

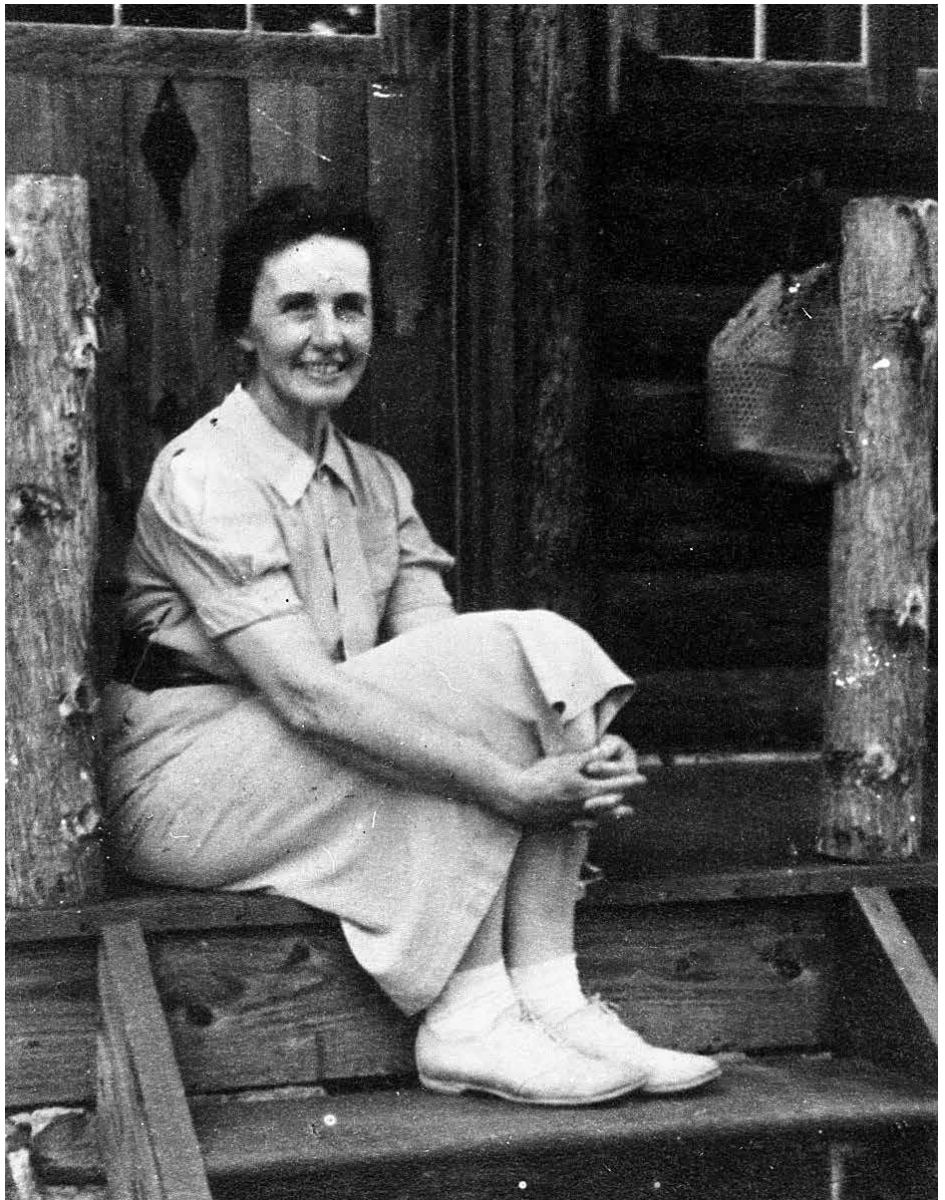
# Songs to Keep

## “Getting the Lore Back to the Folk”

BY DANIEL FRANKLIN WARD, PhD

*I*t seems like a lifetime ago that I first set out to collect folk songs and ballads in the Adirondacks and Champlain Valley. Once in the field, I was surprised to find that there were so many old songs still being sung throughout the region. It struck me that everyone—young and old alike—seemed to know at least one old local song. I also noticed that, more often than not, the same song appeared to change from village to village and from singer to singer. Occasionally, there would be a song learned from a fixed source—usually an ancient newspaper clipping—that was referenced by the singer. More often, these local songs were learned from a relative or a neighbor who either lived through the event in the song or knew someone who did. Once in a while—but rarely—a recording would be mentioned by the singer.

There were a handful of commercial recordings of recordings of songs from New York’s North Country made during the 1960s. Some of these recordings presented local singers that included Sara Cleveland and Lawrence Older. It wasn’t long before I was listening to two albums of songs recorded by two professional singers who were outsiders to this North Country region—Pete Seeger and Milt Okun—that featured contemporary arrangements of songs collected in the field years earlier by a local historian, Marjorie Lansing Porter. The material



Marjorie Lansing Porter in Plattsburgh, New York. Photo courtesy of Sean McNamara Rosemeyer.



Lee Knight performs near mining buildings in the Adirondacks. Photo by Paul Frederick.



Teaching artist and album producer Dave Ruch sings *The Days of '49*. Photo by Paul Frederick.

was rich. I soon learned that when Ms. Porter passed away she left her extensive field recordings to the stewardship of the local history special collections at SUNY Plattsburgh. The collection is known today as the Marjorie L. Porter Collection of North Country Folklore.

Ms. Porter's original recordings on SoundScriber discs were not available for playing, but over 30 reel-to-reel audiotape copies that could be played were made available. These transcription tapes were

noisy, with lots of scratchy sounds, pops, and hiss. The recorded performances were mostly unaccompanied and, unlike the Seeger's and Okun's interpretations of the same material, they were obviously unrehearsed renditions. Much of the recorded material in the archives was not musical. It was clear to me that the collector's interest was in the lives and experiences of her subjects, not just their singing. The songs were like everything else Ms. Porter recorded—they were part

of life. She understood the songs' value; indeed, she actively sought out singers to record them. Yet, it is important to note that she also had a strong historian's interest in each song's context and usefulness, its place in space and time.

Marjorie Lansing Porter (1891–1973), of Keeseville, NY, served as county historian for the two most northeastern upstate New York counties, Clinton and Essex, as well as historian for the city of Plattsburgh. Her intense interest in documenting local people and their everyday lives led her into the areas of folklore and folk music. Her discovery of the SoundScriber portable recorder was at a pivotal moment, when a generation of North Country tradition-bearers were about to take their memories and their songs to the grave. Ms. Porter's recordings, made between 1942 and 1967, therefore constitute a treasure trove of regional tradition that has been well utilized since moving to the college archives. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, through the work of Cathy and Jerry Supple, an effort was made to create lower noise tape transcripts and to place a clean archival copy of everything with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

Jump to the 21st century. Seeking to further encourage the use of the collection and to revive interest in these songs, Traditional Arts of Upstate New York (TAUNY) embarked upon a multi-pronged project to mine and share Ms. Porter's documentation in several ways. First they produced a series of six concert programs throughout northern New York that featured local musicians performing local music and songs. Many of the performances were tied directly to recordings made by Ms. Porter. The intention of the concerts was to spark an interest in the old songs.

Ultimately, three products came out of the project: a 40-page songbook, a 17-song CD featuring contemporary interpretations of traditional North Country songs, and a Public Television documentary, available as a DVD, about Marjorie Lansing Porter's

life, her collection, and the project itself. Fittingly, the products are all branded with an image of Ms. Porter's SoundScriber machine.

The songbook, *Songs to Keep: Traditional Adirondack North Country Songs*, is a project directed by TAUNY folklorist Hannah Harvester. The book includes words from specific field recordings and musical transcriptions by musician Lynn Arthur Koch. The songs (and their singers) included are: *Banks of Champlain* (Lily Delorme), *Frog in the Well* (Lily Delorme), *Johnny Barbour* (Charlotte Meron), *John Riley* (Stella Perry), *Bonnie Banks of Bernio* (Marjorie Lansing Porter), *My Gallant Black Bess* (Dean White), *Ballad of Big Moose Lake* (Lawrence Older), *Young Brennan* (Mrs. Wm. Spry), *Once More a-Lumbering Go* ("Yankee" John Galusha), *Blue Mountain Lake* ("Yankee" John Galusha), *Young Thibeau* (Peter Wells), *The Flying Cloud* ("Yankee" John Galusha), *Dolan's Ass* ("Yankee" John Galusha), *Isabeau s'y Promene* (Peter Wells), *Lily of the Lake* ("Yankee" John Galusha), and *Bert LaFountain's Packard* (Elizabeth Smart).

The words are carefully transcribed. Rarely, when a phrase is unintelligible on the field recording, it is filled in from another recording of the song. Otherwise, these are the words on the variants recorded by Ms. Porter. Historical and



The Bacon Brothers (Kevin and Michael) perform in the documentary *Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector*. Photo by Paul Frederick.

contextual information and quotes from the singers, as well as photographs from the Porter Collection and the Adirondack Museum make this an attractive package. Although there is a CD from the *Songs to Keep* project, it only shares three songs from the songbook. However, recorded versions of all but two of the songs in the songbook are available on another CD of songs from the Porter Collection, *Adirondack Ballads and Folk Songs Sung by Lee Knight* (\$18.00 from [www.LeeKnightMusic.com](http://www.LeeKnightMusic.com)).

The CD, *Songs to Keep: The Adirondack North Country Recordings Reimagined*, is a selection of 17 songs and tunes from Ms. Porter's collection, reinterpreted by contemporary artists. This project was overseen and the CD produced by Dave Ruch, who served as master of ceremonies for the concert series and also performs on two of the songs. With the exception of the Bacon Brothers, the performers are mostly musicians who are already associated with the Adirondacks and well known throughout the region. Short excerpts from Ms. Porter's field recordings can be heard between tracks. The fiddle interludes provided by Don Woodcock alone are worth the price of admission, but every recording is a sparkling gem.

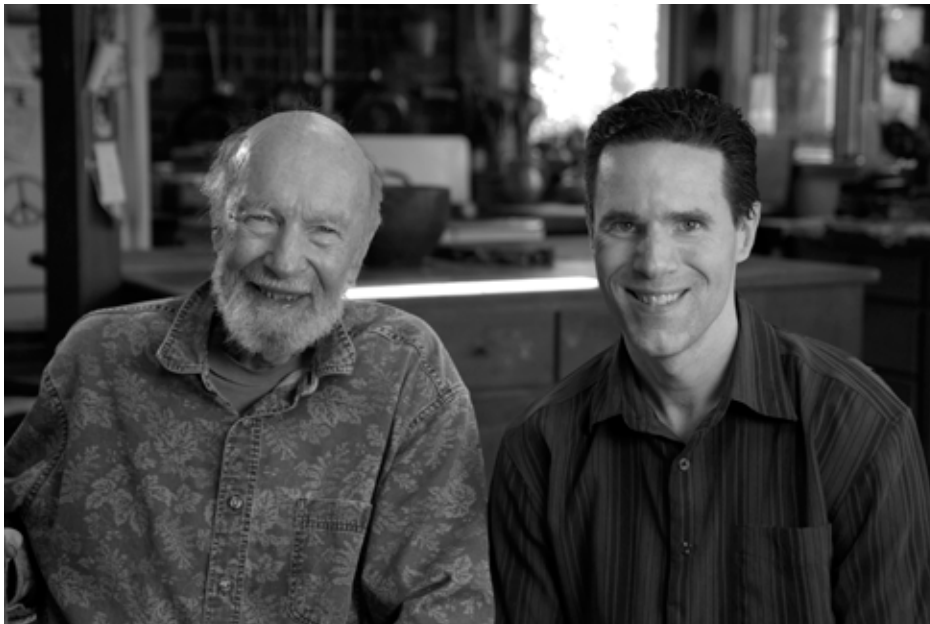
The songs on the CD are: *Cutting Down the Pines* (Celia Evans with Dave Ruch), *Le Cotillon Blanc* (La Famille Ouimet), *Interlude: A Life on the Ocean Wave* (Don Woodcock), *The Sailor's Grave* (Dan Berggren), *My Adirondack Home* (The Bacon Brothers), *Young Brennan* (Lee Knight), *Interlude: Quadrille in D* (Don Woodcock), *Fish Song* (Akwesasne Men's Singing Group), *Thunder Song* (Akwesasne Men's Singing Group), *The Days of '49* (Dave Ruch), *Johnny Barbour* (John Roberts), *Paddy's Wedding* (John Kirk and Trish Miller), *Bert LaFountain's*



Producer Paul Larson with his Emmy Award for *Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector*.



Colleen Cleveland performs her ballad a cappella. Photo by Paul Frederick.



Folk legend Pete Seeger and producer Paul Larson, on the day of Seeger's final television interview. Photo by Daniel R. Swinton.

songs that would have been forgotten but for the keen interest and energy of a North Country woman who learned early on that these songs were “fine to keep” and kept them for a new generation to claim and embrace as their own. ▼



***Songs to Keep: Traditional Adirondack North Country Songs, Songbook***, 8.5 x 11”, spiral bound, 38 pages (\$15.00 from [www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/books.html#porter](http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/books.html#porter))

***Songs to Keep: The Adirondack North Country Recordings Reimagined***, CD, 17 tracks (\$15.00 from [www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html#porter](http://www.nyfolklore.org/gallery/store/music.html#porter))

***Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector***. DVD (\$19.95 from [www.mountainlake.org](http://www.mountainlake.org))

*Packard* (Bill Smith and Don Woodcock), *Lord Ullin's Daughter* (Colleen Cleveland), *Interlude: Lannigan's Ball* (Don Woodcock), *Great Grandad* (Sue Grimm Hanley and Jamie Savage), and *The Irishtown Crew* (The Fraser Family and Friends).

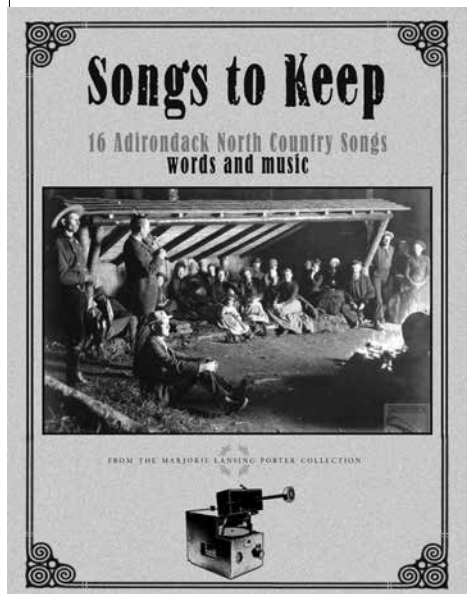
The final product is the television documentary available on DVD, *Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector*, produced, written, and directed by Paul Larson for Mountain Lake PBS. This documentary won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Documentary at the 2014 Boston/New England Regional Emmy Awards. The program interweaves the biography of Marjorie Lansing Porter with documentation of the *Songs to Keep* projects, drawing on the memories of family members, recollections of the musicians who performed at the concerts and recorded the CD, as well as philosophical discussions about folk songs from Pete Seeger, Peter Yarrow, and Noel Paul Stookey.

Throughout the documentary there are wonderful performances of songs set in the places they are about. Lee Knight sings *Young Brennan*, a ballad memorializing a mining accident, near the head of a mine. Dan Berggren gives a tour of the Irishtown cemetery near his hometown of Minerva,

pointing to the headstones, naming the long dead crew members who will forever be remembered in the *Irishtown Crew* ballad, which was first sung in the 1880s. There are beautifully captured performances by Colleen Cleveland and Celia Evans.

The DVD includes a number of bonus features that were not shown on television. These are at once fascinating but also essential supplements to the songbook and the CD. There are interviews and performances by musicians on the CD such as Bernard Ouimet, John Kirk and Trish Miller, and John Roberts. Folklorist Hannah Harvester explains what they were trying to do in making contemporary recordings of the songs from the Porter Collection. There are photographs of the singers on the CD. One very special feature is what Paul Larson claims is the last interview Pete Seeger ever granted, which includes a discussion of his friendship, dating back to the 1950s, with Ms. Porter.

In all, *Songs to Keep* is a satisfying project. The documentary beautifully illustrates how it is a model for TAUNY's effort to “get the lore back to the folk” in upstate New York. The concerts were well attended and thoroughly enjoyed community events. The songbook is a beautiful reference work, and the CD breathes new life into



Daniel Franklin Ward, PhD, is a folklorist, an adventurer, and an “End to Ender” who has ridden a bicycle the length of New York State twice. While in college and graduate school, he conducted folklife fieldwork in the Adirondacks and Champlain Valley and could often be found pouring over the amazing Marjorie Lansing Porter Collection. Dr. Ward is a past president of the New York Folklore Society.

