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# 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. NRPC 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.

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]

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

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.

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

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



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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