

SONGS TO KEEP

Documenting the Adirondack Songbook of Marjorie Lansing Porter

By Anthony F. Hall

A film, a record and a songbook, all based on the work of Adirondack folklorist Marjorie Lansing Porter, are coming soon.

The project is a collaboration of Traditional Arts of Upstate New York (TAUNY), Mountain Lakes, the Plattsburgh-based public television station, and the Feinberg Library's Special Collections at SUNY Plattsburgh.

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 Soundscribe 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.

The collection is housed in the Feinberg Library's Special Collections at SUNY Plattsburgh. Last year, the Soundscribe discs were 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 is 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."

The project is funded in part by a grant through the North Country Regional Economic Development Council, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Champlain Valley National Heritage Partnership.

According to Harvester, each of the three collaborators will raise matching funds.

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,



Marjorie Lansing Porter

William Chapman White on Marjorie Lansing Porter

Editor's Note: In addition to being a journalist, a teacher and a collector of folk tunes, Marjorie Lansing Porter served as the official historian for Clinton and Essex Counties. In Essex County, she was instrumental in the creation of the Adirondack Center Museum. After that museum opened in the early 1950s, William Chapman White used the occasion to reflect upon the importance of local history and local historians. The essay originally appeared in the New York Herald-Tribune, for which White wrote a regular column titled "Just About Everything." Many of White's Adirondack-themed columns were re-printed in the 1960 collection, "Just About Everything in the Adirondacks." But this one, called "The Past for the Future," has never been re-printed, so we reproduce it here.



MRS. MARJORIE PORTER is a small hyper-active lady who lives in Essex County, New York. That county, the northeastern quarter of the Adirondack region, is certainly the most varied if not the most interesting of any county in the state. Not only does it have all the high peaks of the mountains but it fronts for miles on Lake Champlain. It has seen many Revolutionary War battles, as well as the changes in the attire of lady summer tourists for over a century. It holds some of the best-grade iron ore in the world,

some of the gaudiest motels, and some of America's loveliest scenery. For more than 175 years people have made their homes in its little towns and villages and have produced in their time colorful people and vivid history.

And that is what has interested Mrs. Porter in her county. She has made its past a life work and a life hobby. She is the county historian, the one person who knows more about this area and the people who lived in it than any one else around.

Every county in America probably has some one like her — a man or a woman, an authority on a given small area but no less important in the history of mankind just because it is small. As with Mrs. Porter, the detailed knowledge these people have of what went before them is matched only by their pride in it. They do the digging, the collecting, and the dusting of forgotten facts. These eventually find their way into other people's histories and contribute their own rivulets of knowledge into the broader stream of the history of the American people, whether in New York, Rhode Island, Ohio or Saskatchewan.

As other American counties might envy having a citizen with such concentrated devotion to their history as Mrs. Porter, so they might envy what the citizens of Essex County, N. Y., have done for their history.

A week ago, in Elizabethtown,

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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."

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The Fraser Family of Lewis County is among the groups who have recorded songs from Porter's collections for a new CD and documentary

Local Support for Mandatory Inspections is Unprecedented; Commission Should Listen

By Anthony F. Hall

When the Lake George Park Commission meets on July 23, it will vote to adopt one of several possible strategies for preventing new aquatic invasive species from establishing themselves in Lake George. Let's hope the commissioners choose the only policy that has any chance of success, which is the mandatory inspection of every boat trailer to Lake George, followed by a mandatory decontamination if needed.

We know from scientists on other lakes that mandatory programs work. Since one was implemented on Lake Tahoe in 2008, they haven't found any new invasive species. But here's another, no less cogent reason for the commissioners to support mandatory inspections and boat washing: it's what local governments want.

Everyone familiar with the political history of the Adirondack Park over the past fifty years knows that when local governments, chambers of commerce, and advocates for environmental protection agree on anything, it's a very rare occasion. And when they join forces to urge New York State to adopt regulations that could be costly and interfere with access to natural resources—that's unheard of. But that's what we've witnessed on Lake George since Asian clams were discovered here in 2010.

A statement of support for the "creation of a new mandatory boat inspection and decontamination program for Lake George" is now circulating among the towns on the lake. As of early June, the town supervisors of Queensbury, Lake George, Bolton, Hague, and Putnam had signed it, as had the mayor of Lake George village. Others were expected to follow.

Warren County's Board of Supervisors was also expected to endorse the statement. The credit for this goes to Chestertown Supervisor Fred Monroe.

Monroe, of course, is the executive director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, a position from which he cheerfully admits, he opposes much of what the Department of Environmental Conservation proposes.

For the past several months, though, Monroe has been urging Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens to take action, not refrain from it. Martens is a member of the Lake George Park Commission, and the DEC's attitude is regarded as the decisive one. So far, DEC has seemed reluctant to endorse mandatory inspections but has not discussed its concerns publicly.

Monroe is also a founding member of a coalition of elected officials, lake-protection advocates, and scientists called Stop Aquatic Invasives from Entering Lake George, or SAVE for short.

In the absence of mandatory boat inspections, the group has taken steps to strengthen existing measures to prevent the introduction or spread of invasive species. For example, it has contributed its own funds to purchase and operate portable boat-washing stations. Anyone can have their boat washed for free; moreover, the owner will receive a voucher for free goods at a bait shop or marina.

The mayor of Lake George village and the supervisors of the towns of Lake George and Bolton have even offered to match whatever New York State contributes to the cost of operating

a mandatory inspection system. The total cost could be as much as \$700,000 a year. Five boat-washing stations would be established. Boats arriving at a launch site would be directed to the closest station.

According to Monroe, "invasive species are the single greatest threat to the Adirondack economy today." That view is shared by a majority of local officials in this part of the Park, which helps explain why they're telling the state to institute the strongest measures possible to prevent new invasives from reaching Lake George. Should the Lake George Park Commission do nothing, the downside will be huge. Studies estimate that invasive species could cost the Lake George region as much as \$50 million a year in tourism revenues. And lakefront property values could drop by a total of \$387 million.

It would be inaccurate, and unfair, though, to reduce the local officials' worries about invasives to economics alone. As Lake George Mayor Bob Blais says, "This is our lake." The officials I've spoken with understand that invasives wreak havoc on the lake's finely tuned ecosystem.

But even if the officials' concern with this environmental issue were grounded in nothing more than economics, they would still deserve the support of the Lake George Park Commission. It's glib and superficial, and usually wrong, to say that environmental protection and economic development are compatible. More often than not, practical concessions require



Sunset at Gull Bay. Photo by Veronica Spann

compromises in principle, whether the parties acknowledge it or not. But on occasion the two objectives are not only compatible, they reinforce one another. That's true in this case. The Lake George Park Commission should not forgo this opportunity to affirm that a broad coalition of competing interests is

not only possible but sometimes necessary if we are to protect our greatest natural assets.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the July-August issue of *Adirondack Explorer*.

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"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.

The documentary film is expected to be completed in November, 2013, said Dan Swinton, the director of content and production at Mountain Lakes PBS.

Mountain Lakes is conducting a crowd-sourced, fund raising effort for the project through Kickstarter. (To donate, go to kickstarter.com/songs to keep.)

"The documentary will feature interviews with folk musicians such as Pete Seeger and Peter Yarrow and Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul & Mary," said Swinton. "We're also documenting the recording of an album of folksongs collected by Porter, which were re-interpreted by the Bacon Brothers, Lee Knight, Dan Berggren and Alex Smith, among others."

The CD will be released on August 8 at a Marjorie Lansing Porter tribute concert in Clayton, New York.

A festival inspired by Porter's Adirondack Songbook, sponsored by the Lake George Mirror, will be held in Bolton Landing's Rogers Park on Sunday, September 15.

Titled, "Adirondack Legends," the festival of new and traditional Adirondack music and stories will feature Dan Berggren, Bill Smith, Alex Smith, and Chris Shaw.

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