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From Trapper's Cabin To Festival Stage: *The Evolution of an Adirondack Storyteller*

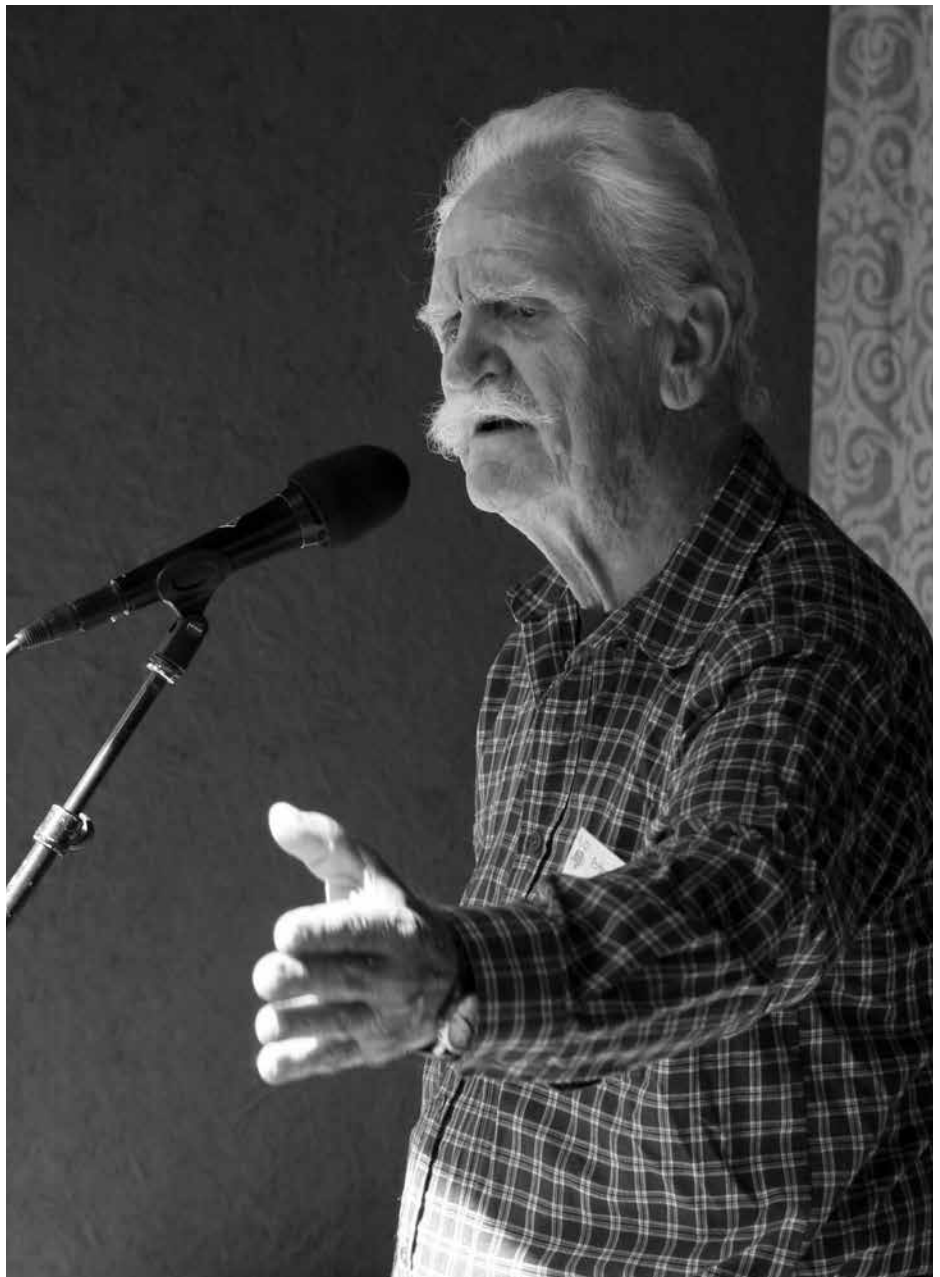
BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

[*Author's Note:* This article is based on research for a paper presented by the author in a session called "Storytelling at the Crossroads of Community and Commodity," for the American Folklore Society annual meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on November 8, 2014.]

I've always told stories since I was a kid, because I liked to show off, and I had brothers that were comical and, of course, I would mimic some of their foolishness . . . My mother would sit around and tell us about this and that, something funny that had happened way back, you know . . . and my father, he'd tell all these stories about logging camp and all that, and he had some stories about the devil. He was scared of the devil . . . Old Morris Roach used to come to the house, and him and Dad would sit there and tell horse stories to each other all day long. In school, I was the class clown half the time, and then I got to work on construction and half of those guys . . . were storytellers. Somebody would tell you a story, then you would tell it to somebody else, and so on. Half of them, you couldn't repeat in public, but they were good stories, and they were told with the same kind of expressions and all that stuff that I do stories today with. And around all them hunters telling big whoppers, you know, and all them trappers. So my whole life has been around storytelling.

—William B. Smith (interview with the author, April 19, 2003).

Now known widely as a gifted Adirondack storyteller himself, William B. "Bill" Smith is a native and lifelong resident of the place he calls the Featherbed, on the edge of wilderness in the northern foothills of the Adirondack Mountains in



Bill Smith performing at Old Songs Festival, Altamont, NY, June 28, 2009. Photo by Bill Spence, courtesy of Old Songs, Inc.



Bill Smith performing with “Woody” and a frog, his dancing limberjacks, at Indian Lake Central School, ca. 2005. Photo by June McKenney, courtesy of Bill Smith.

Colton, St. Lawrence County, in upstate New York. He grew up in an environment of men and women who were steeped in local oral traditions, and he eventually became well known in the Northeast for his personal reminiscences, tall tales, poetry recitations, and ballads performed on stages, from hometown senior centers to Adirondack great camps, and major folk festivals. This is the story of his evolution as a storyteller, from swapping tales with family and neighbors at the kitchen table to mesmerizing audiences in auditoriums far from his home.

Having celebrated his 80th birthday in April 2017, now is a good time to reflect on how this man of a very ordinary background, not unlike hundreds of others in his remote part of the world, has become, in his own lifetime, almost as much an icon of the Adirondack Mountains’ way of life as the guideboats, packbaskets, and outdoor wooden armchairs that bear the region’s name. He is a son of Roy Smith, a woodsman who hauled provisions into the

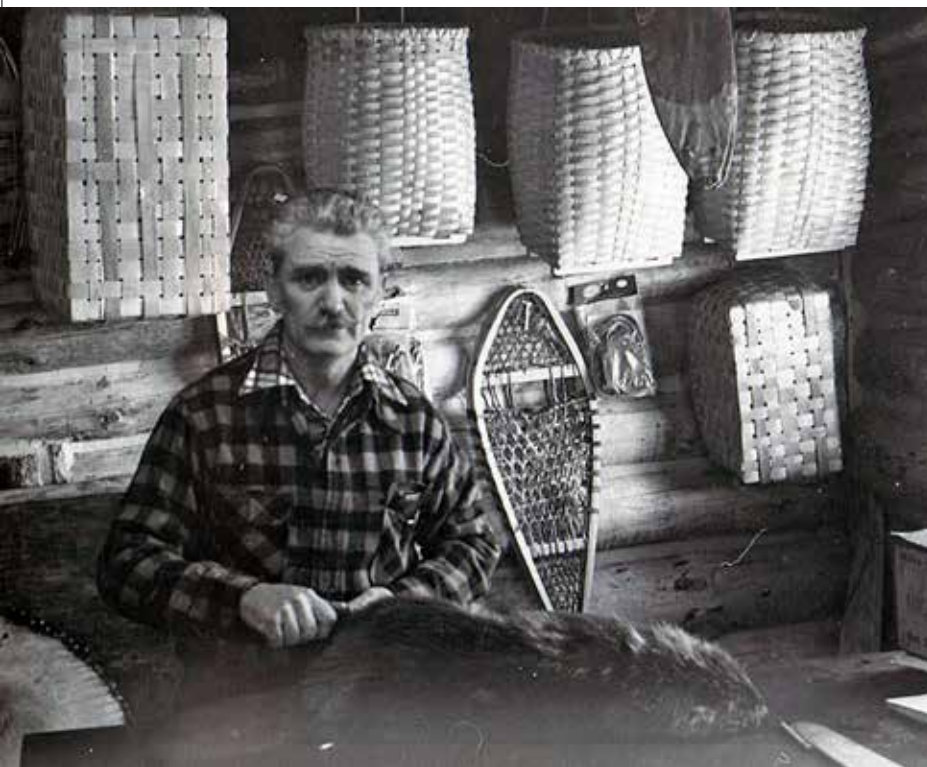
lumber camps of 60 or more years ago, and Emily Bicknell Smith, who raised 10 children and augmented the family income by boarding men who were on their way into or out of the lumbering operations.

The youngest of 10, for most of his boyhood, Bill was the only child at home, as his siblings were much older. He helped his parents on their subsistence farm, started his own trapline at age eight, and learned many of the skills of living close to the land. Over the following years, Bill first became known in his region for his interest in and mastery of many traditional skills: deer hunter, fisherman, trapper, guide, basket maker, rustic furniture maker, and snowshoe maker, among them. After school and work for a few years in construction, Bill opened a trapper’s shop, where he bought pelts from local men and boys, and sold supplies. Having learned the basics of traditional, hand-pounded, ash splint-basket-making from Mohawk Indian men who had stayed at the family house when he was a child, he took it up again and began selling his very sturdy packbaskets to trappers and hunters.

Author and longtime summer resident in the Adirondacks, Burton Bernstein

once said, “North Country people, especially, but not exclusively those over fifty, love to talk. Most of their talk is anecdotal and about the past. Recalling a person, a place, an incident, an emotion from some happier or sadder day has developed into a native craft, not just a device to escape the drab of winter or a tiresome chore” (Bernstein 1972, 68). Folklorist Robert Bethke added: “[Talk] binds people together, serving to define, reinforce, and extend relations.” Furthermore, “. . . yarns (often locally called ‘big stories’) celebrate memorable people and events and often such stories are the direct product of artistically structured, verbal ‘visiting’” (Bethke 1981, 140–143).

It was in this kind of environment that Bill Smith grew up. Between the men who stopped at the family house on the literal edge of “the Big Woods,” waiting for a ride into “camp,” and those loners and eccentrics who floated in and out of the family’s lives (what we would likely call “characters”), there were many lasting impressions made on young Bill. There was little else for entertainment than talking about their routine lives, their adventures, and the people around them. Bill says: “Front room,



Smith with beaver carcass and ash splint baskets in his trapper’s shop at his Colton home, 1978. Photo by Varick Chittenden.



Smith with stretched beaver pelts and beaver carcass, early 1970s. Photographer unidentified, courtesy of Bill Smith.

kitchen table, funerals . . . family reunions, all that. Whenever there was some people gathered up, there was a bunch of that going on . . . You heard lumberjacks tell stuff like that, and you heard hunters tell stuff like that. And working on construction, my god, every day you heard a story from somebody, you know?" (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

So, years later, once he started his fur-buying business and built a small log cabin near his house to be a shop for processing pelts and selling supplies, it became a natural gathering place where lots of talk about life and work in the woods took place. During that time, Bill also worked at Higley Flow State Park, near his home, where he was a caretaker and guided visitors on nature walks. At night, around campfires, he entertained campers with songs and stories of life in the woods. Having learned to love old-time music from his mother, he took up the

guitar as a teenager and sometimes played with local country bands for dances. After marrying young and giving up construction work to have more time with his young family, he completed his GED in 1976 (when he was almost 40), and was employed as an outdoor education teacher in a couple of local high schools for several years.

Typical of Adirondack men of his generation and before, he developed many skills just to survive. He often put them to good use to make a decent living, sometimes having two or three jobs at the same time. He recalls: "I put an ad up at each of the four local colleges, saying that I would guide students and professors into the hills and mountains for canoeing, hunting, fishing, or hiking. Much to my surprise, I got many interested people" (Ward, 1990, 101–102).

Bill's natural storytelling ability, sense of humor, and great knowledge of local nature and people attracted the attention of

outsiders, who first invited him to share his stories with local students and other audiences near home. Among his earliest public appearances was to demonstrate ash splint-basketmaking at the first Festival of North Country Folklife on the SUNY Canton college campus in 1978. The festival subsequently became an annual event and was moved to Robert Moses State Park on Barnhart Island, near Massena, where Bill appeared for many years. After the word was out that he was willing to tell stories, too, Bill became a popular entertainer for senior citizens groups, college classes, the Grange and hunting club functions, public libraries, and more. Soon he was traveling to meetings, museums, schools, and other sites all around New York State to perform, demonstrate, and share his contextual knowledge of Adirondack life.

Bill's conscious efforts at storytelling for real income actually began as a



Smith and Hamilton “Ham” Ferry during an apprenticeship at Ham’s Inn, Seveys Corners, 1988. Photographer unidentified, courtesy TAUNY Archives.

complement to his demonstrations of weaving baskets. In 1984, a local author observed: “Lately, he’s been thinking that he will build his collection of Adirondack tall tales and add storytelling to his repertoire of skills. Listening to him in his kitchen when he isn’t even trying hard, you know if he set his mind to it he could tell some whoppers that would leave your jaw slack in amazement” (Van de Water 1984, 16). An early contact with the Adirondack Museum—a first-rate regional museum, now known as Adirondack Experience, which interprets history and life in the mountains—resulted in nearly 25 years as an artist-in-residence there. From demonstrating pounding black ash logs into splints, through weaving a basket and its rim, it takes Bill about three days to complete a basket. Visitors to the museum would stop by his demonstration area, and Bill would fill the time while working by also keeping them entertained with personal stories and jokes. Subsequently, he was invited to do the same at Great Camp Sagamore, the restored and celebrated rustic camp once owned by the Vanderbilt family, now presenting traditional crafts demonstrators for summer tours and overnight guests. At first, Bill made and sold baskets; then he taught basketmaking at workshops and Elderhostels, performing stories and songs for evening entertainment. This close relationship has continued ever since.

In the early 1980s, North Country Public Radio (NCPR) hosted a monthlong

festival of nationally well-known professional storytellers—like Jackie Torrence, Donald Davis, Michael Parent, and Jay O’Callahan—organized by local author Marnie Reed Crowell. They gave individual performances on the St. Lawrence University campus and in several local libraries nearby; excerpts of some were later

broadcast on NCPR. On one occasion, to add some regional flavor, Marnie asked Bill to join her on stage to tell a few of his own stories. Bill recalls: “Apparently, Marnie recognized me as a storyteller... And I knew quite a few of the old ballad songs, and that, which went along with it. So I became a ‘folk person,’ I guess, and a storyteller.” And, he adds, “[She] made sure I got to hear and watch the storytellers so I could better myself. I was pretty naïve. I didn’t know what was going on. I never tried to mimic them, or changed what I was doing because of somebody else. I think that had a lot to do with how I was brought up” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were critical and fruitful for establishing Bill’s wider reputation as an iconic Adirondacker. In early 1985, a reporter for the *New York Times* made his way into the Adirondacks to start a series of features on local traditions and artists. It began with a front-page piece about Bill, with the headline “An ‘Old-Fashioned’ Man Keeps Adirondack Lore Alive,” describing both his basketmaking and his storytelling and including several compelling photos (Gargan 1985, A1).

The story got him lots of attention and requests to travel to demonstrate and tell stories well outside his home area. About the same time, the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) established its Folk Arts Program with public funds available, so that libraries, historical societies, arts councils, and schools across the state could apply for folk arts programming. Because of that funding, a new network of public folklorists also found Bill to be a valuable resource for their programming. His credentials as a traditional artist were unassailable, and he was an excellent presenter for the folklorists to offer to all kinds of audiences, from small children to seniors. He even found himself, in his fifties, going to New York City for the first time in his life, to perform for urban school children at the



Smith telling stories with the Liars Club at the Norwood Village Green Concert Series, with, left to right, Daddy Dick Richards and Chris Morley, n.d. Photo by Varick Chittenden.

staid New-York Historical Society and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, quite an experience for a native Adirondack man!

Later in the 1980s, Bill was awarded a NYSCA apprenticeship with acknowledged local storyteller Hamilton “Ham” Ferry, Sr.—a featured figure in Robert Bethke’s seminal discussion of oral traditions of the northern Adirondacks in his 1981 book, *Adirondack Voices: Woodsmen and Woods Lore*. From that experience, Bill observed Ham’s mastery of the anecdote

Adirondack Stories and Songs, which is still in print (Smith and Ward 1994).

During that same time period, Bill was discovering that he really could earn some money by making baskets and performing music and stories. He readily admits that NYSCA’s support of folk arts programming made a big difference in his family income during that time. He says, “I don’t think I ever asked for a job. I just got calls. People would tell someone in another school, and it just kept happening. And I went all over the

audiences about his life as a woodsman, about his family and work in the woods, about times gone by. Bethke has said, “Bill’s stories also tend to be about a past, if not gradually passing, way of life in his little neck of the woods. At least he puts a lot of emphasis on ‘back then’ rather than today... his audiences seem to find such things nostalgic, or maybe exotically different, from what they are familiar with. So that’s also part of the appeal” (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL).



Smith tells stories to a gathering at the former one-room schoolhouse at Cooks Corners, near his home, Summer 2003. Photo by Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY Archives.

and joke and the tall tale, of poetry recitation, and of timing and delivery. And in 1991, *National Geographic Traveler* published an extensive article about the great camps of the Adirondacks, with Bill prominently featured in the section on Sagamore (Brown 1991). By 1995, folklorist Vaughn Ward worked with Bill to compile and edit a collection of over 30 of his stories in a book titled *Tales from the Featherbed*:

state and other places in other states (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013). Requests for private appearances began as well—for private parties, after dinner speeches, corporate and sportsmen’s meetings, and private homes (the DuPonts and other wealthy Adirondack families, for instance).

Today, Bill Smith recalls that in those early years, he was often asked to talk to local

audiences about his life as a woodsman, about his family and work in the woods, about times gone by. Bethke has said, “Bill’s stories also tend to be about a past, if not gradually passing, way of life in his little neck of the woods. At least he puts a lot of emphasis on ‘back then’ rather than today... his audiences seem to find such things nostalgic, or maybe exotically different, from what they are familiar with. So that’s also part of the appeal” (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL). And college classes were interested in environmental issues and cultural history. The fact that he was an active hunter and trapper made for occasional tense moments, but Bill took those opportunities to talk about conservation, ecology, and economically depressed people providing for their families (including his own).

Tired of heavy construction and unsatisfied with being a school teacher, and with

Bill Smith Tall Tales and True

Wednesday, Aug. 20th 7:00 pm

Bill Smith is the Genuine folk article. He tells stories from his experience growing up in a logging camp and farm in the Northern Adirondacks, and living here for - well, you guess how long.

**\$9 non-members, \$7 members
\$3 children
\$20 non-member families
\$15 member families**



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Bill Smith poster advertising past performance, "Tall Tales and True" at the Adirondack Lakes Center for the Arts, n.d. Courtesy of Bill Smith.

some anxiety, Bill and his wife Sal decided to try earning their living making baskets and telling stories. They've told me since that, like a lot of other native Adirondackers, they always knew that if they had to, they could provide for themselves by raising their own food and doing odd jobs. While Bill had become comfortable with performing in more intimate settings with audiences familiar with his way of life and background, going onto a larger stage with experienced storytellers was a new challenge.

Bill now remembers his first such outing:

I think the first time I was in a big festival was in Charlottesville, Virginia [1985], went there when Michael Parent invited me. We stayed with Michael. There was Judith Black and Jackie Torrence, Bill Harley, and Jim May. Then

they had me stuck in the middle there, somewhere. I looked at it as an honor to be with those people. I wasn't afraid of them or anything. I don't think I knew enough to be afraid. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013)

In the 30 years since that festival, he's performed by himself or with others—sometimes repeatedly—at many of the prominent venues of the Northeast, among them Pete Seeger's Clearwater Revival Festival, the Old Songs Festival, the National Folk Festival in Lowell, Massachusetts, and the iconic Caffè Lena in Saratoga. He's also appeared at the Augusta Festival in West Virginia, Doc Watson's MusicFest in North Carolina, Jim May's Illinois Storytelling Festival and has been invited to several others.

To succeed as a festival circuit storyteller, Bill discovered that he had to work on his repertoire. In his earlier efforts, he had focused on local history and personal experiences, because that's what his audiences seemed to want. He had added a few humorous stories, mostly from his family, and inflated them to make them more entertaining. But he soon realized he had to create more and different material:

...because I needed a longer story. And you get such an amount of time on stage that you've got to fill, and if your stories aren't enough, they ain't gonna keep you, you know. You gotta have this certain—you're on for 45 minutes, usually, and you do that at a festival several times. And you can't just do the same stuff over and over again, so you've gotta have 20 stories to get through a festival, you know, with songs and stories and poetry. And that filled in the gaps. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

Because of the rugged Adirondack wilderness, the hard labor and isolation of woodsmen, and the hardscrabble existence for most who lived there, Bethke has observed that stories of all genres—personal experience, character anecdotes, encounters with "sports" and game wardens, tall tales—stress themes like self-reliance, skillfulness, resourcefulness, and quick-wittedness (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with the author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL). Conscious of these themes from his own experiences, Bill chose to retell familiar family and neighborhood stories, adapt stories heard from other tellers, or create new ones.

Of those most familiar—and among the first he polished into stories to perform for others—Bill says:

"Reverend Waterson's Woodpile" was absolute truth. People, everything in it, was true. That was one of my home stories that my mother always told about my father. And "The New Game Warden," with the venison in the stove, that was all true. "Ira Irish and the Bees," that was true. "The Dapple Gray Horse," my mother

told that to be true. I guess she probably picked it up from somewhere, because the same story is supposed to come from the Loomis brothers [a legendary notorious gang of outlaws in central New York in the mid-19th century] and something about they stole the horse or something and painted it up and that, but this story is different because I tell it the way my mother told it. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

While these and other stories that Bill tells are based on real people and real situations, he acknowledges that the truth may well have been stretched at times in the ordinary stories he'd always heard from the people around him. He also knows that his apprenticeship mentor, Ham Ferry, had made such exaggerations—tall tales—into an art form and mastered it, at least as far as the regulars at his Adirondack small bar were concerned. During his visits, Bill had carefully observed Ham's choices of topics, his sense of timing, his style of delivery, and his audiences'—the bar patrons'—reactions to the storytelling. In the time since, Bill has applied many of the techniques he learned from Ham to his own work and developed many more of his own. As such, tall tales have become his stock in trade.

Bethke has described the genre this way:

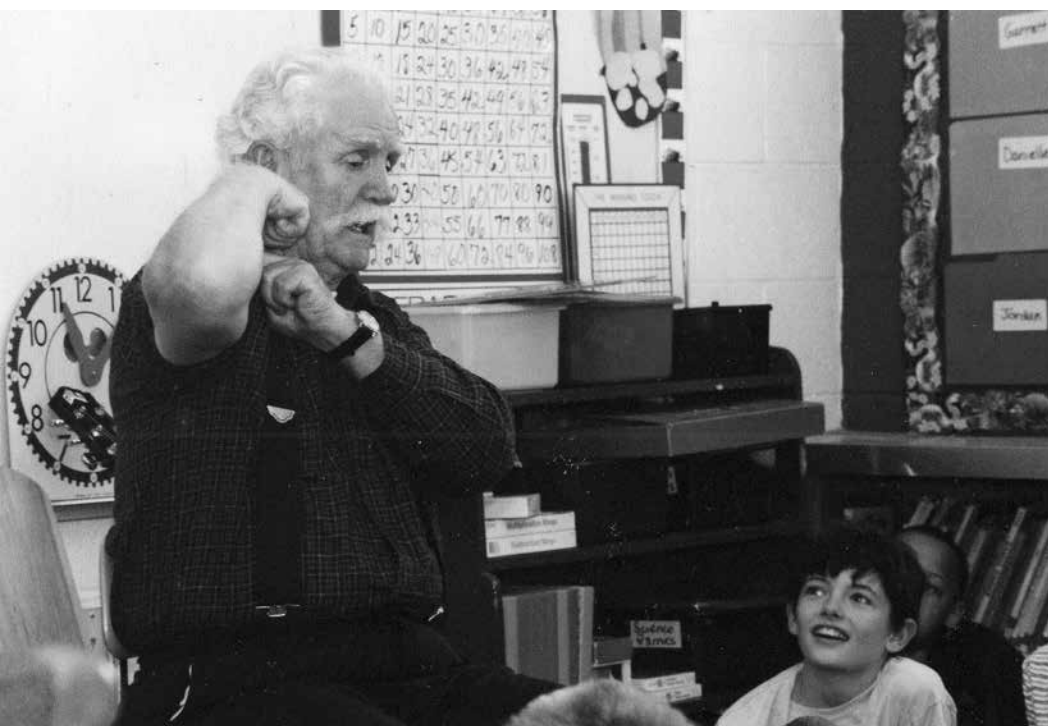
One story type favored in woodsmen circles throughout regional America is variously known as the humorous "lie" or "tall tale." In the Adirondacks, I have also heard them referred to as "big stories." The storytelling format typically involves a narrator beginning what, on first encounter, is set up as a personal experience account—plausible reminiscence related in deadpan style. As the telling progresses, the art of the genre begins to emerge; things become increasingly fantastic and incongruous. The story ends on a comic and often uproarious note. As a listener you've been hauled along, caught up in playful absurdity, and ultimately the victim of falsehood in fun. Arguably, the tall tale is the most venerable of artistically self-conscious story types in Northern New York; without question the tradition has deep roots and widespread popularity. (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with the author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL).

Vaughn Ward added: "The immense scale, the extremes of weather, the seriousness and danger of life in the New World seemed tall tales in themselves. The frontier, both marvelous and menacing,

was perfect soil for replanted big stories. Outrageous understatement was a kind of reverse bragging, a slow-talking bucking up in the presence of immoderate circumstances" (Ward 1990, 7).

Such stories came naturally to Bill, and he's most often promoted by his presenters as a master of the tall tale. One particular characteristic of Bill's stories has been his insertion of real people from his childhood as narrators or protagonists, whether there was a grain of truth in the story or not. He speaks of both his father and mother, the French Canadian Eddy Ciere [who lived with his family for awhile], Lanty Martin and his hounds, Will Newton, Howard Crossman, Wallace Vebber, and others whom he knew, playing on some of their eccentricities and qualities that make them both human and humorous. When asked why he's done that, Bill says he loved them all as real people and doesn't want them to be forgotten. One such story, since polished into a piece that he performs—about Ira Irish, one of those "characters" he remembers vividly from his childhood—he told me about in this way:

Old Ira Irish would come by the house with his stories about how he'd been to the moon and all that stuff, and how he got on a spaceship and went to the moon and all that, and I believed he could see into the future because all of his stories came true! And...Ira—I remember this, because I was there and heard it, and...he hadn't come in a long time and my father said, "Where you been Ira? I haven't seen you in a month!" "Oh," he said, "I've been up in Maine, lumbering, working in the woods up there." Of course, he never left this area, he couldn't read or write or nothing, but yeah—he knew all about spaceships and all this stuff. It's pretty interesting when you think about it! And...he said, "I've been up to Maine, lumbering in the woods up there. And boy," he said, "You've gotta see the machines they got up there," he said. "You can't even reach the top of the tires on them things, they're so big!" And he said, "They bend in the middle so you can get around the trees!" he said. And everybody laughed, and thought that



Smith performing his own story of "Uncle John's Muscle," Old Forge Central Library, n.d. Photographer unidentified, courtesy of Bill Smith.

was pretty neat, you had to bend it in the middle to get around the trees, and all this stuff. “Big blade on the front,” he said, “Shove them trees right up; hook right onto eight or ten trees,” he said, “snake ‘em right out all in one trip.” He described the color of the machine was a reddish orange and everything. He described a timber jack’s skidder, right to the number. And they hadn’t even been invented yet! (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

Many of Bill’s stories are traditional, and the sources may be impossible to find, but ideas occasionally also come from books and other storytellers. He’s adapted some, like “The Snake Bit Hoe Handle” from Richard Chase, “Ma and Percy” (originally, “The Plane Ride”) from *Bert and I*, or “The Pet Trout” from Ben Botkin’s 1944 book, *A Treasury of American Folklore*, which his daughter found at a yard sale and bought for a quarter. Traveling as he did in the 1980s and meeting all kinds of professional storytellers from various parts of the country, he heard many of their stories as well. While their styles of performing and their choices of stories were very different from his, some he took a liking to and considered adapting for himself. With a chuckle, he jokes, “I wasn’t above swiping somebody’s story and embellishing on it and telling it. Fair game, as far as I was concerned. And I think it is fair game. I still think it is. Others do it to mine!” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013)

Here’s an example:

When I was a kid, Chet Bice lived next door. And he was always carrying on about something, he always told about the “Gillagaloo Birds” and they were covered with “Goofal” feathers. And so, I—and I was down in West Virginia [Augusta Festival] and there was a guy down there, he said the hills were so steep where he lived, the birds had to lay square eggs so they wouldn’t roll off the mountainside. And so I brought that information home with me, and I made the story about the Gillagaloo birds and the Oo-ah birds. Now that you could tell the Oo-ah birds in the spring of the year, you’d hear their voices echoing



Always the outdoorsman, Bill Smith as a teenager with a day’s catch of fish, n.d. Photographer unidentified, courtesy of Bill Smith.

off the side of the mountain because they were laying those square eggs! And you’d hear, “Oooh, oooh!” And then you’d hear, “Aaahh.” And you’d know you’d just come by Oo-ah birds.” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013)

Some of Bill Smith’s stories are entirely original, at least as far as he knows. Having always been artistic (for fun, he’s written poetry, sketched line drawings, and carved in wood, for example), he’s sometimes been inspired to fashion new stories to perform. He’s created a series of tales about his real Uncle John (known for his physical strength) and Aunt Lillian (and her overzealous shows of affection when his siblings were young). Others were about Miss Corcoran, his favorite teacher (like the time during World War II when there was an air raid practice in their little school), or when Lanty Martin’s hounds licked the dinner plates clean before they went back into the cupboard.

As for the rest of his repertoire, he chooses to recite long narrative poems, like selections by Robert Service such as “Blasphemous Bill” or “The Passing of the Backhouse,” widely attributed to James Whitcomb Riley. This was an idea fostered

by Ham Ferry who had recited them for years to hunters, campers, and snowmobilers at Ham’s Inn. Remembering his early contacts with French Canadian woodsmen from nearby Quebec and his wife Sal’s family, Bill tells a few humorous poems and stories with the patois and accent he’s heard all his life. A more recent addition has been recited spoonerisms like “Rindercella” and “Pree Little Thigs,” which he first heard on radio shows and have become popular with his audiences, especially children.

A musician before he was a storyteller, Bill grew up listening to early country music on stations like WWVA and programs like the *Grand Ole Opry* and *Hee Haw*. Believing that such songs also tell stories, Bill regularly includes several in any performance, too. He sometimes includes traditional songs, like “Once More a Lumbering Go,” or “Cabbage Head,” which he learned from a favorite musician of his, Doc Watson; he’s adopted “tearjerkers”—his words—like “Wildwood Flower” or “Rosewood Casket” from the Carter family. He has also written a few of his own songs in a similar style, such as “Only a Housewife,” an adaptation of a poem written by his mother, and “Adirondack Memories,” which he calls his theme song. At last count, he has recorded over 110 pieces on 8 CDs but has numerous others in his repertoire and still adds new ones all the time.

As for his style of performing, he admits that he has learned a lot over the years. His old friend Marnie Crowell says that she never coached him, but they had long conversations about the nature of storytelling, polishing a tale, audiences, and more. They discussed how personal experience stories could become better if practiced and repeated (Marnie Reed Crowell to Folk Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, September 20, 1985). Bill himself observed that the professionals he met, like Michael Parent and Jay O’Callahan, had a beginning, middle, and end to their stories...and a punch line. He has told me that Jackie Torrence was “the best storyteller of the lot, her and Donald Davis. Donald Davis was more like me. His stories were

like my stories. They were country stories, about things that happened. He'd put a comical twist in it somehow or other" (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013). He also says:

I think a big change came when I met Utah Phillips. I met him later on, at the festivals, you know. He used humor and people loved it. I think I was impressed by him. I don't think I mimicked him, but I realized that people like that, as opposed to "this is the way we did it when I was a kid thing"...I discovered I get more work with the humor than I did with the history. People enjoy laughing and it's good medicine. (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013).

Bill has adapted one Phillips signature piece—"Moose Turd Pie"—and he's often requested to perform it.

So what, if anything, sets Bill Smith apart from other professional storytellers?

A local newspaper reporter wrote: "Unlike some of his contemporaries, Mr. Smith has a traditional style, meaning he relates his stories as if he were having a conversation with the listener. Therefore, each telling may be a little bit different" (Ellen 1994, 12). By the time Bill was getting recognized as a storyteller beyond his own community, according to Joseph Sobol, "The 'ancient art of storytelling' was in the midst of a transformation, through the storytelling festival medium, from an art of front porches, parlors, and church basements to an art of auditoriums, microphones, and revival tents, with seats for three hundred, five hundred, eventually a thousand" (Sobol 1999, 111). Organized storytelling events, including the National Storytelling Festival (NSF) in Jonesborough, Tennessee, that has since become the gold standard for professional practitioners, were becoming more selective about who would be asked to participate. Star professional storytellers

drew large crowds and commanded fees accordingly. One exception—the celebrated traditional Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks—was featured at the NSF for many years, in part because he was so exotic for the audience to see and hear. Sobol said, "Certainly Hicks is an anachronism and an anomaly in many ways, a man whose speech and lifeways are a century removed from his audience's experience" (Sobol 1999, 112). Some would say that Bill Smith is equally colorful and out of the ordinary for an audience of school children, millennials, Adirondack tourists, or urban transplants today.

Coincidentally, about the same time that Bill was becoming recognized far beyond his hometown, John Vinton, a Brooklyn native and occasional Adirondack visitor with an academic background in music and theater, decided to study the literature of the Adirondacks and interpret it for vacationers in local communities. Calling



Smith performing in the game room for guests at Great Camp Sagamore, Raquette Lake, 1990. This image was part of an article by Dale Brown, "The Great Camps of the Adirondacks," which appeared in the *National Geographic Traveler* in 1991. Photo courtesy of the photographer, Kenneth Garrett.

himself “The Adirondack Storyteller,” Vinton perfected recitations of short works with regional content by numerous historical writers like Charles Dudley Warner, Philander Deming, Jeanne Robert Foster, and Irving Bacheller (Vinton 1991). He described his process:

The way I deal with Adirondack material may seem overly refined and technical to some tellers. However, my tastes have always been more classical than folk (to borrow a differentiation commonly used in music). I love the 19th-century English in many of my sources and retain as much of it as possible when I perform. However, the action passages usually get modernized with shorter sentences and modern words. I often play a character from the past or engage in multi-character dialogue. In these instances, I become a voice-actor who requires extensive daily voice work. (Vinton 1985, 17)

Vinton continued performing for audiences in local schools and other venues throughout the region for several years and acquired quite a following.

According to Ruth Stotter, a teacher of storytelling: “Unlike a traditional storyteller, who typically learns stories from, and tells stories to populations who share a cultural heritage, a nontraditional teller may appropriate stories found in published texts from cultures which neither the teller nor the audience have firsthand experience. Performance-oriented story interpretation is shaped by the individual teller’s personal taste. A story heard at a festival, even from a traditional teller, may go through idiosyncratic transformations” (Stotter 1996, 690).

By contrast, Bill Smith, who admires many of the professionals he has come to know, has observed: “Did you ever watch [some storytellers]? They sometimes get so prim and proper. They learned this story word for word, and they follow that like it was a song. And the words all have to match. I can’t do that with a story because I *talk* my stories. When you talk stories you can do anything you want with them. You can borrow some from somewhere else.

Do a lot of ad libbing. Play off the audience. Pick somebody in the audience and put them in the story, then take them back out again and put them back in their seat” (Bill Smith interview by Karen Taussig-Lux, September 25, 1995). Marnie Crowell adds: “Most fortunately, Bill recognized early on that what he had to offer the storytelling world was his repertoire of stories and songs from his backwoods childhood. He has not fallen into the trap of imitating the big name performers. Rather, these visiting storytellers have been delighted to meet Bill. In swapping sessions, they also let him know that his versions of the songs have their own validity and that his Adirondack tales are gems” (Marnie Reed Crowell to Folk Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, September 20, 1985).

The descriptor for Bill Smith that immediately was used by all of the people I have interviewed was “authenticity.” Not to demean other performers, but my sources suggest that he truly represents the culture from which he comes, wherever he is. Michael Parent spoke of his lack of self-consciousness, that “once he starts a story or a song, it’s just kind of flowing out of him and he’s not thinking about how he looks or that kind of thing.” He added:

Bill is one of those people who is the same guy when he’s singing a song or telling a story around home as he is on stage, and he can pull both of the things off. Over the years I’m sure he’s learned some stagecraft and some techniques and all, but basically I think that storytelling works the best when the storyteller gets the hell out of the way of the story, is just themselves on stage. I think that’s one of Bill’s strengths, really, that he’s really just himself and not trying to impress anyone... He’s just the same Bill Smith when he’s on stage or when he’s in his living room. (Michael Parent, telephone interview by author, August 18, 2014).

For most of his adult life, Bill Smith has had a shock of gray-to-white hair and worn a handlebar mustache. Photographers take to his rugged good looks and weathered

appearance and have used his image in numerous publications as the quintessential Adirondack woodsman. Even his clothing—Buffalo plaid shirts and jackets, wide suspenders and work pants, which you’ll often see him wearing on stage as well as on the street—fits one’s preconception of a lumberjack, but it’s no costume. Beverly Bridger, the Sagamore director, has said: “Bill plays a character but he doesn’t come on saying ‘I’m a character.’... He’s the old codger and when I first met him 25 years ago, he played the old codger because he wasn’t old enough, but now he *is* the old codger, so he grew into his role. And none of the rest of the storytellers has a persona like that. So he’s very different when it comes to that. I think he knows full well what he’s doing, but he’s probably 75 percent of that character anyway” (Beverly Bridger, telephone interview by author, July 24, 2014).

Unlike many of the storytellers he has met and performed with, Bill Smith has a reputation that could best be described as local or at most regional. He’s a devoted family man, with all of his four grown children and their families living nearby. While he’s driven thousands of miles some years, when he was doing at least 200 performances and demonstrations, he’s never flown and likely wouldn’t. He usually travels with Sal, his wife of 60 years, and he says, “Sal wasn’t gonna do any flyin’, unless she becomes an angel or somethin’” (William B. Smith, interview by author, April 19, 2013). She has always managed their household and takes care of the business end of things for his work. Word of mouth has seemed to serve them well. He’s never advertised and doesn’t have an agent, a brochure, or a website; he pays no attention to Facebook or any social media. Storytellers and presenters have told me that Bill surely could have had a national following and jobs much farther afield had he been willing to travel and make some other sacrifices.

Finally, since I’ve known Bill Smith for nearly 40 years and watched his career as an Adirondack storyteller go from his

trapper's cabin to festival stages, I've been curious to know how he's perceived by people who've studied the art form and artists who know his work. So I asked both folklorist Bob Bethke and storyteller Michael Parent the following question: "Where on a spectrum of 1 to 10, with Ray Hicks at number 10 and Garrison Keillor at 1, would you place Bill Smith?" Their responses were interesting.

Michael Parent has known Bill for about 35 years and has had a distinguished career as a professional storyteller with an international reputation. He told me:

I think Bill is closer to Ray Hicks. Garrison Keillor has a regular national platform with a large, devoted audience and a certain degree of fame. He has created a niche for his storytelling and is really good at it. But he's also limited to what he can do. If he doesn't do a piece on his Lake Wobegon each week, he'll be in trouble with his fans. Like Ray Hicks, people generally come to Bill, and his stories and language have stayed authentic. Bill has and uses his freedom to do whatever he wants... On your scale, I would rate Bill a 6 or 6-1/2. (Michael Parent, telephone interview by author, August 18, 2014).

Bethke, who did his doctoral fieldwork in the early 1970s, interviewing numerous elderly Adirondack woodsmen who had done the work and lived the life Bill talks about, takes a different view. His response:

Hicks specialized in passed down "Jack Tales," tellings of which he excelled by any measure. They were understood as long ago fantastic "fairy tales," the stuff of "could/would this be so?" Bill Smith, on the other hand, tells a variety of stories grounded in the historic past of the Adirondacks he knows, firsthand from youth. In this latter, Bill Smith connects more with Garrison Keller and his constructed, nostalgic, and local character-filled Lake Wobegon. (Robert D. Bethke, personal communication with author, September 2, 2014, Venice, FL).

As it so often happens with traditions and tradition bearers in contemporary

life, there are so many outside influences and so many challenges to sustaining their culture. Is Bill Smith still a traditional Adirondack storyteller? Is he yet another performer telling stories out of their natural context? Or is he a hybrid who has adapted, keeping some aspect of our heritage alive for another day? As for me, Bob Bethke says it best: "Bill Smith not only epitomizes the heritage of Adirondack traditions, he is today New York State's best-known traditional storyteller. In repertory and honed performance skills, he represents a long line of Adirondack outdoorsmen oral storytellers inclined to narratives mixing local history and lore, humorous anecdotes, and tall tales—at that, stories that typically convey an 'insider's' identity, while often wryly observing encounters with 'outsiders'" (Bethke 1999). ▼

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Look for Bill Smith's CDs
in the NYFS online store:

[www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/
music.html](http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html)

Tales from the Featherbed is also
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