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Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History

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Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History

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N O R T H E A S T F O L K L O R E

WINTER 1991-1992 NO. 35

Martha Ross was a student in my Narrative course in the Spring of 1991, and while there is perhaps no direct New England connection, I thought it might stir up memories for some of our members. Does it? Can anyone tell of similar experiences or memories? How many family historians are there "out there"? Let us know.

-Sandy Ives

KEEPER OF THE FLAME BY MARTHA ROSS

When I was very young, my grandmother would have wonderful family gatherings at her house in Lockport, New York. They were always held in July, so that all the relatives on my father's side could come, spouses and children in tow, to sleep on the floors, the sofas, and even out on the front lawn of Grandma's rambling three story house for a single, magical week in the summer. The daylight brought all the children out into the green expanse of the yard, to play football with their fathers, to help their mothers with the barbecue, to show their tiny, newer cousins how to blow the fluff off a dandelion gone to seed. There was lemonade, and chicken salad, and homemade strawberry ice cream. There was noise-- laughter and shouting and scolding-- but if you were too shy to do anything but watch the fracas, there was something even better. There were the old women, and their stories.

The old women remained stationed in chaises and rocking chairs on the wide, open porch of Grandma's house, fanning themselves and watching over the proceedings on the lawn. I loved them. They were quiet, and graceful, and trembling. I loved their scratchy voices and their papery skin, and the way their cataracts gave their eyes-- all of them had blue eyes, it seemed-- a dreamlike cast. They were all terribly thin, and very respected. They didn't mind me sitting with them there on the porch; I was quiet, I could thread needles, I would fill lemonade glasses. And I was always willing to pay the ultimate respect a small child can pay to an ancient-- I would listen to them. They talked about the most wonderful things, always, smells and colors and songs-- and I would sit very still, with my eyes shut tight, until their memories lay like piled treasures around me, until the smells and colors and songs were so clear to me that it seemed that they were my own. They would all speak of these things, until there was an argument about what year it was that Grace had worn the flowing garnet-colored velvet dress, and the man that was supposed to be some kind of count had monopolized her all

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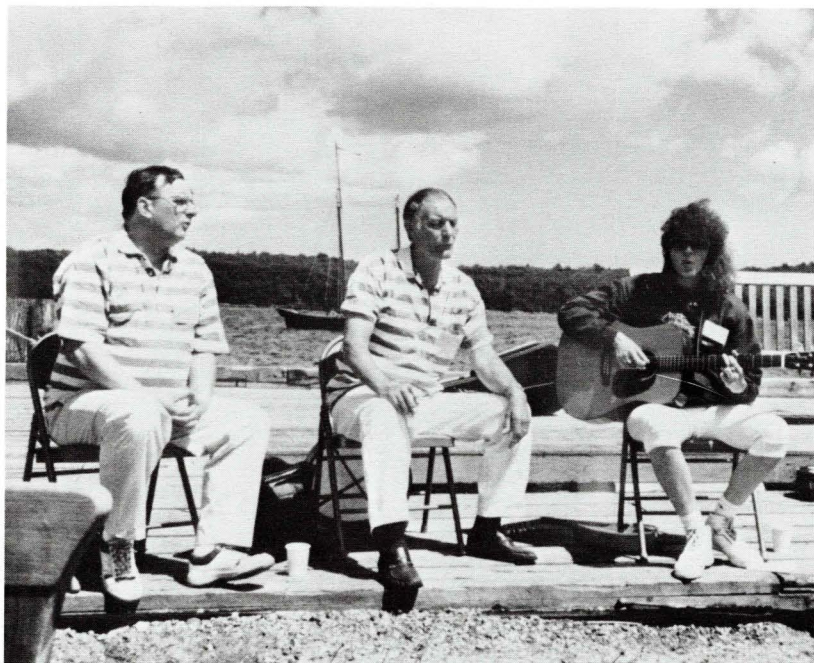
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OLD TIME REMEDIES AND RECIPES

A little book with this title crossed my desk not long ago, and readers of the newsletter might be interested in it. It's only 34 pages long, was put together by one Linda M. Polkey "in memory of my parents," and is refreshingly simple and straightforward. A sampling of the contents: "Hair grower (bay rum, olive oil, quinine); Disinfectant: Card of matches set in dish of water; recipes for elderblossom wine and ginger beer." The author very carefully notes that the remedies are included for their historical interest and that anyone using them does so at their own risk. There's worse things you could do with \$4.95 (check to author at 12 Portland Rd., Gray, Maine 04039).

-e.d.i.



"FOREBITTER" SINGING AT MAINE MARITIME MUSEUM

SINGING SEA SONGS BY THE SEA SHORE

This summer, Teresa Hollingsworth, my daughter Chrissy and I attended the second annual Festival of Traditional Sea Music at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath, Maine. We were fortunate to experience one of those rare June days when the sun is warm, the sky is blue and a light breeze keeps all insect species at bay.

The festival consisted of a series of workshops all day Saturday given in two concurrent sessions which were then repeated on Sunday, making it possible to attend them all. On Saturday night a concert featured all presenters. The topics of the workshops (primarily performances of songs and stories sprinkled with some introductory and perfunctory remarks) included: sea shanties, ballads of love and war, instruments at sea, women at sea, songs of Maine and the Maritimes, ghost sailors and shipwrecks, to name a few.

There were performers from New England, Canada, Virginia, California, England and Wales. Many of the performers were also experienced sailors. They included Stan Hugill, Louis Killen, "Spindrift", Jerry Bryant, "Forebitter", Tom Goux and Jacek Sulanowski, David Parry, Don Sineti, Dick Swain, John Townley, Bob Webb and "Wickford Express." One half of the workshops were presented on the dock, where there were not only chairs, but also picnic tables and a children's play area complete with a boat-shaped sandbox and crow's nest. The latter was a great hit with my daughter.

We all had a wonderful time and can only strongly recommend both the Museum and the Festival. I hope we'll see you at the "third annual" next June.

-Pauleena MacDougall

KEEPER OF FLAME...

night. And then all eyes, bright with anticipation and full of faith, would turn to Great Sophie.

Great Sophie was actually my Great Aunt Sophie, my grandmother's sister. Despite her powerful, weighty name, she was actually a tiny little old woman, a wiry, gnarled widow who knew everything that had ever happened to anyone within the far reaches of my father's family, and way, way beyond. There wasn't a name she couldn't remember, or a situation she couldn't provide the exact embellishments for. When presented with an unfinished story, Great Sophie would smile and sit for a minute, silent. Then the searching look on her wizened little face would disappear, and she would lean back in her chair and begin to speak. Her eyes were closed, and her words were every bit as sure and correct as though she was reading them directly from a book. The memories ceased to be conversational when Great Sophie took over; it was understood that when she began to speak, it was our own story that was being told, by someone who had been storing it all up while we had just been letting it unfold.

The old women would rotate for places on the porch--some would go into the house to rest, only to be replaced by others, wandering out of the dark, cool house, blinking in the July sunlight. Great Sophie, however, was a constant. It was good that way. The snags in the stories would have been insurmountable without her. It wasn't until years later that I realized the immense feeling of responsibility Great Sophie must have felt to the family stories during that annual gathering in the summer. Her sense of place as keeper of the flame must have been enormous, to have kept her in her rocking chair from morning till dusk without retreating to the house for a break from the heat. Because even then, even when I first met Great Sophie, at my

first family gathering at Grandma's house, she was very sick. Great Sophie was dying.

When I was nine, Great Sophie did die, of lung cancer. She died in June, and at the family gathering in July, I sat next to Grandma, waiting to see what would happen when someone forgot the details in one of their memories. The old women were talking about my Uncle William, who had been a terrible driver and had hit several people in the family with his car, as well as several less forgiving individuals outside the circle of relatives. Two years before I was born, he had run over his wife, my Aunt Claire, in the driveway of their home in Buffalo. The old women talked about the injuries, and of visiting Claire in the hospital, but none of them could remember where Aunt Claire had been standing when she was hit, or why. I closed my eyes then, and I could hear Great Sophie, the summer before, telling the very part of the story they were missing. I opened my mouth, and then I closed it. And then I looked at Grandma, who had been watching me the whole time. She smiled at me, and squeezed my hand, and nodded. I opened my mouth again, and Great Sophie's words came out. I said:

"Claire was watching the Rosa family from across the road pack their car to go away for the summer. She knew that they were going that day because they had asked her the night before to keep an eye on the house while they were at the shore for two weeks. Claire asked if they needed her to feed the pets, but they had told her that Ashley

Wilkes--that was the cat--and Scarlett--that was the dog--were going with them that year. But Claire looked down the side of the Ford, and saw Ashley Wilkes' tail disappearing behind the car. She could hear the Rosa children looking for him, calling him so that they could put him in his cage for the car trip. So Claire walked behind the car to fetch him for the kids, and wasn't standing beside the car like she usually did, and Bill didn't look, of course, and just piled right into the poor dear. He got out of the car and went to see what he had hit, and there was Claire, lying on the driveway with Ashley Wilkes sitting right on her chest and making a horrible racket. It was only a fractured thigh, and the nurse at the hospital said that it's a very common thing to happen to older couples, and Claire said, 'Are you telling me that? We're the couple who made it a common thing.'"

The old women were all silent while I told the story, and for a few minutes afterwards as well. My Great Aunt Libby opened her mouth to say something, but she never got to. Grandma straightened up in her chair, put her hands on my shoulders and said, "That's exactly right, dear. Exactly. Will you go and fill the lemonade pitcher?" The weight of her hands on my shoulders turned into a slight push, and I went off to the kitchen. I stayed off the porch for the rest of that gathering; I knew that something had happened and I wasn't going back until Grandma had talked to me about it.

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RIDDLE:

Heidi Rickel, a student in my Introduction to Folklore, handed me the following riddle the other day: "Ralph had it once, Len had it before, Paul had it afterwards, and Bryan never did have it. Girls have it once, but boys don't have it at all. Mrs. Mulligan had it twice in a row, and Dr. Lowell had it before and afterward, but he had it twice as bad afterward as he had it before."

It stumped me completely. Try it. Then you can check the answer on page 7.

Keeper of the Flame...

That's how it started, anyway. But that was only the start of it. Grandma was diagnosed with lung cancer the following fall, and the family gathering was moved to Aunt Margaret's home in Buffalo that summer. She didn't have a front porch, and the old women spent their time on the screened-in patio off the back of the house. I spent my time under a tree with an already dog-eared copy of *Dandelion Wine*, that had turned up in my Easter basket that year. By and by Grandma came and sat next to me, and she remarked on how the gathering had changed, and told me that by next year, it would be gone altogether. If that happened, she said, next summer would be the perfect time for us to get started on telling me Great Sophie's stories. Arrangements were made with my parents the following spring, and I went to Grandma's for a six-week stay in the summer of 1982.

That summer was the strangest in my memory to date. I lived part of every day looking through a leather-bound book of mostly black-and-white photographs, meeting people who had been dead for years before my parents were even married. Grandma would tell me stories about relatives and friends of the family, showing me the pictures they were in-- a story for every single picture. Later that day, she would point to a picture and ask me what the story behind it was. I could almost always tell her, word for word. But Grandma's stories were different from the ones Great Sophie told. Grandma told tales in the same style that a J.D. Salinger story reads. She stressed certain words, and almost always started the story on a tangent. She would point to a faded photograph of a group of men in white summer suits, and women in long, slim white dresses, and say, "There was a dog, who lived two yards over from my cousin

Elizabeth, a little terrier who would terrorize the family of cardinals who lived in her woods..." The story would end up really being about Bishop John Neylon coming to visit Elizabeth's family and breaking his leg while trying to cheat at croquet.

Grandma was, in many ways, a better storyteller than Great Sophie. Sophie had known every fact and name there was to know, but Grandma went one step further and took you right into the picture with her. She included people and events that went far beyond what anyone would imagine the picture depicted. But, for some reason or another -- Grandma always said that it was because she had been terribly vain as a young woman, and much too concerned with her appearance to pay attention to anything as lasting as family history-- Grandma had never been the storyteller in our family. It had always been Great Sophie. And now Grandma had decided that it was going to be me.

Few people I have talked to on this subject have had this title bestowed upon them in such a deliberate fashion. Those who do hold down the job as family storyteller say that they are only defined as such by the fact that when the family is sitting around talking, people are likely to turn to them and say, "Tell that story about..." usually these stories are about events that the person had witnessed personally, but they will also be asked to tell stories that they have heard before but were not a part of personally. The storytellers I have met and talked to about this, many of them my friends, have certain things in common. They are good listeners, with good memories. They like old people. They are all women. They genuinely like stories, and often have boxes full of books that go wherever they do. In fact, they have boxes full of just about anything that go wherever they go; they are gatherers. They stand out as storytellers not only

in their families, but also in their social circles-- in my group of friends, my friend Pam and I tell most of the stories. People actually come up to us at parties and ask to be told an amusing tale-- others tell us stories in a one-on-one setting and will then ask us to repeat the story in a group setting of one kind or another. This, too, is common of all the people I have spoken to who tell the stories in their families and social groups. Our friends and families would never refer to us as artists. However, I think that the very way we are singled out as the ones to see when someone wants to know the story behind something, or just a story in general, makes what we do an art.

The family gatherings are a thing of the past. Grandma died in 1984, and left me Great Sophie's amethyst rings and a leather-bound box of family photographs-- pictures of bright-eyed girls at garden parties, and young men with their hair slicked back from their faces, holding triangular high school pennants, and a football helmet that looks more akin to a World War II aviator's headgear than anything else. And I know them all. When my aunts and uncles have questions about their aunts and uncles, I get a phone call. Every member of a family establishes themselves in some kind of role sooner or later. My brother Bill, with his uncanny knack for getting himself into the most ridiculous situations, is the Court Jester. My mother, who is ever serene and patient, even in the most trying of times, is the Resident Mind. My father is not only king, but with his talent for detaching himself from detail and confusion, is Pathfinder-- he can divine the easiest and most sensible way out of any mess. Because of Great Sophie and Grandma, and a liking for books, old women and their ways, I am Keeper of the Flame. It's the nicest, most infinitely comforting job I know of.

A NEW BOOK OF THE SEA

When we brought out *Tom Tilton: Coaster and Fisherman* back in 1984 (actually it was *Northeast Folklore XXIII*: 1982) we included a story about a Captain Pinhead on page 62, just the way Tom told it to Gale Huntington. The book hadn't been out long before I got a smokingly angry letter from one Robert O. Walsh saying he was Captain Pinhead and that story was all wrong and he wanted us to do something to set the record straight. The only thing I could think of was to suggest he write up what really happened and we'd publish it in the Newsletter, which he did and then we did (#30, January 1987). He told his story very well, and since he claimed he had a million of them I suggested he get to work and tell some more. I'm damned if he didn't take me up on it, and I'm doubly damned if now he hasn't gone and published a hundred of them in a book: *Swordfish, Sculpins, and Suds: Memoirs and Adventures By A New England Seaman, Of Seamen, And Other Worthy Characters* (Tilton Brothers: Box 68, Rye, NH. 03870). "First off," he begins in his Preface, "the narratives contained in these pages are true!...My intent in writing these accounts is just to relive old times and adventures, and to pass along to those who love the sea experiences I have had and been through." Some of them are funny, some not so funny, some positively hair-raising, but for sure we can take Bob Walsh at his word: they happened! He did all his writing in Yuma, Arizona, where he now lives. "I'm a lot older now," he says, "and can't do anywhere near the things I used to, but I can make tapes to my buddies that are still alive on the Vineyard and other places, and I can dream and remember! What else has an old sea dog got but memories?" Well, we can thank Bob for sharing a hundred of those memories with us.

Order the books from Tilton Brothers, Publishers. The books will be sent UPS direct to individuals for \$9.95 plus \$2.00 shipping charge. Master Card, Visa, personal checks or money orders O.K.

Annual AFS Meeting At St. John's Newfoundland

The combined American Folklore Society/Canadian Folklore Studies Association meetings were held at the Hotel Newfoundland in St. John's, October 17-20. The grass was greener and the weather warmer than it was either when Bobby and I left Maine or when we returned to it, and the meetings themselves were the best I've attended in many a long day's march. For one thing, there were more sessions on ballads than I've seen in years, and that just happens to be my favorite subject. For another, the acoustics in the meetings rooms was excellent, and that's important for someone as deaf as I am. Finally, the banquet Saturday night was excellent, including such local delicacies as caribou, flipper pie (seal flipper, that is), fish-and-brewis, and salmon, all delicious.

No way I can name all the NFS members I saw there from all over, but from here in Maine there was Teresa Hollingsworth, Folk Arts Coordinator for Northeast Archives; Smokey McKeen, who's done most of the fieldwork for the Maine's Traditional Music series; Robin Hanson, who knows more about New England knitting traditions than anyone else alive, I'm sure; and Peggy Yocom, who is writing a book on the woodcarving Richard family of Rangeley. David Taylor was there, too. He's now Folklife Specialist at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, but he's from Maine and used to be one of the regulars around the Northeast Archives. Ron Labelle of the Centre d'études acadiennes at the University of Moncton, did an interesting tandem presentation with Marge Steiner on Alan Kelley, one of the veteran and star performers at the Miramichi Folksong Festival. And finally, throwing modesty to the winds, I suppose I should add that I was awarded the Canadian Folklore Studies Association's Marius Barbeau Medal "for outstanding contribu-

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tions to the field." It was gratifying.

Another note: Estelle Reddin of the University of Prince Edward Island gave a paper entitled "Neighbors, Cousins and Sojourners -- Linking Foodways," which described a tour she and a group of her Home Economics students took down the eastern seaboard looking for links between the foodways of the Maritimes and the eastern United States. It was good to see P.E.I. represented on the program, and while I missed her presentation I remember talking to her students about bean-hole beans when they landed in Orono on Valentine's Day last.

Sandy Ives.

NORTHEAST FOLKLORE SOCIETY MEETING

The annual meeting of the Board of Directors of the Northeast Folklore Society convened at noon, June 26, 1991. Present were board members Sandy Ives, Joan Brooks, George Carey, Florence Ireland, and Dick Lunt. Also attending were Pauleena MacDougall,

consulting editor of *Northeast Folklore*, and Mary O'Meara, Associate Director of the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History. The board members constituted a quorum for acting on the order of business which follows.

The meeting commenced with the Treasurer's Report, which was read by Pauleena MacDougall and voted upon as accepted by the board. A discussion of journal sales ensued, and the directors were brought up to date on current volumes, volumes in progress, and journal sales. The success of the volume "Damariscove" was noted and an idea was advanced to reissue the first five volumes as a single reprint edition. Joan Brooks resignation as the Secretary Treasurer was approved, and the pro tem duties were assumed by Pauleena MacDougall.

The next item on the agenda was the proposed merger of the Northeast Folklore Society and the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History as a single entity to be called the Maine Folklife Center. The board was apprised of the activities and planning which have led to the "Proposal for Establishing the Maine Folklife Center" and a lively discussion ensued about the rationale behind its creation. Several board members were particularly concerned about the prospects for official University approval and were informed about the strong support which the proposal has already received from Dean Watkins. Members will be kept abreast of the discussions which are presently being held by Dean Watkins with Interim President Hitt and Vice President Brown. The board unanimously agreed to accept the proposed reorganization scheme pending approval by the University of Maine administrative hierarchy and appropriate legal action which is being handled by Sandy.

Motion 1: Pending the approval of the University of Maine, the ex-

ecutive Board of the Northeast Folklore Society empowers the President to take whatever steps are necessary to carry forward the dissolution, merging and transference of assets of the Society into the Maine Folklife Center.

Motion 2: The Northeast Folklore Society Board members will continue until the merger takes place. Both motions were voted on and approved.

In light of the acceptance of the plan for merging NFS and NAFOH, a lengthy discussion took place about increasing the membership base of the current NFS. Sandy advocated the development of a broad grassroots membership as a preliminary step in developing the organization's funding basis, a plan which all agreed was the most logical way to proceed. Several board members expressed their interest in helping the organization communicate its mission and goals to a broader base and to influential individuals within the region. All of the board members reaffirmed their commitment to remain active as board members of the Maine Folklife Center.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Alicia Rouverol, who left her position as Associate Director of the Northeast Archives last fall, worked on several freelance folklore projects here in Maine this past winter, including field research for an exhibit at the Maine Maritime Museum. This summer she undertook a maritime project for the Reedville Fishermen's Museum in Reedville, Virginia, and she is now attending a folklore graduate program at UNC- Chapel Hill. We just want her to know we're all very proud of her and wish her well.

ANSWER TO RIDDLE ON
PAGE 3:

"IT SOUNDS LIKE AN L OF
A DISEASE, DOESN'T IT?"



News From The Northeast Archives of Folklore And Oral History

The last four installments of the Maine Traditional Music Series were aired in September on the Maine Public Broadcasting Network. "Swedish Music of Aroostook," "The Music of the Maine Grange Hall," "Lumbering Songs of the Maine Woods," and "Slavic Music of the Lower Kennebec" provided listeners with selections of music, stories and personal narratives. The original four segments, broadcast on MPBN in 1988, 1989, and 1990, featured the "Music of the St. John River Valley," "Maine's Finnish Communities," "Pioneers of Maine Country Music" and "Songs of the Passamaquoddy." The programs were written and produced by Jeff McKeen and Ernie Freeberg. Audio cassette tapes of the segments, titled, "Maine's Traditional Music, Volumes I, II, III and IV" are available through the Northeast Archives. Funding for the series was provided by the Maine Community Foundation Expansion Arts Fund and the Maine Arts Commission. For more information about the series, and for cassette copies write: Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, So. Stevens, University of Maine, Orono, ME. 04469

This fall the Northeast Archives will coordinate a pilot "traveling trunk" project with the New Sweden Consolidated Elementary School in New Sweden. The project will incorporate the Northeast Archives' existing materials pertaining to Maine's Swedish folklife in addition to encouraging students to explore their local history, community and family folklife, and oral history. The traveling trunk is expected to be available to schools across the state in the fall of 1992.

MAINE ARTS, INC.

Maine Arts, Inc. plans an extensive program of folk arts presentations for the 1991-92 season. In addition to folk arts components associated with its two major festivals, the Maine Festival and New Year's Portland, Maine Arts, Inc. produced regional folk arts samplers in Sanford (November 22) and Presque Isle (November 24) and will produce more in the spring in Machias and Bethel.

Program coordinator Jeff McKeen sees these public presentations as a vital corollary to the field work he has conducted throughout the state over the past several years. "Providing a showcase, a forum for folk artists lets them know that their work is valued by the community they live in. It also makes that community more aware of the rich variety of its own cultural roots."

The sampler in Presque Isle featured artists from that area's Native American, Swedish, Acadian and "Yankee" populations. Work presented in Sanford included Cambodian and Franco American music and dance.

The 1991 Maine Festival featured a traditional arts area which included a tent dedicated entirely to demonstrations of folk arts and crafts, a variety of folk dance workshops and several music performances as well.

Further information about any of these activities is available through Maine Arts, Inc., 582 Congress Street, Portland, ME 04101. Telephone (207) 772-9012.

This One Didn't Happen!

About a week before Halloween this year I began hearing that there was going to be a mass murder, maybe on the University of Maine campus. The details varied some, but in general the story was very consistent. It would take place on Halloween on a college campus on a river and on the east coast, it would happen in either an L or T-shaped building, and twenty-seven people would be killed. I also heard that not only had it been predicted by "a lady" (no further identification) but also by Nostradamus himself, and that the rumor had been given air time by both "Oprah" and "Donahue." The day before, word came through that two local colleges had canceled classes on Halloween and even that they had sent students home (I have checked that out, and of course they had done neither one). It should be pointed out further that this was no stray rumor that I picked up from one or two wide-eyed students; the majority of the students in my Introduction to Folklore had heard it in one form or another, and I can assure everyone that they are no more wide-eyed than I am, which is not very wide-eyed at all.

Needless to say, nothing of the sort happened. Halloween passed peacefully and bloodlessly, and so far as I can see the whole business had been amiably forgotten about. That's about par, since we tend to remember successful instances and forget failures. But, card-carrying skeptic that I am, I wanted to get this in here for the specific purpose of documenting a rather significant failure. Of course, someone pointed out to me that five people were shot to death on the Iowa State University campus in Iowa City the day after Halloween. As far as I'm concerned, that's about like predicting that California will fall into the sea tomorrow and then pointing out after the fact that there had been a bad rockslide near Big Sur that day.

-e.d.i.

**THE NORTHEAST FOLKLORE SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER**

EDITORS:

**EDWARD D. (SANDY) IVES
PAULEENA M. MACDOUGALL**

CONGRATULATIONS SANDY!

**For all of your many accomplishments,
but especially for receiving the 1991 Canadian-American Understanding Award November 14, 1991. The award recognizes your outstanding contributions to promoting friendship and awareness between the two countries.**

-PMM

NORTHEAST FOLKLORE SOCIETY
NORTHEAST
FOLKLORE

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