

The Library of Congress: Alan Lomax and the Soundscapes of the Upper Midwest: 75th anniversary of the 1938 Library of Congress Folk-Song Expedition to Michigan

Episode Title 7: “Across the Straits of Mackinac”

[Intro]

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.

After returning from Beaver Island in the first week of September, Alan reported his activities to Harold Spivacke and shipped to the Library discs filled with the bounty of his August collecting and needles for resharpening. Of his prospects and near-term intentions he wrote:

Upper Michigan is full of old lumberjacks, much to my surprise, and I expect to get this next couple of weeks enough lumberjack songs so that we won't have to go begging to any of the local folk-lorists for material.

Fieldwork wasn't a costly business but it came with expenses—not least the libations that many performers expected—and Lomax had exhausted his funds. Securing his paycheck or his expense reimbursement--anything at all to buy the bare necessities--was a recurring annoyance during the month of September 1938. Despite his near-empty pockets Alan continued through the counties of northern Michigan, recording in the Polish communities of Metz, Posen, and Cheboygen.

While recording the Lewandowski family in Posen, he devoted a disc to the teenage Lewandowski sisters. Recording children was unusual on this particular trip but something Alan and his father had done frequently. The girls' signature tune was “Goldmine in the Sky,” the title track of a Gene Autry film by the same name that was showing in theaters during the summer of 1938. The *Star* in nearby Rogers City likely ran the film.¹ It is unclear if Alan knew the song's provenance. Certainly, he never recorded a more timely bit of popular culture.

“Goldmine in the Sky,” performed by Edwina and Stephanie Lewandowski, Posen, MI, Sept. 7, 1938. *Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings* (AFC 1939/007, AFS 2320a1), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

On September 7th Alan Lomax took the ferry across the Straits of Mackinac. The drizzle of the previous days had cleared and the air was cool. He edged the Plymouth off the boat and onto Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, emerging five weeks later on the Wisconsin side having recorded an astounding 147 discs—24 hours of music five minutes at a time.

[Outro]

“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. 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 1st, 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.

□