

Migration to Michigan: An Introduction to the State's Folklife

by Laurie Kay Sommers

Throughout Michigan's history those who migrated to the state have been drawn by — or themselves have introduced — fishing, trapping, mining, lumbering, farming, and automobile manufacturing. The lore of such occupations, combined with the rich ethnic heritage of those who built Michigan, form the essence of the state's traditional culture.

The French explorers, missionaries, and fur traders who traversed the Great Lakes beginning in the 17th century were the first Europeans to view the vast expanses of water and virgin forest that became the state of Michigan in 1837. The twin peninsulas had long been inhabited by Native Americans who struggled to maintain their way of life in the face of increasing European encroachment. By the early 1800s they had been forced to cede almost all their tribal lands, and of the various tribes that once inhabited the region only the Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Ojibway (Chippewa) remained, living primarily on reservations or in larger cities. The reservation Indians in particular have preserved or revived traditional crafts that utilize natural materials such as porcupine quills, black ash splints, and birchbark. They also maintain some of the state's oldest skills: fishing, trapping, and techniques for smoking meat and fish.

Trapping and fishing became the earliest occupations for Europeans as well. French and British fur traders supplied the courts of Europe with luxurious New World pelts in the decades prior to statehood. Contemporary trappers have different markets, but they are the heirs to the original hardy backwoodsmen. In addition to expertise with setting traps and skinning and stretching hides, many trappers are masters of recipes requiring muskrat, raccoon, turtle, venison, and other game. "Mushrat," once linked exclusively with those of French ancestry, has emerged as a regional foodway and identity symbol for southeastern lower Michigan where it is prepared both in the home and for public dinners.

Commercial fishing on the Great Lakes attracted men from the eastern seaboard and Europe who braved the unpredictable moods of the largest freshwater lakes in the world to haul in yearly catches of whitefish, perch, and lake trout. Today, a small core of seasoned sailors, still plying the waters of Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Erie, are steeped in the lore of the "Big Lakes." The commercial fisherman's livelihood depends on an intimate knowledge of the lakes themselves, the habits of fish, the techniques of constructing and repairing gear, the ability to modify and in some cases build steel-framed fishing boats (the descendants of earlier wooden vessels), and the skills of packing and filleting with speed.

Inland river culture, on the other hand, is the domain of experi-

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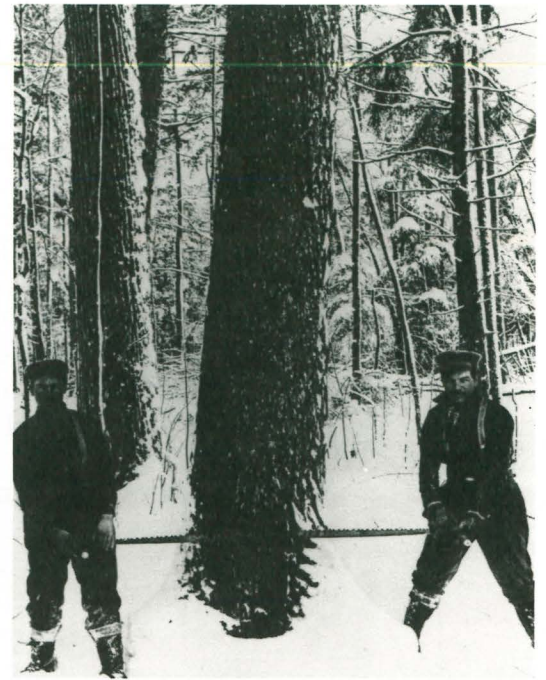
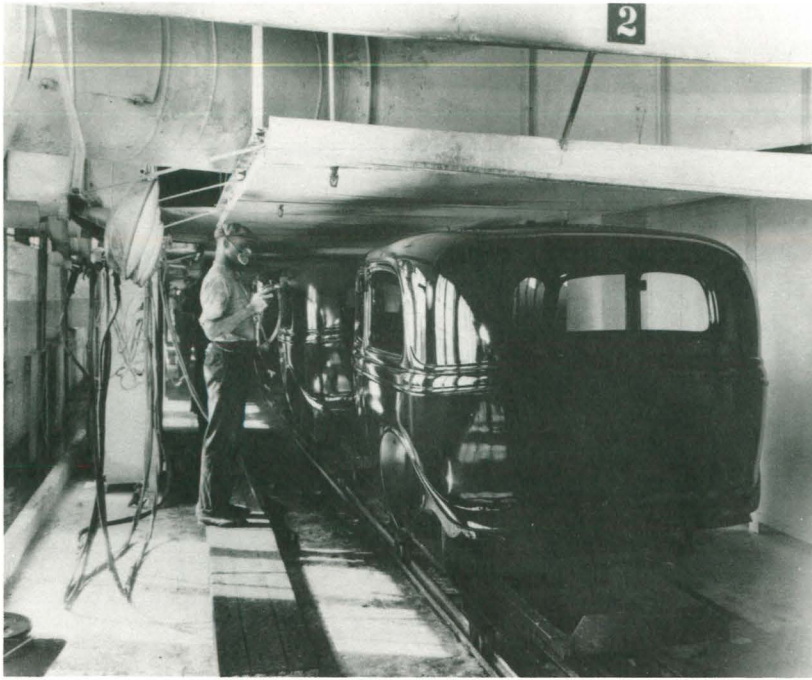
Cornish mining captains underground. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State



enced river guides, bait shop owners, builders of wooden boats adapted to different rivers and uses, expert fly tiers, and carvers of special lures and decoys. These individuals often live off the land in contrast to the scores of recreational fishermen who comprise their customers. While much inland riverlore crosses ethnic boundaries, some traditions are linked to specific groups. One example is the burbot harvest on the Sturgeon River of the Upper Peninsula where Finnish-Americans use hoop nets in cleared sections of the ice-coated river to catch a type of freshwater cod known as “poor man’s lobster.” The fillets and livers are used to make *kukko*, a fish pie often served at Christmas (*L’Anse Sentinel*, January 14, 1987).

Not until the great European migrations of the 19th century did extensive settlement of Michigan begin. The early pioneers came primarily from the eastern states, the British Isles, Germany, and Holland. They were joined by Scandinavians and French and British Canadians who arrived by the thousands to work in fields, lumber and mining operations, mills, and factories. The landscape which greeted these pioneers contained mile after mile of majestic virgin pine and hardwoods five feet in diameter. Between the 1830s and early 1900s the state was stripped of these timber resources as lumber barons and loggers alike strove to make their fortunes in the Michigan woods. Many land owners were eastern capitalists while Finns, Norwegians, Swedes, and French-Canadians were among the largest ethnic contingents to lead the dangerous and demanding life of the lumberjack. The experience was commemorated in songs and tales that are now little more than a memory culture, yet evoke in powerful ways the special community formed by the log drivers, sawyers, scidders, teamsters, and camp cooks who helped build Michigan while the logs they cut were shipped west to help settle the plains.

The bygone days of the lumberjack are celebrated today in logging festivals, such as those held in the eastern Upper Peninsula town of Newberry, where demonstrations of camp cooking, cross-



cut saw competitions, and other contests evoke the spirit of the old logging era. Many participants in these festivals themselves work either full or part time in the woods since reforestation has prompted a flourishing pulpwood and Christmas tree industry in the state. The famous Grand Rapids furniture industry, founded during the mid-to-late 19th century, also has survived thanks to the importation of hardwoods. Generations of master carvers have fashioned the prototype chair, table, or bedpost which serves as a “template” for the multiple carving machines.

The rich iron and copper deposits of the western Upper Peninsula proved a powerful impetus to settlement. Although native peoples had fashioned copper tools and adornments from accessible surface deposits, commercial mining did not begin until the 1840s. Activity centered around the Keweenaw Peninsula which witnessed the nation’s first mineral rush: thousands of prospectors flocked to Michigan several years prior to the more famous California gold rush. Iron ore also was discovered during this period, creating boom towns near the Marquette, Gogebic, and Menominee ranges of the western U.P. During the late 19th century the mining counties had the largest foreign-born populations in the state. More than thirty nationalities could be found within a single township, including Cornish, Belgians, Irish, Scots, English, French-Canadians, Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Italians, Slovenians, Poles, and Croatians.

The Cornish had a special association with the mining country. From the start the mine owners recruited their shift captains, foremen, and, eventually, mine managers from the ranks of the Cornish who brought deep mining techniques from the copper and tin mines of Cornwall, their special jargon of mining terms, and the meat and vegetable turnover known as pasty. The pie was carried by miners deep below the surface and, according to legend, heated by the flame of a miner’s candle.

The centers of copper and iron production subsequently moved

Worker spray painting lacquer on Ford car bodies at Brigg’s Body Company, 1933. Many Afro-Americans migrated north to work in Michigan auto plants after World War I. Photo from the collections of Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village

Finnish lumberjacks at Oscar, Michigan, ca. 1890. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State

westward and overseas. The western U.P. landscape today is punctuated by ghost towns, abandoned mine shafts, and communities with severely depleted populations. After the great copper strike of 1913-14, many miners migrated out-state or down-state to urban centers like Detroit and Grand Rapids. Finns are now the dominant ethnic group, especially in the western mining regions, followed by Eastern Europeans and Scandinavians. In the eastern U.P. Canadians predominate. Mining is still a source of employment (along with logging and agriculture), but perhaps the real legacy of the peak mining years is a strong regional identity born of ethnic intermingling and defined by the distinctive lore of the independent "Yoopers" (residents of the U.P.).

The dream of owning land has long attracted migrants to Michigan. Many early pioneers were New Englanders. They brought with them the house-party dance and musical traditions of the East, which survive today in the state's dominant fiddle style, a repertoire that predates the French-Canadian and southern traditions of subsequent migrants. Eastern-born Quakers and abolitionists also were instrumental in establishing underground railroad stations in the years prior to the Civil War. As a result, counties such as Cass, Mecosta, and Lake have significant rural Black populations. Some of these families still tell escaped slave narratives. These old agricultural enclaves are culturally distinct from the larger and more recent Afro-American settlements in cities like Detroit, Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Flint, most of which date to the Great Migration (the massive movement of rural southerners to northern industrial centers during the pre-and post-World War II periods).

From the 19th century onward, scores of European immigrants cleared timber, brush, and glacial rocks to establish family farms throughout the state. The Germans, for example, settled predominantly in southeastern Michigan and in Saginaw and Berrien counties. The Danes, another group of skilled farmers, raised potatoes

Mexican migrants thinning sugar beets. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State



northeast of Muskegon. Poles homesteaded the Thumb area and northeastern Michigan near Posen and Metz. The Dutch founded the town of Holland in 1847 and introduced celery, and more recently, tulips to Michigan. Many groups who came for lumbering or mining later turned to agriculture in the cutover (clear-cut forest lands) and more marginal lands of northern Michigan.

During the 1800s Michigan farmers were generalists. In the 20th century, however, the state's agriculture has become more specialized: fruit along the Lake Michigan shore, nurseries near Detroit and west of Grand Rapids, navy beans in the Saginaw Valley, sugar beets in the Thumb area, peppermint and spearmint in the midlands near St. Johns, soybeans in the Monroe area, and vegetables in the muck soils of the south.

Prior to mechanization most farmers required extensive seasonal help. Beginning in the 1920s, when immigration quotas reduced the numbers of European workers, thousands of displaced southern sharecroppers and field hands – both Afro- and Anglo-Americans – headed north to the fields of Michigan. Mexican migrants, often recruited by the sugar beet companies, also began seasonal journeys to Michigan by truck or train. Despite the hardship of migrant life, certain traditions emerged such as the big Mexican *fiestas* at the end of cherry harvest. With the introduction of mechanical harvesters and more stringent migrant labor laws, the Michigan migrant stream is now much smaller.

Most migrants eventually made the transition from field to factory, and the cultural traditions they brought with them are now part of Michigan folklife: southern Black blues and gospel (the roots of Detroit's famous Motown and soul), quilting traditions, and "soul food" in the cities; *conjunto* music and foods such as *menudo* (tripe soup) and *cabrito* (barbecued goat) among Mexican-Americans; the foodways, craft traditions, vocal, and fiddle styles of the upland South.



Native Americans fishing in the St. Mary's rapids, 19th century. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State

After the turn of the century many newcomers to Michigan found their first jobs in automobile and related manufacturing. Although the state's major cities all have auto plants, the "Motor City" of Detroit remains the hub and world symbol for the American automobile industry. It was here in 1908 that Henry Ford introduced the assembly line technique, which soon became standard throughout the industry and enabled management to replace skilled craftsmen with unskilled labor from Eastern and Southern Europe. With the line came a new chapter in workers lore as people creatively adapted to the relentless pace of mechanization and found ways to humanize the factory.

As workers from across the United States and abroad poured into Detroit, old ethnic neighborhoods changed character and new ones took shape. They often were centered around particular factories where foremen tended to hire family, friends, and countrymen: Hungarians in Delray, Poles in Hamtramck near the Dodge plant, and Croatians, Slovenians, Finns, Rumanians, and Lithuanians adjacent to Ford's Highland Park facility. Some nationality groups became associated with particular crafts or skills: Swedish engineers in the auto industry, Italians in tileworking, Germans in brewing, Scotsmen in tool and die making, Greeks in confectionaries, groceries, and restaurants, and Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians in the food business.

Michigan and other northern industries — like their counterparts in agriculture — sought a new labor supply in the American South after the outbreak of World War I. The urban population soared for southern Anglo- and Afro-Americans. In Detroit alone the Black population rose from just less than 6,000 in 1910 to 120,000 in 1930. Prior to 1935 Ford's River Rouge plant hired more Blacks than any other auto company and was the only firm to employ Afro-Americans on the assembly line although most still held janitorial and unskilled foundry jobs. "Motown" is now the largest city in the U.S. in which the majority of the total population is Afro-American.

Today's migrants — primarily from Asia, Mexico, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe — continue to perpetuate the traditions of their homelands in Detroit and other Michigan cities. Descendants of earlier immigrants, on the other hand, have created new types of folklife to celebrate the distinctive ethnic identities of the American-born. Church, family, community, and ethnic organizations all serve as important vehicles for the continuity and reshaping of traditional ethnic crafts, foods, musics, and narratives.

Michigan today is home to more than one hundred different nationalities, including the country's largest population of Finns, Belgians, Maltese, and Chaldeans; the second largest numbers of Dutch, Lebanese, and French-Canadians; and perhaps the largest concentration of Muslim Arabs (in southeast Dearborn) outside the Middle East. Detroit alone is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country. The heritage of these diverse groups — along with those of Native, Euro- and Afro-Americans who migrated to Michigan throughout the state's history — give Michigan folklife its distinctive characteristics.

Suggested reading

- Anderson, James M. and Iva A. Smith, ed. *Ethnic Groups in Michigan*. Michigan Ethnic Heritage Studies Center and the University of Michigan Ethnic Studies Program. Detroit: Ethnos Press, 1983.
- Babson, Steve. *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*. New York: Adams Books, 1984.
- Dewhurst, C. Kurt, Yvonne Lockwood, and Marsha MacDowell, ed. *Michigan Folklife Reader*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1987.
- Dewhurst, C. Kurt and Marsha MacDowell. *Rainbows in the Sky: The Folk Art of Michigan in the Twentieth Century*. East Lansing: State University Museum, 1978.
- Sommers, Laurie K. "Economic Development." In *Michigan: A Geography*, ed. Lawrence M. Sommers. Boulder: Westview Press, 1984.
- Vander Hill, C. Warren. *Settling the Great Lakes Frontier: Immigration to Michigan, 1837-1924*. Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1970.

Suggested recordings

- Songs and Dances of Great Lakes Indians* (Ethnic Folkways Records, LP4003).
- Songs of the Great Lakes* (Folkways Records, FM4018).
- Songs of the Michigan Lumberjacks*, E.C. Beck, ed. (Archive of Folk Song, Library of Congress, AFSL56).

Suggested exhibit

- Crew, Spencer. "From Field to Factory," Smithsonian Museum of American History, 1987.