

# Folklore of the Upper Peninsula

by James P. Leary

When the state adopted “Say yes to Michigan” as a boosteristic slogan, residents of the Upper Peninsula (the U.P.) quickly countered with “Say yah to da U.P., eh!” The phrase was soon emblazoned on T-shirts, billed caps, and license plates, often accompanied by a map greatly magnifying the U.P.’s size in proportion to the “L.P.” (Lower Peninsula). Map and phrase simultaneously address outsiders and locals, and both are deeply rooted in folk cultural traditions of the region and its peoples.

Michigan proper reluctantly accepted the Upper Peninsula in 1837 as compensation for the loss of the “Toledo strip” to Ohio. The relationship between the two peninsulas has always been problematic. They were not physically linked until the Mackinac Bridge was completed in 1957, and cultural ties are hardly vibrant three decades later. Residents of the U.P. call their latitudinally higher region “Superior” or “Superiorland” — overtly in reference to Lake Superior, but also in sly juxtaposition to its “lower” and implicitly inferior counterpart. Indeed folks north of Mackinac sometimes use the phrase “below the bridge” to suggest playfully that residents of Michigan’s more populous and wealthy territory nonetheless reside in a kind of hell.

For their part, lower Michiganders occasionally dub their upper kin, “Yoopers,” uncouth backwoods louts inhabiting a land that is presently almost ninety percent forested. But U.P. dwellers, like southern Appalachian “hillbillies,” have transformed this potentially negative stereotype by celebrating positive qualities of earthiness, endurance, and self-sufficiency. “Say yah to da U.P., eh!” is classic Yooper talk. “Yah” and “da” derive from the patois of rural and working class ethnic-Americans in the western U.P. and beyond, while “eh!” comes from the English of Anglo-Celtic, French, and Indian settlers who entered the eastern U.P. from Canada.

Pugnacious when establishing their geographic, ethnic, and class identity in opposition to that of Michigan’s other peninsula, Yoopers have shown considerable affinity with neighbors to the east and west. Ojibways, Ottawas, and Potawatomis, all of Algonquian stock, began moving into the eastern U.P. in the early 1600s. The now-dominant Ojibways, who eventually displaced Menominee and Sioux in a westward push, occupy tribal holdings that extend across Michigan into the northern parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota. French and Anglo-Celtic Canadians likewise entered the peninsula and beyond with the fur trade, then came in greater numbers in the 19th century as loggers, laborers, and farmers. The “pinery,” three iron ore ranges (the Marquette, the Menominee, and the Gogebic), and the Keeweenaw Peninsula’s “Copper Country” likewise drew Cornish, Finns, Germans, Italians, Poles, Swedes, and Yugoslavs by the thousands in the latter half of the 19th

*James P. Leary, a free-lance folklorist based in Madison, Wisconsin, holds a Ph.D. in Folklore and American Studies from Indiana University. His extensive fieldwork in the culturally diverse upper Midwest has resulted in numerous publications and media productions concerning traditional narrative and music.*



century — as did the mines and woods of adjacent northern Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The western U.P. mining and lumbering boom towns of Ironwood and Menominee abut Hurley and Marinette, Wisconsin, respectively. Residents of these cities still tell a joke that mocks any notion of cross-border differences. An old-timer is about to move from Ironwood to Hurley (or vice versa). His cronies ask why? “Well, my bones are getting creaky and I’d like to get away from those cold Michigan winters.” The winters are, of course, the same on either side of the line. Indeed the designation “Superiorland” has often been enlarged to include northern Wisconsin and northwestern Minnesota where mining, logging, small-scale farming, and commercial fishing were the historical pursuits of Ojibways, Canadian-Americans, and late 19th century European immigrants.

Today these industries are in decline and the population has leveled at roughly 300,000. Nonetheless, the Upper Peninsula’s folk culture — an expression of environmental, ethnic, and occupational experiences — remains vibrant. Thimbleberry pickers are everywhere in mid-summer, making jam for their own use or for roadside sale from makeshift stands. Men and boys with dogs hunt bear in the fall, while older Ojibway couples harvest wild rice. In deference to fierce winters, roofs are often constructed Finnish-style with steep pitches and ladders nailed on for snow removal. People enter houses through covered stoops, and use handmade wooden or aluminum snow scoops to clear a path. Spring and early summer weddings are not complete without walnut rolls (Yugoslav “potica”); nor can summer picnics happen without Italian sausages; and pasties, originally a Cornish miners’ food, are eaten year round by everyone.

Dialect jeketelling and pan-ethnic dance music are among the

Ojibways George and Mary McGeshik parching wild rice, Iron County. Photo by Thomas Vennum, Jr.





most widespread and venerable forms of folklore in the region. Richard M. Dorson first reported the former in the late 1940s after doing fieldwork in what he called "the fabulous U.P." He encountered scores of humorous tales concerning errors in the usage, pronunciation, and interpretation of English by assorted Cornish, Finns, French-Canadians, and, to a lesser extent, Swedes, Italians, and Irish. In addition to their basis in linguistic blunders, the tales described aspects of regional life in rich detail. Their tellers, "dialectitians," were mostly male, ranging from average to expert as performers, and likely to hold forth around a boarding house fireplace, in a tavern, or from the rostrum of a banquet table.

Finns are easily the dominant ethnic group throughout the U.P. and the repertoires of contemporary tellers, like Oren Tikkanen of Calumet, abound with the antics of Eino, Toivo, Heikki, and other stock characters. These humorous fellows are portrayed speaking "Finnglish," an exaggerated version of the English spoken by Finns. Since no Finnish words begin with double consonants, initial consonants are dropped from English words that begin with clusters (the city Trout Creek becomes Rout Reek, for example); b's and p's are transposed; w's become v's; and syntax is often garbled. Similar exaggerations are used for humorous representations of other varieties of English, as in a classic joke, widely known throughout mining communities on the southern and western shores of Lake Superior. Heikki, an experienced worker, is paired with Luigi, an Italian newcomer. As Heikki struggles with an unwieldy drilling machine, he spots a board that might serve as a brace. "Luigi, geev it for me dat lank." Luigi offers a pick ax, then a box, and, finally, the board. "Ya, dat's vat I vanted vas dat lank." "Whatsa matta you?", Luigi returned, "You been in dis country ten-a-fifteen years and all-a-ready you canta say planka."

Art Moilanen and Bill Stimac, Upper Peninsula musicians whose repertoire reflects the region's ethnic heritage, at "Stimac's Musicland," Copper City. Photo by James Leary







Ed Raisanen of Calumet with his hand-crafted snow scoop, one of various strategies for dealing with yearly snowfalls in excess of 165 inches. Photo courtesy Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections

Snow removal in downtown Calumet, Michigan, ca. late 19th century. Photo courtesy Roy Drier Collection, Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections

#### *Suggested reading*

Beck, Earl C. *Lore of the Lumbercamps*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948.

Dorson, Richard M. *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952.

#### *Suggested recordings*

*Accordions in the Cutover: Field Recordings of Ethnic Music from Lake Superior's South Shore*, ed. James P. Leary. A two-record set and 36-page booklet distributed by the Wisconsin Folklife Center, Route 3, Dodgeville, WI 53533.

*Dance at the Finn Hall and Life in the Finnish-American Woods* (Thimbleberry C-1&2). Available from Thimbleberry House, Box 195, Route 1, Calumet, Michigan 49913.

#### *Suggested films*

*Finnish-American Lives*, by Michael Loukinen. 58 min. Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan, 1983.

*Good Man in the Woods*, by Michael Loukinen. 87 min, 30 sec. Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan, 1987.

A parody of the Michigan Travel Bureau's slogan "Say yes to Michigan" illustrates the regional identity of the Upper Peninsula. Photo by James Leary



The U.P.'s people find no insult in such dialect jokes but rather enjoy the ethnic variety, common predicaments, and evident humanity of characters who are reminiscent of themselves and their ancestors. The region's dance music likewise celebrates diversity and unity, evolving from house parties and community doings when neighbors and co-workers of differing backgrounds shared tunes and steps.

Fiddlers like Coleman Trudeau, an Ottawa, play jigs, reels, and hornpipes for step and square dancers among Anglo-Celtic, French, and Indian residents of the eastern U.P. To the west piano accordionists like the Finn Art Moilanen and Croatian Bill Stimac play push-pull polkas, waltzes, schottisches, or an occasional country tune for their Finnish, Italian, Polish, Swedish, and Yugoslav listeners.

Just as dialectitians master a babble of tongues, dance musicians perform a span of old-time ethnic standards, while updating others to suit more recent conditions. The Croatian song, "Oj Maricka Peglaj" (Oh, Marie Is Ironing), has combined with references to the Calumet-Hecla mine (names for an Indian pipe and a Scandinavian goddess) to become an anthem in the Copper Country.

Oj Maricka peglaj — peglaj, peglaj, peglaj.

Calumet and Hecla — Hecla, Hecla, Hecla.

Part Old World, part New, pluralistic, esoteric, about women at work, about miners, copper, and mythology, the verses are, as another ubiquitous bumper sticker declares, "100% U.P."

