

THE QUARTERLY

Official Publication of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association

October 1989



Speaking Of The North Country
A Northern New York Oral Storytelling Sampler

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Cover: William B. (Bill) Smith of Colton listens intently to a tall tale by Hamilton (Ham) Ferry of Sevey's Corners at Ham's Inn, 1984. (*Photograph by Albert Gates for Adirondack Life*).

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Introduction

Speaking Of The North Country

A Northern New York Oral Storytelling Sampler

When I was a boy in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Hopkinton, I spent a great deal of my time when I was not in school in our family general store. With the exception of a few chores asked of me (probably to justify my free access to the penny candy counter), I really didn't have to be there. There were plenty of other things for a kid to do—fishing, softball, haying, or ice skating, for example. But real entertainment for me was hanging around the store, any season of the year, especially when some of the local men were gathered around, swapping stories. That could be almost any time of day or night.

Although the store has been closed over twenty years and almost all of those men are also gone, I remember them vividly. There was Barnum Perry (and his sons George, Randall, and Charlie), brothers Floyd and Clarence Kingsley, Milan Wright, Fred Williams and Roy Knapp from Fort Jackson, all regulars, making certain to stop in at least once a day to catch up with each other on "the news." On bad weather days, some of the farmers of woodsmen—like Clyde Hooper, Aaron Warner, Howard Miller, Bert Stacy, Leo Snickles, and Ambrose Stark—came in on the pretense of buying a few groceries and staples, but joined the others in small talk.

Sometimes one can read about such gatherings in other places, where the men were called "loafers," or "squatters," or even "liars," but we never had any real name for them. They did, however, have their place. In warm weather they would gather on the long set of concrete steps across the front of the building, a few feet away from Route 11B. Such a vantage point gave them much to talk about, as they watched the slowly changing scene of local traffic and summer people from nearby camps. When it got cooler, they moved inside, to a mixed lot of chairs, pulled together in a circle, close to an oil-fueled space heater. Some of the veterans made claims to the more comfortable rockers and few others ever even tried to challenge them, least of all we younger ones. Almost all day long some would be there, but especially after supper. From 5:00 pm on, there would be a full house. To pass the time, they would often play a few games—trying to arm wrestle with one hand behind the back, holding a ten pound bag of sugar or flour at arm's length for the longest time, or picking a pencil off the floor



Postcard view of people gathered in front of drug and grocery stores, Hammond, no date. (Archives, SLCHA)

with one's teeth while legs were stretched out straight to the sides and both hands were held behind the back. (Try those sometime!) The winner might claim a bottle of cold Nehi pop, a Baby Ruth bar, or a plug of Day's Work tobacco. But usually it was just the chance to visit.

Sometimes my mother or grandmother objected to my listening in, especially at night, because they worried that I might pick up some ideas or language that I would never hear in Sunday School. But, as I recall it, there was little for them to worry about. They talked about all kinds of things in their everyday lives—the weather, broken farm equipment, taxes, their cars, their children, local politics, good crops, or bad crops. My father often exclaimed that more loads of hay were cut and loaded in that store than were ever possible on any of those men's little farms. They often talked about hunting and fishing, marking off the cycle of the seasons with big trout or the 12 point buck "that got away." And always, it seemed, there were the "characters," local men or women with little quirks of personality or habits that might have been at all different from the rest. I don't remember that talk as mean-spirited or demeaning; perhaps it was. I do remember that it seemed awfully funny at the time, very creative and insightful, full of clever language and

real wit.

Most of these same men would probably make a few other stops in town almost every day, or very frequently. While out on our bikes, we boys might well find other storytelling sessions going on at Asa and Gordon Wellers' gas station, Gene Miller's garage, Dwight Yentzer's barber shop, and, at least twice a day, in the post office, one little room in Edith Reagan's house. Because Hopkinton was then dry, there were no bars or taverns for gathering. If they wanted that, they had to go at least as far as Nicholville.

As we all know, in the years that have passed since the end of World War II, much of American life has changed. Even small town life. In turn, the years have made a big difference in the role of storytelling in our daily lives. The old settings are gone. Supermarkets and discount stores in larger towns put the old crossroads general stores out of business; convenience stores with gasoline pumps may have replaced them, with customers who hurry in and out with a few small items needed at home right away. Barber shops have been replaced by unisex styling salons. Even post offices are being closed or limiting hours because of cost and competition. The storytelling bastions in small town life have been disappearing one after another.

Perhaps the greatest factor for many,



Unidentified men in blacksmith shop, Canton, no date. (Archives, SLCHA)

though, has been the revolution caused by the television set. When all of "us men" began to gather at Randall Perry's house once a week to watch Friday night fights (he had the first tv in town), unbeknownst to us, we were participating in the downfall of an old social tradition. From those days on, there have been increasingly fewer daily contacts among townspeople, less need to communicate with one another, less time given over to just sit and "visit." The entertainment that came from hours of conversation—an active involvement in creating, recreating, and listening to others relate their own experiences in long narratives—is now very much replaced by passive reaction to popular media images beyond the personal experiences of most listeners. Of course, there are other reasons for the changes—new work patterns for rural people and new roles for men and women in the home and in the community, for example. So, storytelling as many of us used to know it in the North Country may never be quite the same again.

Storytelling and the traditional storytellers of the northern Adirondacks were first studied and written about

by Robert D. Bethke, a professor of English and folklore at the University of Delaware, in journal articles and a book titled *Adirondack Voices: Woodsmen and Woods Lore* in 1981. In the early 1970s he had spent a great many hours tracking down and interviewing a whole generation of storytellers in the northwestern towns of the Adirondacks, especially Colton, Parishville, and surrounding communities.

In the years that have passed since, other storytellers have emerged, one in particular, Bill Smith of Colton. Bill is a native of that Featherbed region just above the village of Colton. He is a son of Roy Smith, a woodsman who hauled many loads of provisions into the lumber camps of fifty or more years ago, and of Emily Bicknell Smith, who raised ten children and helped the family income by boarding many of the men who were on their way into or out of the lumbering operations of the time. From his father, Bill learned about many of the old woodsmen's adventures and how to tell about them; from his mother he learned many old ballads and songs that were popular among local folks in an earlier time in the North Country. To those great

resources he added his own years of living as a woodsman among woodsmen and women and, for a bonus, received a grant from the Folks Arts Program at the New York State Council of the Arts to study as an apprentice storyteller with an acknowledged master of "big stories," Ham Ferry of Sevey's Corners. Since that apprenticeship, Bill has become well known throughout the Northeast, travelling almost constantly to one place or another to tell Adirondack stories and sing old songs. When he first appeared before local audiences, he began to have people come forward to share some of their own stories or to tell him about someone else they knew who could really "tell a yarn." After having that happen many times, Bill approached me to ask how it would be possible for him to receive support for the time it would take to travel throughout the region to interview many of the people he was hearing about and to record their many stories for posterity. We discussed the idea with Rich Rummel at the St. Lawrence County Historical Association, he prepared a grant proposal to the state arts council, and this project was born.

Over a period of several months in 1988-89, Bill recorded scores of hours of interviews and stories from many local people, mostly in St. Lawrence County. From that part of the project, Bob Bethke, Bill, and I developed a short list of people who very well represent the most common styles and repertoires of traditional storytelling in the woods tradition. On Saturday, April 15, 1989, the Association sponsored an all-afternoon event to which over 250 individuals came out. It was very gratifying to have so many people have so much fun. And it was proof that storytelling and an audience for it are still very much alive in our midst. While the old general stores may be gone and there are fewer regular storytelling sessions in our everyday lives, at least for now we know that the stories and their masters have not vanished. One just has to look and listen a little harder for them.

The final stage of the project has been the creation of this special issue of *The Quarterly*, one which I predict will become a benchmark in the history of the magazine. It is informative, interesting, and just plain entertaining. The hours of work and dedication put into the effort by both men reward us all in this product. Bill's sensitivity to the storytellers and his knack for knowing good stories is compounded by Bob's ability to sort through so much material and provide valuable interpretation in such a pleasing way. I hope you will enjoy it too.

—Varick A. Chittenden
Guest Editor

Speaking Of The North Country

A Northern New York Oral Storytelling Sampler

by Robert D. Bethke

Let's Not Forget

"Stories are things if you don't tell them right along, you forget 'em." So said Eddie Ashlaw, St. Lawrence County woodsman and former lumberjack, during my interview with him two decades ago. It's difficult to believe twenty years have elapsed since that afternoon near Parishville during the 1970s. Eddie, together with other longtime residents largely of the county's timbered Adirondack foothills, made possible a book. I entitled it *Adirondack Voices: Woodsmen and Woods Lore* (1981). What then seemed culmination of North Country inquiry, or at least hiatus, now seems destined as work-in-progress. I'm hopeful that this issue of *The Quarterly*, in presenting additional yarns and a selection of Adirondack voices familiar to some, new to others, will convey my sense of rediscovery.

Initially, the research leading to *Adirondack Voices* was intended to document a heritage of woodsmen traditional singers, singing performance occasions, and folksongs. I held to that goal, but once into the fieldwork my scope began to broaden. The quest for singers of venerable folk ballads—the storytelling songs of grassroots, non-commercial folk music—led to tellers of stories in spoken prose. Men like Eddie Ashlaw spun yarns associated with logging experience, and weaved in oral history about the localized occupation, with greater ease and spontaneity than recalling "the old songs." There were, to be sure, exceptions to this pattern; Eddie's brother, Ted, was an outstanding case in point. Yet it was the talk, whether casual "visiting" or stylized tales linked to woods-identified persons, places, and incidents, that mostly filled the hours of tape. As I wrote in the book's concluding chapter, "I came to appreciate woodsmen's yarns as capsules of experience—time capsules, if you will, containing memorable images and impressions preserved in words."

This is not to say that oral storytelling tradition in the North Country is somehow immune to erosion. Bernice Enslow, age 75, drove home this point early in my inquiries. I went to her seeking leads to woods singers, and for reminiscence about the river-driving era in her Colton community. She preferred to share "local character" anecdotes she recollected as told by, and about, elderly residents during her up-



Unidentified hunters in Adirondack leanto, no date. (Courtesy of The Adirondack Museum)

bringing. Two of the individuals were Henry Potter and Elbridge Young.

Potter, a lumberman, had been a memorable narrator in his own right. "That's how I got those stories, you see," Bernice inserted into one segment of anecdotes. "I suppose Mr. Potter would think of them as he was sitting there, or something would come up that would bring up the association with the story." It struck me that Bernice Enslow was a living counterpart to Henry Potter. At the least, her memories-in-story carried both of us back to people and scenes now distanced from the present. Here was an elderly resource person with a first-rate repertory of community anecdotes. Were such memories-in-story widely retained in this small community into the present day? Would a humorous anecdote about logger Elbridge Young's reputed susceptibility to a drink or two beyond sobriety resonate for the generations removed from Bernice's youth?

Folklorists like myself tend to ask questions keyed to bridging past with

present. A question to Bernice posed the issue. "Most of the younger people in the community don't tell stories like this?" Her reply spoke volumes. "It isn't handed down to them, I don't think, by the older ones. Maybe their parents tell them. I don't know. I do know I have quoted some of them to my daughter, but whether she'd remember them or not, I don't know. She has no association with any of those people, don't you see. It wouldn't mean much to the younger kids about these old people, I don't think. Not like it did to *me*, because a lot of these people were really alive when I lived at the Potter's place sixty years ago." She concluded, "You have to keep collecting things for history if you want them. I've found that out."

Whether or not the kinds of stories captured in the pages to follow will endure time and change in Northern New York remains to be seen. Collecting and publishing them may serve their continuity, as do recent efforts to publicly present gifted living storytellers at organized gatherings and

through the media. Appearance of this special issue of *The Quarterly* caps just such endeavors.

A little more than a year ago, guest editor Varick Chittenden asked that I join Bill Smith and him as consultant in a project with the working title "Oral Story Collecting and Presenting." Neither individual was a stranger. Friend and fellow professional folklorist, Varick had followed the progress of my book and wrote several flattering reviews. I owed him something in return, and the project he had designed—under sponsorship of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association, with funding from the New York State Council on the Arts—was filled with timely promise. The concept involved putting Colton resident and well-known storyteller Bill Smith in touch with other North Country tradition-bearers. Bill was to carry along a tape recorder, and collectively we were to see to it that a sampler of results would be brought to public attention. One of my roles was to work through the findings, with an eye to singling out unifying story-types and emergent themes, and to put together a selection and commentary for *The Quarterly*.

As the project unfolded, and Bill passed along tapes to me, I had occasion to return to certain field recordings that never made their way into *Adirondack Voices*. In the new forum they seemed pertinent, and I have included them, together with narratives I recorded separately from Harvey Carr, of Blue Mountain Lake, earlier this year. Assembling all of this has proved a challenge; I have opted for a number of compromises that deserve mention in the context of expediency and story presentation.

Folklorists, no less than other folks, are susceptible to the entertaining sway

of a good story well told. The risk is in forgetting that the art of the story and the storytelling, the appeal of the moment, are but two dimensions of a much more complex phenomenon. Rehearing the stories at hand, and lifting them through transcription from the flow of other talk, reminded me again and again of the difficulty in doing justice to oft subtle connections between this regional lore and its regional environment. My task was easier in some ways while preparing the book, for its inherent unity of focus—native woodsmen, and a legacy of work, recreation, talk, and song integral to what I termed "Woods at the Doorstep"—made for tidy observations. A couple of reviewers, in fact, felt that I erred a bit in brevity, to the detriment of interpretive nuance. They may have been right. But I felt then, and here once again, that the documented folks and lore ought properly to be afforded the deserved dignity of self-revelation, alongside whatever I find prompting of thought and words. I do not wish to stifle their voices.

My predisposition has been to present evidence of oral tradition and its human carriers generally unencumbered by jargon-laden rhetoric and esoteric analytical leanings. That inclination remains a constant, a reminder of intents and audiences. From the beginning, I've understood the intent of this planned issue to be primarily a tribute to selected storytellers, a representative but by no means exhaustive sample of North Country yarnspinning. The presumed audience, mostly general readers familiar with the heritage, by and large likely could care less about this or that nod to disciplinary trends in folklore scholarship. What thus may strike one potential reader as compromise might strike a greater number as

a blessing not disguised. I do not wish for dense reading.

A related matter, more in service of expediency, concerns the format for ordering the narratives. Again, comparison with the book is useful. There I made much of intertwining "lore" with "folk." My approach was to keep tradition-bearers in the foreground, often depicting them and their yarns, or songs, as self-contained units. Organization of material compiled for *The Quarterly*, by contrast, has encouraged grouping narratives by story subject matter, in blocks, with framing material and remarks preceding each block.

A number of the storytellers we recorded shared narratives topically and thematically dovetailing with accounts told by others. Additionally, someone like Vic Pommerville from Newton Falls ranges from French American religious belief stories to captivating personal experience encounters with game wardens, and bootleggers. Trying for the "lore with folk" scheme here would invite a chaos of disjointedness and interpretive redundancy. It would probably take another book's worth of agonizing revision and sweat to clean it up, and for present purposes that's neither a practical nor welcomed option. Instead, I encourage readers mindful of issues such as total repertory study and personalized, narrative-to-narrative spoken style, to stitch together the sometimes disparate storytelling evidence. I do some of this in brief profiles of the ten storyteller contributors.

Finally, I should point out that these preliminaries began with a comment previously published. I used Eddie Ashlaw's remark as part of an epigraph to get *Adirondack Voices* underway, and to anticipate what I believe remains its ultimate message and truth. The phrase "Let's Not Forget" is also borrowed, in this instance from a column heading that ran in 1970s issues of *The Quarterly*. The wording retains, for me, an elegance of concise suggestiveness. Good quotes, like good stories, prompt their retelling. But there are also drawbacks in such recycling.

It happens that several of our storytellers came forth with stories essentially duplicating renditions by them already in print. In the case of frequently "collected" Bill Smith, the happenstance extended to yarns he has disseminated on audio cassette. Copyright permissions aside, was it suitable to represent the already available? Ham Ferry, for instance, with my prompting told several yarns in front of a large audience at Crary Mills Grange Hall on April 15, 1989, that I had included in *Adirondack Voices*. Tupper Lake's Margaret LaPorte, first in an interview



Storytellers on stage at Crary Mills Tri-Town Community Center, April 1989. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)



Members of the audience, a "packed house" for SLCHA storytelling program at Crary Mills Tri-Town Community Center, April 1989. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)

with Bill, then at the staged event, offered several French American accounts that conformed closely to her citation in a more recent book. Other examples of duplication occurred during the project, through absolutely no fault of the residents themselves. Made aware by Varick, Bill, and me of previously identified regional storytelling topics, they obliged in tellings of self-familiar narratives. We attempted to navigate the recorded interviews and public performances with a sense of the terrain, without imposed roadblocks. And familiar stories carrying published attribution on occasion mingled, in those journeys, with ones newly

recovered on tape.

As a compiler, I've had to confront the issue head-on. The decision has been to exclude narratives to my knowledge linked elsewhere in publication with the narrators. In so doing, I've proceeded on faith that this sampler of Northern New York storytelling will not suffer in absence, say, of Ham Ferry's renowned tall tales about Adirondack guide and storyteller Mart Moody (1833-1910); Bill Smith's wonderfully evocative North Country woods stories about "The Featherbed" and "The New Game Warden"; Margaret LaPorte's several harrowing *loup garou* accounts set both in French Canada

and Tupper Lake; or the vernacular poems composed by "Nappy" LaBarge, neighbor of Margaret's and whose fishing yarns included here hardly do justice to a woodsman with uncounted songs, sayings, and tales lodged in memory. The listing of persons and material excluded could go on, but will not. Difficult decisions about who, what, and what not to appear in the wake of "Oral Story Collecting and Presenting" had to be made. I take responsibility and apologize if there are disappointments. I hope what is here will be consistent with "Let's Not Forget" rationale and sentiment.

The Living Resource: Our Storytellers

Harvey Carr
Blue Mountain Lake

"I can't tell 'stories,' but I've had a few 'unusual experiences' in my life that I could pass on to people who stay and listen to me." Indeed, one can't be around Harvey Carr for long without exposure to witty remark or wry observation on just about anything. Harvey's inclined to bend the truth of the matter, momentarily at least, in the name of artistic license. He strikes one as revelling in the play of life, North Country style. "I'm about fifty-one," he says, "and a few months . . . I think it's about two hundred and forty-six months."

Born in western Canada in 1917, Harvey has earned the right to pro-

claim himself an Adirondack native, and a woodsman, with sides serious as well as entertaining. Major involvement in concerns of his Blue Mountain Lake community, among them the volunteer fire department, and debates over environmental planning policy, seem not to have worked their way into his typically lighthearted renderings. It may be that some subjects are beyond fanciful humor. Now retired, Harvey's occupational experience included logging, utility tree-work, and carpentry. Besides a reputation for local storytelling, he is known for whittling wooden chains, a folk art in keeping with lumberjack pastimes.

Many mornings Harvey can be found frequenting a corner store in walking distance of his home. The place hums



Harvey Carr. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)



Ham Ferry at Ham's Inn. (Photograph by Robert Bethke)



Bill Smith. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)

with activity during the summer tourist season, dispensing gasoline and food. But some of the real vitality is of a traditional sort best-known among locals. A table in a small room adjacent to where most transients cluster has for years served as a "liars' bench" for men.

"It's quite a gang there at the station," Harvey told me. "Every morning it's pretty much the same crew. Some of them are taking coffee breaks because they've been working—on construction, or this or that. I take a coffee break because I want to go over and listen to those jokers, and throw in a few words here and there. We get there pretty much on schedule at nine o'clock. The mail is sorted by about ten o'clock; pick up the mail and go on to do whatever you're going to do. Well, we talk about everything from national politics down to how you fix a flat tire. Of course, somebody always throws in a little humor, or a little 'tall story,' or something or other. There's nothing planned. Just ad-libbing. One story leads to another."

In 1987, with encouragement from Bill Smith, Harvey Carr began to surface as a storytelling talent beyond "the station" and, in the Adirondack vernacular idiom, convenient and favored "local watering holes." He recalls, "I got a letter from Vaughn Ward [a North Country folklorist who teams up with husband, George, in keeping Northern New York folk tradition in public awareness] to come down to an event in Saratoga County. I thought I was going down as a spectator, to listen. I did a little talking and wound up as one of the performers." The occasion led to formation of an informal Liars' Club to which Harvey lends his special gift. "Harvey's not what you'd call a 'liar,' but he might stretch the truth once in a while." That's the gist of matters as summed up by Bill, in tribute, and there are few who would disagree.

Ham Ferry Childwold

Former lumberjack, hunting and fishing guide, mechanic and school bus driver, among other endeavors, woodsman Hamilton ("Ham") Ferry remains synonymous in name and proprietorship with Ham's Inn. At age 84 the man behind the bar, like the Inn, is an Adirondack institution. Patrons at Ham's Inn once numbered lumberjacks seeking a change in diet, a clean bed, and good talk. They found those things, plus spontaneous music and song that made for late nights. Hunters and fishermen also sought out the establishment. There have been changes since the boom years of logging in the 1950s and earlier. The visitors now are a

mixed crowd, rural locals and “down-staters,” but there remains a consistency of appeal to outdoors-minded men and women who know Ham’s “watering hole” as an oasis in the midst of the Big Woods of southeastern St. Lawrence County. Many thirsty and hungry folks make a point of stopping for the warm atmosphere, and Ham.

Colorful talk and lore dealing with North Country regional experience—people, places, the pace of life and perspectives on them considered separately and in collective identity—have for years been standard fare at Ham’s Inn. This pattern is as much a tradition of visitation as knowing there are certain cues that, given the right mixture of attentive audience, might “get Ham going.” His performances blend tellings of favored yarns with recitations of popular poems. Ham has committed numerous poems to memory, in virtually every case delivering them with great flair and textual modifications. Such variation from the otherwise familiar, be it an oft-told story of anonymous origin or literary verse with attributed written evidence, is a hallmark of *oral* literary acceptance. And judging from Ham’s repertory, together with requests he regularly gets for yarns and recitations equally beloved by others, this Adirondack native has fine-honed insight into what strikes a resonant chord. “I like a story that keeps you guessing all the time. Robert Service is great on poems like that. Tells a story right straight from the beginning, that could be possible, and you don’t break the funny part of it until you punch it to them. Then it’s funny.”

Ham Ferry is an Adirondack storytelling presence and voice so much a fixture that he’s earned numerous tributes since the early 1970s. Prior to this attention, which has included Ham in performance on local public radio and television, he “got around” with his memory archive of story and verse. More recently, Bill Smith has been among those residents aware that even Ham Ferry, durable as he is, will someday no longer hold forth at Ham’s Inn. So it’s both fortunate and appropriate that Ham not long ago entrusted Bill with material from that figurative archive. These woodsmen storytellers share bonds. Two attributes emerge spontaneously whenever either feels called upon. The first, what I’d call forthrightness of viewpoint, seems widely characteristic of numerous Adirondack woodsmen. The second attribute, with Ham calls “putting it over” in front of an audience, is a special gift subject to imitation if never intentional direct copy. Says Bill, “Just about everybody knows Ham Ferry, from Ham’s Inn. And there probably is no one who hasn’t heard at least one

or two of Ham’s great stories when they stop by to get a little snort or two.”

Art Gates Blue Mountain Lake

Art Gates is the single contributor to this project whom I never met. Art passed away early in 1989. Bill Smith, in an interview conducted on November 25, 1988, was very likely the last person to record this North Country woodsman on tape. One fleeting interview must therefore attempt to do justice to this self-described lumbercamp “jack-of-all-trades,” guide, carpenter, and for half a century caretaker at an Adirondack retreat frequented by visitors euphemistically referred to as “sports.”

Art probably would like to be remembered, in part, for his efforts to usher neophyte Adirondack visitors through initiation into Big Woods hunting and fishing. His recollections pursue this theme with a ready ease and enlightening pointedness. “I had trouble with a lot of them. That’s a fact. They would think you were beating them, stealing from them, and stuff like that. I used to get into some hellish arguments.” But there were also humorous times, some among friends familiar with ordeal in the wild. Recalled Art, “One night my buddy Ernie and I were in the woods, trapping. We camped next to a beaver dam and built up a fire. Ernie that day had taken off his underwear. Going in, it was hot; he had taken off his underwear. That night, I woke up at midnight and there he was, stripped stark naked in a snowstorm, putting back on his union suit.”

Born in his parent’s lumbercamp, between Blue Mountain and Indian lakes, Art Gates was a woodsman described by neighbor Harvey Carr as “a real classic.” Close to 90 at the time of death, “he never claimed to be a ‘storyteller.’ He didn’t really tell ‘tall tales.’ But he could tell us so much about the history of this general area, telling honest facts. It got to be that he was more or less an unofficial historian of the Indian Lake area.”

Claude Guthrie Canton

Fieldwork notes from April, 1971 reminded me that 65 year-old Claude Guthrie was an old-time fiddler in Canton whom I ought to document, there being periodic get-togethers with fellow musicians at his home. He arranged a gathering at which the musicianship was confirmed, along with talent as a traditional singer and step-dancer in keeping with his father. Growing up on a local farm, he con-

tracted scarlet fever as a teenager. “My education was badly limited: I had about half-a-year of high school, had to quit, and never went back. I worked in the bakery business since I was teenager but now I’m retired.”

Claude is mentioned in the same fieldwork notes as being particularly helpful on matters of local history and lore. At greater distance now, mindful of topics then regarded as peripheral to my controlling interests, I find a valuable lesson for others who might take up the implicit call of “Oral Story Collecting and Presenting.” Put into deceptively simple dictum, “Record everything you can, and return to it on occasion.” Claude Guthrie’s recollections back in 1971 of itinerant “Rovin’ Joe” had importance as recollecting one form of regional experience at the fringe of another. His stories contribute towards a picture taken with a wider-angle lens.

Nappy LaBarge Tupper Lake

“They call me Nappy. My name is Napoleon LaBarge. I was born on a farm in Tupper Lake. You can’t grow beans, but I was there for some time. I was in a lumbercamp, too, when I was little. Dad was at the lumbercamp run by John Davignon, at Dead Creek. When I was a kid my father was the lord and master of the house. You didn’t dare contradict him. One day he hit me with his felt hat and I thought he hit me with a two-by-ten. My folks always talked to me in French.”

The clipped rhythm of Nappy’s spoken English is an inheritance from a French American tradition deeply rooted in his community of Tupper Lake. Like numbers of senior citizens there, he will sometimes slip in a Franco-phone expression or two in tribute to this heritage. There’s an unmistakable Gallic verve in the man that defies facile description; it is fitting to regard Napoleon LaBarge as a representative type, rather than a stereotype.

Nappy’s credentials as a storyteller at age 76 are consistent with a number of other men singled out for this project. He says, for instance, “I’ve gone through life loving the woods and fishing. And I’ve done a lot of guiding.” The similarities extend further. Like Harvey Carr, he’s a wood whittler; like Ham Ferry, poetic verse holds strong appeal, Nappy being the author of many autobiographically informed “prose-poems” (that’s how I’d label the genre); and akin to several narrators in playful deference to convention, he’ll proclaim in one breath “I mostly tell the truth, I don’t tell a lie”—and in the next breath tell a yarn that belies that folk art smokescreen.

or so captivating accounts in keeping with what she calls "old French lore."

"I was born in Tupper Lake and come from a lumbering family, when lumbering was its heyday around Tupper Lake. Of course, Tupper Lake then was all French. We had a couple of Irish families, but the rest of us were French and spoke French. They used to tell stories at night and weekends. The stories were continuous; it would go on for days before you would get to the end of it. They were scary in those days. A lot of the people had incidents happen to them, or maybe they could have been hallucinations." Locally active in documentation of *loup garou* ("werewolf"), Devil, and allied lore passed along as a traditionally widespread but non-orthodox phenomenon of rural French religiosity, Margaret adds: "I wish we had then the equipment we have today."

Fortunately, Margaret LaPorte's diligence in attempts to preserve the Roman Catholic folk belief and storytelling tradition is newly available in Peter C. van Lent's seminal booklet, published in conjunction with an artifact and photographic exhibit in Malone, entitled *The Hidden Heritage/L'Heritage cache; The French Folk Culture of Northern New York* (1988).

Bill Massey
Waddington

Back in 1981, William ("Bill") Massey and Ham Ferry were paired up in a storytelling session I moderated at what was called a Festival of North Country Folklife, that year organized and staged as other times thanks to Varick Chittenden and his team of heritage-conscious recruits. Bill, Ham, and I interacted under a tent, our theme announced as "Woods and Water." I showcased both men, brought together from across the expanse of St. Lawrence County but revealing certain fundamental commonalities. I knew what to expect from Ham; with Bill it was all new discovery, beginning with his preamble as among the "river rats" of the St. Lawrence River flatlands.

Bill Massey seemingly has essence of St. Lawrence River flowing in his blood. In any case, it's there in his family bloodlines. Born in 1914 "fifty feet into Canada," and soon thereafter residing on Oak Island, Bill remembers the surroundings as "pretty wild." His father was a renowned "market hunter" providing ducks shipped to New York City. "It was just the same as if somebody owned an apple orchard. They'd pick the apples and sell them. Well, there were just thousands of ducks." Regulations prohibitive of commercial harvests once accepted commonplace are now needed, and rigorously adhered

to, in personal observance by Bill today. Outspoken in advocacy of environmental safeguards, he retains an unshakable nostalgia in talking about his younger days, his admired father, and a sometimes secluded upbringing that others not of his ilk might protest, perhaps even deny. "I never saw anybody who could work a pump gun or shoot ducks like he could. He had lots of practice. There were days he'd kill a hundred-and-twenty ducks." Back then, "it was a great life."

Now 74, Bill has achieved renown as a skilled marksman and St. Lawrence River fishing guide. He is even better known in circles beyond the Adirondacks for his expertise in carving wooden duck decoys, having apprenticed many years ago under the eminent folk craftsman Chauncey Wheeler. Acknowledged for stories informed by long experience as a "river rat," his yarns about bootleggers are revealing of a river of lore still awaiting extended navigation up and down the St. Lawrence River Valley.

Vic Pommerville
Newton Falls

Vic Pommerville, one of twelve children in a French American family, resides in a southern St. Lawrence County settlement isolated in appearance and impression from social changes elsewhere literally making inroads into forested wilderness. Newton Falls, in fact, is for the outside visitor what seems a long drive from mass popular culture in the late twentieth century.

The longtime environmental seclusion of Vic's portion of Northern New York may explain, and certainly put into perspective, reminiscences that recall itinerants back in his youth. Narratives he tells about reputed and personal encounters with other presences, recounted with considerable intensity blended with matter-of-fact report, correspond in substance and spirit with reports elsewhere from the migratory French-Canadian antecedents.

Vic, 74, is well-known in his community as a musician and singer. Other family members have shared in this inclination, along with work provided by the local wood-processing firm. Recovering from illness one afternoon, he more than kept us attentive and busily documenting at a table strewn with the clutter that folklore fieldwork somehow generates.

Otis Schofell
Colton

Otis Schofell was 91 when I interviewed him in 1970, the first woodsman leading to *Adirondack Voices* and eventually given a place of honor on the

first page, first chapter. He died in Colton never knowing that our several encounters one summer would result in tribute.

Then living in a rustic shack, Otis loved to reminisce about what he termed "good old days, gone forever." His stories tended to go on at great length, one blending into the next. He was particularly animated during ones about fishing experiences as a young man. Transcribed, the two narratives here included capture something of that spirit. The accounts, and others, also made me aware that yarnspinnings might be located who further exploited what sometimes seemed a fine line between matter-of-fact reality and the marvelous. With Otis, I confess I spent more time just listening, on the first day literally at his feet outside the dwelling and swatting at a persistent June hatch of black flies.

Otis, as I eventually wrote, "was in many ways an anachronism. He was, by general acclaim, the most colorful character in town, Colton's oldest living resident." It is a self-satisfying indulgence to share a couple of his personal-experience narratives that are not in my book.

Fred Selleck
Pierrepoint

Fred Selleck is a prominent resident of a centrally located St. Lawrence County community small in populated expanse but large in local history. He's well-qualified to be known in several capacities. A descendant of Civil War era settlers, Fred has ties to farming and commerce, frequent community service in public office, and notable regional historic-mindedness. We interviewed him only once, at home. A follow-up scheduled appearance before a much larger audience, at the Crary Mills event, was cut short by Fred's urgent attention to competing local heritage: it was a day that called for maple sugar harvest, and the fickle rhythms of Mother Nature would not be dictated by human plannings.

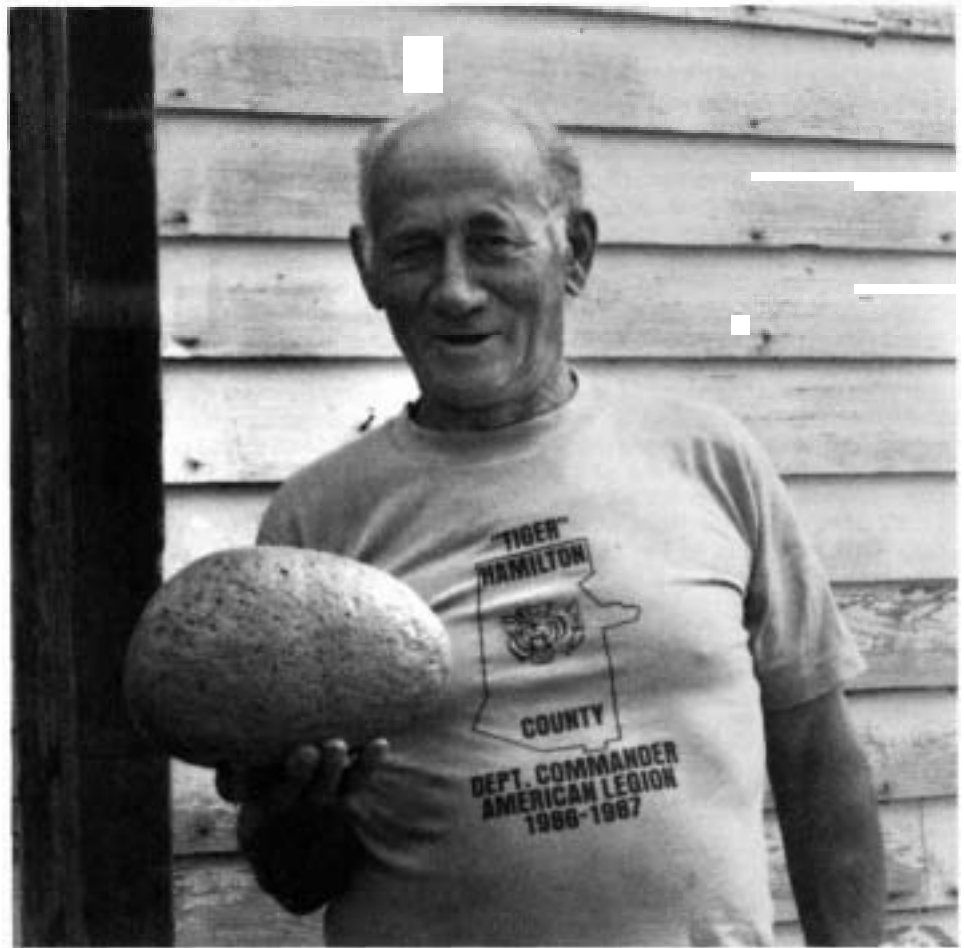
One measure of Fred Selleck's personal attentiveness both to Adirondack and local community history-in-the-making is his authorship of an article in *The Quarterly* devoted to Pierrepoint relative Gilman "Gil" Selleck (1858-1926), a renowned woodsman-hermit. Anecdotal lore about Gil's traits and routines in the woods, and beyond, continues to surface in the western Adirondack foothills. Fred told us things that conformed to what he had published; I have excluded the local history accounts, along with a wealth of anecdotes about persons Fred has known, or heard about, during his 74 years on the local scene.

Ties That Bind: Story Themes and Types

Our sampling of stories orally told sift into seven blocks. Within and among the blocks one discovers some overlapping in story themes and types, and to find this emergent pattern is by no means a surprise. In any regional storytelling heritage, the North Country included, certain story subjects and narrative conventions tend to hold sway—even without, I quickly add, special quest by collectors.

Among resident Adirondack storytellers, it is certainly to be expected to find *woods* and *water* permeating many accounts, independent of the form and style the story takes on in the rendering. Often paired, woods and water are the classic settings; tales about guides and guiding, hunting, fishing, game wardens, and even bootlegging (at least North Country style) would have little occasion without that context. Indeed, a treatment that would embrace a broader spectrum of Adirondack story literature beyond design of our project, to include literary reactions indebted to spoken tradition and lived North Country experience, could not sidestep discussion of the woods and water environmental backdrop at length. Fortunately, the prolific author and indefatigable scholar Paul Jamieson has already made efforts toward this end, notably in an anthology aptly titled *The Adirondack Reader* (1982). But one of the authors whom Jamieson, among others, cites in the literary canon of Adirondackiana begs mention. I refer to 19th-century Boston clergyman William H. H. Murray, whose now “classic” book *Adventures in the Wilderness* (1869) touted the region’s woods and water, and resident professional guides, though essentially at the expense of extant folk narrative.

The author who came to be known for the “Murray Rush” to the Adirondacks was not ignorant of indigenous oral storytelling tradition. Rather, he was predisposed to underplay it. As Murray stated with explicit candor in getting his *Adventures* underway, his tact was to offer “a series of descriptive pieces, unencumbered with the ordinary reflections and jottings of a tourist’s book, free from the slang of guides, and questionable jokes, and ‘bear stories,’ with which works of a similar character have to a great extent been filled....” The result was an enormously popular work that rallied Big Woods tourism, yet did little to serve public awareness of Adirondack oral yarnspinning. The irony is that tradition-bearers were constantly in Murray’s midst. What he must have heard told around campfires, by the same guides he otherwise celebrates, one can only guess. Most point-



Life imitates art as Harvey Carr shows off his “pet rock” which “floats in a bucket of water.” (Photograph by Robert Bethke)

ed, perhaps, is non-inclusion of parody anecdotes the guides likely told at the expense of city “sports” among Murray’s followers.

Interplay between woodsman *insiders* and non-local *outsiders* is a theme running through a number of the stories we present. Sometimes the outsiders represent imposed regulation that challenges ingroup-sanctioned ways of doing things. Stories about bootleggers often fit this mold, as do some yarns about dealings with game wardens (who may have insider credentials in one sense, but who often personify threat to conventional folkways). Implicit, also, throughout the collection are a number of human attributes brought to the fore with great frequency: *self-reliance*, *skillfulness* forged in the practical exigencies of rural North Country life, *adaptability*, and pragmatic *quick-wittedness*. In sum, what I would characterize as *resourcefulness* surfaces time and again. I find it revealing, for instance, that accounts about itinerants—the “tramps” remembered as once a fixture of the

countryside—tend to highlight the resourcefulness attribute; these men, while by inclination outsiders from the norm, are not recalled as posing threat. It’s as if locals recognized resourcefulness wherever found, and tramps certainly embodied its essence. By contrast, in the French American tradition, what might be termed “supernatural outsiders” are spoken of as quintessential threat, at odds with Franco-Catholic religiosity.

One story-type favored in woodsmen circles throughout regional America is variously known as the humorous “lie” or “tall tale.” In the Adirondacks, I have also heard them referred to as “big stories.” The storytelling format typically involves a narrator beginning what, on first encounter, is set up as a personal-experience account—plausible reminiscence related in deadpan style. As the telling progresses, the art of the genre begins to emerge; things become increasingly fantastic and incongruous. The story ends on a comic and often uproarious note. As a listener you’ve

been hauled along, caught up in playful absurdity, and ultimately the victim of falsehood in fun.

Arguably, the tall tale is the most venerable of artistically self-conscious story types in Northern New York; without question the tradition has deep roots and widespread popularity. One reason may be that it is an opportunity to "lie" without intention of real-life deception. Among our project's resources, Harvey Carr epitomizes a storyteller given to playful distortion of "truth" in surroundings where honesty is generally held, in seriousness, a revered virtue. Harvey has thought about such things, in any case, as I discovered during an interview. "I looked up *lie* in the dictionary, and to 'lie' is 'to deceive.' And to deceive somebody, you've got to tell them something and make them believe it, when it's an untruth. That's a *lie*. Well, I tell them something, they don't believe it, so I'm not deceiving them." That said, in a serious tone, Harvey concluded with a brilliantly logical twist. "So, if I'm not deceiving them, I must be telling the 'truth!'"

This juncture is the suitable place to get on with the heart of matters, our sampler of stories. Earlier, in the section "Let's Not Forget," I spoke about difficulties inherent in presenting "lore with folk." That's accurate, and story ordering in seven blocks is forthcoming. With Harvey Carr, nonetheless, there is an opportunity to adhere to partial yet indicative presentation of one storyteller's repertory as a unit.

The tall tales that follow did not make it through my metaphorical sifter—happily so, I contend. I've brought them together in an ordering that Harvey *might* use if seated before a sizable audience comprised of both strangers and friends, say at a public festival featuring North Country storytellers, or for the imagined readership of *Speaking Of The North Country*. And if you could take him aside, privately, he might preface the yarns with these words (they are from a recorded interview): "Some of my stories are so old people haven't heard them, and some of them are so new people haven't heard them. For me, something funny will happen and I'll think it's comical. I'll just think about it and build a little story around it. It's hard to tell which is original, and which isn't. You've got

Harvey Carr

I'm from Blue Mountain Lake, right in the middle of the Adirondacks. Beautiful, beautiful spot there: beautiful mountains, beautiful lake. We are getting quite modern up there now. We've got indoor plumbing, electricity, and paved roads. Pretty modern up there now. Wasn't always that way. When I was a younger fellow we didn't have all

these conveniences, but we survived. We had a well, we had an outhouse, and we had gravel rocks. So we got along pretty good.

A friend of mine came up from the city one day. He was going to stay a day and visit. We sat there in the kitchen drinking and he says, "Harvey, can I use your bathroom?"

I said, "We don't rightly have a bathroom; we have an outhouse up back, that's what we use." So of course it was dark and I gave him the flashlight. Told him there's a trail. "Go right up that trail and on the right you'll see a building and that's the outhouse." So away he went, and I waited and waited and waited. He was gone quite a while, so I got worried.

Well, you know these city slickers up in the Adirondacks, they're not too well informed in the way things operate. So I figured I'd better go out and look. So I went up to the outhouse and he was not in it. He wasn't there. So I walked up the trail a little ways and I hollered. "Hey, Joe! Hey, Joe!" I finally heard a weak little holler.

"Yeah, right here."

So I went up. What he had done, he went by the outhouse on the right and went up to the well on the left. He opened the door and he fell in. So he's down there splashing around. And I hollered down, "Hey, Joe, you all right?" He said, "Well, I am so far, but don't flush this thing till I get out of here!"

I had been a lumberjack for a long time, in the woods there. Did a lot of hard work, and had a lot of fun and so on. Once we were down in Independence River country, and we cut a lot of pulp that summer. About seven thousand cords. Then came winter and we sleigh-hauled it. When the ice went out we dumped it in the river and floated it down to Lowville, about thirty-three miles. Well, this fella was going to buy it from us, but once we got it down there he decided to cut the price. He wanted to cut it three dollars a cord. Well, that was quite a lot of money in them days. We haggled with him some, but he stuck to it. "Ok, buddy," we said, "no deal." We drove it right back up the river again.

Up here in Blue Mountain Lake, it's a nice little town. But it does get kinda cold, up here, once in a while. Wasn't too bad last winter: got down to just about zero. Of course, that was in the *kitchen*. (It was a little colder outside).

But I was out this one day, and it was pretty cold, and I looked at my watch to see what time it was. And my watch was rubbing its hands together to keep them warm.

It *was* cold. So I built a little fire to warm up a bit, and it was so cold the flames froze right in mid-air. "Well," I said, "there should be some way I

could use them." They weren't kicking off much heat, either, after they froze. So I brought them home and put them in the freezer (if I didn't they'd thaw out and set fire to something, probably). So then I run them through the food grinder, and ground them up, and it made the best red pepper I ever had in my life.

Yeah, it was pretty cold. In fact, one day I was out and saw a rabbit. Just whistled, and the rabbit stopped right there. I went over and looked, and the poor rabbit was frozen solid. Froze right there.

I went up to the hunting camp one day, my buddy and I, and it was cold. In the middle of the winter. I was getting supper ready, and looked, and there was a tomato there. My buddy was outside. I threw that rotten tomato at him, and it knocked him colder than a mackerel. Froze before it got to him.

Art Gates and I had a garden over on Crane Point, next to the lake. We had a pretty good garden there. A few problems, and a few weeds, but it wasn't too bad. Had it fenced in, so the deer and coons and woodchucks couldn't get to the garden. Then I used some of this fast-grow fertilizer on the cucumbers, and they grew like crazy. Trouble was, they went right out through the fence and clear up into the woods. No trouble finding them. The main problem was that the vines grew so fast they were wearing the cucumbers out, dragging them along on the ground. They were pretty well bumped and bruised by the time I picked them.

Now zucchini, that come along good. I had one big one, one really big one. Got ten or twelve feet long. Well, it was too tough to try to eat it, but I hated to see it go to waste. So I decided to make a canoe out of it. I hollowed it out and took it down to the lake. Got a paddle and went out on the lake, and it floated along pretty good. I was having a lot of fun, and went over to West Bay. Looked, and here comes a beaver. So I just sat there watching the beaver. He come up and he took one sniff of that canoe and slapped his tail on the water just like a rifle shot. And here come eight or ten more beaver. They all sniffed, and they started eating. And they ate the canoe right out from under me. So this year I'm going to try it again, if I can get a good big one. I think I'll put about a 25-horse motor on it; I think then I can outrun them.

I was up in the woods one summer, and every night I was using a chain saw. And every night, when I'd get through cutting, I'd fill up the saw with gas and oil and sharpen it. Get it ready for the next morning. Well, I went up one morning and tried to start my saw. It wouldn't start. I cranked on it a while, and it wouldn't start. I checked

it out, and the gas tank was empty. Thought, "Maybe I forgot to fill it last night." So I filled it up and away it went—it worked good. And that night I made sure I filled it. Next morning the same thing: it wouldn't start, and gas tank was empty. Then I said, "It must be it's leaking." But I couldn't find any leak anywhere, so I filled it up and away it went. And that went on for a few days.

Well, one night I went down to camp and had supper. Said, "I'm going back up and check that chain saw again." Got pretty well up in there and I could hear a chain saw running. Thought it kinda funny, because nobody up in there. So I tiptoed up and looked, and here the doggone beaver had my chain saw and they were using it to cut brush,

logs, and stuff to build their dam. What they'd been doing, they'd use it until it ran out of gas, and then they'd take it back and put it on the same stump.

Somebody said, "Why, they're pretty smart, those beavers."

I said, "Not really. I think they're kinda stupid. If they had just filled that thing up with gas again every time they got through using it, I never would have caught them."

I'll tell you about a salve I made. Now, this isn't a "story"—this is just one of the "unusual experiences" that I've had. Back when I was teenager I invented this salve. What I did, I took hemlock sap and balsam pitch, and mixed it up. And I tried it on little cuts and bumps and bruises, and it seemed to work pretty good.

So I was back here splitting wood one day, and Sparky was with me. Friendly old dog. She was wagging her tail. And, god, she wagged her tail right across the block of wood just as I was going to split it. I cut her tail right off. Boy, I pretty near cried. I didn't know quite what to do. So I put some of that salve on, and it felt pretty good I guess. She quit crying. And she grew a new tail.

Well, next Spring I was out raking up the chips and sawdust that was left over, and here was Sparky's old tail. Said to myself, "Hell, what am I going to do with that?" Then I thought about that salve again. So I took that old tail and rubbed some of the salve on it. And it grew a new dog, and you couldn't tell them dogs apart!

Guide and Guiding Stories

Stories that highlight Adirondack guides and guiding experience are appropriate to lead off these seven blocks of narratives sharing subject matter in common. While the examples are few in number—we present a sampler, bear in mind—the traditional role and image of the Big Woods guide looms large. Romance surrounds the calling. As an eminently skilled outdoorsman, the guide represents an ethos entrenched in the American grain: rugged individualism, ingenuity, courage and pride. In profession, he must deal with knowledgeable as well as inept people, and in situations that demand a juggling of resourcefulness, adaptability, and interpersonal skills. Dealings with outsiders muster these attributes, and testing of them prompts recognition of their importance in stories told by two former guides.

Art Gates

I liked to guide for hunting, but I didn't like to guide for fishing because the people were in the boat with you. Sometimes they'd ask you questions that you'd get disgusted with, so I didn't like to have them in the boat with me.

I can remember one hunting party that hired us, me and some other local guides. There was snow, and we would make drives to them. They were no good. Lots of times, if we were making a drive, and want to turn a deer, we'd shoot. They thought we were killing deer, you see, unbeknown to them.

So one fella says one day, "I'm going to watch that little guide today. I'm going to follow his tracks."

Well, I found out about it. And I took him through this big swamp down here, right through the willows and everything else. Snow and all. I'll tell



Unidentified Adirondack hunting guide and party at rest, no date. (Archives, SLCHA)



Art Gates. (Photograph by Matthias Oppersdorf, courtesy of Phyllis Gates King)

you, he finally got tired, and instead of following my tracks he thought he could cut back to the camp. Well, god, he got lost. Had a hell of a time.

So his brother was there. Said, "Why didn't you follow your back track?"

"Well," he said, "by the time I was ready to go back to camp I was a mile and a half *from* my back track!"

Harvey Carr

A friend of mine is a retired New York City policeman. He come up, and he didn't know much about hunting.

So he said, "Would you take me hunting?"

I said, "Sure, no charge. You're my buddy and we will just hunt for the day." We got in the woods. I said, "You get right up and stand on that stump and I'll make a drive up through here. There's deer in there, and I'll put them out in front of you. If you see a nice buck, take him." So I made the drive, and come up through, and never heard a sound. But I thought I heard him

holler. I said, "Did you see my deer?"

He said, "Yup."

I said, "Horns?"

He said, "Oh, one had big horns."

I said, "Why didn't you shoot him?"

"Well," he said, "he was going too fast."

So I said, "Well, we will try again." Went to another swamp, I drove and he sat watch. I said, "This time you see if you can't get yourself a nice buck."

Come through and I saw a flash of horns. I knew there was a nice buck ahead of me. And I thought I heard him holler again a little bit. Got up there. Said, "Did you get him?" (I knew he hadn't because he hadn't even shot.)

He said, "No—going too fast."

I said, "What do you mean going too fast? They aren't going to stop and look at you!"

"Well," he said, "I threw my rifle up and took dead-center on him. Said 'Freeze! It's the police!'"

Then I took two hunters out one day. That was back in Depression times, and money was pretty scarce. They

were going to give me two dollars a piece for guiding them for the day. That's the last day I guided; that day I lost two hunters and four dollars.

Art Gates

Rarely if ever a dog would follow a deer out into the water. You'd take an especially big deer, you know. If a dog found them around, they'd come in water quick. That's the way you did it long ago.

We had a big hunt one day. It was a guides' hunt, but this other guy wanted to go with us. We said okay. Put him to watch on Loon Brook point. That was the favorite spot, and two deer come in. And the damned fool, instead of getting into his guide boat and rowing out and shooting, he started shooting from the shore. And he lost both deer and shot up all of his shells. He didn't know enough. So that was the last hunt he made with us. We decided that *he* wasn't what we needed.

You'd wait until the deer got out in the water. If he was close enough, you'd shoot from shore. But if not, you'd wait until he got out where you knew he couldn't get away from you, and then you'd row like hell out and head him off, drive him toward shore, and then shoot him. You wouldn't want to shoot him out in the middle of the lake, you see; you'd have to tow him to shore.

One day this nice big buck come in. I waited and watched the deer. And this "green" guy, he started to shoot. And I said, "Don't shoot yet. Wait till he gets out in the middle of the lake where he can't get away from you."

Well, he finally started to shoot. The bullets were flying two-thirds of the way down the lake. And so I waited until the deer put its feet on shore, and then I shot him.

I said, "You made a good shot!"

He tried to cock his gun, and he handed me a ten dollar bill. He says, "This is between you and me."

Harvey Carr

I used to be a guide. I don't do much of it anymore, but I used to do some guiding up here. Got out one day and it got pretty snowy and blowing. Kind of a white-out. I got a little bit confused.

I had a couple of guys with me from down in the city that hunted. So I stopped, and was looking around, and scratched my head. Didn't have a compass.

One of the hunters said, "Are you lost?"

I said, "No, not really lost. A little bit confused."

He said, "You told me you were the best guide in the Adirondacks."

I said, "Yes, I think I am. And I'm afraid you're in the *Catskills* now."



Bill Massey. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)

Hunting and Trapping Stories

While sentiments vary on the killing of wildlife, done legally or otherwise, it is an incontestable commonplace in North Country folklife. As Art Gates put it, "I can remember when you didn't have to hold a license to hunt. My father never had a license. 'I have hunted all my life,' he said, 'and I'll be goddamned if I'm going to buy a license.' He carried his rifle, hunted right along, and never paid a fine. He said, 'There's a *Constitution* that says we have the right to bear arms, and I'm going to bear them.' Of course, in a way, he was right: it did say that—but it didn't say that for killing illegal deer."

Stories related to hunting and trapping game in Northern New York are as legion in number as the practitioners, indigenous and non-resident statistics combined. Someone else can tally those numbers. In total they'd more accurately fall short of the reality, as a day spent with a group of hunters or trappers sequestered "to camp," in retreat from day-to-day routine elsewhere, would confirm. Trappers tend to be a close-knit circle. Their lore deserves an attention in the North Country heretofore given little notice. I welcome correction if I'm in error. Hunters, in comparison, seem every-

where accessible. Some trap, to be sure, but their wealth of storylore is as predictable as the card playing, social drinking, and hearty eating that make for their ritualized yarnspinning and prevalent camaraderie.

During the project we barely tapped into accounts about hunting and fishing. As it is, I've honed with selectivity what we got. In this unit Bill Massey offers a glimpse into an earlier era of St. Lawrence Valley hunting. Harvey Carr is heard from, too, his tellings seasoned with humor and best taken with a grain of salt. Additional hunting encounters from other narrators appear in the block "Game Warden Stories."

Bill Massey

We moved over to Oak Island, near where I was born in Canada, and we were pretty tough characters. A lot of people didn't fool too much with us.

I remember that Will Haskins was a trapper. He trapped coon, and skunks, and mink on Oak Island. This island we lived on was about two miles long and three-quarters-of-a-mile wide. All timber, never had been cut, and it was pretty wild. And old Will used to trap his coons. I was trapping coon also.

I had a bait set and went up one morning. I was young kid about ten years old at the time. We always carried a shotgun because you never knew when there was something to eat. We didn't have rifle shooting. We had no deer or anything like that, but we had all kinds of little animals and ducks. Well, I went up to tend my trap and I saw it was gone. I followed it along, and a nice big coon was hung up in the brush. I didn't know what made me do it, but I backed off about fifty feet and sat down to watch him.

And old Will Haskins come along. He was an old native trapper. He tapped the coon on the nose with the handle of his hatchet, and put him in his pack-basket. And I'm sitting with my shotgun across my knees. I says, "Will, how much are you going to give me for that coon?" And he pretty near tore his hip pocket out, getting his wallet out.

Well, this is the kind of a life we led. My father was shooting ducks for the market. And every weekend away from school I used to go with him. In those days we shot ducks for the money. We'd kill the ducks in the morning, stop hunting about noon, and put them on the train at night in Hammond. They'd be in New York City in the morning. I thought it was all right to shoot those ducks. I didn't know the difference. Now I'm a conservationist, and I feel sad I did that.

Harvey Carr

I used to do a little coon hunting. One

day, I saw a coon come up to the top of a hollow tree, about thirty feet up. And he'd come down, and go in the bottom, and go up to the top, and down the tree to the bottom. I thought that was kinda funny. So I thought I'd see what was going on. Went and got a saw and cut the tree down. And what it was, the tree was full of coons—and one coon left over. He'd go to the bottom and push another one out of the top.

I used to do a lot of hunting, back when I was a young fella. Using a muzzle-loading rifle. So I went out one day right in back of the house here and loaded up the old muzzle-loader. And I filled up my pipe and put it in my pocket, in case I wanted a smoke.

So I got back in the woods and saw a beautiful buck, about a ten-pointer. And I pulled up. Just a click; nothing happened. Said to myself, "Gee, that's funny." So I tried it again. I pulled the trigger, and nothing happened. So I leaned the old muzzle-loader up against a tree, and took out my pipe, and lit it up. And all of a sudden, *ker-bang!* It was the goddarndest noise you ever heard.

I guess what happened, I got my

black powder and my tobacco mixed up. It blew my pipe all to pieces, blew most of the hair off the top of my head (and that never did come back), and I've been a little more careful about how I've loaded my muzzle-loader and my pipe since then.

I was up in a hunting camp once. Rainy, sloppy day. And nobody wanted to go hunt except me. So the boys stayed in camp. I was out, and I saw a bear sitting right there looking at me. So I pulled up and I shot. It just nicked him in the ear, just enough to make him mad. Well, he took after me, and I headed for camp. I was just ahead of him. Got to camp and opened the door, but I tripped at the same time and fell down. Well, the bear was going so fast he went right over me and right into the camp. So I jumped up, went outside, and closed the door. Said, "You fellas take care of that one; I'll go and get another one."

We had quite a time up in the hunting camp. Nobody liked to get up early in the morning, so they made me the cook. And I didn't do too bad. Then I discovered that if you put beer in pancake batter it makes them lighter. So

I put beer in, and sure enough they were lighter. So the next time I put in more. And the more I put in, the lighter they'd get. Well, they go so light I had a little trouble keeping them on the griddle. They'd go right up through the chimney and outside. I had to put a guy up on the roof with a landing net to grab them as they come out of the chimney. That didn't work too bad, but they were a little cool once they got them in the camp. Then one of the guys in the camp got to trapshooting the pancakes as they'd come out of the chimney. That didn't spoil the taste too much. It got a little aggravating picking the birdshot out of your pancakes, but they were still good.

I used to do a lot of bow-and-arrow hunting, but I quit that after a while. The old-timers always told me, "Now, if you get lost, just shoot three fast shots and then wait. We will come and get you."

So I got out hunting with bow and arrow and, sure enough, I got lost. I fired three times, and I sat there for *hours*. They never did come and get me, so I quit using the bow and arrow.

Fishing Stories

What would fishing be without a whopper of a story or two? Who hasn't heard allusion to the claim that "The big one got away," even when the topic is other than fishing? I have no idea why fishing and fanciful "lying" seem so inseparable (maybe psychoanalytic explicators know the reason), but their connection is not difficult to find. Our stories begin with personal experience narratives that are either quite plausible or quite cleverly fantastic. Both Otis and Nappy told their accounts as "true story," Nappy prefacing his with those exact words. There is no reason not to accept the assertion as fact—no reason, that is, until one recalls that tall stories begin their masquerade with this ploy. It is enlightening to reflect on what makes some of the following yarns dead giveaways as "lies," and what provides for ambiguity in others.

Otis Schofell

Way back, in 1910, I was up there one day at Sevey's, at that hotel. We had boats, and we used to do trolling. I says to this guy Lee Hepburn, "I guess I might as well go trolling." So we went out. Well, he wanted to row, but he couldn't row because he'd bump his knuckles, he'd keep bumping his knuckles. And I said to myself, "When he gets up to a certain place I'll let him bump his knuckles, while I do some

fishing."

There was a trout brook coming through right there, and there was a great big pool right in front of it. So I changed over oars with him, and I was the one doing the trolling when we came by that spot. And I got a strike. It was an old whopper. I had to hold him in the middle of the river to get away from the bumping and banging of oars (first one oar, and then the other). And the fish came right out of the water, but I landed that fish. I bet it weighed sixteen or eighteen pounds. He was a whopper. Biggest one I ever caught. Well, I dressed it out for him and sent it over to Sevey's hotel for him. After that, when I went over to Sevey's, there was nothing too good for me over there.

Another time, I says, "Are there bullhead around here?" There was a guy about my age who was driving team for Sevey's.

"Oh," he says, "there's Candle Pond down the road a ways. We've got a boat that we do night hunting in." Told me where to find the boat.

So I dug some worms and took fishing tackle and started out. I went down there and found the boat. Well, it was shallow; the water couldn't have been over three or four feet deep. But, by gosh, the bullheads were there. They were small, though; just big enough to clean was all. And I started fishing.

They were biting so goddamned fast I got twenty-one bullheads without ever having to bait up. Well, I filled a twelve-quart milk paid near full and went over to the hotel and dressed them out. Enough so the whole hotel had bullheads to eat for dinner for three or four days!

Nappy LaBarge

This is a true story.

My friend, Frenchie, always wanted to go fishing with me, but I never had the chance to take him. So one day I was at the Grand Union Hotel having a beer and I met Frenchie.

He said, "What are you going to do?"

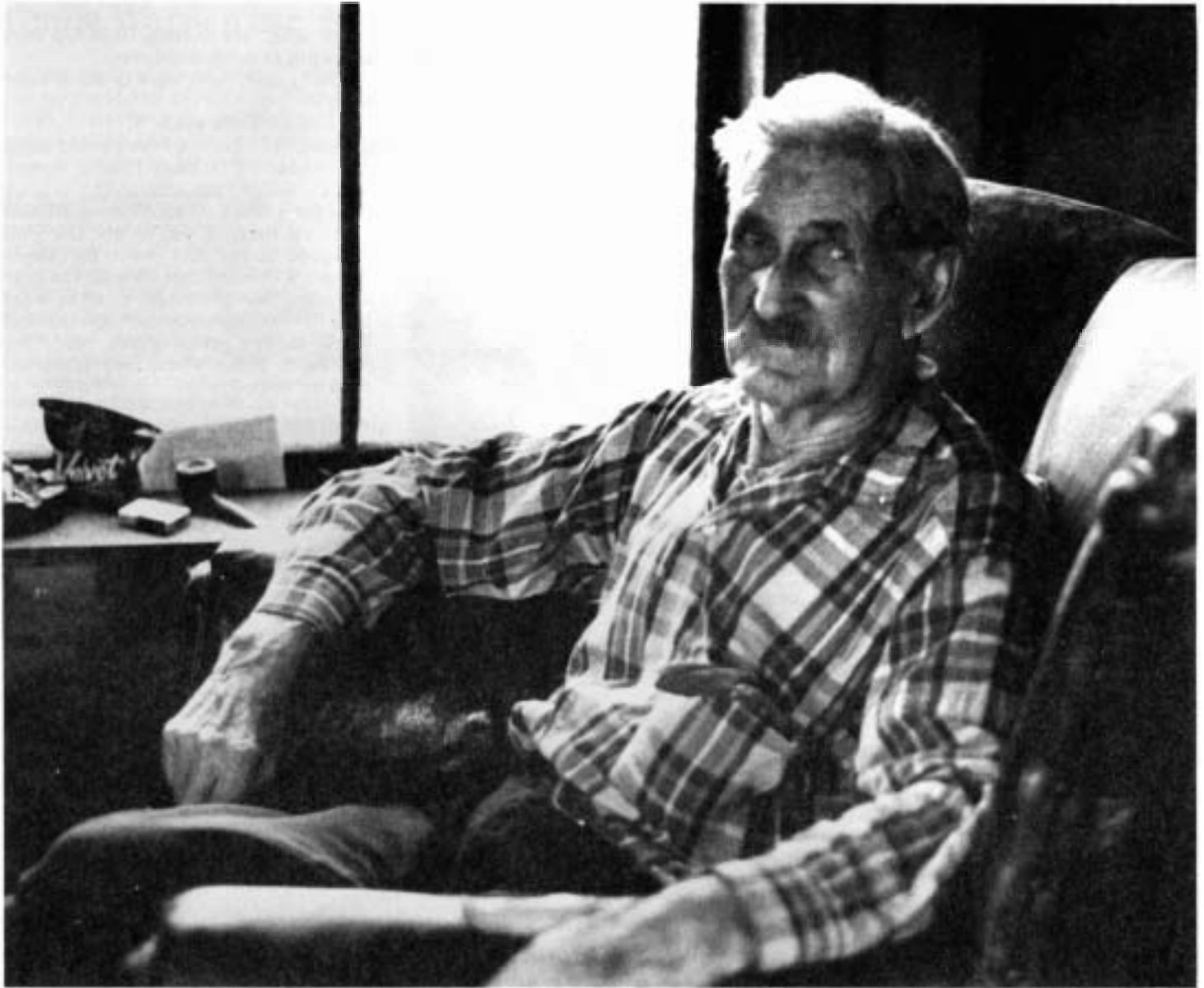
I said, "This afternoon I'm going fishing."

He said, "Can I go with you?"

I said, "Sure."

I took him down to the pond. He had tackle you could skid logs with! Well, I got him all fixed up for catching brook trout. I had a transistor radio. You know, you turn those little radios and you get a better reception. So when I was heading towards the spring hole it was getting good reception. So I told Frenchie, "You listen to that radio, and when you hear it play nice and loud, you be careful. You are going to catch a fish."

Sure enough, when we hit the spring hole, we catch fish. I did it on purpose. I'd go sideways, and the reception



Otis Schofell. (Photograph by Robert Bethke)

wasn't very good, and neither were the fish. Anyway, we got sixteen trout, and we decided that was enough. Went back to the hotel, had a few more beers, and in come some friends. We showed them the trout; they were some nice trout.

And Frenchie says, "I know how Nappy fishes now. He fishes by radio."

This is a fish story. This fellow's name was Thompson, and it so happened that him and I had been fishing a couple of times. We caught a few little bass and that ended the fishing. One day I happened to go fishing at another place twenty-two miles away, and I caught a beautiful bass. About four pounds. Later I happened to meet Thompson in a store.

"Have you been fishing?" he says.

"Oh," I says, "I caught a nice one last night." Right away I knew I had a story; the gears were turning. I said,

"You know that house on Raquette River Drive that has that screen enclosure?"

He said, "Well, that's where I live."

I said, "Right there in front of it there's a dock. And I caught a big bass."

Well, Thompson he was thinking about that. He says, "You know, Nap, I wouldn't believe you until I see some evidence."

It happened that one of my boys hadn't gone to school yet, so I got on the phone and said to him, "You go and get that bass hide that I put in the garbage pail last night. Put it in waxed paper, and put it in the refrigerator." Then I says to Thompson, "I'll have the evidence here tomorrow morning."

I bring in the thing. I says, "Here it is, Thompson." I unfolded it from the waxed paper, and he looked it all

over. It was a nice skin.

He says, "You know, Nappy, I'd call you a damn liar. But you see that marking under that fin? I put that on there three years ago."

One day I was fishing in Blue Mountain Lake. One place in the lake there was a flat rock stuck above the water about three inches, and above that there was a limb. On that rock there was a beechnut. This red squirrel would go out on this limb. And as he would go out, the limb would go down. Each time he would go down a little farther, and eventually it got so he would jump off the limb and onto that rock. He saw that he couldn't get back up because the limb went back up, so he's eating that beechnut. And all of a sudden there came a splash. A big old bass grabbed that red squirrel. All you could see was the tail sticking out of his mouth. And

I says to myself, "I've fished a lot of bass. I've caught them with flies and spoons. But I've never seen one eat a red squirrel." So later I'm goofing off around the lake. And all of a sudden I see a big old bass put another beechnut on that rock.

Harvey Carr

We have some nice fishing up here. The brook trout is one of my favorites. I got one last summer, about a six-inch trout. Of course, up here, we measure them different: that was between the eyes.

Old Sparky, my dog, I took her fishing with me one day. And I was trout fishing there, and I had my jackknife out to cut the line or put another lure

on, or something. And I stuck the knife in a log and went downstream fishing. I looked for the knife. Remembered I didn't have it; left it in a log.

And I said, "Sparky, go back up the creek and get my knife. It's sticking in a log up there."

So away she went and came back with a jackknife. I looked at it.

"No, that isn't my knife; go away and get *my* knife."

Well, she was trying hard anyway. You know, she brought back seven jackknives before she brought *mine*. (And I've got them right here, in my pocket, to prove it!)

Ham Ferry

Two guys come into the bar and sat

at a table.

One said, "We're from Ohio. Up here and want to catch some trout."

"Oh," I said, "you want to catch them today?"

He said, "Yeah, yeah."

I said, "If I knew where I could catch them today I'd be there fishing myself. But I'll tell you something, if you're up here for a week or so. There's a brook right up here, if you've got the time to stand there and wait for them. There's a culvert that crosses the road and runs into the river. But the wash is so full the big trout can't get through there; they're jumping the road. You can catch them when they jump the road up there."



Napoleon LaBarge reading his own poetry. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)

Game Warden Stories

Judging from these stories, wildlife management and regulatory officers in North Country oral tradition are regarded with a measure of ambivalence. Note, for instance, the competing terms of reference: "game protectors," "game wardens," "state men." These men symbolize dictated enforcement of behavior as imposed from beyond woods and water; they are the policemen of the wilderness. Game wardens are depicted as persistently going about their business, but sometimes relentlessly so. Well-meaning, we see them portrayed as sometimes a nuisance, sometimes a threat to be reckoned with. In actuality, of course, there are plenty of Northern New York residents who feel otherwise—including, I bet, many if not all of our narrators. One should bear in mind that stories about encounters with game wardens are, by expectation, oppositional. They are, in part, formulaic contest-of-wits tales. Similar accounts, with different protagonists and antagonists, are commonly found in the oral tradition of other social settings where tensions exist between exercise of desire, and constraint.

Vic Pommerville

We used to go up in this hunting camp with a bunch of fellas, back when I was teenager. And they didn't have no regard for a game warden. My father said, "They're good guys, but you are going to get in trouble, my boy."

I went up one night and was hunting with Shep. He said, "I'll make sure we get some meat this time."

So we went back in. Coming out we each had a half of one deer over our shoulders. Shep saw a light coming down the tote road. He said, "I know who *that* fella is; he ain't going to catch me!"

I said, "What are you going to do?"

He said, "You wait and see. I'll take care of everybody."

Well, he had a 30-30, and he picked right up in the dark and shot that light right out of that man's hand. That man let a scream out of him and away he went down the road.

Shep says, "He won't be back for a while; he won't bother us."

I thought he was crazy. I was scared to death that I was going to get into a killing, or something like that. Well, I got chased and lost him. I got home with the meat and dumped it on the floor in the back kitchen.

I said, "There's some meat for you."

My mother says, "You crazy or something?"

Then I told my dad what happened up there. He said, "You'll never go with



Vic Pommerville playing banjo. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)

that man again. *Never*. I don't want my boys getting implicated in that stuff."

Otis Schofell

Joe Smith was the game protector here years ago. There are a lot of stories I could tell you about him, but I'll tell you this one.

I was staying up at the old Hollywood Hotel. For years I could stay up there anytime I wanted and it never cost me anything, doing odd jobs and guiding fishing parties. Well, I was up there one day and a bunch of guys come up from Canton who owned some nice cottages along the bank of the Jordan River. The Jordan River was a big trout stream in those days, one of the best, and they were going to fish. A party of three or four other guys I knew were up there, too; they were going up the Jordan River to get a mess of trout.

All these guys hadn't been gone long when along came the game protector, Joe Smith, and another fella. Joe was a great friend of mine. They took a boat, and away they went.

Well, getting along towards noon I thought maybe I ought to go and see if I can get a mess of trout to take home for dinner. Got my fishing tackle and a bait box full of worms and rowed up to a point near what we called Gate Dam. The river there fell down to a big elbow, and that was one of my favorite fishing places. I walked down and there were the footprints of fishing boots, where someone had stood and gone on. Said to myself, "I guess they didn't get them

all." So I set right there where that man had walked away and caught *thirteen* nice trout out of that one hole before they quit biting. I waded the river and caught three more nice ones. Then on the further side of the river took two trout that weighed better than a pound apiece. That was eighteen trout, and my basket was full.

I said, "Hell, might just as well walk up as far as Tebo Falls." I tell you, there was plenty to be seen up there! A big boulder and foam bed was at the foot of it. And a man was sitting right up on the ledge, fishing. Why in hell the fish didn't bite his hook I couldn't imagine; I knew damn-well there were trout, but he didn't get a bite or anything. Then I noticed that the rest of his party had built up a bonfire and was getting ready to have a trout dinner. And Joe Smith, the game protector, was actually there fishing, measuring out short trout and laying them all to one side!

I said to myself, "Here it goes." I baited up and threw my line right beside his *Kerplunk*, I got a trout and put it in my basket. Joe didn't say anything to me. This was on a Saturday.

On Monday I walked into the Hollywood Club with my basket, and there was Joe. Grinned at him.

I said, "Hi, Joe. How does it look in your basket, too?" I turned around and gave it a flip. I said, "Look them over, Joe; you won't find any short ones in that basket." Holy Moses, I had seen that basket full of trout!

He said, "You sonofabitch. Where in



Ham Ferry telling Bill Smith about his hat, "taken from the game warden that didn't get away!" (Photograph by Carol Barclay, Barclay Photography)

hell did you get all those trout? I've been through twelve baskets, and if you put them all together haven't got as many as you've got right there."

"Well," I said, "that was something. Them other fellas left them behind in their hurry to get up where the *big* ones were."

Margaret LaPorte

I was a little girl at the lumbercamp with my parents. My mother was cooking. In the evening the men would go out and fish, and my mother would cook their catch. I was walking along, and in the meantime the game protector shows up on the scene, walking. Knowing that kids have big mouths, he figures that he can get some information because none of these men had licenses to fish. So he's walking along with me. Asked, did I know anything about any men fishing?

"Oh, yes," I said, "my mother is going to spend all weekend cooking these fish for these men. They catch them in a river up by Meachem Lake, I think."

The game protector turned to this

man well-known for telling tall tales and says, "Were you one of those men who were fishing?"

He says, "No, I don't fish, but all these other men, they have been doing some fishing."

The game protector was dressed in plain clothes. And he said, "Do you know who I am?"

The man looked at him and said, "I think I know who you are. Do you know who I am?"

Game protector says, "No, I don't."

The man says, "Well, I'm the biggest liar in the whole state of New York, and I can prove it by anybody who knows me."

My nephews used to go up to Whitney Park and they'd jack deer. I was old enough to work, a secretary, and was pestering them I wanted to go along for the ride. My nephew said, "If you are going to go, you are going to hold the light. You are going to hold the light while we do the shooting."

They were in the front seat of the station wagon, one on each side, and I was in the back flashing light at the deer as we went by. I don't remember

how that turned out, but the next day in Tupper Lake I had to attend an inquest to take notes. There was a young trooper there (not from Tupper Lake) and he was being kind of cozy.

So he said to me, "There's nothing much to do around here. What did you do last night? What do you do on Saturday nights?"

I said, "Well, last night I was out jacking with my relatives."

And he looked at me and laughed. But that's exactly what I'd been doing; he just didn't believe the truth when he heard it!

Harvey Carr

I'm pretty much a law-abiding citizen when it comes to hunting and fishing. I did kinda put one over on the game warden this spring, though.

I went trout fishing, and the water was a little high. I got six; you are allowed ten, the limit. So the next day I went back fishing again and the water was down a little bit. They were biting better and I caught twelve. So I started back to the car with them and I met

the game warden.

He said, "How you doing?"

I said, "Good. I got twelve."

He said, "Let's see them." So he counted them and, sure enough I had twelve trout. "Well," he said, "I'm going to have to give you a ticket for that. You see, you are allowed ten trout in one day."

I said, "Look, yesterday I was here and I caught six fish. Today I come back and caught twelve. Six and twelve is eighteen—you owe me two fish."

So he thought about it and then said, "Get your two fish and get the hell out of here."

Then another game warden, I thought I was putting one over on him. But I wasn't really, I guess. It was nice fishing, but there was a "No Fishing" sign there. So I was fishing away and I see the game warden coming. So I took my bait off and put a carrot on and cast it back out. He came along and said, "You're not supposed to be fishing here."

I said, "Well, I am only using a carrot. Isn't that all right?"

He looked and said, "I guess so." And

away he went.

As soon as he was out of sight, I took the carrot off and put the minnow back on and went back to fishing. Later on, back he came. Laying there on the ground were five or six nice trout. He said, "Now, don't tell me you caught them with a carrot."

I said, "No, I caught *you* on that one!"

Ham Ferry

A lot of state men come into the Inn, telling about how the deer need to be killed off. One was sitting there. In come a guy and he had been hunting. Game warden said to me to pass out a big pamphlet, headlines "We Estimate There's Twenty Deer to an Acre in the Adirondacks. They've Got to be Killed Off."

I said to him, "Well, which way did you come down here?" He told me.

I said, "You didn't run into any deer up there on the way down?" He said he hadn't seen any. "Well," I says, "there's twenty-thousand acres between here and there. How many deer do you think should be on that then, with twenty deer to the acre? I've got one hundred

acres here; there should be two thousand. I don't know how I could live here!

They didn't have respect for game wardens around here for years.

I went fishing down in the river—a bunch of us—and along come the game warden, come up through there. Stopped and run right up to me in the boat. Said, "Ham, I'd like to see your license."

I said, "Jesus Christ, I've got it in my pocket here; I don't have time to dig it out."

"Oh," he said, "I'd like to catch you without a license."

I said, "You known goddamn well I've got a license. I've got it in my pocket."

He said, "I want to see it."

So I pulled it out and showed it to him. He said, "Okay." He said to me, "Where'd you get that hat?"

I says, "You really want me to tell you how I got the hat?"

He says, "Yesss, I'd like to know."

I said, "The first game warden I shot, I ruined the hat. But the next one I didn't."

Bootlegging Stories

Prohibition began under federal legislation in 1920 and ended, in New York State, in 1933. The North Country's northern border, together with the St. Lawrence River Valley, were conduits for liquor smuggled to and from Canada. Interrupting the trade was, at best, a hit-or-miss challenge for law enforcement agents. Allan S. Everest, in his book *Rum Across the Border: The Prohibition Era in Northern New York* (1978), provides a fascinating accounting of bootleggers, bootlegging, and some of the reasons why the practice flourished. His treatment is restricted to the U.S.-Canadian border adjacent to Lake Champlain. Our several stories are set in the vicinity of the St. Lawrence River—in three cases, *on* it.

Bill Massey

I knew lots of bootleggers. I remember Henry Hanson bootlegging in Chippewa. I had a little boat. And on the island there where the millionaires' stuff was, there was a big brass searchlight off a steamboat. The light was about a foot in diameter. I screwed that on the back of my little boat, and hooked her up, and I'd go around at night looking at the scenery. This one night I heard Hanson coming across with a load. So I turned the light on, and viewed him, and he threw the whole load overboard. They never found that until maybe twenty years later.



Bill Smith and Fred Selleck examining legendary woodsman Gil Selleck's rifle. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)

He threw it in shallow water—it was only in about ten feet of water. It scared him, I'll tell you.

I'll tell you about a little bootlegging episode of my own. I didn't know too much about bootlegging, and I didn't figure my father was any bootlegger at all. Anyhow, my car was caught on the island one spring. The ice went out

a week before I could get it ashore. And my father said, "Well, we will take it in on the scull just as soon as all the ice goes out."

This one day we loaded it on the scull and headed for Chippewa. That was two miles. When we got down to where we could see the dock, the border patrol was at the dock. Well, I didn't know

it, but my father had put cases of liquor under the front deck of that boat. So he kept right on going, and he said, "Now, when I land, and put the planks up to run her up on the dock, you run the car right into the river." Well, I thought he was crazy; but when he told me to do something, I did it.

So the border patrol was there, helping with the planks, and I ran the car up and off the planks in about ten feet of water. He had also told me to put on a good show for them. So here I was drowning, and blubbing, and blowing bubbles. In the meantime, while they tried to fish me out, he took the boat and went around the point to the boat-house. And they never caught him.

Fred Selleck

I have a story about the bootlegging. They came over through West Pierrepont, in the 1920s. I remember they had these heavy Studebaker touring cars. The heavier they could get, the better, because they could slam them through the rough roads. The revenuers apparently found out they were coming from Star Lake to Pierrepont in order

to get to Massena. Well, they caught these three guys in a car at West Pierrepont. They had a roadblock. And one of the guys got out and run around in back of a store, and they didn't find him until they looked in the hog pen that was there. The guy had crawled in there with the pigs, and they captured him.

Then there was this fella in Potsdam, on Water Street, who had an eating place. But he always had this race horse out in back in a barn. He kept the clear alcohol right in the horse's stall, under the manger. Somebody would come and want to buy a pint, or half-pint, and this guy would go out the back and lift up a board. That horse was very friendly to him, but with a stranger around would kick and bite. No federal man would ever dare to go in there. This was one of the tricks that they used.

Another guy used to drive a Model-T truck and bring cream over from Canada to the Waddington butter factory. They had a ferry across. One day, he said, he had the truck parked on the ferry and he didn't have it blocked very

good. The wind was blowing and there was a big lurch; the Model-T rolled right off the ferry and into the St. Lawrence River. He said, "The worst thing about it was we had two cans in there that had clear alcohol."

Vic Pommerville

We had a guy come down into Aldrich and they were chasing him. Troopers were chasing him. And he got away from them, but one of the bullets hit his finger and took it off. Well, he turned into our place, drove right around behind the house, and the troopers had lost him then. He had whiskey. And my mother did up his finger for him. She said, "You damned fool, it was a wonder you didn't get killed!"

So he says, "Hide the car for a while." He had an old Model-T. That's one time I remember a bootlegger.

Well, one load a brother and I took from Utica. Just one load; it was clear alcohol. Had fifteen gallons. Carried it in tin cans. I only run one load with them, that's all. Then we said we'd better stop this stuff. I was fourteen or fifteen years old then.

French American Stories

In his study of French folk culture in the North Country, cited earlier, Peter C. van Lent makes a strong case for retentive sense of identity among French Canadian descendants in the region. He demonstrates that this self-recognition of "Frenchness" has for

generations clustered around a number of orienting values, and patterns, in the ethnic folklife. Summarized, the factors include mindfulness of, and geographical accessibility to, Quebec soil and lineage roots; respect for handed down tradition with rural shaping and

substance; veneration of immediate and extended family ties; ingroup community continuities; vigorous Roman Catholic faith and religious observance, display of which extends beyond Church and strict orthodoxy; French-language consciousness, nowadays varying from pride of usage to lack of working knowledge or dismissal; and, in the collective heritage, a zest for living manifest publicly in visual display that includes traditional folk arts.

A supplement to van Lent's treatment might take greater note of an element that often surfaces in collections of Old and New World French folklore. In the present instance the gist is that French American storytelling tradition in Northern New York also has a profoundly introspective, even brooding side. There are matters alluded to in oral lore about the *loup-garou*—and in the larger corpus and contexts of folk Catholic storytelling additionally reported from France, Quebec, and old French American settlements beyond the North Country—that convey deep wrestling with matters of faith and fate.

Vic Pommerville

When I was growing up in Aldrich, in the family, we all had our job to do. We all worked together, even us boys. Twelve kids. Our father was pretty religious. The first thing us kids used to do when we come home from school



Margaret LaPorte. (Photograph by Varick Chittenden)



Photograph of logging crew and "brag load" from Woods Lake, 1923. The handmade frame, created by French American woodsman Peter Arsenault, was given to the owner of the American House Hotel in Tupper Lake as payment for food and lodging. (Photograph by Robideau Studios, courtesy of Peter van Lent)

was to sit down and study our catechism. We got *that*; there was no church nearby. Then we got in the woods and water.

My dad was telling me about one time he was driving logs on the Gatineau River, in Quebec. They worked right amongst the Indians. They come to this place and they were going to make camp there. They had an Indian guide. The Indian shook his head and said, "No make camp here. No make camp here. No rest. Can't get no rest. No." Well, they insisted on making the camp there anyway. But do you know, they couldn't get any rest all night long. All kinds of disturbances. One guy went down to get some water, and he came back wilder than hell.

Said, "Somebody threw a stone in my pail!"

The Indian told them the story. There was a murder there. And two Indians had fought over a squaw in that place. They both had drown there. Nobody could ever camp there at night and have any peace after that. Well, from then on, all the log drivers would by-pass the spot.

The French-Canadians are very superstitious sometimes. They believe in the *loup garou*. That's a werewolf. My dad told me a story. He was working in a lumbercamp, and this fella used to go in the woods at night. And they were fifty miles from nowhere; they wondered where he went, this fella. He'd come back after midnight.

The boys started watching him, and a couple of them went out one night and followed him. He went under a log bridge and lay there. He opened his mouth, and all at once a little blue light come right out of his mouth and went right up in the air, circling. Then away he went, right in the direction of the town fifty miles from there. They watched and watched, and finally after two or three hours a blue light come back, circled, and went down under the bridge and into his mouth. He got up and come back to camp. They said, "What in the heck are we going to do with that fella? This time, we will fix him."

So they went up there, and that blue light come out through there again. And what they did, they took off a coat

and threw it over his face. Then they stayed there and watched. And after two or three hours that light come back, circled and circled and circled—kept on circling to get into his mouth, but it couldn't get in. Pretty soon the light started to get dimmer, and dimmer, and dimmer. And then it went out. What happened to the guy, I'm not sure.

They took their wagons and went down to this town, where the drinking places were, and they started talking about this fella. Someone said, "Such and such a night that fella was down here drinking and carousing around with the women."

Lumberjack said, "That's funny; he was up in the woods all that time."

What was happening, his soul was going down there—his spirit was going down there—and was taking his shape in the village. Having a good time and then coming back. That story was told in our family for years by my father, Peter Pommerville.

At one time my faith was pretty low; I didn't believe in the Lord too much. Anyway, I was in the bedroom. And

whether it was a dream or not, I don't know, but it was just as real as could be. I looked up and there was the old Devil himself, standing right by my bed. This actually happened; this is what happened to *me*. Boy, I was scared. If you believe in the Lord at all, the Devil means something if he comes into *your* life. I was just shaking all over, wondering how I was going to get rid of him. I thought, there is only one

thing he can't stand: I'll make the sign of the Cross. I did, and I'm going to tell you, he left in a hurry. That happened, and that restored my faith in the Lord.

Twice this happened to me. I'm not what you'd call an overly religious person. I'm moderately religious: believe in the Lord, and He's been good to me.

Well, I was in the upstairs bedroom, sleeping up there, and I had lost faith. And I woke up, and there he was. The

Devil. I actually fought with him, wrestled with him.

It's deep in my mind—I actually fought with the Devil up there in that room. My wife was sleeping downstairs then, and whether she heard us thrashing around or not up there, I don't know. But I said to the Devil, "You're not going to get me, and that's it!" And I won that night. So *that* restored my faith in the Lord, right there.



Claude Guthrie. (Photograph by Robert Bethke)

Tramp Stories

Allusions to itinerants passing through Adirondack experience are scattered among the hours of tape recordings sampled in the presentation. Listening to those tapes, I was reminded that reference to "tramps" was a subject of dinner table conversation, in a Potsdam household, two decades ago. I wish I had been more attentive to that talk. In folklore inquiry, and especially in fieldwork, attentiveness to what commonly gets talked about should be a primary concern. Sometimes it may take return to Adirondack voices like that of Claude Guthrie, accessible on tape, to reinforce the credo.

Vic Pommerville

When I was young, we lived in Aldrich, right by a railroad track. And tramps used to come through there. I never knew my folks to turn a tramp away; whenever he came to our door, he got something to eat.

I recall one Christmas morning we got up, and this tramp came along. He was hungry and cold. My mother and dad told him to come in. Did he ever put a feed into that fella! My mother made a nice lunch for him to take with him, and my brothers and I took up a collection amongst ourselves—just something for him to go on his way with. He was a pretty happy fella, I'll tell you.

Claude Guthrie

I was brought up in Russell, in that vicinity, until I was twelve years old. That's in the foothills of the Adirondacks. We had a guy there that was a tramp. He used to come through once a year, or twice. And he never done a day's work that I ever knew of. I believe his name was Joe Brainard. They called him "Rovin' Joe."

He was a good singer, and sharp. He could take a deck of cards and pretend

to tell your fortune if you'd give him something to eat or keep him overnight. And if he was going to tell your fortune, before he'd come along here to stay all night, he'd stop somewhere. And he'd say, "You know this man who lives up here in the brown house? Where's he from? What did he used to do? What did some his ancestry do? You know anything about it?"

Well, he'd pick that up. Then he'd come up and approach somebody. Say, "Can I stay all night? I haven't got any money, but I can tell your fortune." People used to believe in that stuff more then than they do today. And I'll tell you one little incident.

He come through to our place, and he'd sing songs. He was an entertainer, and he made up a song. Here's one of the verses:

I've laid my head on a southern bed,
And my feet in the northern snow;
Go where you will, on Porter Hill
There's a home for the Rovin' Joe.

He was telling one time about how he was travelling, and he came to this house and rapped. The guy come to the door and Joe asked him, "I've travelled all day and I'm tired and hungry. I don't have any money."

The guy says, "I can't help you out. I don't have any money; I'm a bachelor here."

Joe says, "Well, I can't expect any service or accommodations. If I can just get a place to lay down on the floor, or anywhere, I'd be happy."

The guy felt kinda sorry for him, so he fixed up a little supper. He had a farm there, and that night they got to visiting a little. "My wife has left me here a few months ago," the guy says.

"Oh, is that so?"

"God, I wish I could get her to come back. I don't think I can keep the payments up and do the work on this here."

"Well, where is she?"

"She's over here about four miles. She left me to live with another man over there."

"You'd like to get her back? I'll see what I can do."

"Well, I went and begged and teased her to come back, but she won't."

"I think I could help. Where's your wife's people live?"

"They live twenty miles from here

now. They were Canadians; she was born in Canada."

"What kind of looking, these people?"

"Well, her father is a heavy-set man. He's short, has sandy hair, sandy complexion, and red whiskers. And her mother is a tall, slender woman."

So, next morning he got his breakfast and took off. He went over and found out where they lived. Went to the door and rapped, and pulled the story on her.

"Can I have something to eat?" No money, but I can tell your fortune?"

This man she was living with was out in the field, or somewhere, so he told her fortune. Turned over two or three cards.

"You weren't born in this country, were you?"

"No!"

"You were born across an ocean, or a river."

"Yes!"

"And your father is heavy-set, sandy haired, and has whiskers. And your mother is a tall, slender woman." Turned over two or three more cards.

"Why, this shows that this man you're living with isn't your husband."

"No, he isn't."

Well, the sum and substance of it was he told her she was going to have a long and drawn out sick spell. And this man she was living with wouldn't provide for her, but her husband would if she'd stay with him. She broke down and cried that if her husband would come after her, she'd go home with him. So then Joe went back the three or four miles afoot. Told the guy, "She wants to come back." So he went over and got her.

Another time, Rovin' Joe came along to this house one night. It was just getting dark. He sees an apple tree there, and a ladder into the apple tree. It was raining. And he went to the door and rapped. It was a miserable night to travel. A lady came to the door, and he asked if he could have something to eat and could stay all night.

She said, "No! My husband isn't here."

"Well, if I could just lay down in the kitchen, on the floor, or anything. I can assure you that I am a *gentleman*. But I don't have any money."

She'd have nothing to do with him. Told him to get out, so he did. He went by that apple tree and he glanced up, and he saw a window in a chamber upstairs. He knew damned well nobody slept up there; pretty low roof. So it was raining, and it got a little darker, and he took the ladder out of the apple tree and laid it up against the house, climbed up, raised the window, and got in upstairs and laid down. Nice and warm. Chimney stove pipe went up there.

She was fluttering away, downstairs. All at once a rap came to the door. She went to the door to unlock it. And he could hear them a-hugging and kissing. They were so tickled to see each other, he thought her husband must have come home. She'd told him he worked in the lumberwoods.

So that man gave her a quart of gin. "Here's something I brought you." She thanked him and put it in the cupboard. He said, "Here's something I got for lunch, too." He had a chicken, all dressed and ready to roast. So she took the chicken and put it in the oven. And they went to bed.

Well, Joe thought he'd go down. He couldn't stay all night, and maybe her husband would be a little more benevolent than she was. But he was comfortable there. So he said, "The hell with it." He hadn't been to bed for more than half-an-hour when another rap came to the door.

She came stomping to the door. Said, "Who is it?!"

"Why, it's *me*. Soaking wet. Let me in."

"What are *you* doing home this time of the week??"

"Something broke down in the woods, and I thought I'd come home for a day or two."

Well, she was real ugly with him; he knew damn well that was her husband. So he come in and she fixed him a little something to eat. She kept fighting with him all the while. Finally, Joe made up his mind that he would go down. So he climbed out the window and went down the ladder and rapped. Her husband came to the door.

Joe said, "I'm wet, I've been travelling, and I'm tired. Can sleep on the

floor anywhere?"

"*Come right in!* What do you do? A lumberjack?"

"No, my health never let me. I do tell fortunes a little."

"By God, you're going to tell my fortune. You're going to tell my fortune, or else you go."

Well, Joe made up his mind he wasn't going to go outdoors. So he told the man to get a deck of cards. And Joe turned over two or three of them.

Said, "You've got a quart of gin in your cupboard."

"No, never bought gin in my life. Not a drinking man."

"You'd better look."

The wife says to Joe, "Now you keep your mouth shut. You get right out of here."

"No," her husband said. "I want to hear some more." He went and opened the cupboard. And there was a quart of gin.

Well, Joe turned over two or three more cards. Said, "If I ain't mistaken, there's a chicken roasting in your oven."

The man looked, and his wife wanted Joe ordered out. Sure enough, there was a chicken in there. Well, she tried to explain that.

He said to Joe, "Tell me some more." Joe turned over two or three more cards. "If I ain't mistaken, there's another man in *your* bedroom."

He went in there, and he pretty quick put the boots right to the guy.

I was small, but I can remember Rovin' Joe coming through and telling some of those yarns. I assume he composed them, probably. I don't think they all happened, actually, but he was a *good* storyteller. And my mother always gave him a good bed.



About the Author:

Robert D. Bethke, Ph.D, is a member of the Department of English faculty at the University of Delaware. His research and teaching focus on regional folklife and folklore in the United States, and American literature. Widely published, Professor Bethke has frequently lectured on North Country folk music and storytelling tradition. He says he relishes fishing and hunting "during breaks from academic routines and professional endeavors as a folklorist."

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