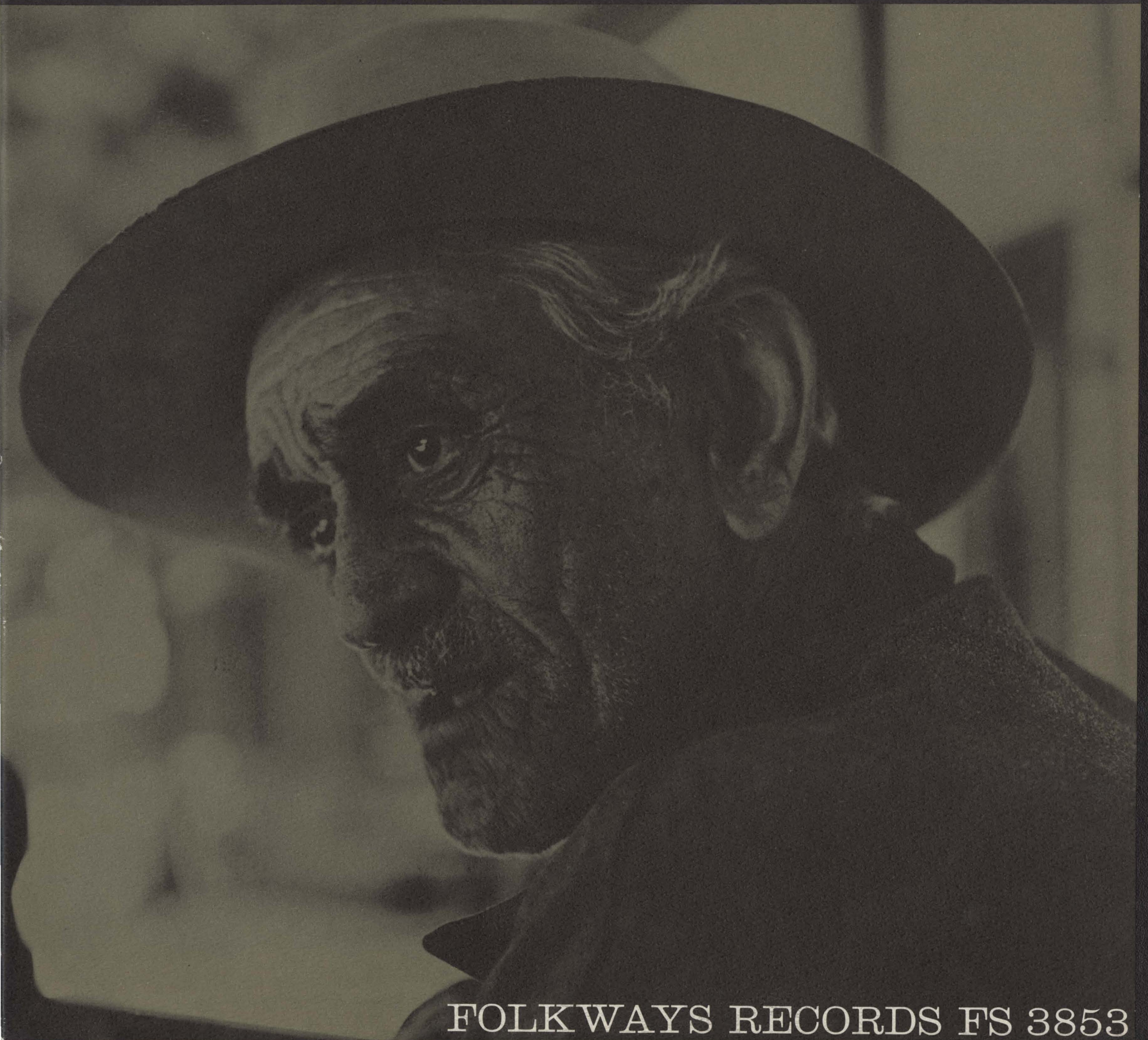


ALL THE HOMESPUN DAYS: A Narrative Poem

With documentary recording, written and read by Norman Studer



FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3853

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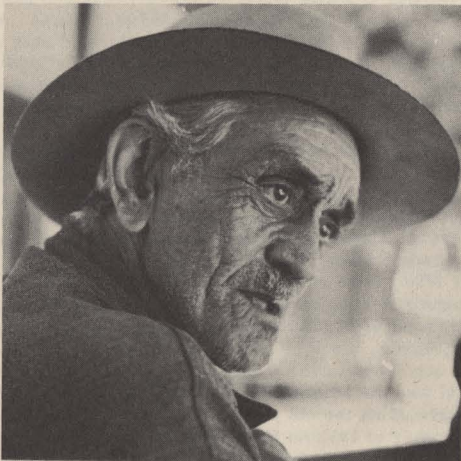
ALL THE HOMESPUN DAYS

by

Norman Studer

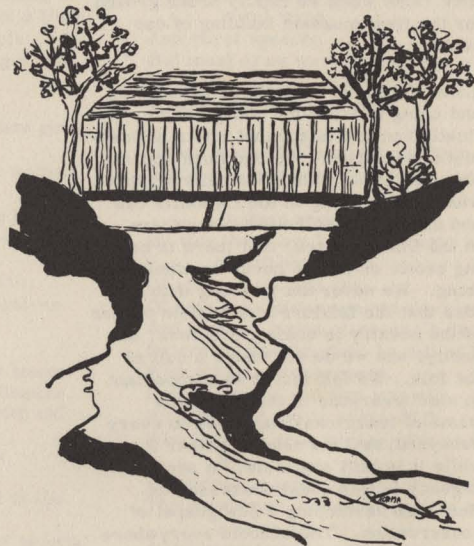
Opening The Door to the Past

This poem was written in memory of an old man of the Catskill back country. It is also a memorial to a project which this old man, and many others like him, made possible when they gave us freely of their songs and stories.



That project started at Camp Woodland over twenty years ago, when we began an endless search for the songs, stories and traditions that cling to the hills and valleys of a particular region. We wanted this material to be saved and used, so it would season the experience of children growing up in a country that has been notoriously profligate of its heritage of history. We went straight to the old people of Catskill villages and country.

The field trip was the technique that brought us to the people. Looking back with no little nostalgia, this was a sizable operation, considered alone in terms of mileage on cars, gasoline burned and tires worn out on impossible mountain roads. Considered in terms of influence on the attitudes of young people who went on these trips, the effect was immense. The generations of campers who rode with us remember those trips more vividly than any other happening at camp. Who could ever forget those voyages of discovery over the remote



Drawing by a Woodland camper of the covered bridge and stream, above the spot where the old forge stood. Drawn on a trip to Dry Brook with Mike Todd.

Peekamoose Road, through Sundown, miles of road without houses! Or the trip up Dry Brook and over Balsam's shoulder to Millbrook, and then down past the endless succession of exquisite little waterfalls and swirling potholes. There was always the long suspense of the search, the backing and turning, the getting lost and finding nobody home, and then the sudden coming upon a farmhouse and an old couple waiting on the porch. We met with shyness, playful evasion, but never with hostility. Patience and fortitude was called for. I remember the many trips and the polite fencing before the gingery old Etson Van Wagner--Catskill Voltaire--began to yield up his stories, songs and spicy philosophy. I remember the warm, reminiscent Jerry Van Kleeck and his lectures on the woodpile, pert, hospitable Celia Kelder, earthy Mary Every and many others. What a wonderful array of personalities for young folks to know and savor.

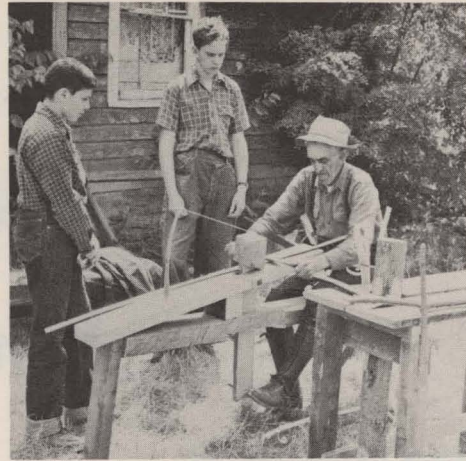
As we accumulated stories, legends, square dance calls, ditties and come-all-ye's, and a variety of work implements from a husking peg to a dog treadmill,

a new task loomed ahead. We began to realize that this growing amount of material carried an obligation to preserve it for future generations. That is why we began to take a musicologist along on the station wagon. When the tape recorder was invented our job became easier and the collection grew even more rapidly. We began to classify and catalogue. Early in the project we developed the Folk Festival of the Catskills, as a simple and unpretentious gathering together of people who had learned music traditionally and enjoyed sharing it with others. Especially sharing it with children. Our project always involved the youngest and the oldest. And as the material piled up we began to dream of a comprehensive folk arts center where everything could be kept and used. The time came when we finally broke ground for the first museum building of our center.

This process of collecting, preserving and using folklore for young people finally became integrated into a philosophy of education. We had faith that our idea was exportable. We believed that what we are doing in the Catskills can and should be duplicated everywhere in the United States, that there is nothing exotic or unique about the whole thing. We never did go along with the idea that the folklore of a remote corner of the country is quaint, precious, or pretty, and we do not foster a cult of the folk. We felt that it was important to alert everyone to the enormous waste of traditional materials in every backyard, and the need to gather it while it is still available. A sense of urgency in this quest possessed us. Here was developing a new gospel of conservation. The schools everywhere could become vast reservoirs of folklore, constantly augmented by new material gathered by students and teachers from old people from a hundred ethnic, religious, cultural backgrounds. Here is a dynamic, creative role for the school. Here is the ground being turned for a new regionalism, a regionalism deeply rooted in the spirit of place.

In this process of conserving the folk tradition, old people become elevated to a new status denied them heretofore in the modern world. They became people with a contribution to make, valuable individuals, rather than obsolescent human machines pushed off in a corner. This restoration of old people to a role of dignity and importance, still accorded them in other cultures, was also a benefit to young people, since we never do an injustice without harming everyone involved. Youngsters are more completely human if they can be immunized from the infantilism of a culture which teaches that the present moment is everything, that the past is old hat and that there is no wisdom in old people.

To prove to ourselves the validity of our idea about the use of folklore in schools we have been carrying on a parallel



experiment in New York City. Downtown Community School is located in lower Manhattan, and its children come from many backgrounds, as one would expect at the world's crossroads. Here we use folklore in a variety of ways, through the elementary and junior high school years. Here, grandfathers and grandmothers bring to the young people a variety of songs and stories that have their roots in the four corners of the world. Here, as in the Catskills, in ways appropriate to a school curriculum, folklore is proving a marvellous bridge between people.

In order to experiment effectively with the use of folklore in schools and at camp it is important to define and clarify purposes. This I have tried to do several times, without much success. And when Mike Todd died in the spring of 1960 I tried again, and wove into my memorial something of the spirit of our project of folklore use. This was inevitable, since he was deeply involved in our project over a number of years, and was the most completely representative of all the old people. In the summer of 1953 he first came to spend the summer months at camp, and every summer up to his death he was involved with us to some degree. His was a many-sided personality, a veritable encyclopedia of Catskill folklore. I have for instance an amazing tape of a long morning of rambling reminiscences between him and Will Van de Mark, with the tape recorder running all the while, counselors and campers coming and going, and long, easy pauses between remarks. All through his years with us he seemed to have a deep consciousness of his mission, and he emptied himself of memories. At the end of the summer of 1958 he sat down with me and for two days dictated into a tape recorder the story of his life. Between us was a mutual feeling that this was close to the end. When I wrote the poem I tried to express what Mike Todd had meant to us all, and I also wanted to express our feelings for the others--- George Edwards, Orson Slack, Latius Every, Mary Scott, and all the rest. They opened the door to the past, and let us see and feel what had been there.

Norman Studer



The central building of the Catskill Folklore Center. Located on a tract of land belonging to Camp Woodland, this center will contain exhibits, work tools, tape recording, photographs and other materials relating to the pioneer days in the Catskill region.

ALL THE HOMESPUN DAYS

As when the leaves turn on a frosty night
And trees stand scarlet in the morning
sun,
Children, seeing sudden flames upon the
hills
Cry out that summer's gone;
So it was when this oldman died
And earth returned to earth once more;
We rose, by habit, with the day
To learn that in the night a change had
come
An epoch and a person passed away---
The world would never be the same,
For all the homespun days lay buried in
an old man's grave.

I'm from a long line of Todds. He dates
back five generations from me. The
first Todd was Samuel, a soldier in the
revolution. He had twelve sons. They
all had families, and that started a lot
of Todds in Dry Brook.

The first thing I remember is my
grandfather carrying me on his back
up to Aunt Nancy Seeger's. She was
his sister. On the way up he had a
big umbrel. There came up a shower.
Well, I can remember hearin' the rain-
fall rattlin on that umbrel. And that
was early in summer. I'd be three
years old in September. And that was
my first remembrance of anything--
to hear that rain fall on that umbrel.

Well, then, after that I was going up
the same place with my mother.
Along toward fall -- beechnut time--
and there was a drove of pigs coming
out of the woods and they scairt me
about to death, and I run and squealed
and yelled. She chased me up and
cuffed my ears for running away from
her when she told me to stop.

My father and mother treated me aw-
ful good, but they was a little rigid.
I had to mind some. If they told you

to do so and so, that was it. No
guesswork about it.

In the year of '88 Uncle Murph Seeger
took violently sick with pneumonia and
my mother and Betsy Brunson--a neigh-
bor woman--they helped take care of
him and they both got it and they both
died. One died the day after the other.

My father and I went to live in a log
cabin up Dry Brook, till he went off
to Chenango County looking for work.
From then on, I took care of myself.

These hands are quiet now,
They're hands that learned to work with
tools no longer known.
Who taps a frow or swings a flail or
peels the bark with spud?
Who lays a wall of stone or hetchels
flax?
Those hands are quiet now,
And all the homespun days are buried
in an old man's grave.

There's a way to use a tool, a knack to
be learned;
Knowing how, he used to say, is a big
start for any job.
He'd watch the old folks work and he'd
struggle for their twist of wrist,
And strain and sweat until it came;
And with it came a certain joy:
To look upon a straight-hewn beam,
Light up a fireplace that draws,
Or heft a nicely whittled scoop or yoke.

But there's more to it than skillful
hands
And eyes that surely guide the stroke
of axe
And sweep of draw shave;

There's a mind that sees, remembers,
uses all it knows,
The horse sense that tells you what
to do and when.

He caught the homespun science from
the old folk's talk:

The meaning of the haze on mountain
tops,
The kind of wind that brings the rain,
The silver leaf to cure the poison ivy,
The way to hold the stick,
For water witching;

The sign on trees and bushes that
shows
Where deer are used to graze on
autumn afternoons.
And runways where you'll surely find
the bear.

We raised flax and I knew the trade from
a to z. My great grandmother used to
spin flax in our house. Nights us kids
used to have to pick wool, pick it up
loose and git it ready for the carding
mill.

I used to split shingles at an early age.
My father taught me.

I remember the tannery at Margaretville,
where my father took hides for our boots.
George Messenger used to tan leather on
the half.

I'd go to the blacksmith shop in Margaret-
ville and watch the blacksmith work. I'd
get some crackers and cheese for my
meal and sit there all day. Sit and
watch him sharpen tools from the quar-
ries, and that's the way I learned to
temper steel and learned to heat it and
work it.

My father taught me to lay stone. He'd
lay a nice wall, and liked that work
best of all. He had a patent on laying
a fireplace, and never failed to have
one that would draw. He also trained
steers. He lowed if you wanted to
train an animal you mustn't hurt him.
He pushed and pulled, and tried not
to learn 'em too much at once, and
learn only one thing a little, so they
knowed what he was talkin' about.

He doctored animals. I learned a lot
from him. I had a book I'd study and
used the dictionary to find out words.

I learned the hull cheese from my
father. Well, it was kinda natural
for me. I ketched on a lot.

What restless dreams will drive a lad
Who lives alone in an old log house,
Way up in Dry Brook hollow?

There's not much left for young folks
here,
Where all the virgin trees were
slaughtered long ago,
And with the forests gone, there's
little left.
You'll find the hemlock timber rotting
on the slopes,
The bark stripped off to feed the
tanneries
And millions of feet of lumber
abandoned
To fire fires and slow decay.

He heard the old folks tell of tanneries
In every hollow:

Ten booming years of tanning hides
Was all that any Catskill valley had,

Then came the aftermath:
That awful, flaming sky that crowned
the ridges,
The fires that licked the wasted timber
up
And left the blackened slope with naked
rocks.

There's not much left for young folks
here
Where ruthless hunters slaughtered
right and left
For fifty years or more.

He heard the old folks tell
Of passenger pigeons that blackened
skies
And roosted by the millions
Along the Neversink.
Not one bird was left.

There's not much hope for young folks
here,
Where sportsmen's clubs are buying
up the pilfered acres,
And mile on mile of mountain road
and stream
Flaunts the warning signs:
No hunting here....
No fishing here....
Trespassers will be prosecuted....

Money was scarce. I sold John Blish
a lot of game. He sold it to a million-
aire, took all the trout I could catch
and all the partridges and rabbits.
There weren't much in the way of
game laws, not at that time. That
was before the game protectors.

The two years I stayed in that log house
up Dry Brook alone, I didn't do nothing
else but fish. Poached it all the while.
Kept it up for two seasons and a half.
I trespassed on the Gould's in Dry
Brook, also on the Balsam Lake Club,
and on the Millbrook club, and over on
the West Branch of the Neversink. A
long way to go. I could run pretty good,
and I'd get away. I always fished at
night, you know. I come so awful close
to getting caught that it wasn't too much
fun in it.

What restless urge will drive a lad
To leave his home for days on end
And trudge through lonely woods
When icy winds rip through the
leafless trees
On rocky ledges,
To follow tracks across the mountain
ridges
And match his mind against the crafty
bear's,
Until the chase must end in blood and
death.

I was born with an interest in hunting,
I guess. I remember when I was a kid,
the first bear I seen. My Uncle Frank
Todd killed it. He hung it up in the
old sawmill. I just stood and looked at
it for a half hour. I used to go with
old Hiram Graham when he came up the
holler, go fishin' with him jist to get
him to tell bear stories.

My longest bear hunt was started on the
16th of December, and three of us--
Sherwood Samuels, Jim Yorks and my-
self--followed that bear twenty days.

We struck the bear on the divide between
the Beaverkill and the Willowemoc. He
had a hole all fixed up for wintering...
He run right back, backtracked, and
went right off down the Beaverkill. We
raced him twice down there and back
and played all kinds of tricks and tried
to get ahead of him on the run and he'd
dodge every time. More snow came
and blocked the tracks--a young blizzard.

We ran into another gang of hunters and
one of them fellers thought he was quite
slick. They tried to get in ahead of us.
I know the country pretty well, if I do
say so, and I was right down in my old
stamping ground by now.

The day I caught up with the bear I see
where he broke off a balsam bush
about an inch and a half thick and
dragged it into the hollow log to lay on.
About the time I discovered him where
he was, I turned around to see his head
coming out of there and he got his body
out. Then I shot him. The first shot
put a bullet through the side of his heart.

What restless dream will drive a lad
From job to job
Across the mountains, down the
Beaverkill,
On, to the Pennsylvania line,
Sawing wood, laying walls,
Butchering hogs,
Logging, rafting,
Restless...

I was on a log drive in Pennsylvania,
driving logs down the creek 25 miles
--twelve of us. We had two million
feet of small pine peeled, some hem-
lock peeled--all wet to the neck in
icy water all day and night sometimes.
An awful job. It took us about a month
to get the two million feet of timber
20 to 25 miles down to the river.
We'd walk along the bank and some-
times the logs'd get jammed and we'd
have to unjam them. That was the
dangerous part of it. It took an ex-
perienced feller to do that. The
feller'd have to get on the jam and
loosen the key log, then jump off and
go ahead of it, get out of the river.
That was quite a rugged business.
You'd have to swim out fore the logs'd
ketch you.

Down there in Pennsylvania I took to
rafting for a while. We'd run the
rafts down the Delaware River in the
spring freshets. We'd float the logs
clear through to Bordentown. Well, I
was on the back end of the raft. A new
man would go behind first--that was
easier. Rit Apply was an old steerman,
and I went with him. He was a hard
man to work under. He'd pull you to
death. He worked on the river all his
life and he was tough himself, and he
thought everybody else was. We had
a pretty tough racket--fight some, and
so on. I got my eyes blackened once.

I was planning to marry Nancy Tyler, a
nice girl. I worked for her grandfather.
He had a sawmill, a water mill, and a
lake. He was an old man. His wife died
and Nancy kept house for him. Her and
I was engaged to be married in about a
month and she had a pet horse. He got
the blind staggers, going down that
dugway road to Callicoon, and he went

over the bank and killed her. About
a month before we was going to be
married.

I stayed about two months and I was about
half crazy--kept getting worse. The old
man was bound I was going to stay. I
sawed up all the timber he had in the
yard. One morning I buckled up my goods
in a knapsack and I walked down to
Callicoon. I had a little money, a few
dollars. I got a drink or two at Brink
Pennypackers. It was Sunday and he let
me have a pint. I pulled right back the
way I went, on foot, walked back to Dry
Brook.

There came a day when men in uniform

Went up the valleys, over ridges, armed
with rod and chain,
Put their bench mark on the rocks,
Drew a line to show where land is owned
by State,
Where forest trees may stand forever
And wanton men may never waste the
woods,
May never slaughter game or trees
beyond the law.
Now trees again may grow to lofty
height
On Peekamoose and Slide and
Wittenberg,
And all the world may come and use
the shade.

Unhampered now the saplings march
Across the upland fields,
And start a hundred forests,
In places where the tired men and
women lugged the rocks
With blistered hands,
And won themselves a farm.

Now maple, beech and poplar fill the
pasture lands and orchards,
Crowding rows of unkempt apple trees,
Jostling them and blotting out their sun,
Till only old men know that once the
plow ran here.

Now shaggy houses tip and sag like
drunken men,
Lonely and lost in the darkening woods,
And up each hollow where the town road
peters out
A lilac bush stands watch on gaping
cellarway,
And drops its purple spray into the
spring.

The wilderness has come again to claim
its own,
A people's wilderness belonging to the
State---
Bringing new folk into the empty
hollows,
Into the campsites, with knapsacks and
skillets.
Filling hunting lodges and motels
With city folk, escaping from the smell
of gasoline
And homeward rush on BMT.

Now children file on shady trails on
August days
And fill the quiet slopes with eager
cries,
Where oxen dragged the sleds of hemlock
bark
And peelers slaved with spud and axe
And cursed the gnats.

The wilderness has come again to

claim its own
And all the world may use the shade.

I got a chance when I came back to Dry
Brook to go down to the East Branch in
the Fall, sharpen the tools and help the
District Ranger build his first tower.
I done the work and we got through the
5th of October.

I went up Balsam Mountain with a pack-
load of stuff, a blanket and some food
and an old house skeleton key and got
into the shanty. Got me some wood and
stayed there. So I was appointed Fire
Observer on Balsam Mountain.

I was up Balsam Mountain in some
pretty dangerous fire weather. Supposed
to mail out a form every week. One went
to the District Ranger and one to the
Albany office, on wind and weather, and
the distance you could see and this and
that and the other. Fill out a form and
if you see a fire, what time you reported
it and who you reported it to and when the
smoke ceased. There was a time when I
was there as much as three or four weeks
in the spring when the dangerous fire
weather was and never was off the moun-
tain. Somebody would bring my grub to
me and every Sunday they'd come with a
load. Sometimes they'd miss fire and
they didn't fetch the food. Then George
Lambert's boy brought me a couple of
loaves of homemade bread and I had to
dig leeks and eat leeks and bread.

In 1947 I was 70 years old. Had been
on the tower 29 years. I had to retire,
was getting so I wasn't able to carry
my grub on the mountain, tired me out.
It took me a half day to git up, and it
was gitting a little tough. I got a little
pension from the State, so I could live.
I trapped a little, honeyed a little, and
somehow made a living.

With him the homespun days are gone

When Todds and Fairbairns gathered
in barns
To husk each neighbor's corn or peel
the apples;
And end the job with dancing through
the night
That lasted till the old folks had to
stop
To get the breakfast ready.

Gone are the barn raisings,
The row of men who lifted up the frame
At the signal of the boss carpenter;
They had to heave and strain as one,
For if a man should falter
The frame would fall and crush an arm
or leg.
You always had a dance when the floor
was down,
Even if it rained and someone held an
umbrella
Over the fiddle.

Gone the quilting bees and bobsled rides,
The skimmeltions, where shotguns went
off

Under the bridegroom's window,
And dynamite was hung on washlines.

I first became interested in music very
young. I played a Jews harp as quick
as I got my teeth. I played a mouth
organ when I was nine year's old. My

father was a pretty good violinist.
He played a guitar some too.

Once I worked at Alder Lake. There
was a colored fellow there. Named
George Combat. He played a banjo
and it sounded good. I learned to play
the banjo and sing some songs, and
when we parted from the job I could
pick the banjo pretty good, could play
three or four tunes and could sing two
or three songs.

A workman on the Gould place built a
house and got 25 Eytalians to work
there. One of them was a great ac-
cordion player and I learned an Eye-
talian tune I played on the mouth organ.
There was one of them played the
bones with one hand, right handy. I
took a notion to it and kept looking at
his, after a while I rattled em a little.
He gave me a set of hard maple. I
got so I rattled with him and got the
time.

With him the homespun days are gone,
Story telling days,
Days when lonesome men and women
came
From lonesome houses up the hollow
To buy some sugar at the general
store
And trade their hoops for calico,
But most of all to warm themselves
with talk.

He served well his apprentice hours
With older story tellers and singers,
Down at Dry Brook, fishing with old
Hiram Graham,
And catching more than trout.

He sat with men who gathered in the
evening
On a polished bench in front of Moot's
General Store
And listened with his sharp young ears
While men performed heroic deeds of
work and play---
Cut four foot lengths of timber a while,
Then rafted logs and quarried bluestone,
And finally told each other stories so
tall
You'd have to put on hinges to let the
moon go by.

We found him old and full of tales and
songs
In his cabin on the side of Balsam
Mountain,
Watching the fire flicker on the wall;
And when he sang for us
A song some Todd had brought to Dry
Brook
Many years ago,
The patterns on the wall
Became an ancient Scottish maiden,
Tending her sheep
On the Hills of Glenshee....

But who has time for an old man's
story?
Who'll give ear to a song?
Who want to hear some yarns
That won't detain you long?

Where's the bench that stood
In front of the general store?
Who has time to sit there,
What's an old man for?

The mouth organ is covered with dust,
The banjo lacks a string,

And where are the feet for a dance?
Where is the voice to sing?

He came to camp to visit us,
This gnarled woodsman in his uniform of
olive green
And tight puttees,
And all was very new to him.
On opening day he gravely watched the
passing show
Of boys and girls from city streets and
boulevards,
Dark and light-skinned youth together,
Filing gaily from the bus
With duffel bags and tennis gear
And minds and hearts still tuned to city
time.

Some wondered what this wizened fellow
did at camp
And cracked their quiet little jokes on
rural ways
And rural speech;
But most of us were looking for a bridge
To any person on this earth
Where anyone may cross.

He sat at the table at supper time
While idle words would ripple overhead,
Of beatnik verse and atom tests and
Dodger scores;
He was there but he had brought his own
world along,
Of stony earth and sky,
Of hemlock spires against the blue,
And endless round of season's change.
Secure in what he was, he felt at home
With all this strangeness.
For he was he and that was all.
And he could smile at the PhD,
Who tried to split the log with wedge and
maul,
Too proud in mind to ask for help:
The woodsman smiled to see the wedge
bounce up
And frustrate the counselor.

He could bide his time and find a lad
And show just how it's done---
How you place the wedge in tiny seams
And tap it gently, and then the log will
fall apart.

He came to camp and made his place
And shared with us his homespun days;
He'd sit and talk with boys and girls
Who followed him until he dropped
Some bits of woodsy wisdom in their laps,
Told them what to take on hikes,
How to walk in woods with loaded packs,
Where to light a fire on dryest days,
And what to do if you are lost.

He'd show some eager youngster how to
make a pair of bones;
Then on a Friday night he'd be up there
On the platform, beside the fiddlers and
callers,
Showing the youngster how to rattle them
and keep time.

The children came to Dry Brook with
questions in their eyes;
He reads for them the answers written
on the rocks and sand
And swiftly running stream.

Someone laid these rocks
For this was once a dam.
Here stood the hammer, here the forge,
And here the millrace ran.

Who built this iron works
Way back here, in olden days?

The Lord only knows.

The children come to Dry Brook with
questions in their eyes;
He reads for them the answer written
on the rocks and sand
And swiftly running stream.

Look closely beside this creek
These rocks were laid by men
And here you'll find a road,
Just faintly visible.

Mark it well.
That's the old Tappan Road that ran
From the Hudson westward.
Forgotten now, and overgrown
And mostly washed away.

The children came to Dry Brook with
questions in their eyes,
An old man led them up a trail into the
woods,
Back, back into the days
That will never be again.

Then one day the children left
With noisy farewells and knapsacks full
of memories;
In a moment the woods were ghostly
still
And all the bunks were hollow shells.
Now you heard the locusts in the trees,
When everyone was gone.

The old man looked up into the faded
leaves and sighed,
Shook his head, and said

I don't like this season anymore. I used
to like the fall colors and I liked to see
the snow come. It couldn't come too
quick in the fall, because I wanted to get
out in the woods and hunt for something
--and bear hunting was my first choice.
I hate to see the cold weather come on.
I'm afraid I'll winterkill.

Each spring we found him there in Dry
Brook,
Waiting for camp to open;
Until one June he wasn't there.
Up Ryder Hollow, at the Dave Todd place
They told us he had gone
To be cared for in a nursing home
Along the Hudson River.
Finally a letter came:

Dear Friend:

I'm here in a home, and it's like a prison.
It's the worst place I ever was in. I've
been pretty sick, a stitch in my back and
that awful cough. But now I'm better,
and I'd like to get back to camp this sum-
mer. I can split a hoop or shave a
shingle yet. I'd like to help build that
museum.

I'd like to come three days. You have to
get me back on time, though, or they'll
take away my privileges.

Make one time a Friday night, for a
square dance. I'd like to see the young
folks dance once more, and chat with
my good friends, Ernie Sager, John Coss
and George Van Kleeck.

The second time, I'll come and show the
campers how to build a bear pen for the
museum. I have built about a dozen in
my early life. I can give you the size,
but that is not all there is to it... It's
a very keen job and a good man with an
axe and saw can put one together in a day.

For the third visit come and get me for
the big doings in the flats. I can tell

you a few good fiddlers you should in-
vite. Maybe I'll have wind for a song
or two myself.

This may be my last. You never can tell.

Merwin S. Todd,
has been bear hunter.

Now he is in the home,
Coughing away the inching hours,
Marking the days upon his calendar,
Until the morning came at last,
When he could wear again his uniform
of olive green
And draw puttees upon his skinny legs,
Wrap his harmonica and bones in an
old newspaper,
And come again to camp.

The boys and girls would gather round,
And quickly pass the word that Mike was
back;
That night the light of campfire
Shadowed his rugged face,
As he told one last yarn of bears and
hunters,
Rehearsed in mind for this occasion.
They listened quietly and with love
To the toothless, mumbled tale
That few could understand
For all his coughing.
And when the tale was told
A youngster walked unbid
To where the fire played upon the bush
And sang a song he taught them.

And now he knew for sure at last
That an old man's song need never die:
And there was peace in knowing this
And strength to walk into the dark.

That winter a letter came from him,

It was the last:

Dear Friend:

Just a few lines to let you know that I
got away from the home. And maybe
I'm not the happiest old cuss you ever
knew. When they asked me how I got
the pull of the Welfare Commissioner,
I told them that a bear hunter never
told any tales out of school. I wouldn't
tell 'em nothing. I am here at Lyman
Todd's place. On Todd Mountain Road,
one mile and 3/10 from the Dry Brook
church.

Last winter was a hard one,
So the people say;
The deer came down to Dry Brook
And farmers fed them hay.

Last winter was a hard one,
A hard one so they say,
An old man turned to Dry Brook
Upon a freezing day.

Last winter was a hard one,
The snow fell all the day,
How he escaped his prison
He would never say.

Last winter was a hard one
In Dry Brook, so they say,
He looked out on the mountain---
As on his bed he lay.

Last winter was a hard one,
The blizzard raged all day;
Icy fingers in the farmhouse
Where he had come to stay.

Last winter was a hard one,
So the people say;
He looked his last on Dry Brook
When Spring was on the way.

We rose that day to learn a change had
come,
And overnight an epoch and a person
passed away;
The world would never be the same.
Our stubborn minds refused to face
the fact,
And all that day we saw him in the camp,
A phantom dressed in olive green who
walked the woods
To tell the campers where to notch the
oak
To fell it where the tree should fall;
We knew we saw him in the social hall,
Chatting with the fiddlers,
While the dancers caught their breath;
Telling stories with a roguish twinkle,
Of crafty bears and bumbling hunters.

Our stubborn minds refused to let him
go,
And kept the image in our eye;
For now we knew that part of him
Would always stay where he had been.

Where he has been the axe blade falls
with surer stroke,
The crosscut slides more squarely
through the log,
And youthful woodsmen walk with
keener sense
And read what Nature wrote on stone
and tree.

Where he has walked the youth will
always see
A view that's more than tree and sky,
A path that's more than hiking trial
Because we now can hear the panting
ox
Draw sled of bark to Snyder's tannery.

We're never alone as we walk in the
woods;
Around us are folks of yesterdays,
Like misty ghosts on the mountain
trails
Struggling still to build a land.

Where he has played his homespun tunes
and rattled bones
To tease the dancing feet out on the
floor,
The music will not die now that he's
gone;
Just let the caller name a tune
And sets will sashay, swing and allemande;
We'll feel again as neighbors felt;
For he has helped us find that link
Which binds us to our brothers
And makes us care
For what becomes of others.

And I am sure that in the years-to-be
The boys and girls he taught to work and
play
Will raise some mighty barns of friendship
in the world
And dance upon some new-laid floors.

Norman Studer is an educator and folklor-
ist. He has been involved in the founding
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