

A love letter to the Adirondacks

Paul Larson wins first Emmy with "Songs to Keep"

By Robin Caudell, Press-Republican Email: rcaudell@pressrepublican.com Twitter@RobinCaudell Feb 8, 2015



The Bacon Brothers, Michael (right) and Kevin Bacon, have summered at their family's Adirondack camp since childhood. They performed "My Adirondack Home" in the documentary.

PAUL FREEDENY/PHOTO

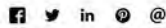
Part one of two

See next week's Spectrum for part two of "A love letter to the Adirondacks," including some of the local collaborators on the project.

On the Web

For "Songs to Keep" CD and songbook, visit www.tauny.org.

See more of "Songs to Keep" at <http://songstokeep.mountainlake.org>.



PLATTSBURGH — Marjorie Lansing Porter and folk songs were unknowns to Mountain Lake PBS producer/editor Paul Larson when he first began to work on his Emmy Award-winning documentary, "Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector."

Larson wasn't born when Porter, a petite and soft-spoken woman, lugged a 20-pound SoundScriber dictation machine within the Blue Line to record traditional folk singers of this region for a 30-year period starting in the 1940s.

"I didn't know anything about folk music before I started working on this project," he said. "It hadn't touched my life but while I was working on the project, the catchy melodies, the wonderful tunes got stuck in my head. I found myself humming them while I was editing the show, humming them while I was driving in the car going to these beautiful locations, and the music completely won me over so I can see why Marjorie Lansing Porter was so enthused by these songs."

Daniel Swinton, former Mountain Lake PBS executive producer, conceived the idea of the documentary after hearing of the CD and songbook project spearheaded by Traditional Arts of Upstate New York (TAUNY), who also collaborated with the Adirondack History Center Museum and SUNY Plattsburgh Feinberg Library Special Collections.

"In hearing about the whole project, (Dan) heard a thread of a story about Marjorie Lansing Porter and how she had so diligently recorded these old folk songs," Larson said.

"What's impressive about her story, she got these folk songs from the aging population that was about to pass away. If she hadn't recorded these folk songs, we would have lost them forever. Many of the songs only exist in her collection."

PROCESS

Over a seven-month period, Larson immersed himself in Lansing's biography as well as British, Irish, Scotch and French-Canadian ballads and songs indigenous to here.

Mountain Lake PBS is airing the show again at 9 p.m. Thursday.

"One of the goals was to present a love letter to the Adirondacks, and I enjoyed showing the modern-day performers out in the beautiful, rugged environment of the Adirondacks," he said.

"The environment had made the conditions for the original singers of these songs, the lumberjacks and the miners, very difficult. And they sang these songs partly as a way to keep their sanity during these very rough work conditions. I enjoyed showing the singers outdoors among the pine trees, on mountain tops, near the beautiful lakes of the Adirondacks to celebrate the music and the beautiful area in which we live."

"Songs to Keep" engages viewers from the start and transports listeners a century back with folk artist Alex Smith's rendition of "Once More A-Lumbering Go" on the top of Whiteface Mountain.

"And, he sang a song called the 'Battle of Blue Mountain Lake' while standing on the shores of Blue Mountain Lake," Larson said. "His contribution, represented for me, the passing on of these old folk songs to the younger generation."

Paul Frederick, Daniel McCullum and Larson were the doc's videographers.

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Margare Lansing Porter (1891-1972) was born in Port Henry. She served as historian for Clinton and Essex counties as well as city historian for Plattsburgh.
PHOTO BY TONY LEAH ROSENBERG

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Pete Seeger gives his final interview for the documentary in August 2013 at his Beacon, N.Y., residence.
PHOTO BY WALTER D'AMICO

"And I find the results breathtaking," Larson said. "Before I got too far into the shooting, I had to come up with a structure for the show. So, I thought it would be a good idea to tell the story of Marjorie Lansing Porter and have music interacting with that story. The documentary goes from music to biography back to music, a little more biography, and it is all related to one another. And I thought we've had a big finale with the concert tour and a big applause at the end to celebrate this wonderful life and legacy of Marjorie Lansing Porter."

CELEBRITY

While working on the documentary, Larson thought it had national potential because people across the country can relate to folk music.

He was also savvy enough to tap the region's celebrity links with the late Pete Seeger, The Bacon Brothers, Peter Yarrow and Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary fame.

Seeger collaborated with Porter on an album, "Champlain Valley Songs," released in 1965 on Folkway Records. Larson was able to capture Seeger's last formal interview ever in the summer of 2013.

"His schedule was full of festival performances, doctor's appointments, and issues involving his wife's failing health," he said. "I would schedule the interview with his daughter, who made all his appointments, and then she'd need to postpone it indefinitely. Once that summer he'd told her, 'No more interviews.' Something told me to hang in there, however, because I knew he would want to pay tribute to a woman who had given him so many songs that he'd enjoyed and sung."

After gentle persistence, Larson scored an August interview date. McCullum and Swinton accompanied him to Beacon, N.Y., where Seeger lived.

"I found him to be very spry that day," Larson said. "He was working in his driveway when we pulled up. He was full of delightful stories and insight about Mrs. Porter and Adirondack music. We also had lunch with him and his daughter, a nice way to spend a few hours on an August afternoon, chatting with a music legend whose songs are known all over the world."

In the previous summer, Larson had worked with The Bacon Brothers, Michael and Kevin Bacon, on a project about their music.

"And I knew they loved the Adirondacks because they had a family camp in the region they've been going to since they were very young," Larson said.

"I was so pleased with their generosity of arranging and recording a song for the project and for telling the audience just how much this region means to them. The song that they perform in the program is called 'My Adirondack Home,' quite an appropriate title for them."

Seeger and the Bacon Brothers' name recognition and artistry was one of the reasons why American Public Television decided to distribute the show nationally. "Songs to Keep" will be broadcast on Valentine's Day in Boise, Idaho.

"That was one of our major goals, one of my major goals, was to get this show on a national level, on a national stage," Larson said.

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Performer Sue Grimm Hanley, documentary producer Paul Larson and Sean McNamara Rossmeyer (Marjorie Lansing Porter's granddaughter) celebrate the recent Emmy win of "Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector."

MARGARET H. SCHNEIDER/STP



Mountain Lake PBS producer Paul Larson (left) interviews folk singer Alex Smith on top of Whiteface Mountain while videographer Paul Frederick captures footage for the Emmy Award-winning documentary "Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector."

DANIEL MCCULLUM/STP



'Telling the story of the Adirondacks'

Local collaborators reflect on Emmy Award-winning 'Songs to Keep'

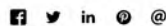
By Robin Caudell, Press-Republican Email: rcaudell@pressrepublican.com Twitter@RobinCaudell Feb 15, 2015



Folk singer Lee Knight befriended Marjorie Lansing Porter late in her life and worked with her. He performed "Young Brennan" in the documentary.
PAUL FREDERICK/PHOTO

Part Two

This is the second and final part of "A love letter to the Adirondacks."



Though a portion of her life's work is in the limelight, Marjorie Lansing Porter was one to hide her light under a pack basket.

"She collected these songs, and she collected stories," said Mountain Lake PBS producer/editor Paul Larson, who compiled Emmy Award-winning documentary "Songs to Keep: Treasures of an Adirondack Folk Collector."

"She wanted all the emphasis of her work to be on the songs and stories, not on herself. She was a historian. She was interested in telling the story of the Adirondacks. She was not interested in self promotion, so very few pictures exist of her. Luckily, her family had gathered together, I imagine all of the pictures that they had access to, and we did have enough photos of her to go through the documentary without repeating any shot too many times."

'BEYOND THE SONGS'

The show's title originates from a cassette recording of Porter talking to Lee Knight, a researcher and folk singer, who befriended Porter late in her life.

"We didn't want to put a whole lot of her voice in the show because the recording was not of very high quality, that's why we had the words on the screen so you could read along as well, but it's delightful to hear her actual voice in the show," Larson said.

"Lee Knight was crucial to the project. He had worked with Porter. He was a friend of Porter's. He is currently transcribing her songs with the goal in mind of writing a music book of the folk songs, a very extensive music book. He is also a researcher, so he knows a lot about the life of the lumberjacks and the miners that we talked about in the show."

Timothy Clukey, a SUNY Plattsburgh professor of communications, had come across Porter's recordings in 2009 and had digitized them and cleaned them up prior to TAUNY's project.

"Her life and her work went so far beyond the songs that she collected," Larson said.

"She loved those folk songs that she collected but she was a historian. She was someone who collected artifacts. She was prolific writer and our documentary only focused on the songs while giving little bits and pieces of the rest of her biography."

NOTHING BUT POSITIVE

The documentary covers TAUNY's "Songs to Keep" sessions.

"We went to the recording studio for most of the recordings of the songs of the album," Larson said. "I would listen to the songs, meet the performers, and then I chose the songs that might relate really well to the environment, and also at that point I decided which performers were going to become characters in the documentary."

Sue Grimm Hanley and Jamie Savage were selected for their artistry as well as their love of the outdoors.

"Jamie Savage is a rock climber, and he actually climbed a mountain for us while we were filming," Larson said. "We scheduled a day where he would climb a mountain for us, and it shows him interacting with the Adirondacks and he relates it to the song ('Great Grandad') that he and Sue are singing."

After Larson completed the initial edit of the show, he asked for it to be given to an effects editor, Michael Swantek, to ramp up the aesthetics.



Celia Evans performed "Cutting Down the Pines" in the documentary.
PHOTO PROVIDED.

"He gave the show, especially the photographs, a visual look that I was not capable at the time of doing myself, a visual gloss," Larson said.

Mountain Lake first aired the show in December 2013.

"We have heard nothing but positive things about the show," Larson said.

"One of the great things that happened was the Lake Champlain International Film Festival. We actually had an audience in the auditorium watching 'Songs to Keep' on a large screen and that was quite a moment and quite an appropriate venue. It did win an Audience Choice Award, second place, for the festival. Someone came up to me after the screening at the Strand Theatre and said you should make a feature on Marjorie Lansing Porter because her story, as we know, goes beyond just the folk songs."

AWARD WINNER

Larson submitted the Emmy-entry paperwork in the Boston/New England region.

"There's no guarantee that it's going to be nominated," he said. "So, it's a great feeling when it gets nominated. There were seven shows nominated in that category for Outstanding Documentary."

People started asking him if he would attend the awards ceremony in June 2014. He got dressed up and drove to the Marriott Copley Hotel in Boston, Mass.

"I thought, wow, 'Songs to Keep' is competing against some films with larger budgets," Larson said. "We did a Kickstarter Campaign. We earned \$15,000. I do not know if the budget went beyond that or not."

When the winner of Outstanding Documentary was announced, Larson watched a large screen filled with his opening montage of Whiteface.

"I saw Alex Smith singing on the mountain top and that gorgeous Adirondack scenery that illustrated his song," Larson said. "I remember thanking everyone at Mountain Lake PBS because it really was a team effort. I also thanked the musicians, the funders, the project organizers, Marjorie Lansing Porter's family and our celebrity guests for their generous contributions to the documentary."

Larson had three Emmy brushes before but never won. The fourth time was the charm.

"That's one of the incredible moments that life gives us sometimes," he said.

American Public Television's distribution is a wonderful gift both to and from the Adirondacks, in his estimation.

"It's not a given, ever, that American Public Television will distribute any show," Larson said. "It becomes a prestigious project for the station if it gets distributed on a national level. This is our culture, our music, our history going out across the country drawing attention to our beautiful region. The program is enriching people's lives with its inspiring stories and songs."

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Colleen Cleveland performed "Lord Ullin's Daughter" in the documentary.
PHOTO: PAUL FREDERICK



Marjorie Lansing Porter was a newspaper columnist in Keeseville and dedicated her life to preserving Adirondack lore and folk songs.
PHOTO: COURTESY SEAN ROSEMAYER