



The Bacon Brothers, who perform songs collected by Marjorie Lansing Porter in "Songs to Keep," with producer Paul Larson.

Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector, Wins Regional Emmy

By Mirror Staff

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"Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector," the documentary about Adirondack folklorist Marjorie Lansing Porter produced by Mountain Lake PBS, was awarded an Emmy by the Boston/New England Chapter of The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS).

The award was accepted by the documentary's producer, Paul Larson, at a gala in Boston earlier this month.

Reviving the work of Porter, who traveled to logging camps, farms and mines to record traditional folk songs and stories in the 1940s and 50s, was a year-long collaboration of the Plattsburgh-based public television station, Traditional Arts of Upstate New York (TAUNY), the Feinberg Library's Special Collections at SUNY Plattsburgh and the Adirondack History Museum in Elizabethtown.

In addition to the documentary, the collaboration produced an album of folksongs collected by Porter, and re-interpreted by the Bacon Brothers, Lee Knight, Dan Berggren and Alex Smith, among others, as well as a songbook, a series of concerts and a traveling exhibition.

The documentary had its premiere at Mountain Lake's Plattsburgh studios last fall.

"Porter is a hero for having captured these songs in the nick of time," said Paul Larson. "Without Porter's original foresight and hard work to preserve these treasures, we would have lost a lot of music and stories that originated in the Adirondacks. She never cared much for receiving awards for herself, but she would probably have been thrilled to know the songs she collected have received such a high honor."

By the time Porter died in 1973, her collection of Adirondack tunes consisted of 33 reel-to-reel tapes that held folk ballads, lyrical folksongs, early hillbilly pieces, French-Canadian songs and fiddle tunes, all taped on a Soundcriber Recorder.

"Her interests in grass roots history, and her methods of learning the history and collecting the lore found her to be in many ways ahead of her time," says folk singer Lee Knight, who has transcribed all the lyrics recorded by Porter.

Knight is also responsible for selecting the songs included in the new songbook and providing the historical context for each tune.

Porter's collection is housed in the Feinberg Library's Special Collections at SUNY Plattsburgh. The Soundscriber discs have been digitized and are available as mp3 files on a new Audio Station computer at the library.

According to Hannah Harvester, the Program Director at TAUNY, one of the purposes of the collaborative project was to call attention to the collection.

"The collection also includes oral histories, photographs and manuscripts," said Harvester. "We wanted to focus on the song collections first, because we knew they'd be of greatest interest to the general public. But we hope to make the rest of the collection better known as well."

Porter began collecting tunes in 1941. At a resort on Lake George, she happened to meet "Grandma" Lily Delorme, who was demonstrating the techniques of woolen-goods production on an old spinning wheel for the resort's guests.

"Her story of pioneer life in an Adirondack valley was set to a musical hum as she paced, now close to the big wheel, now away from it," wrote Porter.

"Grandma's saga continued in lively conversation as she rode home," wrote Porter. "She spoke of her grandfather, Gideon Baker, and of his muzzle-loader and bullet mold from the War of 1812. Did she, by any chance, happen to know a ballad composed by the wife of General Macomb during the battle of Plattsburgh, The Banks of Champlain? Why, yes, it went this way, 'Twas autumn and round me the leaves were descending—' Her thin, reedy voice told the whole story in a score of verses."

Porter said the encounter with Lily Delorme was "the seed for a constructive activity – the collection of folksongs, ballads and lore illustrative of life in the Adirondacks and its adjacent Champlain Valley."

Marjorie Porter was born in 1891 in the Champlain Valley, where her ancestors had migrated from New England in the 1790s. Her great grandfather, Wendell Lansing, founded the Essex County Republican in Keeseville in 1839 as an organ of the Whig Party and its anti-slavery platform. Porter herself, who graduated from the Plattsburgh Normal School in 1912, edited the newspaper in the 1940s.

Porter appears to have known everyone, including Pete Seeger, who recorded "Champlain Valley Songs," an album based on lyrics and tunes recorded by Porter, record producer Milt Okun and the artist Rockwell Kent.

"Marjorie Lansing Porter's music collection is an extremely significant resource for anyone with an interest in traditional music or the cultural heritage of the Adirondacks and Champlain Valley," said Hannah Harvester. "It spans every ethnic group and every occupation; the songs of loggers, miners, Irish, Iroquois, and French Canadians. While variations of songs may be found in other parts of the country, these are authentic Adirondack songs, some of which have never been heard anywhere else."

According to Debra Kimok, the Special Collections Librarian at the Feinberg Library, the files include more than 300 hundred songs, including those sung by Grandma Delorme, versions of "The Three Hunters," "A Lumbering We Shall Go" and "Adirondack Eagle," by Yankee John Galusha, and songs such as Francis Delong's "My Adirondack Home" and "Peddler Jack."

"Porter's collections have impacted the tradition, and have affected all of us Adirondack songsmiths," says Chris Shaw, a Lake George native whose repertoire includes traditional Adirondack songs

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