

Autoharp Clearinghouse – August/September 1996 – Stan Ransom

Stan Ransom, also known as *The Connecticut Peddler*, is a folk musician who specializes in singing and playing the twelve-string acoustic guitar, hammered dulcimer, mandolin, bowed psaltery and, of course, the autoharp. The 'harps he uses include a Dolgeville, New York circa 1894 Zimmermann instrument, a 12-bar Oscar Schmidt Autoharp from the 1920s, and a present-day 21-chord O.S. Autoharp.

Many of his songs reflect the interests of the North Country, from the Adirondack Mountains to Lake Champlain. Among them are numbers relating to amusing or dramatic events in the area, such as *Champ*, *the Lake Champlain Monster* and *the Lake Champlain Ice Rescue*. Other songs describe the beauty of the *Isles of Lake Champlain*, or the peculiar problems of Plattsburgh, such as in *The Plattsburgh Sewage Plant* and *The City with the Stereo Smell*. His Adirondack songs, *The Adirondack Mountains*, *Allen's Bear Fight* and *Adirondack Acid Rain*, range from the historical to the contemporary.

Ransom has also researched the traditional music of Long Island, where he resided for twenty years. His songs span the distance from the days of Captain Kidd to the present, with such titles as *Round Cape Horn*, *The Loss of the Albion*, *Acre's of Clams* and *I Love Long Island*.

Stan, who has been singing and playing folk music for more than fifty-four years, was born in Winstead, Connecticut. He takes his stage name from the Nineteenth Century Connecticut peddler, who traveled around with a pack on his back, selling needles, pins, seeds and notions to rural residents. Unlike his namesake, who sometimes sold "wooden nutmegs" and other dubious items, Ransom's pack is filled with songs of all kinds aimed at all age groups. He knows several hundred American, English and Irish ballads, as well as songs from other parts of the world, and enjoys sharing them with his audiences. Ransom was extensively involved in the traditional folk music revival on Long Island in the Fifties and Sixties, and can remember times in his Huntington home when more than seventy folk musicians were crammed into every corner of every room playing and singing. He also collects stringed instruments, which he uses in conjunction with lectures and demonstrations.

From 1943-1950, Stan Ransom worked part-time as a lumberjack and forest guard for the Connecticut Park and Forest Commission. He learned to fell and cut up trees, use an axe and two-man crosscut saw, and to cut trails and fight forest fires in state lands in the Berkshire Mountains. That experience left him with a warm feeling of kinship for the Adirondack lumberjacks, whose songs he sings.

Ransom comes from a musical family who were “always singing, playing music and involved in choirs and singing groups.” He was a member of the Yale Glee Club, singing under Marshall Bartholomew and, after obtaining a Master’s Degree in Library Science from Columbia University, was a member of the University Glee Club of New York City, and later the Men’s Chorus of Huntington, Long Island.

In addition to being a performer, the Connecticut Peddler is also a songwriter, and a folklorist who has done considerable research and collecting of Long Island and Northern New York State songs. His discoveries have led to the identification of tunes and songs which had been thought lost forever. “I enjoy doing research on tunes and songs,” he says, “because I feel I am contributing to the world’s knowledge as well as learning more about the songs I like.” His song, *The Ironville Mine*, is part of the permanent exhibit at the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, NY. For his work as a folklorist, and in recognition of his achievements in preserving and interpreting local and regional history, Stan Ransom was awarded a Certificate of Commendation in 1994 by the American Association for State and Local History.

Stan is well equipped to do research as a result of his occupation for more than forty years as a professional librarian. He is the retired Director of the Clinton-Essex-Franklin Library System in Plattsburgh, NY. “To me,” he says, “The position of librarian is the most satisfying one in the world. I like books and I like people, and the job of the librarian is to bring books and people together.”

During his previous job as Director of the Huntington Public Library, Stan edited a book of the complete writings of the Long Island slave poet, Jupiter Hammon, who was the first African-American in America to publish his own verse. Since 1970, when the book was issued, Ransom has promoted the nationwide observance of *Black Poetry Day* on 17 October, the date of Hammon’s birth in 1711. The book was reissued in 1983.

The Connecticut Peddler has appeared on Open Mike at Cafe Lena in Saratoga Springs, at Kent DeLord House Museum, at Shepherd Park in Lake George, and at any number of North Country schools, service clubs, coffee houses, libraries, music festivals, nursing homes and hospitals. He has also performed at High Peaks Base Camp in Jay, at Sagamore Conference Center in Raquette Lake, and has regular “gigs” at the Palmer Street Coffee House and at the Sacred Heart Nursing Home in Plattsburgh.

His first recording, *Down the Saranac*, was released in July of 1991, and included original songs of Plattsburgh and Clinton County, as well as hammered dulcimer instrumentals. The *Glen Falls Post-Star* called that tape “wickedly funny,” referring to Stan’s amusing songs about the Plattsburgh Sewage Plant. His follow-up tape, *Adirondack Sampler*, was a 66-minute blend of traditional, original and newly-discovered songs of the lumberjacks and their Adirondack

hamlets--together with more hammered dulcimer tunes. That "Centennial Edition" honors the founding of the Adirondack Park in 1892.

North Country Christmas, Stan's third cassette, and the first to also be released on compact disc, adds the beautiful voice and guitar playing of folk singer Marne O'Shae. It is a refreshing blend of familiar carols and Christmas music of special interest to residents of upstate New York and Vermont.

Stan's most-recent recording, *Songs of Lake Champlain*, was issued in the fall of 1995. Like the holiday album, it is also available in both cassette and CD formats, and the eighteen tracks include: *The Last Long Mile* . *Isles of Lake Champlain* . *Champ* . *Lake Champlain Waltz/Ransom's Waltz* . *Battle of Valcour Bay* . *In Prohibition Days*. *The Sailor and His Bride* . *Biddy Daly/St. Anne's Reel/Gaspé Reel* . *The Piper's Refrain* . *The Burning of the Phoenix* . *Little Ice Shanty* . *Kushaqua Waltz/Singing Sands Beach Waltz* . *My Native Lake* . *Lake Champlain Ice Rescue*. *Fort Blunder* . *Aimé Patnode's Jig/Charlie Hunter's Jig/Sweet Biddy Daly* . *Lakes of Champlain* . *Song of the Moose*.

Two more albums, *I Love Long Island* and *My Long Island Home*, have been recorded and should be released in the not-too-distant future. All of Stan's recordings are autoharp-friendly, lengthy, and give you plenty of good music for your money. The cassettes sell for \$10 with the compact discs priced at \$15. Add \$1.50 postage for the first album, and \$.50 each thereafter. Send check or money order to: Stan Ransom, 39 Broad Street, Plattsburgh, NY 12901 - (518) 563-5719.

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is delighted to make the acquaintance of Stan Ransom and to share his story with its readership. This issue is respectfully dedicated in his honor.

February 2008 Update: Please note that the above article was written nearly twelve years ago. It is not recommended that anyone send payment for the aforementioned recordings without first making contact with Mr. Ransom. I was not successful in my attempt at doing so, and am not certain that he is still living? Sally Schneider's sketch of Stan is available for viewing in the Autoharp Clearinghouse album under Photos from the home page of the Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo. **ER**