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# The View at the Top of the State

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

*“Where is upstate? Poughkeepsie?” It’s an old joke among us who live way up north, along the border of Ontario and Quebec. That’s why we prefer to call home “the North Country” or, as some like to say, “the REAL Upstate!” I wrote the following article a couple of years ago at the invitation of a team of consultants who were working on a Corridor Management Plan for a proposed “North Country Scenic Byway.” The route follows existing secondary highways that, in some places, are a stone’s throw from our Canadian neighbors. I was asked to write “an insider’s perspective,” as both a folklorist and a lifelong resident. With my wife Judy driving and a notebook and camera in my hands, we traveled the length of the future byway. Here is what we saw:*

If you’re headed to New Orleans, you can start at Rouses Point. From Lake Champlain to Lake Ponchartrain, it’s about 1600 miles on historic US Route 11. To get there from here, you will first travel through New York’s “North Country,” an auspicious beginning.

Scholars, politicians, even local residents disagree about the region’s boundaries. Some say it’s the 14 counties north of the Mohawk River or about one-third of the whole state. Others insist it’s only a few northernmost counties, and the Adirondacks are a world apart. But county and town lines, as well as the blue line that designates the “forever wild” Adirondack Park, are results of political decisions—often made by outsiders to satisfy political or economic interests—that may have little to do with the local way of life. However, no one questions the claim to the name in communities immediately adjacent to the Canadian border, where small businesses, organizations, and even government agencies describe themselves as North Woods, North Star, Tru-North, Borderline, and most commonly, North Country.

What is this place we call “the North Country,” and what makes it special? First of all, the term is not exclusively a New York State idea. It’s shared by people from Maine to Washington State. But in New York State, it’s often perceived in relation to life in “New York,” assumed by the rest of the world to be urban, wealthy, and hip. Early historical maps

simply designated our region as “wild country.” Landscape plays (and has always played) a dominant role in the lives of both visitors and residents. The beauty of nature abounds. The open sky—brilliant blue on a summer day and star-studded on a clear winter night—is beyond description. The rich spring greens in May and June and the spectacular colors of autumn leaves are cherished by locals. Woods and water are our greatest natural assets. Lakes, ponds, streams, and rivers are scattered over the entire landscape. Wooded areas—from dense mountainous forests to farm woodlots and village parks and streets—are lush and ever changing.

To those who have passed through once or twice—or maybe never been here at all—the North Country may seem a little off-putting, often summed up tersely as “beautiful but cold!” Locals joke that we have four seasons—almost winter, winter, still winter, and road construction! No matter how one defines it, life in our region is remote from urban centers (our closest cities are Syracuse, Albany, Montreal, and Ottawa—a foreign capital!), and people are often remote from each other (some kids ride an hour each way to school). Although the region thrived a century ago—with growing industries, bustling small towns, and an energetic workforce—it has been slowly declining since. The poverty and unemployment rates are high, the population is aging, and young people leave, usually reluctantly, for greener pastures. The population of most northern New York counties has remained pretty constant for the last hundred years.

So, who does live here? There are descendants of New England farmers—particularly Vermonters—who first settled in the very early 19th century; and descendants of French Canadians who arrived a few decades later to work in the lumber woods or related industries. With the arrival of railroads and factories, the Irish and Italians, as well as other Europeans, found work here, and some families have stayed. Today, it’s dairy farmers, woodsmen, factory workers, public employees (education,

health care, and government jobs are big), independent business operators, and retirees who call the North Country home. It’s also where young professionals have come to start their careers, fallen in love with the place, and stayed. And where people, seeking relief from conformity and city life, come back to the land to make a life that’s simple and rewarding, sometimes even becoming community leaders.

What is it then that makes the North Country such a special way of life? Ironically, the conditions that make it seem challenging for some bring out the best in others. Beginning with the first settlers, those who succeeded here took pride in their independent thinking, self-reliance, resilience, and resourcefulness. Many who followed, natives and transplants, have shown the same spirit. We treasure more elbow room and a slower pace than our city cousins have. We take great joy in living near the Adirondacks, Lake Champlain, the St. Lawrence River, and the Thousand Islands. We’re proud of our history, love the outdoors in all seasons, and take life along an international border for granted. It’s usually evident in the little things of daily life, so I invite observant travelers to keep looking and listening as you visit.

From Rouses Point to Canton—with Malone, Akwesasne, Massena, and Potsdam along the way—is 122 miles of true North Country. While for most of its great length, Route 11 runs north to south, right here it is east to west, starting with a view to the east of the Green Mountains of Vermont and ending in the agriculturally rich St. Lawrence Valley. As you go, you’ll cross several powerful rivers—the Great Chazy, the Salmon, the St. Regis, the Raquette, and the Grasse (most flow north from the high peaks of the Adirondacks to the St. Lawrence).

To many visitors along this route, life may seem small scale. There are herds of Holsteins and Guernseys on family dairy farms, with small barns and outbuildings and modest farmhouses. The hamlets and villages may boast a traffic light or two; most do not. You

can sometimes travel miles without seeing many other travelers; when you do, don't be surprised if they wave. Since this is the major route along this freight corridor, there's plenty of truck traffic, night and day; long freight trains from and to Canadian cities pass through several times a day, causing drivers some of the few delays along the way. And the only commercial air service along the way is at Massena International Airport, with direct flights three times a day to Albany!

If it's lots of fast food choices and a strip of recognizable franchises you're looking for, you may want a different route. Small shops—usually of the mom and pop variety—prevail. There's a convenience store for gas and the basics, or a diner with home cooking every few miles. If you're shopping, look for some local favorites. There are Champlain Valley apples from the largest McIntosh orchards in the world, McCadam sharp cheddar cheese (whose history goes back to when cheese factories were as common as one-room schoolhouses in the North Country), and Glazier hot dogs, the bright red frank with a crispy, natural casing. If you stop for lunch, "michigans"—a very local version of the decorated hot dog with a savory meat sauce—and Quebec-inspired poutine—a stack of French fries, melted cheese curds, and brown gravy—are authentic local choices. And signs for home businesses are everywhere along the route—farm stands, beauty shops, used car dealers, taxidermists, maple producers, and crafts shops are a few. To make a decent living, people in the area have long needed a second income, so the entrepreneurs among us set up shop.

An awareness of the climate and weather is ever present. Woodpiles and snow fences dot the landscape, some all year long; piles of sand and salt rise and fall around highway department garages with the seasons. Roadside markers for snowmobile trails and pickup trucks with snowplows are common sights. Nearly every community of any size sponsors some kind of winter carnival or cabin fever festival during January to March. Cemeteries have holding vaults for burials, awaiting a spring thaw. And in this land where Lake Placid is an international destination for winter sports, residents have always enjoyed outdoor winter

activities—hiking, snowshoeing, skiing, and skating (snowmobiling is more recent). But ice hockey rules. From Midgets to Seniors, there's a league for nearly everyone, male and female alike. Between Rouses Point and Canton, there are 14 regulation size hockey arenas, to say nothing of countless backyard rinks and frozen ponds. The rivalry between St. Lawrence University and Clarkson University teams and fans for local bragging rights, on and off the ice, is legendary. Summer is short and people cherish it. Lawn care and gardening, barbecues, going to camp, boating (in every vessel from Champlain sailing yachts to Rushton wooden canoes), fishing, festivals, reunions, and fairs consume people's lives from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It's hard to get much business done here in August.

Like the icons of American literature a century ago, small towns are the centerpieces of North Country life. Although many still have local businesses scattered about, classic downtown streetscapes—including general stores, drug stores, hardware stores, and numerous tradesmen that once thrived—have gradually disappeared. Simple country churches for several Protestant denominations and Catholic parishes have survived. And, while the old gathering places—like barber shops, Masonic or Odd Fellows lodges, and taverns—are harder to find, nearly every community has a veterans' post and a fire hall. Today, fire and rescue squads are often the backbone of community-minded efforts to help neighbors in need. Church suppers, chicken barbecues, pancake breakfasts, chicken and biscuit dinners, and harvest suppers are commonplace for fundraisers and socializing.

The larger villages along the way have their own identities. Historically, Malone has been an agricultural town, the home of the Franklin County Fair and truck farms for potatoes, broccoli, and spinach. Massena is an industrial center, where Alcoa operates the oldest aluminum smelting and fabricating plant in the world. Since the early 20th century and the arrival of immigrant laborers, it has been the most ethnically diverse community in our region. Potsdam and Canton are college towns. Here you can find interesting restaurants, specialty grocery stores, pubs, bookstores, and

cultural activities like no other in the North Country.

An interest in history is important in the North Country. Most communities have their own little historical societies and museums, where you can find anything from early handmade craftsmen's tools to diaries and records that are a genealogist's dream. It may be a secret to the rest of the world, but towns along this route were important to some major historical events and movements, beginning with skirmishes in the War of 1812, to secret hideaways for the Underground Railroad, rum-running across the border during Prohibition, major US Army maneuvers for World War II, and the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway in the 1950s, said by some to be one of the world's greatest engineering achievements.

Historical markers along the trail identify sites as diverse as the winter of 1814 quarters for the American Army in Fort Covington, the Lost Dauphin Cottage in Hogansburg (home of Eleazer Williams, an Episcopal clergyman and "Missionary to Indians/Reputed to be the son of Louis XVI"), and the birthplace of William P. Rogers in Norfolk, secretary of state in the Nixon years. En route you can also find the final resting places for some celebrated Americans. To name a few: in Malone, there's Orville Gibson, a luthier and founder of the guitar company that bears his name today, and William Wheeler, a politician and one of our least known vice presidents (for Benjamin Harrison, from 1877 to 1881); in Potsdam, Julia Crane, a pioneer in music education and founder of the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam; and in Canton, Frederic Remington, a native son who became the great illustrator of the American West.

Most residents of the North Country counties take living along an international border in stride. Travel back and forth over bridge or land crossings is ordinary. Now and in the past, Canadian life has influenced people on this side of the border: local fiddlers were fans of Canadian stars they first heard on their radios in the 1930s; the first television broadcasts we received in black and white were from Ottawa and Montreal; and weekend getaways to Canada for shopping, dining, and entertainment are still a bonus for many. For most of this route,

you're within a stone's throw of the boundary line. At Rouses Point, some traffic signs are in French; going west, you'll see directional signs for typical villages like Saint-Chrysostome in Quebec, just three miles distant, where over 90 percent of the population speaks only French. Outside Massena, you can cross to Cornwall in English-speaking Ontario, a small city that's a bustling mix of heavy industry and commerce. And, while you're here (on both sides of the river), listen for the local dialect: "Your mother-in-law is out and about, eh?"

Along this route, too, is the rare opportunity to travel through the St. Regis Mohawk Nation—Akwasne or "The Land Where the Partridge Drums." This is sovereign Native American territory, and you'll be frequently reminded by the hand-painted murals that proclaim both Mohawk identity and independence. Along the way, you can find the busy casino and bingo palace and plenty of places to buy cigarettes and gas, without state sales tax. You should also look for traditional Mohawk culture—lacrosse games at the arena, corn soup and fry bread at local eateries, beadwork, and the elegant sweetgrass baskets, for which local women have made themselves famous at the tribe's cultural center and gift shop.

If you're not in a big hurry, a trip across the top of New York State in any season of the year is time well spent. There's a lot more here than wild country. Along the way, you can catch glimpses of picturesque mountains as old as time itself and sculptural windmills in a scene like futuristic fiction; of grand Victorian mansions from our Golden Age and hardscrabble farmsteads of our struggling present. The North Country is not so much a place as a way of life. We may be off the beaten track, but most of us like it that way. Enjoy it while you're here. ▼

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: Martha Cooper.



# Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabaté— The Seed of Mandé Tradition Germinates in the New World

BY SYLVAIN LEROUX

Abdoulaye "Djoss" Diabaté is a Malian musician born to a famous West African griot family. Little brother to the great, world-renowned singer, Kasse Mady, he grew up in the celebrated griot village of Kéla, Mali. His mother Sira Mory\* was a singer who defined her generation. His mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters [In Africa, your father's brother is your father. The same closeness applies to aunts, uncles and cousins.], were, and still are, evolving at the heart of Mandé culture: the cream of the country's instrumentalists, singers, dancers, historians, and storytellers. His extended family reads like a who's who of Mandé music (Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea Bissau).

Abdoulaye absorbed all these influences and demonstrated outstanding musical abilities at a very early age. In his late teens, he moved to Ivory Coast, as that country offered greater promise of material well being, and established residence in Abidjan where he stayed for the following 20-plus years. There, he founded Super Mandé, a group that established itself as one of the most popular bands in the area. He rubbed shoulders with artists who have since become well known, such as Salif Keita, Mory Kanté, Manfila Kanté, Ousmane Kouyaté, and more. They played weddings, parties, baptisms, and concerts, touring all over the region and neighboring countries. An LP by the group, titled *Wahabia ke-dashi*, was released in the mid-70s, but because the title track criticized some hypocritical marabouts (religious leaders), the album stirred controversy and was banned from airplay, contributing to the stifling of the band's opportunities for greater success.

Eventually, Abdoulaye was noticed by Souleymane Koli, the choreographer and director of the world famous Ballet Koteba,

and of the girl band Les Gos de Koteba, who recruited him to tour with the Ballet as a singer, and with the Gos as a guitarist. For many years, he toured Africa and the world with them.

Meanwhile, he had fallen in love (a love story that rivals Romeo and Juliet—minus the suicides), married, and was head of a growing family. Life in Africa was uncertain, and his situation with the Koteba organization, despite all the touring, did not yield substantial rewards. Therefore, in 1996, he saw an opportunity to try his luck in New York City, and he decided to take it.

The arrival in the City of this great Mandé voice stirred excitement among the African music community—everybody wanted to work with him, have him grace a track on their project, front their band, or just play with him—to be by his side when he opened his mouth and stimulated his vocal cords to produce the amazing sounds that, in this case, we deceptively refer to as singing; his vocal prowess and his personality bursting with spontaneous creativity, inevitably perking up any musical situation, generating excitement and delight.

In a short time, he became a figurehead to the Mandé griot community in the United States, a fact consecrated by his participation in the Smithsonian Folkways release *Badenya: Manden Jaliya in New York City*, the cover of which is graced by our protagonist's beaming, irresistible smile. On that photo, and in person, he bears an uncanny resemblance to the greatest American musician of all times, Louis Armstrong, with whom he also shares the qualities of innovative musical talent, indomitable spirit, and an infectious joyous disposition.

As an immigrant to America, Abdoulaye

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