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Getting Off Track

BY DAN BERGGREN

[*Editor's Note:* For the previous issue, Varick Chittenden wrote his last *Upstate* column, electing to retire, and pass the reins to another Upstate voice. We thank Varick for his stories, insights, observations, and all that filled his columns since the inception of *Voices*. We now welcome Dan Berggren to *Voices* to continue the tradition of bringing news and views from Upstate to our readers. This year marks Dan's 40th year of performing in the Adirondacks, and the 30th year since the release of his first album, *Adirondack Green*.]

As a kid, I loved to linger with the dictionary long after the word I wanted to know was found. More often than not, the accidental discoveries were far more interesting than what I was seeking.

So it was when I attempted to piece together a picture of my grandmother by searching for her maiden name online. Many older newspapers have been turned into searchable PDFs; but once on a page, you have to search the old-fashioned way, by reading the page to find the name you've entered. That's how I lost my genealogical path and found instead, the flavor of everyday life more than a century ago in upstate New York.

What was on the minds of Adirondackers in 1906? Through its weekly column "Neighborhood Notes," *The Warrensburgh News* gave simple sketches of what mattered:

People coming and going

Wevertonn: John Davison went to Indian Lake Saturday. Mrs. J. Davison came home from Indian Lake Saturday.

Indian Lake: Nearly everyone around town is afflicted with severe colds. Mrs. Isaac Kenwell and Mrs. Frank Carroll left Tuesday for a week's sojourn with friends at Greenfield Center.

Knowelhurst: There was quite an excitement at L. W. Wood's store and post office Wednesday of last week when Mike Flynn, a fighter from away back,

came in and attempted to run things. He abused three men and then turned upon Seymour Fuller, who knocked him down, blackened both his eyes and choked him almost into insensibility and no one interfered [sic] until Flynn said he had enough. Verdict of the crowd, "Served him right." Fuller knocked his thumb out of joint, but was not otherwise injured.

Beasts of burden

Minerva: Master Arthur Callahan has disposed of his donkey and the boys are now riding on skees [sic]. Mr. and Mrs. John S. James were at the West-side on business Saturday. Mr. James is driving a very fine colt that he has purchased quite recently and has the animal very nicely broken.

West Stony Creek: Orrin Perkins while drawing pulp wood to Stony Creek Saturday lamed one of his horses quite badly. The animal stepped on an old skid in the road and turned her ankle in such a way as to cause a severe sprain, which will disable her for some time.

Stony Creek: Halsey Fuller has sold his work horse to Mr. Waddell, of Chester. W. R. Miles has traded his gray road horse—the one he raised, that is, he "raised" it with tackle blocks, had to raise it that way, because the horse, when down, could not or would not get up by itself. It seemed now and then to get discouraged with things of this world and wanted to lie down and quit. Like the late Southern Confederacy the horse simply wanted to be let alone, but unlike said Confederacy the old horse, with the help of the blocks, was put on its feet and made to stand up and take notice. The horse Mr. Miles traded for needs no advertising, as it "blows its own horn."

Tending to business

Johnsburgh Corners: Wyatt Ellsworth, of Lake George, is in town to buy fat cattle. W. J. Armstrong, who was injured at the Hooper garnet mine, is some better but cannot use his arm any yet. Dr. Somerville removed the bandages Monday and thinks the bones are uniting nicely.

Igerna: Miss Mabelle Cole, of Warrensburgh, is in town securing employees for J. P. Baumann & Son's shirt waist factory.

Bakers Mills: Ellsworth Ross made seventy-five pounds of maple sugar during the last days of February. It is also reported that Lewis Hack, who lives about a mile from Johnsburgh Corners, made 100 pounds in the same time.

Indian Lake: Mrs. John Lawrence left Thursday for New York, where she will purchase her spring millinery.

Knowelhurst: Warren White has hauled 200 cords of pulp wood from the mountain and will let it lay over until next winter. L. W. Brooks has set some teams hauling 400 cords of bark out of the woods and drawing it to the Stony Creek station on wagons. Quite a job at one load per day.

Stony Creek: L. W. Brooks has given up hope of moving the remainder of his logs and will turn his attention to getting his bark out of the woods to a place where he can get to it with wagons to wheel it to the station.

. . . and pleasure

North Creek: There will be a dance at Dunlap's hotel, North River, tomorrow evening. Some of our young people will attend.

North River: John Cornwall, a wealthy city man who has a home here, last week purchased an elegant Ivers & Pond baby grand piano from Baffey's [sic] piano rooms, Glens Falls. The instrument was delivered and set up Friday by George M. Kempton, manager of the Bailey rooms. Mrs. Cornwall, who is a splendid player, is much pleased with it.

Story of the week

Graphite: Mrs. Channcy [sic] Duell had a narrow escape from losing all her hair one night last week. It appears that she had a rubber or other inflammable comb in her hair, and while sitting near the stove she stooped her head over and the comb caught on fire. She screamed and ran to the water bucket

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and succeeded with the help of her husband, who was near by, in extinguishing the flame, but not before the comb and a good quantity of hair was entirely burned, also part of her scalp.

Eventually I located my grandmother's name ("Miss Ella Van Norden, of New York, is a guest at Woodbine cottage." Olmstedville, March 8, 1906), but like meandering through the dictionary, the slice of life from all the other Neighborhood Notes was far more fascinating.

Maybe another search is in store. Was this the first time my mother's mother visited the Adirondacks? Was Woodbine cottage where she met my grandfather? The 1906 date is three years before she gave birth to my mother. Who knows what detours are in store the next time I go exploring. ▼



Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks where he was raised, but his music has branched out across many borders. For over 40 years, the award-winning musician and educator has entertained audiences across New York, throughout the US, and overseas in Europe, the British Isles, and Central Africa. Before devoting his life to music, Dan 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, which has produced 15 albums. Dan is a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. His concerts are engaging as he invites audiences to join in on songs that explore the lives of hardworking folks and the many dimensions of home. You can hear samples from Dan's latest CD, *Tongues in Trees*, recorded with his bass-playing buddy, Ed Lowman, at his website: www.berggrenfolk.com. Photo by Jessica Riehl.

High Banter BY STEVE ZEITLIN

Whenever my wife and I do something really dumb or spacey, we call it "Steve and Amanda go around the world in a daze." Like many, long-married couples, we've developed routines for our own personal comedy team of sorts. For instance, Amanda and I take a commuter train home from Grand Central Station. We often arrive at the station separately and promise that we'll meet at the gate. The other day I got to the gate with only a minute or two before the train left—but she wasn't there. I called her on my cell.

"You're not here—where are you?"

She answered, "I'm at the gate."

"Amanda, it's Gate number 35!"

"I am at Gate 35."

Suddenly a passerby tapped me on the shoulder and said, "By chance, is that the woman you're looking for?" We were standing back-to-back, less than five feet apart, and we dissolved into laughter over our unwitting slapstick. Hilarious for an audience of two. Definitely insider humor.

Every couple that has spent years together probably has a comic and straight man embedded in their humor and their folklore. In our comedy routine, I am a fountain of silliness to a bemused Amanda who plays my "straight man." In every photograph on our vacations, I am trying to pose as a Roman statue on a sheared off colonnade, or make it look like the sun is setting in my glass of caipirinha, while Amanda takes the picture and laughs.

Professional comedy teams themselves are, of course, inspired by real life. Lucille Ball was already a successful comedienne when she was offered a sitcom on CBS. She would only agree to do it if they brought on her husband, Cuban bandleader Desi Arnaz. At the time, her producers thought it was crazy to consider the Cuban bandleader for the show—"what television audience would believe that you were married to a Cuban bandleader?" they asked. "I *am* married to a Cuban bandleader," she told them. Commentators talk about her wanting to bring the touring Desi Arnaz closer to home by

putting him on the show, but she must have known from real life that they could be funny together, with her playing the comic and Desi, the straight man (Kantor 2009).

The idea of which partner will be the straight and which one the comic can change. The comedy team of George Burns and Gracie Allen, that from the 1930s through the 1960s took comedy from vaudeville to radio and then to television, switched their roles at one point. When they got started in vaudeville in New York, Gracie was the straight woman and George had all the funny lines. At some point, they noticed that audiences were laughing at Gracie's straight lines, not at George playing the fool. So they switched roles with George playing the straight man, and Allen playing the ditsy lady with all the funny lines.

"For the benefit of those who have never seen me before," said New York comedian George Burns, "I'm what is known in show business as a straight man. After the comedian gets through with the joke I look at the comedian and then I look at the audience like this" (rolls his eyes). Then Gracie would tell a joke. For instance, George walks into their living room and says,

"Those are beautiful flowers."

"Aren't they lovely?" she answers. "If it weren't for you I wouldn't have them."

"Me? What did I have to do with it?"

"You said when I went to visit Clara Bagley to take her flowers. So when she wasn't looking, I did."

George pauses to bring on the laughter. "That is what is known as a pause," he said. "I'm famous for my pauses" (Kantor 2009).

In the documentary *Make 'Em Laugh*, the actor Lewis Stadlen notes that "George Burns and Gracie Allen captured the idea that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. The idea that two intellectual concepts will never meet, but they still love each other." (Kantor 2009). Perhaps the humor is what enables them to love each other, as it does with many couples.

Whether between comedians on the pop culture stage or partners in everyday life, high

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