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Maine Folklife Center

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Oral History Helps to Answer 4,000 Year Old Question

Four thousand years ago, Archaic period peoples hunted swordfish in the Gulf of Maine. In addition to faunal remains, archaeologists have recovered stone representations of the distinctive sword-shaped bill, suggesting that these animals had a cultural significance that went beyond their dietary value. What archaeologists don’t know is precisely where and how the fish were taken. In our own time, swordfish rarely come inshore. Commercial operators, both harpooners and long-liners, fish the eastern side of Brown’s and George’s Banks and points farther along the continental shelf. Even if hunters of the Archaic period could travel that distance, it would have been too far to make swordfishing worthwhile. Moreover, archaeological evidence shows that Natives in the region stopped hunting swordfish about 3800 years ago.

Since the 1970s, University of Maine archaeologist David Sanger, has been working on the problem of swordfishing in the Late Archaic period. A key piece of the puzzle involves water temperature. After feeding in cooler waters, adult swordfish need to bask on the surface to warm their bodies. The process requires water temperatures above 59°F (15°C), which in turn confines the species to Gulf Stream waters during their northward summer migrations. Much of Sanger’s research has focused on the paleoecology of the Gulf of Maine, when lower sea-levels and possibly reduced tidal action may have resulted in sea surface temperatures that were appreciably warmer than at present. Such conditions would have allowed swordfish to range closer to shore. So far, all this has little to do with oral history. But Sanger also wanted to know more about likely hunting methods, which meant understanding swordfish from a hunter’s perspective. As with most (if not all) hunters, swordfishermen share an extensive occupational legendry. A pervasive belief, reinforced in some cases by personal experience narrative, is that a harpooned fish may deliberately turn on its attacker, à la Moby Dick, lashing about or charging with its bill, which can easily pierce the side of a boat. On the basis of such tales, some archaeologists argue that Archaic period hunters would have had to use dugout canoes to safely land such dangerous prey. Dugouts, however, are less seaworthy and more difficult to maneuver than a large birchbark canoe. To explore the process of harpooning and landing a swordfish in more detail, Sanger decided to conduct systematic interviews with contemporary fishermen. Notwithstanding the marked cultural and technological differences between modern fishermen and people of the Late Archaic period, both would have had to
New Research Initiative

"Occupational Folklore: The Culture of Maine’s Papermills" is the subject of a new research initiative led by the Maine Folklife Center. Several University of Maine’s entities including scholars in anthropology, history and public policy are interested in taking part in a larger initiative to document the history and culture of Maine’s paper industry. We are currently seeking funding to develop a major state-wide initiative to interview paper workers. At the present time we are conducting a pilot project in the Brewer community with former workers at Eastern Fine Paper Company which closed its doors in 2004.

The project seeks to understand the working culture in the mill: how workers learned their jobs, what kinds of skills they used and how they felt about their work. We are collecting oral histories with a focus on narrative forms such as stories, nicknames, special vocabulary, and rituals.

An initial interview and tour of the mill yielded some intriguing examples of folklore such as “the wall of shame” where workers store seconds or papers that did not meet the mill’s standards and “broke” a term used for paper that was broken or torn off the role and sent to the recycle repulper.

The Maine Folklife Center holds a premier collection of materials on the lumber industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Paper making followed lumber in Maine as the major wood-based industry in the state. However, in recent years many mills have closed or downsized. Therefore it is a timely topic for the Folklife Center to pursue.

~Pauleena MacDougall
**Archival Notes**

**Grants:**

I’m pleased to announce that we have received two grants to support our radio program, Maine Roots. The Maine Humanities Council and the Maine Community Foundation have each given us $5,000. This should fund six to eight of the twelve half-hour programs we have planned. Storytelling, music from Prince Edward’s Island collected by Sandy Ives, lobstering, and country music in Maine are the topics for the first four programs we have produced. If you have any contacts with MHC or MCF, please let them know that you appreciate their support as much as we do.

**Acquisitions:**

We have added two valuable collections to the archives recently. Both contribute significantly to our coverage of Maine women.

For the past few years Carol Toner and Mazie Hough have been teaching a class here at UMaine on women in the military. Their students interviewed women veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War and they have donated nearly sixty hours of taped and transcribed interviews. This collection compliments the interviews that Davida Kellogg has been doing for the Veterans History Project, sponsored by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, which are also deposited at the Maine Folklife Center, as well as our series on Maine Women in the Depression and World War II.

The second collection comes to us from Beth Harpaz, author of *Finding Annie Farrell*, a memoir of her mother, who grew up in central Maine, and the story of Harpaz’s quest to untangle the mysteries her mother left behind after her death. Harpaz is an editor for Associated Press who also wrote the *Girls on the Van* about press coverage of Hillary Clinton’s senatorial campaign. Twenty years after her mother’s death, she interviewed her aunts and other relatives, trying to understand in their hardscrabble childhoods a mother dead in childbirth, a father unable to cope who abandoned them to the care of the state and strangersthe roots of her mother’s crippling depression for which the woods of Maine, where Harpaz and her family spent summers, were the only antidote. A “haunting and ultimately redemptive memoir,” one reviewer has called the book while another said, “I am not sure when was the last time I read a book with which I felt such a connection.” On the night I met Beth Harpaz at a reading she gave in a local library, the audience was filled with people who echoed these sentiments, often raising their hand to say, “Your aunt reminds me of . . . ,” and “That happened to my grandmother, too.” Listening to Beth Harpaz made me want to share my family stories as well, and to seek out those I haven’t heard yet before it’s too late. Read *Annie Farrell*, come listen to her interviews with her aunts, and I hope you will be moved to do the same.

~Pamela Dean
Maine Folklife Center Narrative Stage

Caron Shay, basketmaker

Caron Shay and family, Penobscot basketmakers

Maurice Belanger, Ralph Stanley, and Wade Dow play some tunes.

Peggy Yocom, folklorist

Jo Radner and Kathleen Mundell, folklorists
Maine Folklife

Later Narrative Stage
Folk Festival
1st 8, 4

Peggy Yocom, Bill Shamel, Maurice Belanger, Rollin Thurlow and David Moses Bridges, canoe makers

Joseph Lowell, boatbuilder

Young visitor, signing canoe

Maurice, David and Rollin discuss traditional canoe making techniques

Peggy Yocom, Ralph Stanley and the Lowell Brothers, boatbuilders
solves the same problems to maximize the effectiveness and minimize the risk of pursuing and landing a large and potentially dangerous animal.

In 2003, Sanger and Maine Folklife Center Director, Jamie Moreira, received a grant from the Helen Creighton Folklore Society in Nova Scotia, to interview Acadian swordfish harpooners in Lower West Pubnico, at the southwestern tip of the province. People in the area have harpooned swordfish since at least the 1930s, augmenting an industry that appears to have started in northeast Cape Breton, where swordfish still come relatively close to shore. The harpoons used by the Acadians are not all that different from those used in the Archaic period and consist of three parts: a pole or shaft about twelve to fifteen feet long, an 18" by 3/8" diameter foreshaft, and a detachable “dart” that is designed to come away from the foreshaft as soon as it is embedded. A line attached to the middle of the dart lets it act as a toggle, preventing it from pulling free. The hunters’ vessel, whether a modern swordfishing boat or a canoe, needs to maneuver right over the fish in order for the harpooner to do his job. What became clear from our discussions with fishermen is that swordfish are not difficult to approach. In fact, fishermen claim and one of our informants had records to support the claim that they catch as many as 70% of the fish sighted. So Archaic period hunters would have had few problems approaching and harpooning their quarry, even from canoes.

The critical issue, of course, is what happens after the fish is struck. Adult swordfish may weigh in excess of four hundred pounds, and then there is the matter of a two-and-a-half foot bill to contend with. Until the 1970s, dories were used to recover harpooned fish, and even they could get tossed about and occasionally speared if a fish had some fight in it. For the most part, however, swordfish react in a predictable manner, which works in the hunter’s favor. As Blair d’Entremont explained:

* When you iron them, they start down, that’s it. Some of them go fast, others, they just swim off, they don’t go that fast when they take off. But when you start hauling on them, they start pulling, see. And you’ve got to play them out .. . . and if you’re in deep water, they’ll take off. . . . [W]e have a hundred fathoms, a hundred fathom rope on them. And we have a spare buoy line we tie on if they take more than the hundred fathom; we keep paying. But most of the time when they go way down there, after they go down they finish, they die, and you haul them up. And the vessel

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comes and picks you up. And throw you another one.

An empty ten-gallon keg attached to the line does most of the work of tiring a fish by acting as a drag. Even in a dory, there is no hanging on for a “Nantucket sleigh-ride.” If several fish are ironed in a short span of time, kegs are left to float free, and each fish is played and recovered individually.

When asked about swordfish attacking boats, the seven men we interviewed all replied that fish struck a boat so rarely that it was undoubtedly by accident. They acknowledged that stories were rife, and some fishermen had gone so far as to paint the bottoms of their dories white, thinking it would make the boats more difficult for swordfish to see; others put metal sheathing under the seat. Our informants, however, played down the risk. Swordfish, they felt, may turn and swim in the direction of the force that is pulling on them, but whether they come up around the dory or directly under it is a matter of chance.

Assuming that hunters of the Archaic period had a similar understanding of swordfish behavior, and Sanger contends there is no reason to think otherwise, they could have hunted swordfish effectively with minimal risk, even from large birchbark canoes. And like most (if not all) hunters, they probably had more-than-ordinary tales to tell of their adventures.

~James Moreira

The Life and Writings of Manly Hardy (1832-1910): Fur-Buyer, Hunter, and Naturalist Compiled and Introduced by William B. Krohn should be in your mailboxes in February. The book, comprised of 350 pages and thirty-eight illustrations, includes a short biography of Hardy as well as some of his articles previously published in Forest and Stream magazine. “A Maine Woods Walk in ‘61” and “A Fall Fur Hunt in Maine” recount Hardy’s experiences in the Maine woods in the 1860s. Readers will experience a very different perspective on animal life and wilderness through the pen of a nineteenth century writer. Hardy also wrote about Maine animals: mink, caribou, wolves and porpoises. His articles help us understand current debates about environmental management issues by presenting historical precedents. Hardy had a fascinating life as an amateur naturalist, sportsman, and Brewer businessmen. The volume also includes an annotated bibliography of Hardy’s writings, and makes a good companion piece to Northeast Folklore Volume XXXIV: 1999 Tales of the Maine Woods: Two Forest and Stream essays (1891) By Fannie Pearson Hardy Edited and with an introduction by Pauleena MacDougall.
Join us!

Membership dues and contributions enable the Maine Folklife Center to function as a self-supporting unit of the University of Maine. By pledging membership, individuals and institutions play a vital role in encouraging the study, documentation and presentation of Maine’s traditional cultural heritage. Benefits of membership include:

- an annual copy of our monograph series, *Northeast Folklore*
- the Maine Folklife Center Newsletter
- a ten-percent discount on audios, videos, and publications

Please circle desired membership level:

- $1,000 Benefactor
- $500 Patron
- $100 Sponsor
- $50 Friend
- $25 Basic Membership
- $35 Basic Membership and a copy of Sandy Ives’s *Larry Gorman*

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