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Two Minutes:

The Making of the *Battenkill Inspired Video Series*

BY HANNAH DEGARMO

I have a backpack filled with an audio recorder, lighting equipment, a stabilizer, and a tripod that sticks out the top of my pack. I have a large, silver case that holds a video camera and a smaller, black case with lavalier microphones and a TASCAM audio receiver. I have no idea where I am.

I am to meet Jim at 10 a.m., but a glance at my out-of-service-range cellphone shows 9:55. I have driven three miles down this road, peering into the trees for a hint of sign or path. The journey stops abruptly at a dead end. I turn the car around, planning my apology to Jim in my head.

As fate would have it, I spot two women ahead, down the road two hundred feet or so. I pull up, roll down my window, and try my luck.

Neither has heard of the spot I'm trying to reach. They wave down another woman, who has appeared on her front porch, holding a beer and a watering can. I tell her I'm in pursuit of the river access point, and she immediately recognizes its name, nodding at the trees further up the road.

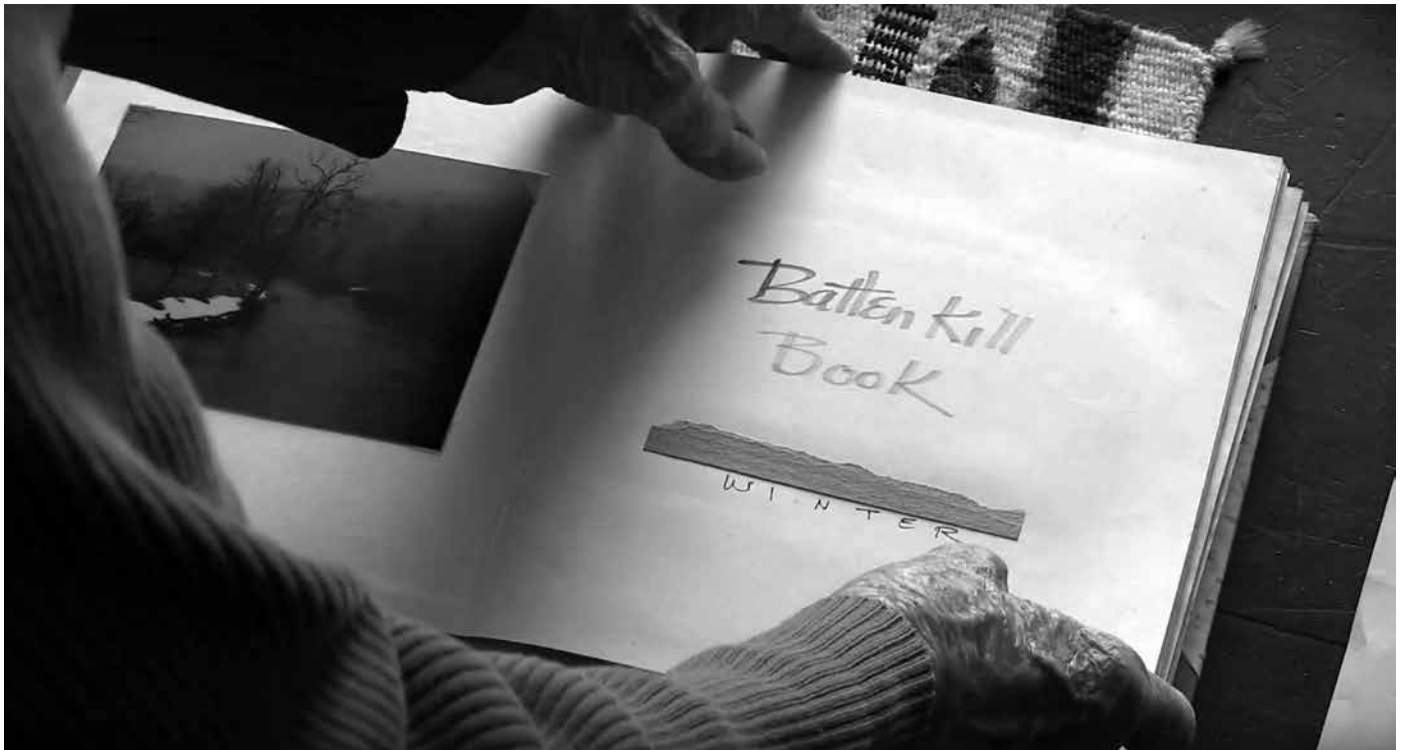
"Oh, yeah, we fish there sometimes. It's nearly impossible to find it if you haven't been there before."

An understatement, I think.

She gives me directions that include crossing railroad tracks and looking out for a small, unmarked path on the right before I hit the river. I'll have to go up and down a small hill to cross those tracks again, making sure to drive as slowly as I can.

"It'll feel like your car won't make it. But it probably will."

I thank the women and somehow (and I can't emphasize that enough), *somehow* find the path. If you asked me to take you there today, we'd drive in three-mile straight lines until we both gave up.



Anita Witten's *Battenkill Book* emerged from winters spent observing the waters through her windows. She, like many of the artists, is lucky enough to have the Battenkill run directly through her property in Shushan, New York. *All video screen shots by the author.*



Harry Orlyk shows me a room adjacent to his studio in Salem, New York, with a wall of experimental paintings on old boxes, separated from his usual plein air works.

Now, that hidden little spot is on video.

The original *Battenkill Inspired* was an exhibit in the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library. Running from January 30 to June 30, 2015, the exhibit presented a collection of works of art, from river stones that inspired a sculptor in his hunt for hidden objects to a fully constructed canoe that was ready to be taken from its display stand and flipped into the waters at a moment's notice. A few years later, the conversation of *Battenkill Inspired* resurfaced, this time with a new presentation in mind.

It would be a documentary series of bite-size, two-minute videos. In this form, the idea could find a new audience. However, the artists would need to put the trust of their words, ideas, and images into the hands of someone else. Namely, me. Artists can often be passionate, opinionated, and stubborn. (Being one myself, I was and am very aware of these characteristics). In fact, that was the first part of the project that excited me: passionate, opinionated people often have the best stories and are eager to share them, if you're eager to listen.

I was also excited about the opportunity this project afforded me. To be handed a kit of expensive equipment and trusted to go experiment, to play, and help create and launch a series? That's not something that happens in the world of video production. Not often, at least, and certainly, not to a me, a self-proclaimed "newbie."

We set up the first batch of interviews, then the next, and the next. The list of possible artists expanded quickly, because everyone seemed to know someone else that we should talk to. My earlier thoughts had been confirmed: there were endless stories that could be told. What I needed to do now was pack my equipment and go find them.

The typical visit went something like the following:

Arrive at the studio, house, or whatever other location we decided to meet. Often, the artist would offer me coffee or tea, and we'd chat. I told them about myself and the project, where I went to school, and how I got involved, all while trying to get a feel for the person I was to interview.

At that point, all of the gear stayed packed in my bags. I knew it was important to make the subjects feel comfortable with me, as well as understand the concept of the project and how filming would work, rather than record everything in sight from the outset. If your subject is uncomfortable, it shows tenfold on film. Although those moments have their place in documentary filmmaking, I knew that it would be out of place here.

When the initial conversations reached a comfortable end, I gave an option: "Would you like to do the interview first, or show me around your space first?"

That was the time to pull out the camera and see the artist in their element. I learned to pay attention to what the artist naturally gravitated toward and which pieces sparked the most intriguing stories, mentally noting new questions to ask in the next phase of the visit.

During the sit-down interview, I changed my approach as needed, depending on the personality discerned in our earlier conversations. I'd like to point out that I use

the term “sit-down” interview here with a hearty pinch of salt. More often than not, I found myself balancing my tripod on an uneven, muddy bank, or within bit of woods next to the river, crossing my fingers that I wouldn’t lose the camera or have my subject fall into the wintery water while I shouted questions over the water’s roar.

After everything and everyone was sufficiently secured, I began each conversation in the same way.

“What is your relationship to the Battenkill?”

And off we went.

A final equipment pack, handshake, or hug from the quick friendship that often formed, and I was back in the car. I was now more familiar with a set of directions, a body of work, and a person. My mind immediately turned to the next task: with at least 15 minutes of interview footage and another 10 of B roll, how could I translate this story into two short minutes?

Battenkill Inspired: The Flow of Creativity, Ingenuity and the River

is a series of mini-documentaries based on a popular exhibition curated by the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library in 2015.

In 2017, we organized a team of Folklife staff and college interns (including the author of this article, Hannah DeGarmo) to tell individual stories about life and work along the Battenkill, utilizing the equipment and techniques we had begun to develop for earlier videos within our series, *Portraits: Documentary Shorts*.

In February 2018, we kicked off the series with a social media campaign, releasing one video every Friday for 30 weeks on our YouTube channel. We then shared the entire series with the local community by loading them onto touch-screen kiosks located throughout the Battenkill corridor.

There are currently 30 videos in all, each approximately 2 minutes in length, featuring an intimate look at the Battenkill’s impact on the history, local arts, sites, and activities of the region.

For more information, visit:

www.crandalllibrary.org/folklife-center/documentaries/battenkill-inspired/

–Todd DeGarmo

Founding Director, The Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library



Matt Chinian paints, as I balance my camera in the woods beside a river bank. Greenwich, New York.



Mark Tougas, the first interviewee of the series, discusses the unique challenge of painting light through layers of water. Cambridge, New York.



Many artists, including Bonnie Hoag, at the Dionondehowa Wildlife Sanctuary, spoke of the importance of water conservation and respecting our rivers.

During the editing process, my first thought was how to depict each subject in a genuine way. I wanted their thoughts and messages to come through, and their personality, quirks, and motivation to become clear in a two-minute video. My own artistic vision and style would come through in the construction and visuals of each intimate portrait.

I began the construction with an audio outline, constructed from the interview. The goal was to condense a 15-minute conversation into a golden two minutes that sounded like a single line of thought. It was important to me that I kept the artist's message and personality clear and uninfluenced by my own opinions. With that in mind, the videos became portraits.

Once my audio outline was set, I built the visuals, literally on top of that line. I layered images of the artist, their work, their environment, and the Battenkill.

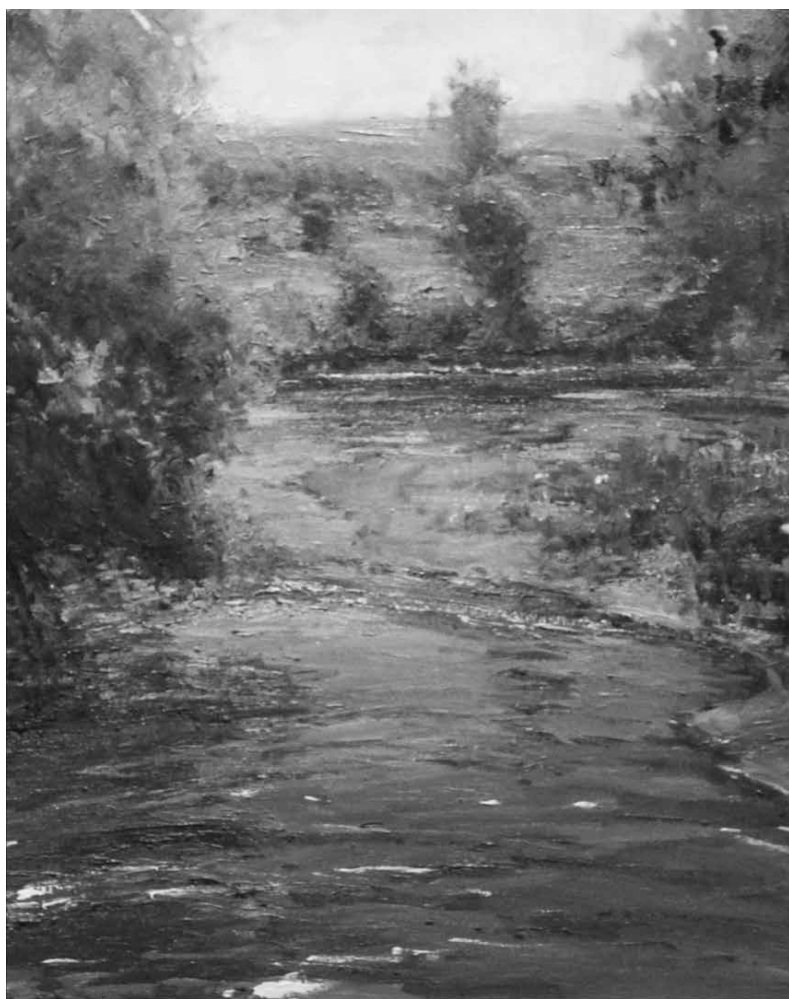
Some of my favorite moments to find in the video had occurred when my subject seemed to forget they were being recorded, and instead, had been wrapped up in our conversation. For a moment, you could see their eyes spark, as they became more animated, letting down their guard.

Eventually, I would emerge with a small, polished two minutes that I hoped encapsulated this person, place, and day.

In writing this article, I found myself thinking through the same question: What is your relationship with the Battenkill?

I grew up across the street from the Battenkill in a small hamlet called Shushan. It never struck me as unique, or even interesting, that the river was so close. I swam there, had picnics in the summer, picked leeches out from between my toes, and laughed when that happened to anyone else. I walked my dogs there and had my prom pictures taken there. My friends and I would go tubing there, jump in after long days of track practice at school, and then wander down to the river again at night, when the water was dark and quieter than its daytime counterpart. I'd go there when I wanted to be alone, and again, when I didn't. It has always been a part of home for me. Now, I understand that to be true for countless others, as well.

Over the course of last year, this series showed me people and places and stories of my home that I would never have found otherwise. It was only because these artists so warmly and willingly brought me into their homes and studios and minds that I had the chance to experience what almost felt like secrets. I hope that through *Battenkill Inspired*, others might get a glimpse of those hidden stories, two minutes at a time. ▼



Battenkill Inspired

Folklife Gallery • Crandall Public Library
January 30 to June 30, 2015

George Van Hook's River Reflections (30 x 24 inches, oil on linen). Image courtesy of The Folklife Center at Crandall Library.



Hannah DeGarmo is a writer, musician, filmmaker, and self-proclaimed cat whisperer. After growing up in Shushan, New York, she graduated from Colgate University with an Art and Art History degree and moved to Brooklyn in September 2018. She now works at an arts nonprofit, and her fifth-floor walkup has a full-sized fridge and a killer view. Photo by Benjamin Phelps.

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