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Mountain Lake PBS wins Emmy for folk song documentary

By Teah Dowling

PLATTSBURGH—When hiking near Lake Placid, one looks ahead to see the beauty of the Adirondack mountains, feeling the fresh cool breeze, and, all of a sudden, the music of a traditional folk song fills the air, just as it did 100 years ago.

That's the mood evoked in the award winning documentary, which was created by one producer and other members from the Mountain Lake PBS (MLPBS) team.

"The entire Mountain Lake team works diligently to produce only quality programming that will best serve our community, [and] we consider ourselves to be the region's storyteller and a convener of many conversations and issues that are important to our community," said Alice Recore, CEO and president of MLPBS. "I am very pleased to be able to work with such a talented and creative group.

"I couldn't be prouder."

"Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector," which was produced by Paul Larson, producer of the series "Art Express" on MLPBS, won a regional Emmy award for Outstanding Documentary at the 37th annual Boston/New England Emmy Awards gala June 7.

"I was overjoyed to win the Emmy and humbled as well," Larson said. "Awards for a job well done inspire me to continue reaching for excellence."

This documentary relates the story of Majorie Lansing Porter, a woman who tirelessly collected 80 to 100-year-old Adirondack folk songs on the brink of disappearing by recording them on a primitive recording device called a SoundScriber, which produced plastic records.

Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY) was producing an album and a concert tour based on a collection of traditional folk songs collected by Porter. Because of this, executive producer Daniel Swinton felt that the story about the album, concerts and the folk collector herself would make an exciting documentary.

"As I am known as the arts producer at Mountain Lake PBS, I was asked to create the program," Larson said. "Much of my television work is about what inspires people to generate art, so the idea of having musicians perform in the outdoor environment that inspired these songs helped drive my vision for what this show was going to look like."

After seeing the potential for this documentary, Larson solicited contributions from New York state celebrities such as Peter Yarrow and Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary, and the late Pete Seeger, getting help from other musicians along the way.

"Lee Knight and Dave Ruch are both musicians who helped me understand the historical importance of traditional folk music," Larson said. "They demonstrated ways to learn about how the miners and lumberjacks lived 100 years ago in the area through the songs these people sung to entertain themselves while working so hard."

Some of the many songs in this film are "The Irishtown Crew" by the Fraser Family, "The Days of 49" by Ruch, "Sailor's Grave" by Dan Berggren, "My Adirondack Home" by the Bacon Brothers and "Once More a Lumberin' Go" by Alex Smith.

"I love to be part of the documentation of the music of this region," Smith said. "As an artist who plays all over the country, it's truly a joy to be involved with something like this in my home area."

"I was invited to be part of the Songs to Keep project because I've been singing songs from Majorie Lansing Porter's collection for almost 40 years," Berggren said. "I jumped at the chance to show my appreciation for the work she accomplished."

Larson worked with videographers Paul Frederick and Daniel McCullum to ensure that the beauty of the Adirondacks was expertly captured for the documentary, along with co-editor Michael Swantek, who's technical wizardry helped bring a large number of stationary historical photos to life.

"We have been referred to as 'the little station that can,' and I feel that aptly describes the efforts that go into each and every project and production we do," Recore said. "Winning an Emmy in recognition of that effort is 'the icing on the cake.'"

"Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector" will air again on MLPBS Aug. 7 at 9 p.m.

"I spent many, many late nights perfecting the show technically after having worked a full day," Larson said. "When it came to the quality of this program, I wanted it to look well polished so it would be able to please an audience on a local level and, potentially, on a national level.

"The compelling story we told, the catchy music performed by talented musicians in amazing outdoor settings, plus the technical quality of the visuals and the editing are most likely the elements that impressed the Emmy judges." ■