

## **The Library of Congress: Alan Lomax and the Soundscapes of the Upper Midwest: 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1938 Library of Congress Folk-Song Expedition to Michigan**

### **Episode 5 Title: “Beaver Island Boys” (2013-11-01)**

From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

“Finnish Waltz,” performed by Apo Juhani on accordion. Recorded in Calumet, MI, Sept. 27, 1938. *Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings* (AFC 1939/007, AFS 2282a3), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

In 1938 the Library of Congress dispatched the pioneering folklorist and song collector Alan Lomax to conduct a folklife survey of the Great Lakes region. He traveled in a 1935 Plymouth sedan, toting a Presto instantaneous disc recorder and a movie camera. And when he returned nearly three months later, having driven thousands of miles on barely paved roads, it was with a cache of 250 discs and 8 reels of film, documents of the incredible range of ethnic diversity, expressive traditions, and occupational folklife in Michigan.

For his trip to Beaver Island in late August 1938, Alan sought the help Dr. Ivan Walton of the University of Michigan. A literature and folklore scholar, Walton had conducted fieldwork on Beaver Island in 1932, and so was well-suited to introduce Lomax to the islanders.

The peculiar history of Beaver Island was not lost on Lomax and Walton as they ferried the thirty miles into Lake Michigan. During the mid-nineteenth century, this 55-square-mile speck of land at the Lake’s northern end had experienced migration, shifting ethnicities, boom and bust, ecological change, political turmoil, social upheaval, tragedy, and triumph—all in just a few decades.

The late 19th century Irish immigrants brought their songs to Beaver Island and they also brought a robust fiddling tradition that livened social events on the cold Island nights. Patrick Bonner’s playing style and repertoire provided a link to the older fiddlers. Here he is playing “Drowsy Maggie,”

“Drowsy Maggie,” performed by Patrick Bonner on fiddle, St. James, Beaver Island, MI, Aug. 24, 1938. *Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings* (AFC 1939/007, AFS 2269a2), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

Lomax and Walton also encountered and documented so-called “bawdy” songs, a rich vein of American expressive culture. Though not particularly remarkable in terms of their uniqueness or performance quality, the Beaver Island songs provide a broader picture of the repertoire performed on the boats and in the lumbercamps of northern Michigan. The song “Baby Take Your Leg Off Mine” begins like this:

“Baby Take Your Leg Off Mine,” performer unknown, St. James, Beaver Island, MI, Aug. 29, 1938. Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings (AFC 1939/007, AFS 2303a2), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

*Oh, there is a little lady who lives back of the jail,  
She makes her living by the sweat of her tail, and it's  
Oh, Oh, Baby take your leg off of mine.*

This song is a variant or parody of “Take a Whiff on Me,” a well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century song about purchasing cocaine. The Lomaxes had encountered “Take a Whiff on Me” on numerous occasions in the South. There were published recordings of it as early as 1927, suggesting that it was a standard among barroom singers.

In 1938 the Beaver Islanders performed repertoire passed down as part of their ethnic traditions, learned from other groups, and created locally. The music reflected the work and lives of the Islanders. In this way, the rich culture of Beaver Island—and its peculiar history—were typical of 1930s America, and typical of the American cultural narrative.

“Finnish Waltz,” performed by Apo Juhani on accordion. Recorded in Calumet, MI, Sept. 27, 1938. *Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings* (AFC 1939/007, AFS 2282a3), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

This podcast series marks the 75th anniversary of Alan Lomax's historic documentation of music and folklore in Michigan, and its enduring impact today. If you would like to more about this remarkable trip, and stay abreast of commemorative programming and performances including a traveling exhibition, and the dissemination of Lomax's recordings to their home communities, visit the American Folklife Center's website at [www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax). And look for the e-book, “Michigan-I-O,” published by Dust-to-Digital Records in association with the Library of Congress and available through the iBookstore beginning November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013.

Alan Lomax's vast documentary collection, including the materials from his 1938 Michigan field trip is housed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The Center thanks its project collaborators, which include the Michigan Council for the Humanities, the Michigan State University Museum; the Great Lakes Traditions Endowment; the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Culture at the University of Wisconsin, the Association for Cultural Equity, and the Finlandia Foundation.

This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at [loc.gov](http://loc.gov).