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Singing Our History

BY DAN BERGGREN

On a tour of the Transylvania region of Romania in 2005, my friends and I sang in small towns, big cities, orphanages, schools, hospitals, and churches. One night after our concert in the little village of Almas (Hungarian for “place of apples”), we asked the audience to sing something for us. That’s when all of them joined in a song about their town, which was hundreds of years old. It was powerful, inspiring, and made me wonder: if a Romanian village could have its own song, then ...

Countries have anthems, branches of service have marches, lovers share “our song,” and big cities like Chicago, San Francisco, and New York have million-seller pop hits. So why can’t towns and villages celebrate with their own song? This is the story of one upstate hamlet in Essex County and how some elementary students created their very own hometown theme song.

Helping people understand the nature of folk music is a passion of mine. Fifty years of songwriting experience has included working with adults in writing workshops, college students in environmental programs, middle schoolers in English class, and elementary children studying New York State and local history. That’s how it came to be that I was walking down the halls of my alma mater, Minerva Central School in Olmstedville, ready to introduce myself to Kathy Halloran’s fourth graders. I told the class I liked to play guitar and banjo, then asked if they’d like to make up a song with me. We started with the traditional “Mole in the Ground” from North Carolina:


*I wish I was a mole in the ground (2x)
If I was a mole in the ground, I’d root that
mountain down
I wish I was a mole in the ground*

Once the students understood the pattern, they sharpened their rhyming skills with “bird in a tree” (that looks down on me), “cat in your house” (I would catch a

Minerva Central School

4th and 5th Grades
With
Dan Berggren
Presents:

History Marches
On



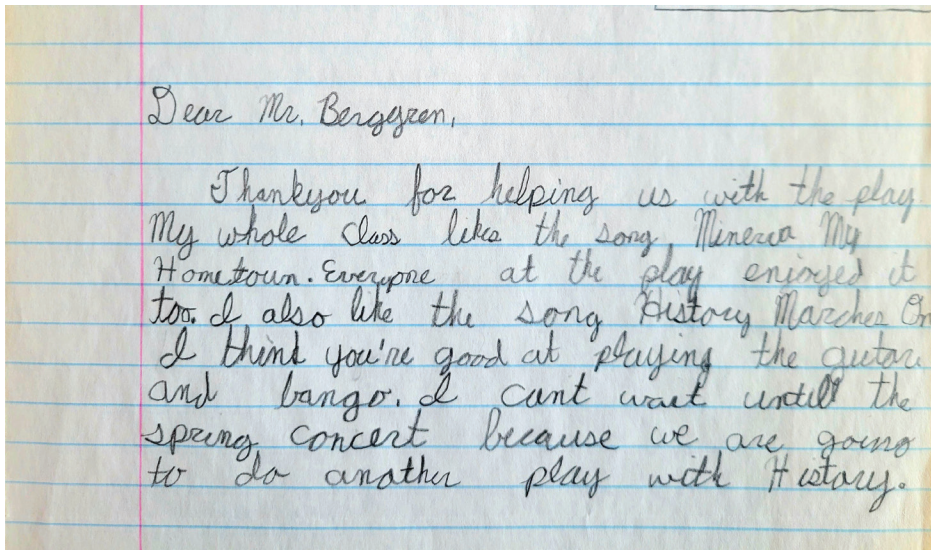
April 23, 2008
7:00 p.m.

Program from the Minerva Central School’s 2008 “History Marches On” concert. Courtesy of the author.

mouse) and so on, before turning to the business at hand: creating a song out of the New York State history that Halloran had mapped out. She said, “My thought was to make a play about the Social Studies curriculum . . . American history and local history.” We had the full support of the K–12 principal Heidi Kelly,

who thought it was “an ideal interdisciplinary project.”

Using the time-honored folk tradition of putting new words to old tunes, the students and I used the tune of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” as our melody to tell and learn some New York State history. For example:



A thank you note from a student. Courtesy of the author.

*The six tribes of the Iroquois — they first
 were here.
 They farmed and fished, trapped beaver, and
 they hunted deer.
 They traded pelts to the Dutch, in return they
 didn't get much
 And we're here today 'cause history marches on.*

*Up the river Hudson did explore, before
 The English fought and won the French and
 Indian War.
 King George raised taxes — what a jolt! So
 the colonists did revolt,
 And we're here today 'cause history marches on.*

This was followed by three more verses, which they memorized and performed like champs! So it was onward and upward to the main songwriting challenge, “bringing Minerva history to life,” as music teacher Sabrina LaPointe phrased it.

My next assignment for this new crop of eager songwriters was: Interview your grandparents and parents and compare what they did as kids with what you do today. What has changed in town? What's remained the same?

The next time we met, they were bursting with stories. The blackboard became the collection place for them to write their responses and see how many were different and how many were similar. For example: “Back then,” the town museum was a church, and there were no snowblowers, only shovels. Remaining the same was playing outside, ice skating on Minerva Lake, and working after school. This information

generated lots of possibilities for the verses of our song.

Next, we focused on building a chorus, one which everyone could sing along with. The students had been excitedly telling me about a basketball game they had attended and how the cheerleaders' call and response routine spelled out Minerva. “Give me an M!” (M!) and so on. Next, the students came up with relevant words for each of the letters spelling Minerva. Some letters, like M, produced a lot: mill, mountains, mining, mountain climbing, memories, meat, maple sap, mason, medicine, museum; others only produced a few, like for N: north, neighbor, and New York State. Their efforts, along with some guidance, produced a song which made its debut on the Minerva Central School stage on April 23, 2008.

*People who grew up here have many stories
 to tell
 About life in the old days, carrying water
 from the well
 Working in the woods, skidding logs with
 a team
 Building a farmhouse using hand-hewn beams*

CHORUS

*Give me an M (M!) for memories that were
 dreams
 Give me an I (I!) for the Irish who settled by
 the stream
 Give me an N (N!) for my neighbors
 Give me an E (E!) for the evergreens
 Give me an R (R!) for the roots that support
 me and go way down deep like a tree
 Give me a V (V!) for vision to learn*

*Give me an A (A!) 'cause I'll always return
 What does it spell? (Minerva!) My hometown
 Minerva, my hometown*

*The museum used to be a church, the town hall
 was a school
 Murdies' once was Jones' store, and walking
 was the rule
 Skating at the dam, hunting for some game
 Then telling friends a tall tale — some things
 stay the same*

CHORUS

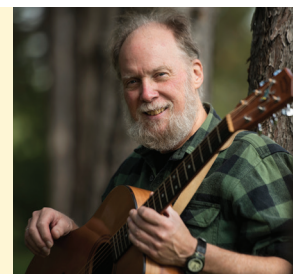
*Olmstead had a tannery, we still bear his name
 Compared to those hard times, today may
 seem tame
 The rivers and the mountains, the bear and
 the deer
 Our friends and our families — that's why
 we're living here*

CHORUS

It wasn't long before the audience was singing along, feeding the energy of these young songwriters. Principal Kelly summed up the experience, saying that the students were “...motivated to work hard to create a product that would become part of our history, instilling a sense of pride not only in their community, but ultimately in themselves.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: This year on July 5, 2025, Minerva Central School is celebrating its centennial, and Dan Berggren will be singing “Minerva My Hometown” (plus a brand new one!) on the annual Minerva Day. ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit www.berggrenfolk.com to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by E. Miller.



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