days, and exhorting me to play on the banjo I'd brought with me that day, a classic country song or two for him to sing along with.

As with many who took part in this project, Arnold was hesitant at first to be interviewed, seeming a bit puzzled but ultimately pleased that anyone would want to know about the work he and others did to build and run the hydroelectric power dams along northern New York's Raquette River in the 1950s, and more recently. Although the St. Lawrence Seaway construction has received more attention, the dams along the Raquette—a number of them built during the same time period—were also substantial feats of engineering that had significant impact on the region's economy and community life. Wright was one of many local people who took part in this transformative work. At 18 years old, he was the 82nd man hired by the Carry Construction Company to help clear the land around the river near Carry Falls for the reservoir that would soon be formed there. His stories illuminate not only the beginning of the 1950s hydro development push along the Raquette, but a range of other important aspects of North Country life, past and present—from the lore of logging to the centrality of social dance traditions.

And although his stories are unique, their richness is shared across the many conversations recorded for the Raquette River Oral History Project.

### The Raquette River Dams Oral History Project Overview

This project, conducted over 2014–2016, documents the stories of people involved in or significantly affected by the construction of the hydroelectric dams and powerhouses along the Raquette River, one of the most heavily dammed rivers in New York State. As early as 1908, a state commission explored the hydroelectric power potential of this river. Work along its length to build dams and harness the river's

power has carried on in various ways over the past hundred years and more. In 1952, however, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission licensed the Niagara Mohawk power company to build six dams and five powerhouses in the Colton, New York area (Watson 2016). While additional rebuilding and relicensing work would continue over the following decades, a distinct building boom occurred as Niagara Mohawk took on these six hydroelectric dam projects in quick succession over the 1950s.

This oral history project sought to document the experience of people involved in or affected by that building boom, as well as the decades of work that followed from it. The project was made possible by the support of the New York



The hydroelectric dam at Rainbow Falls in Parishville, NY, 2014. Photo by Camilla Ammirati. Courtesy of TAUNY Archives.



76. INPC Carry Falls Project - D-7 tractor crossing Raquette River at Parameter Ford. (Edson Martin, navigator.) April 2, 1952.

Edson Martin navigating a tractor across the Raquette River above Carry Falls, 1952. Photo by Niagara Mohawk. Courtesy of Arnold Wright and TAUNY Archives.

Department of State, with funds provided under Title 11 of the Environmental Protection Fund. Project partners include Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), the Raquette River Blueway Corridor Group, the Village of Potsdam, and WPBS-TV in Watertown. Interviews were conducted primarily by me, as TAUNY Director of Programs and Research, and by Mary Jane Watson, in cooperation with Roque Murray of WPBS. We recorded 30 interviews with 31 individuals with significant connections to the Raquette River hydro projects, for a total of approximately 28 hours of archival audio recordings. Mary Jane Watson and Ruth McWilliams of South Colton, New York, also continue to conduct relevant interviews as opportunities arise. Additionally, we collected approximately 500 photos and other scanned maps and memorabilia items from these interviewees relating to the dam projects or their own relevant personal and professional experience. We also collected approximately 3,700 additional photos representing the history of the Raquette River more generally and the life of the communities along its shores, including contemporary

photos taken by Watson and me to document people and places involved in the oral history project. Murray also recorded 15 of the interviews on video to be compiled for a WPBS documentary project (aired spring 2016). Over the summer and fall of 2017, TAUNY will feature an exhibit based on this oral history project at The TAUNY Center in Canton, New York, as well as related programming at The TAUNY Center and other locations around the region.

For this project, we aimed to present as wide a range of perspectives as possible on the history of the Raquette River hydro dam development projects. As the real thrust of the development projects occurred in the 1950s, we found that many who were directly involved have since passed away, and others have left the area. Repeatedly, interview subjects stated that they couldn't think of any others they'd worked with on the projects who were still living. Also, as many who worked on these sites had passed through only briefly in the midst of long careers in a trade, some of those who were involved did not identify with the projects enough to recall anything about that work in particular, and so did

not answer inquiries or declined to be interviewed. Still, we identified as many subjects as possible through word of mouth, media announcements, and direct requests to the power companies, construction companies, and unions around the region that employed people for the hydro development projects on the Raquette. We also sought contacts through historical societies, museums, and other organizations and individuals along the length of the river.

Despite these challenges, we identified and interviewed an array of people representing a range of occupations, geographical locations, time periods, and types of relationship to the Raquette River dam projects. We spoke primarily to people who had worked in connection with the dams, but also with some who shared more general recollections of the dam projects' effects on their communities and their own personal lives. These include individuals whose families lost or gained land due to the dam projects; operated businesses affected for better or worse by the boom in development; owned camps that were lost or had to be moved because of the project; or generally remembered changes to community life and to the river itself, as well as what it was like simply to witness the construction projects themselves. While some individuals tell of negative impact—or suggested the negative effects of the projects through their unwillingness to be interviewed in the first place—the majority of contacts emphasize the hydro dam projects as extremely positive and rewarding for the interviewees and their communities. They talk of camaraderie on the job, great relationships with their crews and employers, and pride in hard work done well.

Ultimately, several themes emerged from these conversations, including both shared experiences and differing perspectives. In our interviews, we focused on experiences related to the Raquette River dams but also inquired about personal and family background and other aspects of people's experience, in order to put the Raquette River stories in a broader context of personal and regional identity. The resulting stories are



Eli Tracy with his Model T at his home in Hermon, NY. Photo by Camilla Ammirati. Courtesy of TAUNY Archives.

different hand signal for lowering and hoisting, booming, swinging, boom down slow, boom up slow, swing slow, and all different hand signals....[There was] no confusion, no it worked perfect. It had to or somebody would get killed, you know, swing an iron into the guys up in the air there, a hundred and fifty feet, yeah, had to be pretty precise, somebody could get hurt.

Whether describing the importance of such hand signals or the buckskin mittens keeping those hands warm in the bitter weather, Eli richly illustrates the daily life of his profession.

People's stories also gave some insight into how traditional occupations in the region have transformed over time. Eli, for example, had received a TAUNY Heritage Award in 2008 for carrying on his family's multigenerational tradition of blacksmithing. As he explained it, early cars such as the Model A and Model T were not far removed from the horse and wagon arrangements blacksmiths had long worked on. Blacksmithing work naturally shifted into early auto mechanic work, and then mechanics might also move further into that profession as auto technology developed. Eli himself owns a Model T and enjoys keeping it in good order and going out on rides with other antique car owners in the area—and, fortunately for me, taking the occasional enthusiastic folklorist for a spin. In his professional life, blacksmithing gave him a good basis for the work he would do as a crane operator and master mechanic on the Raquette powerhouse worksites and around the region.

As his and others' comments made clear, though, their work was far from a cozy ride about the countryside. And while, fortunately, the tales of workplace injury were remarkably few, the work involved a fair bit of danger and daring. The interviews include many tales of the more dramatic moments of life in logging, construction, and other trades. Arnold, for instance, shared the personal experience of nearly suffocating in a forest fire before he managed to get to safety along the waterline. On a lighter

too rich and varied to summarize quickly, but some highlights and themes stand out.

### The Lore of the Dams

One of the main outcomes of this project is a varied but interconnected web of occupational lore. The majority of interviewees worked on the dams or powerhouses and/or for the power companies, such as Niagara Mohawk and Brookfield Renewable Energy, which have run the hydro projects over the years. Occupations or work activities documented include logging, land clearing, construction management, crane operation, security, pipeline maintenance, concrete testing, truck driving, engineering, representing citizen concerns, and “running the river” or managing the hydroelectric assets up and down the Raquette. For some, work on the dams was a summer job during college, while others spent decades working with the Raquette River as a power source, or applying the same skills they developed on the dam projects to other jobs all around the North Country. We spoke to some who were involved at the beginning of the major development in the Colton area in the 1950s, some primarily involved in later rebuilding

or re-licensing projects, and some whose work on the river or in their related careers has continued until relatively recently, thus bringing a more contemporary perspective to the project.

The people we spoke with outlined the goals, responsibilities, and types of knowledge that defined their work, including stories that bring the reality of it into sharp relief. The two crane operators we spoke with, for instance, painted a vivid picture of their work on powerhouses on the Raquette and elsewhere. Al Chase and Eli Tracy told us a lot about the strong working relationship between crane operators and ironworkers—or “rodbusters,” as they were called—who collaborate on the high stakes process of moving heavy materials into place at great heights. Eli demonstrated the language of this relationship—a set of hand signals everyone learned on the job:

Sometimes they'd use radio, if you were working where you couldn't see anybody...but most of the time hand signal, and when, a fellow, if you couldn't see him, he'd signal to another fellow and he'd signal to you. That's the way it worked.... [There was a]

note, Eli described how the Mohawk ironworkers would ride the wrecking ball down and up 180-foot heights to get a coffee break, secured in no way except by holding on and interlocking their legs. Al talked about once lowering the cage so fast that a man dropped his hardhat at the top and caught it again before reaching the ground. While there was no shortage of mundane moments on these jobs, these individuals' stories reveal the degree to which their work depended on deep reserves of skill and courage.

There were also striking stories of happenings around the Raquette River dam projects that became widely known. Certain tales were passed along by multiple people, sometimes with variations and embellishments, which suggest a modest but vivid body of lore pertaining to the dam projects themselves. These stories, too, describe some dangerous encounters. Jane Mousaw, among others, shared the story of how her husband, a carpenter on the dams,

was one of a group that was once swept hundreds of feet down the river, eventually managing to grab hold of trees along the banks and get out. We also heard much about one of the odd, distinctive details of how the Raquette River landscape changed over time. Flooding boggy areas resulted in "floating islands"—large patches of boggy ground that tore loose and made their heavy way downstream. This phenomenon caused concern for some that they'd muck up the works at the dams and delight for others who had fun mucking about *on them* along the way. It was interesting, over the course of many conversations, to hear different takes on these situations.

We also heard from many about people and places that loomed large in community experience, as in the case of one particular character, a time keeper on the project named Ted Fisher. As project foreman William Mousaw put it:

I think anybody in South Colton or Colton knew Ted Fisher, and he was

kind of a, well, oh, he liked to joke and stuff. So, the *Courier* had Louise Blake cover South Colton. So every day she'd call and ask Ted what went on at the project yesterday. And so she called this one morning and he said, 'Well, we had a thing since we poured a slab of concrete and next morning there was a deer stuck right in the middle of it. We had to take and go over there with jackhammers and jackhammer the deer out.' Well, that got in the paper. And...it didn't go over as a joke really with some of the people. But, that was what it was, there was never any deer or any at all.

Other versions of this story have Ted saying they had to cut the deer's feet off to free it, and it bounded away on the stumps as soon as they cut it loose. Both Ted and his stories have the air of the tall tale about them, not only in the details but also in the delight with which various people spoke of them.

Places, too, clearly brought out strong feelings for many. Certain favorite



Crane operator Al Chase at his home in Sandfordville, NY. Photo by Camilla Ammirati. Courtesy of TAUNY Archives.

# “Hazzarding” a Try: A Day in the Field on the Raquette River Dams Oral History Project

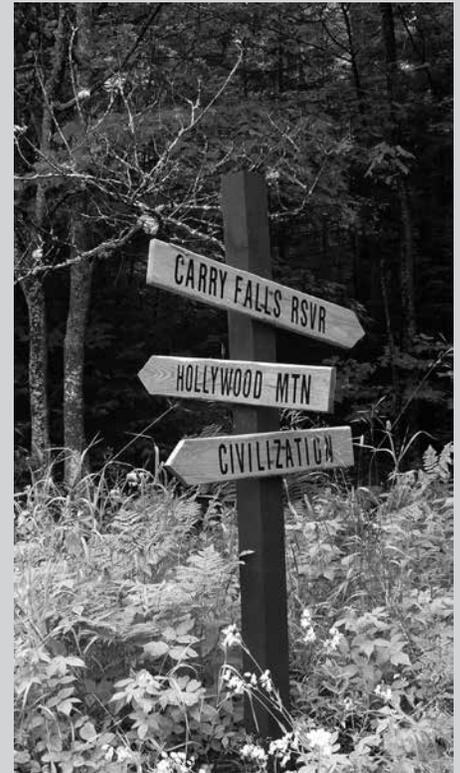
The plan was that unless I heard otherwise, I should show up on the dock at the Carry Flow on Sunday morning, July 19, at 10 a.m., and a boat would arrive to pick me up. My destination was the Hazzard Camp, one of a number of camps making up the 103-year-old association of camp owners known locally as the Jordan Club. These camps originally dotted the banks of the Raquette River near where it meets the Jordan River. When the river was dammed in the early 1950s, camp owners were forced to abandon their camps or get them moved uphill to what would soon be the banks of the newly created Carry Falls Reservoir. The Jordan Club is known for being one of the main sources of resistance to the spate of dams built along the Raquette River in the area at that time, and while its members have adjusted to the (now not-so) new arrangement, it was my good fortune that they were still willing to lend their voices to this project, recording the history of those dams and the people who helped build or were otherwise significantly affected by the building of them.

Others I'd spoken to for the project had noted that I should track down representatives of the Jordan Club but didn't know who to put me in touch with and seemed somehow to suggest the group was elusive. I'd therefore been delighted to make the initial connection with the Club serendipitously through an old friend I'd met up with at a music festival earlier that summer. There she'd introduced me to Ruth Hazzard-Watkins, whose family belongs to the Jordan Club. Ruth had told me their annual meeting and reunion was coming up, and that I should visit that weekend to talk with a couple of the older folks who would have memories of what it was like when the river there was dammed. Thus, the plan to come out and interview people was made.

A few weeks ahead of the meeting, we worked out the details over the phone and via email. Because there's no reliable cell phone service at the camps, we'd have to just go with the plan once the family was over there, as there'd be no way to get in touch if something came up. In the week leading up to the visit, I called and emailed to confirm but couldn't reach Ruth directly.

We'd agreed earlier, though, that I'd turn up on the dock that Sunday morning unless I was specifically told otherwise, so I headed over that morning as planned. The entrance is a gated dirt road off Rte. 56, 6.5 miles from Sevey if you're coming from the Tupper Lake side. I found the spot and turned in, just as another car pulled up to the other side of the gate. As I walked towards the car, a man got out, giving me a puzzled and not completely friendly look that suggested he was not someone who had been sent to meet me. I said I was supposed to meet Ruth Hazzard, and he told me the Hazzard camp was all the way on the other side of the lake, so he didn't know how I was going to get there, but I could go ahead and just find a place to park down by the launch area. He also said it seemed they'd left the gate unlocked for me. So I went on ahead.

It's a long dirt and gravel road, maybe a mile or two, through the dense, shady woods. Along the way, I passed a post with three signs on it pointing to Carry Falls Reservoir, Hollywood Mountain, and, back towards the road, “Civilization.” I went on towards the launch, finding the sides of the road packed with cars as I got closer to the water. The cars were from all over—New England states, Pennsylvania, Florida—a few with boat trailers attached. I came out to a spit of sand where various motorboats and canoes were sitting up in the tree line. Not another person was in sight, though. Ruth had said they'd send a boat over for me. I waited a bit, and soon enough someone did come up in a motorboat, this time giving me a look both puzzled *and* friendly. I asked if he was by any chance a Hazzard. He said he was a Davis, but he could run me over to the Hazzard camp. On the one hand, I didn't want to turn up if they weren't expecting me, and if they were expecting me, they would have sent a boat themselves. On the other hand, it seemed they'd left the gate open for me, so perhaps they were expecting me after all and had just gotten held up, in which case I might be saving them the trouble. Plus, I figured this was going to be my only chance to catch them, as Ruth had said this was the weekend people would be here from far away. So I got in the boat with this friendly fellow and took him up on the offer.



*Signpost on the way to the boat launch for the Jordan Club. Photo by Camilla Ammirati. Courtesy of TAUNY Archives.*

He took us straight across the lake, and we pulled up to a little plank dock on a little scrubby beach, where a man was sitting holding a baby. I said who I was, and he recognized my name as a friend of the friend I'd visited with at the festival. He said Ruth and others were in a meeting and had maybe been expecting me yesterday, but that I could wait for them here. So I got out and we chatted a bit. This was Ruth's son Jesse and his own son Lucas. He took me on a little tour of the beach and camp, showing me the old one-room sleeping camp, one of the original buildings, where people would sleep while working on the bigger cottage. It's now a tool and storage shed. There was a rock-lined fire pit in front with a wonderfully improvised cooking structure set up—a grill surface hanging down from an iron frame. We went up into the main camp, which was also an original building but has had various additions and updates done over the years.

Jesse said that as one of the younger members of the Club, he couldn't tell me

much about how the damming of the Raquette had affected the group, but he could tell me some about the history of the Club and what it's like to live on the reservoir now. So, we sat in a little screened porch looking out through the trees to the water. There was a hummingbird feeder hanging on the corner of the porch, and the hummingbirds were many and active, swooping and thrumming about, occasionally seeming to clash over access to the feeder. They were bright and delicate, but the beating of their wings is surprisingly forceful, sounding almost electrical. While Lucas stayed pretty calm, I interviewed Jesse about the history of the Jordan Club and his own experience with the family camp. Jesse also shared a story of the previous day, when the Club had gathered for their reunion picnic on a beach or small island somewhere on the reservoir and had gotten a surprise visit. Apparently, it was a pilot from around Potsdam who travels over the area all the time and was startled to see dozens of people gathered on a remote beach that's usually empty, so he figured he'd stop by and see what was up.

After Jesse and I spoke for a while, we went back down to the beach, where I waited another hour or so for the meeting

to wrap up. Eventually, Jesse pointed me to the network of trails behind the camps, explaining how to go find the meeting myself if I wanted to try to catch Ruth. I made my way up there, checking out the paths in general as well. One way led to another water access point, another to a pump that, as it turns out, does pump drinkable water into an assortment of empty milk jugs and maple syrup containers kept there for collecting, and another—which Jesse said was sort of the “road”—up the hill to the camp where the meeting was happening.

The purpose of the meeting was for Club members to discuss purchasing the land across the water, where the access road is and where Brookfield had considered building vacation homes, much to the Club's dismay. When I came up to the door, they were in full swing talking about property rights, taxes, etc., and I didn't want to interrupt. After another little while, I came back up and they were still going, but after wandering the path a bit I heard things breaking up.

Finally, folks were coming out and someone directed me inside to find Ruth. First, I found two women who turned around and looked at me, just as you might look

at a stranger who'd just walked into your house in a private Club in a remote area. I introduced myself, which didn't help much, but then Ruth turned around and realized who I was. She was delighted to see me and gave me a big hug and said, “You found us! But how did you get here?!” I explained the adventures of the morning, and much to my relief, she was completely delighted and just sorry we'd gotten our signals crossed, as she'd been meaning to call me before leaving, but some things had come up.

Though folks were already dispersing (not to be contacted easily again once they'd parted ways) and tired from the morning's long discussion, Ruth got hold of one of the longest-standing members of the club, Susan Stoddart, whose family had been charter members and who was a child when the damming was done, but old enough at the time to have some memory of it. Susan and I then had a chance to talk a while about her memories. She was enthusiastic, friendly, and full of vivid stories.

Once Susan and I had finished talking, she needed to get back over to her car to return to where she was staying in Childwold, as the family camp isn't big enough for her and her husband to stay there along with the next generation, who is in it now, and Ruth, too, needed to get back to focusing on her family visit, as it's a precious few days with many gathering there. Ruth took us back across the lake in the little motorboat, bailing at the beginning and end of the ride with a scoop fashioned from a maple syrup gallon jug. She said they make the best kind, as they're sturdy and have good handles. If the sight of a hardy woman cheerfully bailing out her boat with a tool hand-fashioned from a maple syrup jug on the lake beneath the pines in the sparkling sun-lit green and blue afternoon isn't a vision of the North Country's finest summer self, I don't know what is.

Once we were docked, I left Susan and Ruth to say their goodbyes. I made my way back down the dirt road and headed back to town.

*Special thanks to Annie Winkler for the introduction and to the Hazzard family for their kind hospitality.*



*Susan Stoddart in the boat riding back across the Carry Falls Reservoir. Photo by Camilla Ammirati. Courtesy of TAUNY Archives.*



Jane Mousaw in the home that she and her family built in Colton, NY. Photo by Camilla Ammirati. Courtesy of TAUNY Archives.

in the process, thanks to the vagaries of physics as applied to dragging a cabin up a hillside with a crane.

Still others showed remarkable creativity in making smaller and/or less tangible things than houses that nonetheless reflect how rooted they are in their life and work along the river. Jane Mousaw noted that her husband's carpentry work was shared by the whole family. They did in fact build their house themselves, and her husband Lee also enjoyed making signs and doing woodcarving, arts he shared with his children and grandchildren. Jane is a singer. She keeps mum on the personal details people told her when she was working in the 1960s at the Colton Hotel, where men working on the nearby penstock would come to unwind after a long day. She was, though, willing to sing me one or two snippets she recalled from old songs written by others in her community about local life and people. Jim Hourihan, meanwhile, was inspired by his large-scale construction projects to do some unique small-scale construction of his own. He was superintendent on the new powerhouses at Hewittville and Unionville when they were put in, but he has also long taken pleasure in constructing his "tin men." He uses metal scraps and spare parts to make these jaunty, multi-hinged figures—anywhere from a few inches long to much closer to life-size—for himself and friends. He particularly likes to give them to people who are traveling, as he enjoys the idea of them residing in far-off places around the world.

While Jim's tin men might bring scraps of local history and community life to the other side of the world, they ultimately embody the experience, knowledge, and investment in local life and work that our interview subjects consistently demonstrated. Whatever their connection to the hydroelectric dam projects, people spoke overwhelmingly of their enjoyment of their work, their appreciation of the dam projects, and their respect for the powerful river those dams reshaped. Their reflections suggest, overall, an enduring love of the river and commitment to the ways of

swimming holes and stretches of beach were lost to the damming. Several family camps had to be abandoned, dismantled and rebuilt, or dragged to higher ground. Many interviewees also described the beloved old Hollywood Inn and "dude ranch," which now reside at the bottom of the Carry Falls Reservoir. Certainly, the Raquette River dams did not put nearly as many settlements underwater as the creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway did, but from individual camps to community gathering places such as Hollywood, they still created a set of ghost locations that live on in community memory.

It is nonetheless clear that the reshaped riverway became important to the people

along its banks in new ways. In place of lost swimming holes, community members came to love the newly made lakes. Many have used them enthusiastically and often over the years for fishing, paddling, and other recreational activities traditional to the region. Even during the burst of dam-building activity in the 1950s around Colton, the construction sites themselves became special to residents who would drive out in the evening to have a picnic and check out the progress. Those families who moved or rebuilt their camps also found themselves creating new places that would remain important to their families over generations. Some carried out remarkable experiments in vernacular architecture

life connected to it. Many even spoke to us in their homes right along the Raquette's shores, showing us through their windows, as well as in their words, that while they worked hard to shape this powerful river, it has continued to shape them, too.

### Passing the Stories Along

TAUNY is pleased to share these remarkable oral histories with the public in a variety of ways. The 2017 exhibit and related programming, along with a future traveling exhibit, will give people an opportunity to explore the oral histories of the Raquette River Dams at The TAUNY Center and other locations around the North Country through this coming fall. The full collection of materials will also soon be available to the public through TAUNY's partnership with the Northern New York Library Network, which will host the project's digital archive online through their "New York Heritage" website.

This collection benefits listeners in a variety of ways. To begin with, it's full of incredible stories. Stories of stamina and creativity, good luck and bad, fear and fearlessness from the icy heights to the murky depths, wild encounters with wildlife, and formidable feats of engineering. These stories help people in our community and beyond get to know the individual places, the individual moments, and ultimately the individual people who make up our local and regional history. Along with a wealth of vibrant details highlighting the value of lived experience as part of the historical record, the collected interviews can also yield great insights about cultural and environmental history, more generally, in our region and beyond. The interviewees' first-hand observations track the economic and social dynamics of a large-scale project with varied implications. They reflect, for instance, how the businesses involved moved from a mid-century model of operating on a more local scale in which everyone intimately knew their fellow employees and the river they worked, to the national scale, involving more mechanized models, that prevails today. Interviewees also

register environmental change, not only detailing the impressive re-engineering of the Raquette River corridor but observing changes in the numbers and kinds of creatures that roam its depths and prowl its shores. By illuminating the challenges and successes of past efforts at technological, environmental, and economic progress, these stories help us think through many of the hard questions we face today. They give insight, ultimately, into much broader cultural histories and trends, offering anyone from curious community members to scholars and policymakers valuable information about an important moment in our region's economic and environmental history and its possible implications for ongoing concerns about development and sustainability in both of these areas.

As Arnold Wright told me after a couple rounds of Hank Williams, a lot can be gained from the experiences of people like him, who have learned a great deal themselves through their many years in the woods, on the water, and hard at work building the infrastructure of the North Country. "Everywhere you go, we've been there," he said. "Look down, you'll see our tracks." We have indeed been looking, and we are now glad to have the opportunity to share what we have found. ▼

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Dr. Camilla Ammirati is the Director of Research and Programs at TAUNY in Canton, New York, where she resides with her husband and daughter and pursues her interests in the music, foodways, and other living traditions of New York's North Country. Camilla holds a PhD in English from the University of Virginia, with a focus on 19th- to 20th-century American literature and cultural history. She has been an active musician in the Boston bluegrass and Virginia and Canton old-time music communities, playing guitar and banjo, as well as singing and writing music. Photo courtesy of Loretta Lepkowski.

## Schroon Lake Arts Council

### 2017 Boathouse Concert Schedule

Schroonlakearts.com  
 518-532-9259  
 Concerts @ 7:30 PM  
 SLArtsCouncil@aol.com  
 Adults \$15 Students \$5  
 \* Special Concerts \$25.00

- |         |                                    |
|---------|------------------------------------|
| July 11 | Red Head Express*                  |
| July 18 | Lonely Heartstring Band*           |
| July 25 | Molly Venter & Goodnight Moonshine |
| Aug. 1  | Patsy Cline Tribute                |
| Aug. 8  | Patchouli/Terra Guitarra           |
| Aug. 22 | Runaway Home                       |

### Free Children's Program

The Hampstead Stage Co.  
 Pinocchio  
 Thursday, July 27, 1 PM

### Free Family Program

Stephen Grotto & Sons  
 Tuesday, August 15, 10 AM

### 27th Adirondack Folk Music Festival

Free Admission  
 Sunday, August 13  
 Noon to 5 PM - Town Park  
 Atwater & Donnelly, Three Quarter North, Catamount Crossing, Country Living, Stephen Grotto & Sons

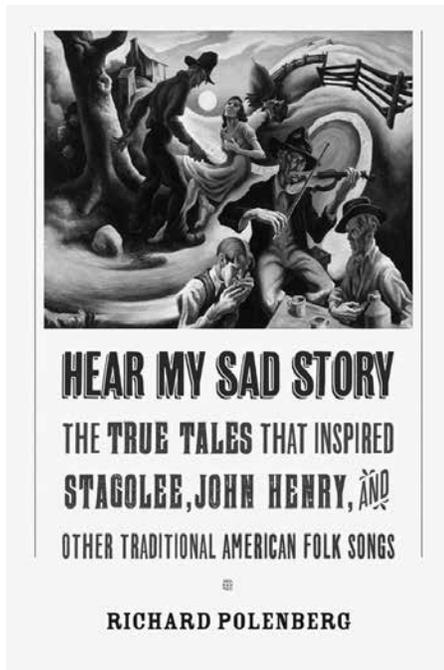
### OPEN JAM SESSIONS

Mondays 7-10 PM ~ at the Boathouse

# Sad Characters of American Folk Songs

BY FRIEDA TOTH

*Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales that Inspired Stagolee, John Henry, and Other Traditional American Folk Songs* By Richard Polenberg, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015, 304 pages, 6.1 x 9.3 in., 57 images, ISBN: 978-1-5017-0002-6. Hardcover \$26.00



People love “true stories” behind pop culture. Every day we see the headlines on MSN or *USA Today* about what this or that celebrity is really like. I was therefore delighted when *Hear My Sad Story: The True Tales That Inspired Stagolee, John Henry, and Other Traditional American Folk Songs* by Richard Polenberg came into my hands. It took a long time. When I tried to obtain this book from my library, all copies were out, so I put it on reserve; there were 92 people ahead of me.

Having grown up reading Alan Lomax, I thought I knew the true stories, and that much of *Hear My Sad Story* would be review. But Lomax, as good as he was, relied a great deal on oral history and less on research, whereas Polenberg went at his research like a dachshund after a rat.

Polenberg starts with “St. Louis Blues,” which is, according to him, “one of the most-often recorded songs of the first half of the twentieth century” (9). This seems a poor start for a book about folk songs since we know who wrote it, and that he was a trained musician, the antithesis of “folk.” However, its status as “folk” is redeemed by its ubiquitousness. Following this logic, Polenberg can include other songs whose origins we know. Polenberg organizes thematically, so that if you are just interested in railroad songs, or just highwaymen, you can skip to that chapter.

The true stories behind “Omie Wise,” “Tom Dooley,” and “The Titanic” are more than poignant. They are really depressing. If we believe Polenberg’s research (and I tend to), Omie Wise was not an innocent teen seduced and discarded, but a woman in her 20s, who, if not exactly sophisticated, was at least savvy enough to secure child support for her two previous children before John Lewis got to know her. Tom Dooley was an unfunny version of Tom Lehrer’s “I Got It from Agnes.” Dula (his real name) bedded three female cousins, one married, and succeeded in giving the clap to an untallied number of people as a result. Stories that have been edited and set to music to become beautifully tragic turn out to be just nasty, or even stupid. Casey Jones was something of a hot dog, with a number of speed infractions on his record, before the fatal and completely avoidable crash. Poor Delia was a 14-year-old who maintained she never went to bed with anyone, completely at odds with Cash’s song.

When I got to Casey Jones, my heart broke. My hero had a safety infraction record? Naturally, I Googled this, hoping to prove Polenberg wrong. I failed.

It’s upsetting how many folk songs owe their existence to bad healthcare. Delia probably would not have died of her wound today, Tom Dula could have gotten

himself some antibiotics, and let’s not even get into contraceptives.

One of the saddest stories was that of Frankie (of “Frankie and Johnny” fame). In real life she not only was able to successfully claim self-defense for killing her abusive teenaged boyfriend, the judge was so sympathetic he gave her gun back. That sounds like a happy ending, but folk songs—the Twitter storm of the day—had the last word. Frankie became notorious through the much more spicy story in the song—this ruined her life; she could go nowhere without people “recognizing” her as THAT Frankie. But when she sued for damages, the fact that the story didn’t exactly match her life was used against her, and she not only lost, but had to pay court costs.

Although it would increase the cost and change the format, this book would be better with a CD. Even if you have good knowledge of folk songs, you may not be familiar with the versions used by Polenberg. I had waited for this book for so long that I jumped into reading the stories without reading about who the author was. I do like Polenberg’s writing, which is so progressive, so liberal, that I was well into the book, certain that the author was a black woman or man before I realized the writer was a white guy. It is refreshing to read a folk song book that makes no excuses for the abuse of blacks, of women, of the impoverished.

Read this book to feel smarter; now you know. Don’t read it to feel good, as the stories are sad. You’ll feel better about yourself after absorbing the knowledge, but you won’t feel good.

Excellent index, great suggestions for further reading, a surprising number of photos make this a valuable addition to your folk library. ▼

Frieda Toth is a career librarian who used to play banjo. She is a librarian at the Crandall Public Library in Glens Falls, New York.

# Beneath the Visiting Moon—Poetry to Ease the Final Passage

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

“We all have to face this thing sometime,” my wife’s father, Lucas Dargan, told me around the time he turned 99.

Six months later, he found himself facing precisely that “thing.” A retired forester who planted over two million trees in his lifetime, he had split wood every morning until two years before.

and looked up the lines. Born in 1917, Lucas was always amazed at the magic of the Internet to access any tidbit of knowledge. The verse turned out to be from a poem by William Haines Lytle, inspired by Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. The first line, “I am dying, Egypt, dying” is from the play itself. We then looked up the drama online and found

surrounded by family members and a stream of visitors, including guests for the weekly poetry and music nights he had hosted at the house for many years. Other visitors included members of his old Boy Scout troop, who talked about what they had learned from him, and a local farmer, David White, who had started a tradition of bringing lunch to share with Lucas every Monday, and who this time brought in a newborn duckling on his visit.

Among his many visitors was the hospice chaplain with whom Lucas couldn’t help but share his own view of religion: “I do not claim to understand the nature of the Supreme Being, and I do not acknowledge that anyone else does either.” Lucas was a devoted agnostic who believed that it was just as much a leap of faith to be an atheist as a believer. The chaplain, who returned for a second visit, said he enjoyed discussing spirituality with Lucas and concluded, “He just doesn’t want to put God in a box.”

It was clear to all of us that, in his final days, Lucas sought solace in poetry, not religion. He told my wife Amanda, “I think all poets share a deep concern for the human condition.” And the poets whose works he wanted to hear or to recite were those who wrote about death and dying, and those whose poems he had memorized when he was young.

Many of the poems he knew by heart, including some we had never heard him recite before. Once, when I asked if he wanted us to read him a poem, he said, “Steve, look up Carruth.”

“Carruth?” I said.

“Yes, *C-a-r-r-u-t-h*, William Herbert Carruth.”

The poem he had in mind, “Each in His Own Tongue,” seemed to capture Lucas’s poetic perspective on religion. I picked up his tattered copy of *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*, published in 1924. I read a line from the poem: “*A haze on the far horizon.*”

Lying in his bed, he recited the next line from memory: “*The infinite, tender sky.*” I



“Daddy and the Hawk.” Photo by Sarah Dargan.

Tonight, he lay in a hospital bed at the McLeod Regional Medical Center in Florence, South Carolina, unable to properly swallow or get out of bed unassisted. Family members took turns staying overnight with him, and this night was my turn. At one point, I thought he was sleeping. I was working on my computer, when I heard lines from a poem coming from the other side of the room:

I am dying, Egypt, dying!  
Ebbs the crimson life-tide fast,  
And the dark Plutonian shadows  
Gather on the evening blast;

“I think it’s from Shakespeare,” he told me, so I brought my laptop over to his bedside

Marc Antony’s soliloquy that begins with that line. Then I read to him from Shakespeare’s play.

When I finished, he said, “Steve, when I close my eyes I think of the billions of people who have done this before me.”

“Well, you know you’ll be remembered,” I said.

“That’s true,” he said, “not as good as heaven—but a lot better than hell.”

The next day the doctor told Lucas and the family that there was nothing more to be done medically and recommended hospice care. That day, we brought Lucas home to the family farm and set up his bed in the living room, where for the next three weeks he was

read the third line, and then he responded with the fourth from memory. We went all through the poem in tandem.

The ripe, rich tint of the cornfields,  
And the wild geese sailing high—  
And all over the upland and lowland  
The charm of the goldenrod—  
Some of us call it Autumn,  
And others call it God.

A day or two later, he asked Amanda to read him the poem “Thanatopsis” by William Cullen Bryant, another classic 19th-century poem about death.

. . . When thoughts  
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight  
Over thy spirit, and sad images  
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,  
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,  
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart . . .

As she read, Amanda watched her father close his eyes. She thought he had drifted off to sleep, and she put the book down, too sad to continue. When he opened his eyes a few minutes later, her sister Rosa asked, “Would you like to hear another poem?”

“Not yet,” he said. “Amanda hasn’t finished the one she was reading.”

Rosa finished reading Bryant’s poem.

So live, that when thy summons comes  
to join  
The innumerable caravan, that moves  
To that mysterious realm, where each  
shall take  
His chamber in the silent halls of death,  
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at  
night,  
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained  
and soothed  
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy  
grave  
Like one who wraps the drapery of  
his couch  
About him, and lies down to pleasant  
dreams.

Lucas draped himself in the weave of his favorite poems as he confronted death, as if he could pull them up like a blanket. They



“Daddy and the Duckling.” Photo by Rosa Dargan Powers.

kept him warm and clearly helped him approach his death with peace of mind. His amazing mind—“fastened to a dying animal,” as Yeats put it—remained sharp until the end. He didn’t stop reciting and listening to poems until the day before he died. “We should all aspire to his life—and his death,” his nephew Rod McIver said.

As befitted this man, his daughters planned the funeral service to include his grandchildren reading some of his favorite poems, including Shelley’s “The Cloud,” Masefield’s “Sea Fever,” and Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar.” The service closed with his poetry night stalwarts—Stanley Thompson, David Brown, and Worth Lewellyn—playing his favorite song, “Loch Lomond,” on fiddle and guitar. (“O ye’ll tak’ the high road and I’ll tak’ the low road, An’ I’ll be in Scotland afore ye; . . .”)

I was left mulling over the lines we had read together from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*:

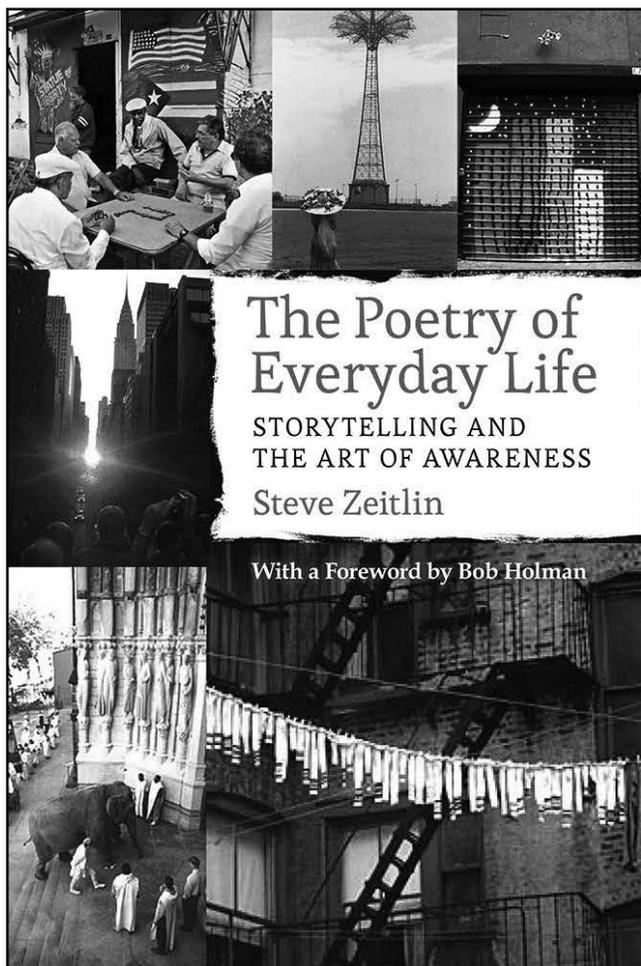
This case of that huge spirit now is  
cold . . .  
And there is nothing left remarkable  
Beneath the visiting moon. ▼

Please email your thoughts, stories, and responses about the poetic side of life to [steve@citylore.org](mailto:steve@citylore.org). Steve Zeitlin is the Founding Director of City Lore. His new book is *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Cornell University Press, 2016), available from City Lore, Amazon, Cornell University Press, and NYFS <<http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/books.html#poetry>>.



# A Jumpstart for Inspiration, A Salve for Troubled Times

BY NANCY SCHEEMAKER



***The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*** by Steve Zeitlin. Foreword by Bob Holman. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, October 11, 2016, 280 pages, ISBN 978-1-5017-0235-8, 6x9" hardcover, \$26.00

I've been a bookseller for a long, long time. And I continue to be quite happy spending most of my time in a building full of stories and the people who love them. Every now and then, I stumble across an exceptional book that awakens my book-selling senses, one I can provide to the right seeker. After all these years, I have learned that the right book can be a tonic for what ails us, a jumpstart for inspiration, a salve

for troubled times, a sincere reminder of what is good right now in our lives.

*The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*, by Steve Zeitlin, has become one of those books for me. And it entered my life at precisely the right time.

Zeitlin's collection is part memoir, part documentary and personal essays that represent a cross-section of his experience as a folklorist, examining and documenting the meaning and power of human expression in all of its varied forms. Here he challenges and inspires us to celebrate the ordinary as the extraordinary—how our daily work, play, music, food, art, and family traditions matter. How

these precious ingredients, if we allow them, if we are mindful and aware of their importance to us and to our time, can be the inspiration that allows us to engage in a more creative life.

For me, the most affecting books are those that teach us something new, change our perception of the world, help us grow. Zeitlin suggests "Perhaps stories and poems, like prayers, have the power to heal." As a professional bookseller, this I have never doubted. What is exceptional about this book is the use of poetry as the lens, as an instrument of interpretation, and as an accelerant for creative engagement.

Each of the 23 chapters takes the reader into themes of living that most of us know on some level of intimacy in our

own lives—the lessons to be found in collaboration with another human being, the power and metaphor in play, aging, and the importance of shared memory ... death ... food ... sex.

Anyone who reads the testimonials in Chapter 9, "The Aids Project," and the subsequent chapter regarding September 11, "Street Poems," will find new insight into the power of poems and stories to heal and express human grief and resilience.

As a lifelong reader, poetry as a genre has always seemed just beyond the reach of my full understanding and passion. This single book has changed me. Page 94 helped me jump that cavern. Here, Zeitlin conveys the story of his yearlong observance from his office on the Lower East Side of the homeless gathered in the park below reading, studying, and praying before an engraved bronze installment of a poem entitled "The Black Sheep." I get it.

More than ever, it seems our lives are infused with worrisome headlines and news that we never thought possible. If in the writing this book, Zeitlin intended to convey how poetry can reach across boundaries and build bridges, he has succeeded. And if he also intended to invite readers to listen, watch, and appreciate our commonalities, this is an affective treatise.

And if the poetry of my everyday life as bookseller means putting the right book in the right hands at the right time, I am so grateful to have this one in my toolbox. ▼

Nancy Scheemaker is the General Manager of Northshire Bookstore in Saratoga Springs, NY. She experiments with textiles, pottery, and collage, and holds an MA in African American Studies. Photo by Todd DeGarmo.



# Gouging Tradition:

## Musings on Fingernail Fiddle Making

BY ERIC L. BALL

I'm out in the garage. I begin by sharpening a gouge on a whetstone. Both items, like many of the hand-me-down tools I'll be using, once belonged to my great-grandfather, William P., a carpenter from New York's North Country, deceased long before I was born.

I recall hearing only two stories about him. One story, told by his son-in-law—my grandfather—concerned the frequent evening rituals of sharpening his tools, and it always concluded with a description of him doing a final check on the blade of a hand plane by making sure he could shave the hair on his arm with it. I guess that's what they mean by *razor sharp*.

The other story, told by my aunt, was about how, when she and my father were little, Great Grandpa would entertain them by taking a chair out into the front yard and jumping over it.

In addition to the tools, I have in my possession a cardboard box, entrusted to me by my grandparents, containing the only other things of Great Grandpa's that survive, apart from those he built. An inventory of the box's contents reveals:

- One school notebook. W. P.'s writings, inside dated 1898. [He would have been about 14].

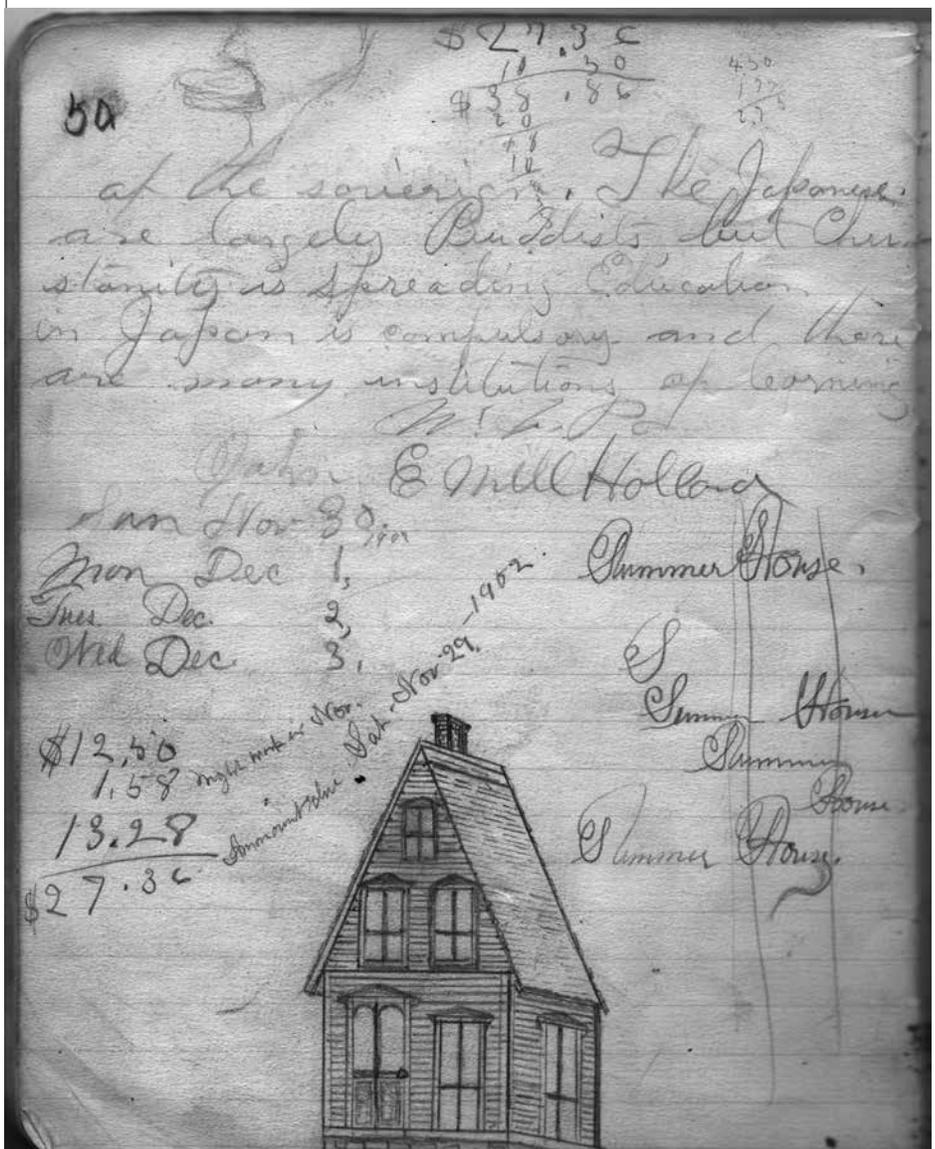
- One schoolbook: *The History of the United States; Told in One Syllable Words* (with colored [*sic*] illustrations) by Miss Josephine Pollard (New York: McLoughlin Brothers, 1884). Contains pencil inscription on inside front cover, "Willie P., Saranac Lake, NY."

- Twelve leaves from unidentified book with black and white illustrations of various animals ("Saddle Horses," "Highland Sheep," "Scotch Deer Hound," etc.).

Opposite each illustration, W. P. has sketched his own copy in pencil.

- One *Holy Bible*. Masonic Edition. Ink inscription, "Presented to Brother William P.," dated 1927. Pencil marking on

title page, "I Timothy 6:17," text of which reads (with underlining in pencil as indicated): "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living



A page out of Great Grandpa P.'s school notebook, 1898 (with additional writing added in blank areas in 1902). Courtesy of the author.

God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.”

• One book: *Select Poems* by Alfred Lord Tennyson, edited with notes by William J. Rolfe, A.M., Litt.D. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1892). Gift to W. P. from sister, as per pencil inscription. Miscellaneous stanzas singled out by pencil markings *passim*, including one on page 38 that begins as follows:

Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,  
These three alone lead life to sovereign power.

• Eight notebooks and ledgers. Pages filled with records (dated 1912–1954), apparently tracking, on a daily basis, all hours ever worked and every penny ever made.



I take Great Grandpa’s rasp in my hands and go to work on sculpting the “back” side of a thick piece of walnut held in place by a bench vise. This piece will comprise most of the fiddle’s body, running from head to toe, and it requires the most work. My mind wanders as I’m working, and I wonder how many years the rasp was sitting dormant in his tool chest before I started using it. I wonder when and where he used it last, and what for.

Am I carrying on tradition?

Well, I’m not building a barn in Willsboro, a staircase in Corinth, or a house in Fort Edward, as Great Grandpa might have done. I *am* still living *here*, practically just around the corner from a house built under his tutelage (by my grandfather), where Great Grandpa lived near the end of his life, and the last place he kept his tools and tool chest.

I’m making a *finger nail fiddle*, which is the name I came up with in English for the (usually) 3-stringed, upright bowed fiddle known in Greece as the *hyra*. I named it that because you make different notes by pressing the flat of your fingernail against the “side” of a string that remains suspended above the neck, not by pressing it down against the fingerboard or a fret, as with most other

string instruments. Cognate instruments—also presumably descended from the *hyras* of Byzantium some thousand years ago—include, for example, the *lira Calabrese* of Southern Italy, the Dalmatian *lijerica*, and the *kemenche* of Ottoman classical music.

I’m descended from French-Canadian, English, Scotch-Irish, and Dutch people who have lived for many generations in upstate and northern New York, or just across the border in Ontario. So building an instrument like this is hardly traditional for *me*, even if it is widely considered to be *the* traditional instrument on the island of Crete, where I lived for some years when I was in my 20s. Crete was a life-changing experience for me, musically and poetically. I’ve already given some account of this elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> so let me just say this: when I was about 23, I wanted so badly to learn to play the Cretan *hyra* that to get money for buying one, I sold my last guitar—which seems crazy because I *really* loved playing guitar, and it seemed like it had taken me forever as a teenager to save up for my Fender acoustic, even at a good price from another kid who was eager to sell.



The sweat drips from the tip of my nose into the “boat” (or “bowl”) that I’m in the process of gouging out of the front of the



Old photo of Great Grandpa P. (right) from family photo album. Courtesy of the author.

thick piece of walnut. The driving rhythm of Cretan music, sounding from the speakers I’ve got out here in the garage, helps keep my adrenaline up, so I can power through until dusk.

I don’t know if there is a music gene, but if there is, all three of Great Grandma’s and Great Grandpa P’s children inherited it. Their oldest daughter, my grandmother, was good enough on piano that upon graduating from Fort Edward High School, some “rich woman from Hudson Falls” (as family lore had it), who thought so highly of my grandmother, bought a piano and had it shipped to her “all the way from California,” as a graduation present—the very same piano on which she gave me my earliest music lessons. Then, their youngest daughter, who had “a beautiful voice,” went off to Boston for a while to study at a conservatory, before eventually getting married and settling down with a local farmer. (I’m still hanging on to her 1940–1941 issues of *The Etude*.) Finally, my great-grandparents’ son was apparently quite the violinist. While majoring in music at Syracuse University, he played in the symphony, and he played violin at my grandparents’ wedding. After he returned from the Second World War, though, he abandoned music for a career as a professor of electrical technology instead. Relatives who knew him well—I was too young—always tell me that it’s too bad that he’s not around to see me playing my fingernail fiddles, and that he would have gotten a big kick out of seeing me make them using his father’s old tools.

But why *am* I making them?

During a 15-year, self-imposed exile from Crete, I almost stopped playing my *hyra* altogether, or any Cretan music for that matter—there was nobody around with whom to play Cretan music and so with each passing year, my active Cretan musical life receded further and further into the past. Then I made a trip back to the island. More than just resurrected, my Cretan musical life was redoubled, fueled no doubt by so many cyberspace developments—countless YouTube videos; numerous Cretan music blogs; instantaneous access to Greek government-sponsored cultural archives and documentaries; free long-distance,



Left to right: Modern Stagakis-type *lyra* by Stelios Tzanakis, two fingernail fiddles by the author, and an innovative *lyraki* by Manolis Staikos. Front: Some of Great Grandpa P.'s tools, used by the author in fingernail fiddle making. Photo by the author.

real-time video chatting with musician acquaintances in Crete; and immediate access to shops selling Cretan music and musical instruments—which made it easier than ever for a person sitting in upstate New York to keep up with and connect to myriad Cretan musical items and activities, present and past.

In time, and concurrent with developments on the island, I became increasingly attracted

to wider possibilities regarding what a Cretan *lyra* could “be.” Back in the 1930s, a distinctively modern Cretan *lyra* emerged—widely known as the “Stagakis-type” *lyra* for the luthier largely responsible for it—characterized by several innovations, including factory-made metal tuning pegs as opposed to wooden ones, a longer fingerboard, and a violin-like peg box and scroll. The modern Stagakis-

type *lyra* subsequently became the standard, and it largely eclipsed older style *lyras*, such as the smaller *lyraki*. The modern *lyra*'s many advantages notwithstanding, one disadvantage is that it can be somewhat more difficult to build on one's own without additional, more specialized equipment and materials.

By the end of the 20th century, it seemed as though non-Stagakis-type *lyras* in Crete

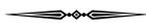
were destined for the museum. Then, old-fashioned-style *lyras* began to make a minor comeback. Recordings and concerts of several well-known, professional Cretan musicians (for example, Psarantonis, Dimitris Sgouros) prominently featured some older style instruments, such as the *lyraki*. Meanwhile, an innovative *lyra* with numerous sympathetic strings devised by an immigrant to Greece, Ross Daly who—involving primarily in world music and gaining increasing attention through Daly’s growing network of students and other collaborators, including Stelios Petrakis, a professional instrument maker—builds the *lyras* with sympathetic strings, as well as the smaller *lyraki* and Stagakis-type modern *lyras*. A glance at the *lyras* currently available for sale online from Greece reveals that a number of other *lyra* makers also have been experimenting recently with additional variations in design.

My “problem” was this: the more frequently I was exposed to the range of timbres produced by these different kinds of Cretan *lyras* (of different shapes, sizes, materials, and even tuning and playing methods), not to mention by *lyras* of regions other than Crete, the more passionately I desired to play on a wider range of such instruments myself—an experience not altogether different, I suppose, from when I was a teenager and eventually wound up “needing” both electric and acoustic guitars. The powerful desire that led me to sell my last guitar in order to buy a *lyra* multiplied. I longed to play several different *kinds* of *lyras*.

But how could I afford such an extravagance? Cretan *lyras*, always handcrafted, might have been inexpensive when compared with many violins, but they weren’t exactly cheap. Or, even if I could afford them, how could I justify such an extravagance? Wouldn’t it mean I was giving in to some kind of over-the-top consumerism?

One solution was to build my own. After all, the Cretan *lyra* is essentially a folk instrument. (Even in its professionally made modern form, it’s still pretty close.) Building one shouldn’t require a long apprenticeship—or *any* apprenticeship—with an actual Cretan luthier, right? As a scholar, I’d read

through ethnographic interviews, over the years, with many an old-time rural Cretan who happened to mention building his own first *lyra* out of whatever materials he had available. I began to wonder if I could ever teach myself how to do it. I filed the thought somewhere in the back of my mind, but as I continued my academic research on Cretan music, I also took note of any resources I happened upon that provided insight into the building process. Still, I didn’t really think I’d ever do it.



I mark three points, as accurately as I can, on what will be the head of the instrument. I press an awl into each one and then drill holes for the tuning pegs. I don’t have a drill press and am doing the best I can to get the holes in just the right places and at right angles to the back surface. I check now to make sure the tuning pegs will slide properly into the holes later when it’s time to put everything together. The fit is too snug. One hole is a little off. It occurs to me to use a round file to correct it, but the round files I have in the garage are either too large to fit in the holes or too small to do the job right.

I know Great Grandpa’s tool chest has many more files. I walk next door to my parents’ house and head down cellar to the workshop, where his tool chest currently resides. With outside dimensions of 38” wide, 24” deep, and 31-1/2” tall, it is a veritable piece of furniture, but also a model of economy when it comes to how many tools it can store, in a way that leaves everything conveniently accessible.

The outside of the chest is finished in light and dark shades of green paint, and every corner is protected by a bent piece of sheet metal that has been handsomely riveted over it. The top is decorated with a large rectangular board that also serves to cover two storage recesses within the top, which are accessible from the inside. This board, whose edges have been rounded (probably for aesthetic reasons), is attached by numerous round-headed screws spaced 1-1/2” apart from each other and arranged in the

pattern of a large double square. Unlatching the top, which is attached to the body by two large hinges in the back, and opening up the chest reveals that the top’s inside face has also been outfitted to hold a carpenter’s square in the bottom left corner. The chest’s inside cavity is home to six wooden trays—each divided into two to three sections of varied dimensions, everything stained and varnished—“stacked” in three levels of two trays each. Each tray runs the full inside width (33-1/2”–34”) of the chest by one-third the depth of the chest (6 1/2”). The four trays of the top two levels are 3” in height and the two trays of the bottom level are 4”. Each tray of the topmost level is outfitted with a decorative lid attached by three brass hinges, making the tray more like an oblong, miniature toolbox. All the trays/boxes can be slid front-to-back, back-to-front. Sliding them makes it possible to expose and provide access to any third of the area of the next level down which, in turn, operates the same way, as does the level below that. The trays slide effortlessly, owing to the meticulously crafted fit of each tray/box to its level, as well as to the precision planing and wax finish that makes their 1/4” runways (affixed to the left and right inside walls of the chest) almost as slippery as ice. The chest’s cavity extends down another 8” or so under the bottoms of the lowest level of trays. The front third of this “subterranean cavity” is outfitted to hold six hand-saws, accessed, of course, by sliding all three levels of trays/boxes to the back two-thirds of the chest. The other two-thirds of this underground has been left wide open for any larger tools that might not fit in the trays or boxes. Even further down, there is an altogether separate compartment in the guise of a single drawer (inside dimensions 30” x 22” x 6”) that unlatches and pulls out from the front of the chest, much like any large dresser drawer.

The cellars, sheds, and garages of my father and brother, like my grandfathers’ before them, overflow with tools and always have. For years, I was the odd one out. Even after my partner and I bought a house, I somehow got by for six or seven years—



Great Grandpa P.'s tool chest. Photo by the author.

mostly by borrowing tools from my father next door—with little more than the two toolboxes that I'd been lugging around from one apartment to the next since college.

I could have gotten more tools a lot sooner, and for free. For years, my father had been telling me I should go over to Grandpa's old house to take whatever tools I wanted out of his garage. I kept putting it off, but eventually, one fine Saturday morning, my brother, my father, and I went over and divided among ourselves all the hand tools, power tools, toolboxes, fasteners, and other odds and ends. Some had been my grandfa-

ther's and others, Great Grandpa P.'s. As the one of us most in need of tools, I took the most home. At long last, I knew I had in our garage most of (what I considered) the basic woodworking and other kinds of tools that I'd been missing for most my adult life, as well as some of the more (to me) "exotic" and "old-fashioned" kinds of tools (calipers, woodturning tools, etc.) from Great Grandpa that I'd never used before.

Knowing I was outfitted with almost every tool I'd need for building a *lyra*, and having collected whatever relevant information, photos, or videos I'd come across, I also got

to thinking: wouldn't it be neat to put my great-grandfather's carpentry tools to use again after all these years, especially to make something like a *lyra*?

Neat? Well, I suppose I had this sense that I'd be communing—that's not exactly the right word for it—with various pasts. First, I'd be communing with my own younger self—a kid out in the garage learning from his grandfather the right and wrong ways to measure, to mark and make cuts, to drive and pull nails, to sand, and to paint, as together they built birdhouses, benches, all kinds of yard decorations, and household items. Second, I'd be communing with a guy from a generation with which I'd never had any living contact (everyone from my great-grandfather's generation was deceased before I was born), someone who was professionally involved in woodworking, and whose kids were among the most musical people in my family. Anyway, it just seemed like these imagined (or imaginary) connections would somehow add to the meaningfulness of taking on such a challenge.

And so at last, I had more reasons *to* try building a *lyra* than *not* to try.

I also had the audacity to think I'd probably succeed. Sure, I knew I still remembered whatever I'd learned about woodworking as a kid, but that wasn't all there was to it. I also grew up watching my grandfather and my father, too, constantly building things without any plans. Maybe such plans didn't exist or weren't easily accessible. Maybe it was the pleasure of figuring something out for yourself. Maybe it was a healthy skepticism regarding "official" expertise. All I know is that I remember Grandpa looking over something he wanted to build and then, in the process of building it, constantly stopping to figure. He'd think about it this way and that, always trying to anticipate how one move might affect or interfere with another move he'd need to make later on. Occasionally, he wouldn't quite succeed but then learn from a shortcoming or mistake, such as when he made a chair and hadn't considered an appropriate angle for the back to meet the seat in

relation to its other dimensions, resulting in something that was virtually impossible to sit in comfortably.

I didn't have plans or a pattern to follow for my fingernail fiddles either. I had access to plans for a modern *lyra*, but that wasn't what I wanted to build, and anyway, it would have required tools, materials, and wood of dimensions that I didn't have handy. That's the other thing: again, like my grandfather, I wanted as much as possible to get away with using relatively simple materials that I could easily and inexpensively acquire. And that meant I had to come up with something like a hybrid design, cobbled together from my knowledge of various actual *lyras* and tentative new ideas all my own. I didn't want to build a modern *lyra*, but neither did I want to build an entirely "authentic" old-fashioned kind. I intended from the start to use metal mandolin tuners that I could easily purchase and which, as a musician, I find very convenient for actual tuning.

When I made my first fingernail fiddle, I took things very *s-l-o-w-l-y*. It paid off—though, for all my own stopping and figuring, I had overlooked something critical about one of the *lyras* I was taking as a partial model. That led to my less-than-ideal shaping of the instrument's head and placing of the tuning pegs, which made it hard for me to get the strings to stay in the right place. I eventually came up with a work-around and, having learned not only from my oversight but from the different things I'd tried out as remedies, I was even better prepared to think about future designs—for I had no intention of building fiddles the same size and shape twice.

With each fiddle I built, I'd get ideas about something else I wanted to try on the next one, or the one after that. In time, I experimented with adding a fourth string to extend the instrument's range. That way, when friends or family wanted to get together to play some American or other non-Cretan music, it would be easier for me to sit in by relying on sheet music intended for the violin or other instruments, without having first to transpose or arrange everything. (Around the

same time, I discovered that some 4-string *lyras* were being built back in Greece, too, for presumably different reasons.)



So, where is *tradition* in all this?

I drew eclectically on a variety of traditional resources (Cretan traditional music, my Anglo-American family's woodworking traditions, and DIY sensibilities) to build a Mediterranean folk instrument, modified in response to the resources I had readily and inexpensively available to me locally in upstate New York. I did so, in part, because I was irresistibly drawn to particular qualities of the instrument itself (the timbre, the feel in the hand while performing, even its appearance) and, in this sense, the *traditional-ity* of the instrument was merely incidental. Yet, it seems unlikely that my attraction to the instrument's qualities would have been quite so powerful, had I not been immersed in Cretan music culture in the traditional ways that I was when I lived in Crete.

Interestingly, it was my love of the *lyra* that led me to develop or discover my love, as a listener, for the violin and viola as well. Had I experienced musical euphoria comparable with what I experienced participating in everyday music-making in central Crete somewhere else with *violins* first—in eastern or western Crete, say, or in French or Maritime Canada—perhaps my attraction to the violin would have been just as strong. Who knows?

In one sense, my activities were *more* traditional than those who consciously strive to uphold traditions, precisely because I had not set out to maintain or revive a tradition in some static, ostensibly pure, or authentic, let alone blatantly caricatured way—out of a preservationist nostalgia born of modern alienation, say, or in pursuit of identity politics.

In another sense, my actions were typically modern, insofar as I was making extensive conscious efforts to look far beyond the many accessible, affordable musical options readily offered to me by the mass commercial culture in which I'm immersed in everyday life (for example, guitars; everyday

life music *consumption* over nonprofessional, everyday life music *making*). Unless, that is, we consider the very act of *making* such an extensive conscious effort *itself* to be somehow traditional at another level.

As long as we acknowledge that traditions tend to be discontinuous as well as continuous, and that (dis)continuities tend to vary with respect to both sociohistorical context and what is "visible" to whoever is observing them *as* traditions in the first place, then I suppose I could consider my activities to be quite traditional indeed.

Then again, how far can we stretch the meaning of *tradition* before it ceases doing any useful work as a concept?

While none of my activities were, for me, a matter of politicizing any particular tradition, they were in another way very political, in that I was (or am here) striving to hold up to anyone else listening—against the grain of many of the most powerful commercial and "public" interests—the value of remaining open to certain lesser-known practices and attitudes with significant roots in the past. Not value in some grand, moralizing sense, but more in the spirit of: maybe we don't know what we're missing.

Personally, I might have missed out on the pleasures of playing a variety of fingernail fiddles and—yes!—sweat and blisters notwithstanding, even on the pleasures of building them. I might have missed out also on certain insights, which remaining open to all this can lead to.

I wrote before that *communing* wasn't quite the right word. Though I was intuitively attracted in a way to such a notion, I was also being ironic, or at least metaphorical: I never for a nanosecond believed there was any *literal* communing going on. Still, I have grown confident that there is value in allowing oneself the luxury of pursuing an attraction that seems at the outset merely naive, quirky, or romantic, so long as that pursuit is tempered by, or left in tension with, a kind of critical thinking that resists surrendering to the many concomitant, *romanticizing* implications and oversimplifications likely to eagerly present themselves along the way.

Wednesday Sept 15

Sun	17	
Mon	18	8-hrs
Tue	19	10.7 "
Wed	20	8. "
Thu	21	8. "
Fri	22	10.7 hrs
Sat	23	8. "
		52.7-hrs
		11-28-35
		31.09-
		Inc 25¢
		30.84-
Sun	24	12-hrs
Mon	25	8. "
Tue	26	8. "
Wed	27	
Thu	28	8. "
Fri	29	10.7 "
Sat	30	10.7 "
		57.4-hrs
		12-5-35
		33.87-
		Inc 25¢
		33.62-
Total		64.46

Thursday Sept 16

Dec		
Sun	1	12-hrs
Mon	2	8. "
Tue	3	10.7 "
Wed	4	10.7 "
Thu	5	
Fri	6	
Sat	7	8-hrs
		49.4
		12-12-35
		29.15-
		25¢
		28.90-
Sun	8	12.8 hrs
Mon	9	8. "
Tue	10	8. "
Wed	11	
Thu	12	Father died
Fri	13	8-hrs
Sat	14	
		36.8 hrs
		12-19-35
		21.71+
		Inc 25¢
		21.46
Total		50.36

Two pages from Great Grandpa P.'s records. Courtesy of the author.

Knowing so little about Great Grandpa P., it was especially easy to plunge into the "romance" of familial communing, focusing on his impeccable craftsmanship and my place in such lineage. I could readily feel innocent, proud, happy, and special.

But then what about all those notebooks and ledgers of his? Forty-two years' worth of work recorded, day by day, dollar by dollar. I can understand why he might have needed to do so whenever he was working for himself. Still, he mostly tracked revenues and rarely recorded any expenses, so could it really have been for business purposes? I suppose so—he might have needed something on which to base writing up a bill, or even just a way to keep an overall eye on exactly where he was making money and how much. But what about all the times he was wage-laboring at a local mill? Why track

that in so much detail? Maybe he thought it wasn't prudent to rely on his employers—better to keep detailed records of his own work on the off chance a discrepancy arose come payday. But then why keep track of all the days he *didn't* work? Perhaps, if he hadn't, he might have wondered later if he'd simply forgotten to write down how long he'd worked that day. Okay, but then what about all the detailed records of paying board to his own children? I can see a logic to paying board, but was it necessary to keep track of it in such painstaking fashion? Maybe he worried that if he didn't, he might lose track at some point and shortchange a loved one.

Scattered among the hours, dollars, and cents, there are a few—very few—miniature diary-like moments in these records. Some seem just as pragmatic: throughout 1934, he records, next to hours worked, any injury

he sustained at the mill that day ("hurt toe with truck," "hurt finger driving coupling on Press roll #3 mach.," and "hurt finger," adjacent to which he later added, "infection set in"). There are at least eight such entries that year and none in any prior or subsequent years, so he must have had some practical reason for keeping track at that particular time. Other diary-like moments seem more personal and suggest anxiety over major life events: for a short period he seems worried about his wife ("Bessie sick," "Bessie operated on," and "Bessie came home from hospital"). During the Second World War, there are numerous records tracking his son's university- and military-related travels (for example, "Took Ronald to Syracuse," "Ronald was inducted into the Army at Syracuse NY"). An entry in 1935, *sans* hours worked, states, "Father died."

I'll never know for sure what Great Grandpa's reasons were for keeping such detailed records of his working hours and income, but two things strike me: first, my grandparents not only hung onto these notebooks long after he'd passed away, but they made a point of showing them to me on more than one occasion when I was a child—clearly impressed (*how* exactly I can't recall, though certainly not negatively) by what they took to be his unusually fastidious recordkeeping. Second, even if Great Grandpa's reasons for such recordkeeping were ultimately mostly unremarkable, it still seems significant that he bothered to keep these notebooks his entire life! Surely by the 1950s, there was no *pragmatic* reason to hang on to logs of hours worked and dollars made in 1912! His reasons were almost certainly psychological. It's almost as if carefully measuring the dimensions of his work and hard-earned income with the same attention to detail that he gave as a carpenter to every board, every line, every angle, and every cut, was part of an unconscious project of crafting the ultimate tool chest of his *life*.

Which brings me to this: what about the fact that one of my motivations for building fingernail fiddles was *saving money*? I'm no psychiatrist, but what if the biggest thing Great Grandpa P. and I ultimately have in common is a tendency to engage in certain "compulsive" activities—however innocuous—as a way to deal with the particular economic anxieties of our respective lives?

What if I felt such a strong need for more than one *hira* or fingernail fiddle largely as a consequence of having been conditioned to direct so much energy into walking a tightrope between an unreasonable insatiable consumerism, on the one hand, and an equally unreasonable self-abnegating frugality, on the other? Maybe what I'm mostly doing in my garage is honing my psychological endurance for walking this tightrope, when it might be better if I tried figuring out if there is anything I can do to help change the conditions that make walking it seem attractive, inevitable, or necessary in the first place.

It does seem like much of the world around us encourages us to chase shiny

objects and quickly succumb to the easy pleasures ostensibly afforded by mass culture, instead of pausing to consider what might be sitting out in the garage or in a dusty old box in the attic. But, oddly enough, it also seems to encourage some of us who open that box to treat what we find inside as an excuse for conceiving of *family* or *tradition* or *craftsmanship* as refuge from, or compensation for, the alienations of modern life. I find I'm learning that such things, upon closer examination, tend to be more ambivalent.



The last coat of finish is barely dry, but I can't wait any longer. I fasten the tuning pegs in place with tiny screws. I connect the tailpiece with a piece of wire. I open a new set of strings and put them on. With strings in place, I position the bridge and sound post.

I tune it and start playing to hear how it sounds. Our seven-year old niece is staying with us for the summer. She wanders into the garage from the garden to listen. I start making up a goofy song with a refrain that begins, "Meli... Meli... Melinda the ladybug...," which I'll hone later that afternoon when I realize she's still whistling it. She giggles at the silly adventures of a ladybug that I'm singing off the cuff.

This is as close as I ever come to jumping over a chair. ▼

### Note

<sup>1</sup> See Ball, Eric L., *Sustained by Eating, Consumed by Eating Right: Reflections, Rhymes, Rants, and Recipes*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013. In his book, Ball is both memoirist and food philosopher, sharing his experiences in the Mediterranean and how to cook Greek foods in the United States, while considering broader questions about family, "self," and the environment.

Eric L. Ball is the author of *Sustained by Eating, Consumed by Eating Right: Reflections, Rhymes, Rants, and Recipes* (Excelsior Editions, 2013). More about his writing and links to his music can be found through his website <<https://sites.google.com/site/filokritos/>>. He is a professor in the Humanities and Arts division of Empire State College.

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# Looking Backwards

BY NANCY SOLOMON

**Memories of storms** and hurricanes have long been part of Long Island's oral narratives, most recently, Superstorm Sandy. Yet other storms have struck the region for much of its history. The most famous of these was the 1938 "New England Express" that barreled through Fire Island and Westhampton Beach, exiting through the North Fork, and eventually crossing Long Island Sound to hit Rhode Island and Massachusetts. There are several people who still remember the storm, along with hundreds who heard stories of the now infamous hurricane. One of those people is Chip Duryea, a resident of Montauk, whose family has been there for many generations:

Prior to the Hurricane of 1938, the entire village of Montauk was located on the shores of Fort Pond Bay. There were pound nets all around the perimeter of the bay. That was where my grandfather bought into the fresh fish business that was owned by Captain E. B. Tuttle. And the Hurricane of 1938 came along and rearranged the landscape. The commercial fleet gradually relocated to Montauk Harbor, where it is today, and the village of Montauk moved over to the south side, on the ocean side, where it is today.

Betty Adie of Fire Island also has memories of the infamous storm:

My grandparents came here in 1922. They found out about this place through my great-grandmother—she had a daughter-in-law who sailed on Great South Bay with friends as a teenager. My great-grandmother got a hold of someone and rented a house on Evergreen Walk. At that time it was called the Bermudian. My grandfather fell in love with this place. Within a week, he bought a house, which is on the corner of Midway and Denhoff Walk—we were in that house for eight years.

When the 1938 hurricane was approaching, Captain Robinson had the



The Duryea Lobster Pound before the 1938 hurricane. Courtesy of the Montauk Public Library.

boats running. We stayed in the house here, and my mother said before it all came, they had about three or four days—around September 13th—and then she said things got worse. She went up to the beach at the height of the storm, and at the time the ocean was coming down every walk except Cottage. Cottage had two sets of stairs and a pagoda at the top. And it had a very high dune at that time. She went

up and looked at the ocean and had to hang on to the railings, because her legs almost went out from under her when she saw that ocean.

She gradually managed to get herself down the stairs. George Stretch, Sr., was emptying out his house, and she said to him what are we going to do? He said, "Lady I don't know." She went back and gave my grandmother the report. In the meantime,



The Adie house was built c. 1930. Photo by Nancy Solomon, 2014.



The Van Wicklen-Byrne bay house. Photo by Nancy Solomon, 2010.

it's flooded down in the village. At the low end, when the eye of the storm went over here, they decided to leave and go down to Sis Narsis, now called The Landings. She got everything together, but she forgot her pocket-book. She left everything here. She just grabbed me and my grandmother and two dogs.

The water was midway almost to her hips. My grandmother had to carry the dogs. I can't imagine how they would have managed to get down to Sis Narsis without somebody carrying them. But they got down to Sis Narsis. Everybody that was here was there. Then at night Mr. Seaman, who owned the grocery business and lived on Cottage, took my mother and grandmother and the two dogs and myself down to their house and stayed there for the night, even though it was flooded—but it must have receded.

I cannot believe we stayed there. In the meantime—my father came home from work. And turned on the radio, and he heard absolutely nothing from Fire Island. He got on the phone to my uncle and my grandfather—he said pack your bags, I'm coming down to pick you up, we are going out there. He drove out to Bay Shore. They couldn't find anybody to take them. Finally, he did get this one person to

take them. It took them five hours to get across the bay, because of all the debris. They finally got there. We were all at the house. The two dogs were missing. Found the two dogs behind the couch in Seaman's living room—they were frightened. We had no damage here. This house had no damage whatsoever.

In 1944, another hurricane struck Long Island, one that would travel from the south shore to the north shore, as most storms do. Rich Van Wicklen of Freeport remembers the storm, from when he was a young boy living with his family in Merrick:

The hurricane knocked out the electricity. I was three years old. We got our water from a well, which had an electric pump that pumped water into the house. Had running water but had no water main. A German family on the corner had a big piece of property that had a garden. In the garden was a pitcher pump that had the sweetest water. All the neighbors would go over there with pots and pails. They would pump water and bring it home to use for their house. When you have to carry water, you learn how to use it. I was really little, so I didn't have to

carry water, but I remember that was my memories of that storm.

My parents had a lot of folk tales. They used to think that the first snowstorm of the year, when snow accumulated—if that happened on the second of the month, there would be two storms that year. If it happened on the 10th of the month, there would be 10 storms, if it happened on the 15th of the month, there would be 15 storms. That was their old folk story. It was amazing. Sometimes it was pretty close to accurate.

As the owner of a bay house, Rich and his co-owner Ed Sheehan learned how to keep their house from moving off its foundation during Hurricane Gloria in 1985:

1985 was a wakeup call. I saw houses float away in '85. In the bay. That is where I got the idea of cutting blow-holes in the floor so that water could get in the house and it would not float. Water could get in the house and get out of the house. In the main room, three feet long, five foot wide. One in front porch, one in back bedroom. When the house is closed up, it's closed up in compartments. Every compartment had a hole for the water to get in and out. Nothing more than a piece of ply wood with a piece of Styrofoam underneath it so that when the storm surge hit, the thing would float up and the water can get in and the house is still there.

The bay house was one of the 14 bay houses that survived Superstorm Sandy and is considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. ▼

Nancy Solomon is executive director of Long Island Traditions, located in Port Washington, New York. She can be reached at 516/767-8803 or [info@longislandtraditions.org](mailto:info@longislandtraditions.org).



# Food as Family History

BY JENNIFER MORRISEY

I recently attended a narrative stage discussion on ethnic foods in the Finger Lakes, organized by the NYSCA Upstate Program Development Initiative: A Partnership with the New York Folklore Society. The event, “You are What You Eat,” held at the Auburn Theater, was really enjoyable, and I found the whole experience informative, so I thought I would share my observations and takeaways.

I realize immigration and integration are contentious issues lately, but the fact remains that immigrants shaped our region. From the building of the Erie Canal, to the Utica greens served at restaurants, you don’t have to look hard to find the contribution that immigrants made to the society and culture of our area, and continue to do. I was intensely interested in hearing firsthand stories, and sharing my own family’s immigration story and the ethnic food traditions that have lived on. The Finger Lakes is, much like the rest of the nation, a melting pot, and knowing our family’s unique place in the melting pot is a gift to be celebrated and preserved.

In the time leading up to this event, I thought a lot about my own family history, and I even doubted my “eligibility” to participate in this conversation. I suspected instantly my story would be different from the other participants. Our family has been quick to “Americanize.” My great-grandmother barely spoke English, yet here I am a mere three generations later, with only a few Polish words at my disposal, and a couple of Polish dishes that were always served at holidays and special events. Surely, I knew the participants would come with handwritten recipes, long-running traditions, and stories of family activities, that would make my story look like that of a fourth generation Pole, gripping at whatever shreds of culture and heritage I could scrap together for the sake of preservation.

But let’s face it, that *is* my story, and if we are being entirely honest, it is probably

## Polish “Haluski”

- 1 (16-ounce) package egg noodles
- 1/2 cup salted butter
- 1 yellow onion, chopped
- 1 large head cabbage, shredded
- 1/2 lb. kielbasa sausage, quartered, then chopped
- Salt and ground black pepper, to taste

1. Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a boil. Cook egg noodles in the boiling water, stirring occasionally until cooked through but firm to the bite, about 5 minutes. Drain.
2. Melt butter in a skillet over low heat; cook and stir onion until the onion is softened and butter is golden brown, about 5 to 10 minutes. Add cabbage and kielbasa and toss to coat. Place a lid on the skillet; cook the cabbage kielbasa mixture, stirring occasionally, until cabbage is tender, about 30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.
3. Remove lid and continue to cook until cabbage begins to brown on the edges, just slightly, 5 to 10 more minutes.
4. Mix noodles and cabbage mixture together in a serving bowl.

a more common story than I have realized. I understood that if I am to share my story with 100 percent honesty, I am the woman who is looking to better understand previous generations of my family and the history of where I come from, with little to go on.

The other participants were Rafael Diaz, a native of Puerto Rico and owner of the restaurant El Morro in Geneva, and Carolyn Elice of Auburn. Elice, an active member of the recently established Cayuga Italian American Organization, had fascinating stories and brought an amazing assortment of foods. Carolyn told stories of making pasta (by hand!) with a pasta board and learning this skill from her mother-in-law. Rafael talked about coming to our area from Puerto Rico to work at a food processor and distributor headquartered in Wayne County, and how he quickly began taking orders for the homemade items he made from scratch for his lunch, and built a business recreating traditional Latino foods.

My story is a little more convoluted. My great-grandfather came to America from Poland in 1910; my great-grandmother followed shortly after, arriving in 1912. They settled in East Rochester, where they grew their family. By 1924, they had seven children. While my great-grandmother was comfortable in her Old World ways and continued to only speak in Polish and cook on a wood stove, my grandmother and her siblings were eager to embrace all things American. Little got passed down in the form of family history for the time period before 1910. In the instability that has been 2016, I found myself yearning for a little security and possibly distraction, and I blissfully dived head first into genealogy to try to piece together the story of a family that so quickly integrated into America, without looking back. While sifting through old documents and hounding family members to look for old pictures is right up my alley, I realize not everyone feels a connection to family history in that medium. Luckily, our family has passed a handful of traditional

recipes down through the generations. Our favorite comfort foods are Polish cabbage rolls, called golumpki, a pan-fried cabbage and egg noodle dish that I can never remember the name of (turns out it is haluski), and potato pancakes, which I rarely make. After attending this event, it occurred to me that food is memory and comfort. It's personal. Food is identity. While we don't have many of the exact details of my ancestors' lives, we can connect through food. Food is family history.

I think there is a lot of emphasis on sharing a prepared dish, but what struck me, even more importantly, was sharing the preparation of the dish. When we share the time spent making the food, we are re-connecting to our past while strengthening current family bonds. Perhaps the single most eye-opening realization for me during the event was that there is no official handing over of the family recipes. In my family and the other participant's recollections,

the passing down of culinary knowledge was much more subtle. We all gathered our recipes and technique simply by observing the process; it was quiet afternoons in grandma's kitchen, lending a helping hand to a parent when traditional family meals and recipes are handed down to children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

As time goes by and families grow and change, so do the foods they serve, but their essence stays the same. The way I prepare golumpki may change, and, yes, I cut up kielbasa and add it to haluski, so it is more of a skillet meal than a side dish. The dish may change from generation to generation, but the tradition lives on, and the intent to keep them alive and every bit as current as they ever were, when they were made generations ago, is the same.

I was asked if I would write down our family recipes. As a food blogger who has made it my hobby sharing recipes, especially recipes of regional importance, this

is something that has occurred to me. But then there is this other part of me that is hesitant. I had a hard time articulating why a "food blogger" would not want to document her own family recipes, probably because I didn't understand the hesitation myself—that is until I thought about it more. My hesitation to write down these recipes is selfish. When I am making golumpki, I am not thinking about the exact amount of any particular ingredient that goes into the dish. I am thinking "this is the way my mother makes it, and her mother made it." My hope is that future generations will not get caught up in the technical aspects of the recipe, but will instead repeat the motions and the ingredients from their hearts, and not from a piece of paper, and be fully present in the experience. ▼

Jennifer Morrissey is a wife, mother, blogger, and occasional cow chaser. She created and maintains the website Home in the Finger Lakes <[www.homeinthefingerlakes.com](http://www.homeinthefingerlakes.com)> where she writes about simple, country living, easy recipes, local history, and life on a family farm in the Finger Lakes.

# YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT



*Ethnic Food Traditions in the Finger Lakes*



**Rafael Diaz**



**Carolynn Elice**



**Jennifer Morrissey**

**January 22, 2017 • 2:00 – 5:00 pm**  
 AUBURN PUBLIC THEATER • 8 EXCHANGE STREET • AUBURN

**Narrative stage | Traditional food**

Rafael Diaz: Puerto Rican heritage  
 Carolynn Elice: Italian heritage  
 Jennifer Morrissey: Polish heritage  
 Discussion with folklorist Christina Zinni, PhD

**Presentation**  
 Folklorist Hannah Davis

This event is organized in coordination with the Auburn Public Theater as a part of the NYSCLA Upstate Program Development Initiative: A Partnership with the New York Folklore Society.




For more information, visit [www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org)

## Send Your Story to Voices!

Did you know that Voices publishes creative writing, including creative fiction (such as short stories), creative nonfiction (such as memoirs and life/work stories), and poetry? We also publish artistic and ethnographic photography and artwork, in addition to research-based articles on New York State folk arts and artists. If you are one of New York's traditional artists or working in a traditional occupation—including fishing, boat building, traditional healing, instrument making, firefighting, or nursing, to name a few—please consider sharing with our readers. For more information, see our Submissions Guidelines on p. 43 or contact the Acquisitions Editor at [degarmo@crandalllibrary.org](mailto:degarmo@crandalllibrary.org)

## From the Director (continued)

traditional arts. In its 35-year history, the program has celebrated individuals who exemplify excellence in their chosen art form and have generously shared and nurtured traditional arts activities with others. The NEA website states that the fellowships honor “lifetime achievement, artistic excellence, and contributions to the nation’s traditional arts heritage” <<https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage>>. There have been 413 honorees since the National Heritage Fellowship program began in 1982, recognizing excellence in artistry for music, dance, craft traditions, and folk arts advocacy and service. Honorees include Syracuse guitarist and songwriter Elizabeth Cotton (Onondaga); Klezmer clarinetist Andy Statman (Brooklyn); Ghanaian drummer Yacub Addy (Albany); Lindy Hopper Frankie Manning (Queens); Puerto Rican lace maker Rosa Elena Egipciano (New York); and gospel musician, in the Sacred Steel tradition, Chuck Campbell (Monroe). The nation’s highest honor for folk and traditional artists, this award recognizes the diversity that is at the core of America’s strength.

I am convinced that Americans *do care* about the creative life of America. I urge you to contact your Congressperson today. Ask them to support the NEA and NEH. Their loss will be a loss for America’s cultural heritage and the elimination of a strong economic driver in our communities.

Ellen McHale, PhD, Executive Director  
New York Folklore Society  
[nyfs@nyfolklore.org](mailto:nyfs@nyfolklore.org)  
[www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org)

## Upstate (continued)

### Back to the “O” Names . . .

A geographic investigation disavows the folk tale at the start of the column: Owego means *where the valley widens*, Oswego, *mouth of a river* or *pouring out place*; Otisco Lake may have been named *rising to the surface and again sinking*, referring to a legend of a drowning man, and Owasco Lake, *bridge on the water*. Finally, Otsego is either *bodies of water* or *place where meetings are held*, depending on who you ask. Either is preferable to the town’s earliest name Okkudo, for *sickly* or *stomach pain*. The town requested a name change; in 1843, the New York State Legislature changed it to Otsego. ▼

# Submission Guidelines for *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*

*Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* is a membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society ([www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org)).

The New York Folklore Society is a nonprofit, statewide organization dedicated to furthering cultural equity and cross-cultural understanding through programs that nurture folk cultural expressions within communities where they originate, share these traditions across cultural boundaries, and enhance the understanding and appreciation of folk culture. Through *Voices* the society communicates with professional folklorists and members of related fields, traditional artists, and a general public interested in folklore.

*Voices* is dedicated to publishing the content of folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal publishes research-based articles, written in an accessible style, on topics related to traditional art and life. It also features stories, interviews, reminiscences, essays, folk poetry and music, photographs, and artwork drawn from people in all parts of New York State. Columns on subjects such as photography, sound and video recording, legal and ethical issues, and the nature of traditional art and life appear in each issue.

## Editorial Policy

**Feature articles.** Articles published in *Voices* represent original contributions to folklore studies. Although *Voices* emphasizes the folklore of New York State, the editor welcomes articles based on the folklore of any area of the world. Articles on the theory, methodology, and geography of folklore are also welcome, as are purely descriptive articles in the ethnography of folklore. In addition, *Voices* provides a home for “orphan” tales, narratives, and songs, whose contributors are urged to provide contextual information.

Authors are encouraged to include short personal reminiscences, anecdotes, isolated tales, narratives, songs, and other material that relates to and enhances their main article.

Typically feature articles range from 1,000 to 4,000 words and up to 6,000 words at the editor’s discretion.

**Reviews and review essays.** Books, recordings, films, videos, exhibitions, concerts, and the like are selected for review in *Voices* for their relevance to folklore studies or the folklore of New York State and their potential interest to a wide audience. Persons wishing to review recently published material should contact the editor. Unsolicited reviews and proposals for reviews will be evaluated by the editor and by outside referees where appropriate. Follow the bibliographic style in a current issue of *Voices*. Reviews should not exceed 750 words.

**Correspondence and commentary.** Short but substantive reactions to or elaborations upon material appearing in *Voices* within the previous year are welcomed. The editor may invite the author of the materials being addressed to respond; both pieces may be published together. Any subject may be addressed or rebutted once by any correspondent. The principal criteria for publication are whether, in the opinion of the editor or the editorial board, the comment constitutes a substantive contribution to folklore studies, and whether it will interest our general readers.

Letters should not exceed 500 words.

## Style

The journal follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Consult *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* for questions of spelling, meaning, and usage, and avoid gender-specific terminology.

**Footnotes.** Endnotes and footnotes should be avoided; incorporate such information into the text. Ancillary information may be submitted as a sidebar.

**Bibliographic citations.** For citations of text from outside sources, use the author-date style described in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

**Language.** All material must be submitted in English. Foreign-language terms (transliterated, where appropriate, into the Roman alphabet) should be italicized and followed by a concise parenthetical English gloss; the author bears responsibility for the correct spelling and orthographics of non-English words. British spellings should be Americanized.

## Publication Process

Unless indicated, the New York Folklore Society holds copyright to all material published in *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*. With the submission of material to the editor, the author acknowledges that he or she gives *Voices* sole rights to its publication, and that permission to publish it elsewhere must be secured in writing from the editor.

For the initial submission, send an e-mail attachment or CD (preferably prepared in Microsoft Word and saved as Rich Text Format).

Copy must be double spaced, with all pages numbered consecutively. To facilitate anonymous review of feature articles, the author’s name and biography should appear only on a separate title page.

Tables, charts, maps, illustrations, photographs, captions, and credits should follow the main text and be numbered consecutively. All illustrations should be clean, sharp, and camera-ready. Photographs should be prints or duplicate slides (not originals) or scanned at high resolution (300+ dpi) and e-mailed to the editor as jpeg or tiff files. Captions and credits must be included. Written permission to publish each image must be obtained by authors from the copyright holders prior to submission of manuscripts, and the written permissions must accompany the manuscript (authors should keep copies).

Materials are acknowledged upon receipt. The editor and two anonymous readers review manuscripts submitted as articles. The review process takes several weeks.

Authors receive two complimentary copies of the issue in which their contribution appears and may purchase additional copies at a discount. Authors of feature articles may purchase offprints; price information is available upon publication.

## Submission Deadlines

Spring–Summer issue	November 1
Fall–Winter issue	May 1

Send submissions as Word files to  
Todd DeGarmo, *Voices* Editor  
(e-mail preferred): [degarmo@crandalllibrary.org](mailto:degarmo@crandalllibrary.org)  
or

New York Folklore Society  
129 Jay Street  
Scheneectady, NY 12305

# Join the New York Folklore Society today and become a subscriber to *Voices*

Join the New York Folklore Society and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of key events.

**Annual Conference.** People travel from all over to meet in a different part of the state each year for the NYFS Conference and Annual Meeting. Professionals in folklore and related fields join with educators and practitioners to explore the culture and traditions of the area. Lectures and discussions are balanced with concerts, dancing, and tours of cultural sites.

**New York State Folk Arts Forums.** Folk arts professionals, colleagues in related disciplines, and lay people come together each year to address a topic of special interest—whether it be folklore and the Internet, heritage tourism, cultural conservation, or intellectual property law.

## Help When You Need It

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you need in your work.

**Mentoring and Professional Development Program for Folklife and the Traditional Arts.** Receive technical assistance from a mentor of your choosing. You can study with a master traditional artist, learn new strategies for marketing, master concert and exhibition production, organize an archive, or improve your organizational management.

**Folk Artists Self-Management Project.** If you're a traditional artist, you know the importance of business, management, and marketing skills to your success in the marketplace. NYFS can help you with workshops, mentoring, and publications.

**Folk Archives Project.** What could be more critical than finding a repository for an important collection? The NYFS is a leader in the preservation of our cultural heritage. Attend our workshops and order copies of NYFS books at a discount.

**Consulting and Referral.** The NYFS offers informal counseling and referral services to the members in the field. Contact us by telephone, e-mail, or letter.

**Publications.** Members receive discounts on all NYFS publications. Visit [www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org) for current titles.

## A Public Voice

The NYFS raises awareness of folklore among the general public through three important channels.

**Print.** *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*, published twice a year, brings you folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal's new look distinguishes it from other publications in the field. Read *Voices* for news you can use about our field and legal issues, photography, sound and video recording, and archiving.

**Radio.** *Voices of New York Traditions* is a series of radio documentaries that spotlight the folklife of the state, aired on public radio. Stay tuned!

**Internet.** Visit [www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org) for the latest news on events in folklore. Updated weekly, the NYFS web site is designed to appeal to the public as well as keep specialists informed.

## Advocacy

The NYFS is your advocate for sympathetic and informed attention to folk arts.

- We represent you on issues before the state legislature and the federal government when public policy affects the field. Visit the advocacy pages at [www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org) to learn what we're doing and how you can help.
- The society partners with statewide, regional, and national organizations, from the New York State Arts and Cultural Coalition to the American Folklore Society, and frequently presents its projects and issues at meetings of professional organizations in the allied fields of archives, history, and libraries.

## So Join!

Become part of a community that explores and nurtures the traditional cultures of New York State and beyond. Membership in the NYFS entitles you to the following benefits:

- A subscription to *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*
- Invitations to conferences, workshops, and meetings
- Updates on technical assistance programs
- Opportunities to meet others who share your interests
- Discounts on NYFS books

Plus the satisfaction of knowing that you support the only organization devoted to folklore across New York State.

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The amount of memberships greater than \$20 and all donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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SAVE  
THE DATE!

## CULTURAL MIGRATION: DISPLACEMENT AND RENEWAL

*A Conference of the New York Folklore Society*

SEPTEMBER 9, 2017

The Castellani Art Museum  
At the center of Niagara University, New York 14109

Migration across national borders reflects the conditions of an ever-changing world. Its impacts include the sharing of cultural knowledge across geography and across ethnic and community boundaries. Migration also encourages accommodation, both from the hosting communities and the new arrivals. This shifting landscape may spark both positive and negative emotions, as hosting communities and migrants experience tensions arising from cultural intersections and differences.

Against the backdrop of the American political landscape of 2017, these issues have grown in urgency, timeliness, and importance. Contemporary folklore sits at the intersection of arts, humanities, and social justice, and the planned community workshop will invite participants to explore these issues from diverse perspectives through a New York State lens.

Presented in a roundtable format, this gathering will include perspectives from traditional artists, community members, folklorists, and human service providers.

For more information, call us at 518/346-7008 or email us at  
[info@nyfolklore.org](mailto:info@nyfolklore.org)  
Check the website for updates: [www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org)



Karen and Karenni master weavers and their apprentices showcase their work at the Schenectady Green Market, December 2015, as part of an apprenticeship program supported by the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). This apprenticeship was part of a NYFS-sponsored "Newcomer Arts Project" that received support from Empire State Development, the National Endowment for the Arts, and NYSCA. In this apprenticeship, Karen and Karenni weavers, originally from Burma (Myanmar), worked with less experienced weavers to teach the techniques and designs central to the tradition of women's textile traditions in their communities.