Back issues of and single articles published in New York Folklore Quarterly, New York Folklore, and Voices are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder’s express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346–7008
Fax 518/346–6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
http://www.nyfolklore.org
Adirondack Folk Music

BY DAN BERGGREN

It’s not hard to find information online about the folk music of New York State’s North Country. A quick search provides a link to the wonderfully rich website, “W is for the Woods,” created by TAUNY (Traditional Arts in Upstate New York) and to a video link for Songs to Keep— Treasures from an Adirondack Folk Collector, which is the story of the late Essex County historian Marjorie Lansing Porter (1891–1973). Both are highly recommended, and if you’d like to explore this rich vein of material further, visit SUNY Plattsburgh’s Feinberg Library and listen to Ms. Porter’s collection of front porch and kitchen recordings that have been digitized. Folk music of the region’s past is well represented by these two sources, but what about its present and future?

Who and What

Over 30 years ago, I was one of about ten musicians in upstate New York who were performing and recording Adirondack folk music. Of that group, three have since died, two have retired, but seven or so other musicians have joined the ranks of those telling the region’s stories through their performances and recordings. That’s a positive sign.

There are plenty of North Country musicians on either side of the Blue Line who play bluegrass, blues, and country, but not so many who play folk music. What’s the difference? I distinctly remember a night in 1976, when the restaurant owner where
I was singing said that he’d be glad to have me back, but only if I’d sing country-western instead of the folk songs I was performing. The country songs on the radio at the time didn’t seem to connect with my mountains and my experiences. I stuck with folk and sang traditional songs of the region and wrote new ones about people, places, and experiences that resonated with my audiences.

**Then and Now**

Songs we now consider traditional often grew out of group work situations. For example, there’s a body of North Country songs about the logging industry and getting trees to market. If family members sang, then it was up to the next generation to learn and pass along their repertoire. Consider Yankee John Galusha (1859–1950) of Minerva. He is, perhaps, the greatest single source of Adirondack folk songs, owing to the work of folk musicologists Frank and Anne Warner and Essex County historian Marjorie Lansing Porter. Some of the British Isles ballads that Galusha sang were from his parents and grandparents; the lumberjack songs came from older, fellow workmen; and a handful of Civil War songs came from one of his brothers, returning home after service in the Union Army. Folk music was once shared in smaller, more informal settings: with the family after dinner in their homes (before record players) or with friends in a local pub (before jukeboxes). Today, the great variety and diverse nature of Adirondack folk is a result of technology exposing us, both singers and listeners, to increasingly more and different kinds of music. With all that’s now available on the Internet, you can just as easily sit at home and listen rather than experience it live. There are currently more places in the region, than in past years, where you can hear and participate in live folk music, but with so many demands on our time and so many more ways to spend it, one wonders if people are less likely to attend concerts. Sometimes, venues have a tough time getting the word out and filling the seats.

Many folk themes have remained the same: love and falling in and out of it; hard times, good times, and reminiscing about them; and the environment, both in a generally appreciative, isn’t-nature-beautiful way and in specific ways of protecting the aspects we value. There are threads of remembrance; roots of the British Isles, Québécois, and Native American cultures; deeds of real people and situations; and stories of struggle and hope in a place surrounded by beauty.

**How and Where to Hear It**

Before listing places where Adirondack folk music can be heard in person, I’d like to mention the positive influence that public radio has had, and continues to have, on this music. There are three radio stations whose signals cover the region in varying degrees with their multiple transmitters: North Country Public Radio’s *The Folk Show* on Mondays at 8 p.m.; Northeast Public Radio’s *Hudson River Sampler* on Saturdays at 8 p.m.; and Vermont Public Radio’s *All the Traditions* on Sundays at 7 p.m. Not only do listeners hear Adirondack folk music in the mix, but these programs have concert calendars that tell of upcoming folk concerts and festivals in the Adirondacks and beyond.

Opportunities to hear live folk music are increasingly popular. One can hear various groups and styles throughout the region at farmers’ markets, house concerts, arts centers and local arts groups, town-sponsored summer series from Norwood to Inlet, libraries from Old Forge to Glens Falls, churches from Big Moose to Plattsburgh, the Grange Hall in Whallonsburg, nonprofit organizations—like Adirondack Experience, BluSeed Studios, and Adirondack Folk School—and at festivals like the one in Schroon Lake, which just had its 30th annual Adirondack Folk Music Festival. Schroon Lake has another folk tradition that’s been going strong since the 1930s—summer square dances in the town park with live music. While a few of the dance tunes might be relatively new, many have been played at North Country dances for generations.

Will the tradition continue? Looking to the future of folk music in the region, Great Camp Sagamore in Raquette Lake created a program several years ago called Roots & Branches. It’s a hands-on weekend that is designed to cultivate the next generation of musicians interested in learning and presenting traditional songs of the region’s past, as well as continuing the tradition of telling new stories in song about the Adirondacks. How about your neck of the woods? Are there musicians keeping the folk tradition alive where you live? Are you nourishing it with your support? 

---

**Send Your Story to Voices!**

Did you know that Voices publishes creative writing, including creative fiction (such as short stories), creative nonfiction (such as memoirs and life/work stories), and poetry? If you are one of New York’s traditional artists or working in a traditional occupation, please consider sharing with our readers. For more information, see our Submission Guidelines on page 36 or contact the Editor at tdgorman@sals.edu
Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

**For the General Public**

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you’ll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

**For Artists and Professionals**

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

- Mentoring and Professional Development
- Folk Artists Self-Management Project
- Folk Archives Project
- Consulting and Referral
- Advocacy
- A Public Voice

**Membership Levels**

**Individual**

- $50.00 Basic Membership
- $100.00 Harold W. Thompson Circle
- $150.00 Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

**Organizations/Institutions**

- $75.00 Subscriber
- $100.00 Partner
- $150.00 Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add $20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

- Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org
- or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;
- or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.