



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Occupational Folklore: The Focus of the New York Folklore Society's 2013 Annual Conference

BY LISA OVERHOLSER

On March 2, 2013, New York Folklore Society hosted its annual conference at ArtsWestchester in White Plains, NY. The theme centered on occupational folklore. While the current economic crisis has drawn much attention to the need for strategic and sustainable economic development, this conference was a great opportunity to highlight folkloric aspects integral to the economic machine in New York State.

At the heart of the conference was the maritime exhibition, "From Shore to Shore: Boat Builders and Boat Yards of Westchester and Long Island," an exhibition co-curated by folklorists Tom van Buren of ArtsWestchester and Nancy Solomon from Long Island Traditions. The exhibition was ongoing in the Peckham and Shenkman Galleries of ArtsWestchester and provided an informative visual display of the folklore of work. Highlighted were master maritime craftsmen of the Hudson River and Long Island Sound, the tools of their trade, and

the landmark boatyards where they work, all which have been documented and researched by van Buren and Solomon. Chronological displays, boat models, and actual boats punctuated the exhibition, giving a good contextual background. [More information, exhibit history, and current exhibit locations, can be found at the ArtsWestchester website, www.artswestchester.org and the Long Island Traditions website, www.longislandtraditions.org.]

After a co-curator's talk by Nancy Solomon and Tom van Buren at 1 p.m., two subsequent panels focused attention on occupational folklore. Robert Baron, director of the Folk Arts and Music Programs at the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA), led the conversation about "The Apprenticeship Model in Professional Development and the Revival of Traditional Trades," and posed questions to Maxwell Kofi Donkor (former NYSCA apprentice and Ghanaian musician residing in Westchester county), Eric Cantemessa (stonemason and another former NYSCA apprentice), and John Remson (a Long Island boat builder whose work was featured in "From Shore to Shore"). Across various cultural and occupational backgrounds, the model of master and apprentice has been a constant in helping to sustain traditional ways of life.

Guest folklorist Nancy Groce, Folklife Specialist at the American Folklife Center, led a discussion with a panel consisting of past and present recipients of the Archie Green Fellowship, the award for public folklorists specializing in occupational folklore.

Discussants included the NYFS's own Ellen McHale ("Stories from the Backstretch of the Thoroughbred Racetrack"), Steve Zeitlin ("Eric Canal Stories"), and Hannah Harvester ("The Changing Relationships of Dairy Farmers and Farm Workers in Northern New York"). New York State was well represented in the realm of occupational folklore research, a testament to the crucial link between folklore studies and the economic landscape in the Empire State.

The invited keynote address, "The Teaching of a Traditional Craft," was given by Adam Green, founder and executive director of Rocking the Boat, a community-based Bronx organization that works with youth to use boat building as a means of community revitalization and developing individual skills. Although not a practicing folklorist, Green has had quite a bit of training in folklore with a sophisticated understanding of it that informs his work. He wrote his undergraduate thesis at Vassar College on the storytelling process, including an in-depth analysis of the "Ramapo Salamander" tale, and believes that process is essential to his focus at Rocking the Boat. "It's about process," he says in a recent interview. "You do things, and things happen as a result of you doing them. I like to think of it as a narrative. Everything relates to everything else we do, and it's got to tell the larger story. Our kids are building something real and learning all the skills they need to do that, and it can take them places." The idea is perhaps summed up best in Rocking the Boat's memorable tag line—"Kids don't just build boats at Rocking the Boat, boats build kids."

The highly successful boat building organization that Green launched in 1996, as a volunteer youth project in an East Harlem junior high school, is also a model for finding relevance to many different sectors of society. Rocking the Boat serves the youth of Hunts Point in the Bronx, and in the mix are kids from many different races and cultures. Most have one



Adam Green, founder and executive director of Rocking the Boat. Photo by Lisa Overholser.



Kids in the Rocking the Boat program out on the Bronx River. Photo by Charles R. Berenguer, Jr. Courtesy of Rocking the Boat.

thing in common—they and their families struggle with often severe economic, educational, and social conditions. Many of them have never had the opportunity to build anything or experience the outdoors of their own environs. So, in one sense, Rocking the Boat is a social service organization, providing practical hands-on job skills training and opportunity.

They are also an environmental organization, however, carrying out very real environmental research and restoration projects along the Bronx Riverway. These projects are often carried out in conjunction with corporate or governmental partners. Current projects include: a wetland monitoring project for their Bronx Riverway neighbor, ABC Carpet & Home, in conjunction with landscape artist Lillian Ball and environmental engineers at eDesign Dynamics and Drexel University; a wading and shore bird foraging survey with the New York City Audubon Society; an American eel monitoring project to study eel populations that come up from the Sargossa Sea in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean; and a Bronx River Oyster Restoration Project in conjunction with NY/NJ Baykeeper and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Green says: “We want to do things that are real. Our excuse for building boats is that we need boats in order to do environmental research along our waterfront. This is real science, in the context of larger scientific purposes.”

Because they build boats that historically were used in the local waterway system, they are also a historical entity. They build in the traditional fashion, using traditional materials rather than modern materials that define most boats made today. They work with Historic

Hudson Valley, allowing them to delve more deeply into the historical recreation process in presentations there. Of the roughly 45 boats that Rocking the Boat has built since incorporating as a non-profit in 2001, a number of them have ended up at Historic Hudson Valley and at the Adirondack Museum. Green suggests that the way boats are designed and shaped are very related to their use; you can learn a lot about past ways of life based on their design. For example, a dory is a traditional fishing boat that he says is “tippy and tender.” It has a lot of what he calls “freeboard,” the distance between the water line and the top of the boat. For a fishing boat, this allowance was necessary for heavy loads. Whaleboats (they built one of these for the Mystic Seaport Museum) are a distinctive double-ended boat, with no front or back. This design feature reveals the necessity for flexibility—when you harpoon a whale, you never know which way the whale is going to swim.

A standard kind of boat that they have repurposed (and the boat featured in their logo) is the Whitehall boat, a boat historically used in the New York City harbor to transport people and goods from ship to shore. Green explains that function to the kids in his classes. To emphasize the point, he jokes with them: “Say, it’s the 1850s in Manhattan, and you want to go clubbing. How would you get there?” “The answer is with a Whitehall boat.” Though no Manhattan nightclubs are involved in Rocking the Boat’s Whitehall boating, they do haul kids back and forth, so the essence is the same.

As with any work or labor culture, Green recognizes the great variety of folklore that is present in their own organizational day-to-day life. A great example is when they complete a

boat and go through the ritual of naming and launching the boat. The whole community typically shows up as they march the boat from the shop to the waterfront. They wonder, “Well, let’s see if she’s going to float!” and christen the boat not with a bottle of champagne, but with a jug of Bronx river water, a variation on the traditional boat-christening scenario. Additionally, there is a symbolic handing off commemorated in various ways as the boat passes from the Boatbuilding program to the On-Water program

There is also lots of storytelling that happens as kids work on the boats, something that Green says is not intentionally incorporated but is nevertheless there. In fact, he wishes he could focus more on this. He would love to be more involved in inter-generational storytelling, for example, or to share the stories of those who originally come from water- and island-based cultures outside of the US, particularly as they reflect some of the youth that Rocking the Boat works with.

Conference participants were able to browse through the “From Shore to Shore” exhibit at a public reception, sharing ideas and thoughts raised throughout the day. Annual conferences of the New York Folklore Society are always thought provoking and stimulating. For NYFS, this conference was not only a chance to reach out to new audiences, but also to remember the connection of folklore as a discipline to various other sectors of a cultural economy. ▼

Lisa Overholser is staff folklorist at the New York Folklore Society, where she manages the Mentoring and Professional Development program and contributes to many other projects and initiatives. She holds a PhD in folklore and ethnomusicology from the University of Indiana.

Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore 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 Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

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

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

\$ 50.00	Basic Membership
\$100.00	Harold W. Thompson Circle
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Organizations/Institutions

\$ 75.00	Subscriber
\$100.00	Partner
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.