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An Open Invitation To My Downstate Friends

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

“Get Outta Town!” the ads around Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan have screamed. To New Yorkers of the five boroughs (and maybe a little beyond), the recent message has been clear. For a couple of years now, a big focus for tourism in New York State—at the behest of our current Governor Cuomo—has been to get people of The City and close environs to vacation Upstate. Posters in city buses try to catch riders’ attention with photos of exciting things to see or do north of Yankee Stadium. TV and radio spots with voiceovers by well-known New Yorkers urge city dwellers and suburbanites to think of the Hudson Valley, the Finger

Lakes, or the Adirondacks when they’re looking for a weekend—or a week-long—getaway. For a short time, even some cars on the 42nd Street crosstown shuttle were wrapped with dramatic images of hikers or snowboarders and a call to take advantage of Upstate assets for recreation and relaxation.

Actually, this is hardly a new idea. While lecturing to city folks in Boston and Connecticut in the 1860s about the health-enhancing, spirit-reviving values of travel to the Great North Woods, Rev. W. H. Murray became a household name—“Adirondack Murray”—to urban dwellers. His book, *Adventures in the Wilderness, or,*

Camp-Life in the Adirondacks went through eight printings in 1869, its first year. Realizing its value as a tourist’s guide, Murray’s later editions included maps of the region and train schedules from various Eastern cities to places like Lake George, Old Forge, and Saranac Lake. An amazing flurry of activity in these isolated areas occurred; railroad and steamboat access deep into the wilderness was created to accommodate the sudden demand; scores of rustic Great Camps and upscale resorts were constructed in the wilds to appeal to people who were not quite used to living like Adirondackers; and a regional industry of hunting and fishing guides, camp



People eating bullheads at the annual Brier Hill Bullhead Feed in the local fire station, spring 2009. Photo by Varick Chittenden. All photos courtesy of the Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY) Archives.



Volunteer firemen cutting blocks of ice from Crystal Pond, New Bremen, for the annual ice harvest, winter 2004. Photo by Martha Cooper.

caretakers and cooks, guideboat and canoe builders, tourist cabin and small hotel owners was born.

In the same era, vacationers from The City—especially the more prosperous kind—found their way to various parts of Upstate to vacation. Seasonal homes were built in the Hudson Valley, a short train ride from Grand Central Station. Ethnic resorts and hotels, catering to the Irish, Germans, Czechs, and Italians, prospered as did, of course, the much-celebrated Jewish destinations to “the Borscht Belt” in the Catskills. Niagara Falls for honeymoons, wineries and TB-cure resorts in the Finger Lakes, religious retreats like the Chautauqua Institution and Lily Dale—all these and more have had their days as popular destinations away from city life. Some are still doing well; some are long gone.

Promoting travel to “the provinces” is not a new idea, either. Who doesn’t recognize the iconic “I Love New York” logo—complete with the red heart symbol—that was created

by graphic artist Milton Glaser for a state-funded ad campaign in 1977, to promote tourism to New York City? Soon after, came the song “I Love New York,” and within a couple of years Governor Hugh Carey declared it New York State’s anthem. By that time the program and funds to support it were increased to attract tourists to all parts of the state.

In the years since—including the current TV ad series that run frequently—the usual emphasis has been recreation in the Great Outdoors. Exciting video of happy people in inflated rafts crashing through white water in the upper Hudson near North Creek, seniors and teenagers racing down the slopes of Whiteface Mountain on skis or snowboards, anglers standing hip deep in Catskill streams and casting for trout, or families cycling around breathtaking waterfalls in Letchworth State Park—all provide the clarion call for tourists to jump in their Volvos or minivans and head upstate. It’s Adirondack Murray all over again, 21st-century style.

There’s no question that Upstate has some of the most varied, beautiful, and compelling landscapes in all of America, (including the largest public park and the largest state-protected area in the contiguous United States, with a longstanding commitment to remain “forever wild”). There are lots of good reasons for visitors, whose daily drama comes from subway rides at rush hour or hearing sirens screaming through the neighborhood in pursuit of miscreants on the loose, to take to the woods.

Just as those of us who live up north like to protest that “there’s more to New York than New York City,” I like to say there’s more to Upstate than wild rivers and rugged mountain peaks. There’s plenty going on culturally as well. In fairness to the TV ads, they’ve recently featured some big names, like the Glimmerglass Opera and the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, Proctors Theater in Schenectady, FDR’s home in Hyde Park, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, or the National



Clay Ferguson and Jim Brabant, veteran 1000 Islands fishing guides in their shared boathouse in French Creek Bay, Clayton, summer 2010. Photo by Martha Cooper.

Museum of Play in Rochester. These are only a few of the great cultural institutions in Upstate; I love them all.

But the folklorist in me thinks *Voices* readers will be interested in other possibilities as well. I'm reminded of a visit to the North Country in the late 1970s by David Whisnant, a Maryland-based folklorist who'd been sent by the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to audit our first folklife festival. It had been carefully planned for the campus of SUNY Canton, where I taught at the time, with

plenty of spaces, parking, and volunteers for a good festival. Typical of other festivals we had observed, we had gone to great lengths to bring together musicians, dancers, craftspeople, ethnic cooks, an auctioneer, logging crews—you name it, we had it. The event was a big success with our public.

However, Whisnant followed his visit with a lengthy and rather stinging written review of our project that he later sent to us and to the NEA. According to him, as festivals go, we had done a good job, but his general impression was that such events provided an

artificial context for real folk activities and were not be encouraged. Greek cooks making baklava in a college gym, square dancing with old-time fiddlers in a courtyard surrounded by classroom buildings, or a country auctioneer selling random goods on a carefully groomed football field were hardly natural and usual. He pointed out that during his stay he'd stopped in several places—the local post office, a grocery store, a feed store, a convenience store—where bulletin boards were covered with posters and notices, often handmade, announcing music and dances, church suppers, ball games, fishing derbies, winter carnivals, fundraisers (and lots more), in the small towns and hamlets scattered throughout the St. Lawrence Valley. All these things were going on where people lived, worked, entertained themselves, and did things for each other. It was a good point. None of these things required a curator or a choreographer (or folklorists) to plan or carry them off; they didn't have or need ad agencies or celebrity spokespersons to draw a crowd. These were homemade community events, many of them traditional for generations, so who better knows how they should be done?

I agree in principle with Whisnant's opinion. These are social gatherings that bring rural people together in ways more common to their grandparents' time; they preserve some sense of community identity when outside forces chip away at it on a regular basis; they give elders ways to introduce children and grandchildren to the values of being a member of a community; and often they raise money to help local causes do much needed good. Being present when and where such things are really occurring, rather than where they may be recreated for the convenience of the public, can be a much richer experience for any visitor, whether she is from the community and knows what to expect, or if he's never been there or seen anything like it before.

All parts of Upstate have events like these. Because I'm most familiar with the North Country, I'd like to share some examples we have. Some are more organized than others; some have a long history and, while intended



Santa Claus and elves dance and sing in front of Santa's house at Santa's Workshop, Wilmington, summer 2003. Photo by Martha Cooper.

mainly for fun and excitement at home, are welcoming of visitors, including tourists, to join in. I think of pancake breakfasts during maple syrup season, fish fries during Lent, chicken barbecues all summer long, harvest dinners in the fall, and chicken and biscuit suppers and spaghetti dinners in the winter months. There are outdoor events all year long—maple festivals in the spring; firemen's field days, fireworks, parades, and county fairs in the summer; college homecomings and hunting club gatherings in the fall. Our long winters inspire everything from ice fishing derbies, polar bear dips, snowmobile races, and pond hockey to pass the time and recover from cabin fever. If you live here—or visit, like David Whisnant—you can check out bulletin boards to see what's up or you can check with local TV or radio stations for their community calendars. Today, however, even our smallest towns maintain websites and Facebook pages, so

there's little excuse not to keep informed.

After all my years here, I have some favorites that occur regularly, and really reflect important parts of our way of life. If you really want to *experience* some memorable times while you visit our region, I suggest you consider these for starters:

The Brier Hill Fire Department Annual Bullhead Feed. Bullhead are bottom-feeder fish in northern waters—similar to catfish. For centuries, locals have fished for them in early spring to feed their families. For decades, public suppers usually prepared by firemen's or veterans' groups are a rite of spring in many communities. In late April, the Brier Hill version, in northern St. Lawrence County is one of the oldest and typical, but nearly 1,000 people gather in the fire hall in the hamlet of 200 for all-you-can-eat. Someone local will surely help you figure out how to eat them, an interesting challenge.

The Wilson Hill Goose Drive. Since 1974, scores of volunteers—from elders to kids—gather in June in a colorful array of kayaks and canoes to assist Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) personnel round up several hundred Canada geese for banding and gender identification. At a time of year when the birds shed their feathers and can't fly, the task of herding them into holding pens along the St. Lawrence River near Massena is easier. It gets exciting when rogue birds get away, but being involved in good wildlife conservation practices is a pleasure to those who participate.

Thousand Islands Guides and Shore Dinners. If you want your turn at the very old tradition of “sports” going out with their personal guides for a day of fishing on the St. Lawrence River, this is the way to do it. “River rats”—local men who know the river well—hire out to take a party as large

as six or eight in pursuit of perch, bass, northern or walleye pike, or the biggest prize of all—a muskellunge. With well-equipped boats—some of them historic—it can be an exciting day on the water, often topped off with your guide preparing a complete shore dinner of the day’s catch and all the trimmings, including the celebrated “Thousand Islands French Toast” for dessert.

Woodsmen’s Days. To honor one of the North Country’s oldest and richest occupational traditions, for decades now woodsmen’s associations have turned work into play with festivals featuring competitions that test the skills of modern workers in cutting logs, throwing axes, climbing poles, and more. It’s also an occasion for manufacturers to display their newest equipment and for families to get a better idea of the difficulties and requirements for work in the woods. Weekend events in Tupper Lake in July and in Boonville in August are among the best known.

The Hammond Fair. Recently celebrating its 75th anniversary, this small town agricultural fall exhibition is meant for competitors under the age of 18 from area towns. With even the local school closed for the two-day event, it’s taken very seriously by the whole community in one of the best farming areas of the St. Lawrence Valley.

The entire event emulates an agricultural fair of the past, with cattle, sheep, goat, poultry, vegetables, fruit, and “domestic arts” competitions all produced by members of 4-H and FFA (Future Farmers of America) clubs.

The Lowville Cream Cheese Festival. Home of a Kraft cheese plant that produces all the famed Philadelphia brand cream cheese, local people organized this late September event to celebrate the product and agriculture in their area in the Black River Valley. It’s entirely for fun with Kraft employees making the world’s largest cheese-cake on a large wagon bed and giving out thousands of samples to visitors. There’s a milk tray relay race, a cream cheese toss, a kid’s hand milking contest, and lots more. TripAdvisor recently included the festival on their list of “wackiest in America.”

Adirondack Canoe Classic [The 90 Miler]. This is a three-day, 90-mile long canoe race from Old Forge to Saranac Lake through the historic Fulton Chain of Lakes and more. What began in the early 1980s as a more local event has evolved into a well-known competition, drawing paddlers from all over the US and Canada. Limited to 250 boats, there are some professional paddlers, but the vast majority are recreational, some well into their 70s. It’s not uncommon for whole families to participate.

The Edwards Opera House. While opera houses—usually a combination of town offices, a theater with proscenium stage, and some small businesses—were often the centerpiece of late 19th-century North Country villages, most are gone now, the victim of fires or deterioration. The Edwards Opera House is an exception, having been restored with its original stage curtains and molded plywood seats, so an active schedule of programs keeps it thriving. Most events feature local theater or musicians or groups, with an occasional star—like Jay Ungar or Tom Rush—lighting up the tiny raked stage.

Santa’s Workshop. This is the only commercially operated place on my list, but it’s such a step back in time that it’s really worth a visit. Created in the late 1940s as what some call “the first theme park in America,” it’s barely changed in the decades since. Colorful chalet-like cottages dot the landscape at the base of Whiteface Mountain. A cast of playful characters, including a team of live reindeer, talking trees, elves, and of course, Santa and Mrs. Claus, play to children “who still believe,” as founder’s son Bob Reiss maintains. While open all summer, for several extra festive weekends in late November and December, the village welcomes families to stay in nearby lodging with all kinds of special holiday entertainment, including visits by Santa to tuck kids in at night.

The New Bremen Ice Harvest. Keeping alive an ancient tradition of harvesting blocks of ice from North Country ponds for refrigeration before electricity, the local volunteer fire department in this Lewis County hamlet cuts ice on Crystal Pond (usually in February, after several weeks of sub-zero temperatures), mostly for socializing and entertainment. It’s become a spectator activity, when men gathered with ancient tools to saw 16-inch thick blocks that weigh about 200 pounds and load them onto wagons for a short trip to their community icehouse. It’s a fascinating experience to see, one that’s been cancelled a few times because the ice never froze enough to make it work.

So, to my friends in Poughkeepsie and south—“Downstate” to us—the next time you consider “getting out of town,” I hope

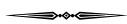


Local musicians perform on stage at the Edwards Opera House, Edwards, spring 2009. Photo by Varick Chittenden.



Young competitors show their sheep for judges at the annual Hammond Fair, fall 1999. Photo by Martha Cooper.

you think of coming north. It's a great place to visit, whether you want to climb the 46 high peaks of the Adirondacks, tour the Thousand Islands on a sunny afternoon cruise, or experience, up close and personal, a little bit of life as we know it. You're invited anytime!



This is my last Upstate column for *Voices*. Editors, designers, and, of course, readers of *Voices* have indulged me and my particular worldview long enough. It's time for me to move on to other long-awaited projects and time for others to speak up for Upstate. I'm really looking forward for someone else—from Buffalo, the Southern Tier, the Mohawk Valley, the Capital District, wherever—to have the opportunity to write about people, places, events, and things from the perspective of their part of Upstate. I wish them the very best and

half the fun I've had in thinking about and writing these columns since the Spring/Summer issue of 2001 (I missed the first issue for some reason, just like me, usually a day late and a dollar short!).

When the New York Folklore Society decided to launch *Voices*, one of their early decisions was to reintroduce regular columns called Downstate and Upstate, as they'd been called in the early days of the society's journal in the 1950s. I was intrigued and challenged by the invitation to write on behalf of all "Upstate," for as we all know, life in America's largest city and its outskirts is a parallel universe with some areas of the state that are as rural and isolated as they come in the rest of the country. I was struck that I would be part of a history of commentary on folklore in our state that goes back to the days of Harold Thompson, Ben Botkin, and my own Cooperstown Gradu-

ate Program mentor, Louis C. Jones. And I was flattered to be asked, especially when I realized that my partner in this project would be Steve Zeitlin, my old friend and colleague from Manhattan, who writes so intelligently and beautifully about any topic he tackles. Finally, I'm grateful to the editors over the years for the privilege of writing for this audience and for the freedom to write about anything I wanted (as long as I kept it to 875—give or take a few—words!). It's been fun. ▼

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