Questing with Alan Lomax: Michigan’s Historic Field Recordings Inspire a New Generation

by Laurie Kay Sommers and Samuel Seth Bernard

“What a place Traverse City is a-comin’ to be!” Retired lumberjack Lester Wells once sang these words while sitting with his aging buddies in Launtner’s Tavern (now Union Street Station—still a bar with live music) in downtown Traverse City, Michigan. The folklorist Alan Lomax recorded the song by cutting a 12-inch disc on the spot with his Presto instantaneous disc recorder. The year was 1938, and Lomax—then a 23-year-old Assistant in Charge at the Archive of Folk-Song—was in the midst of a 10-week folk music collecting trip of the “Lakes States,” gathering examples of Michigan’s rich trove of traditional song to enrich the Archive’s holdings at the Library of Congress.

Seventy-five years later, a new generation discovered Lomax’s recordings and made them their own. The Quest—A Celebration of Community was an innovative, place-based afterschool arts program in seven underserved schools in northwest Lower Michigan. Seth Bernard, Artistic Director of the Quest, envisioned a project in which participants would “embark on a creative adventure, discovering the awesomeness of both our place and our path, and in doing so, to co-create a professional performance to share with our communities.”¹ The Finale concert featured students’ artwork and collaboratively written songs, inspired by Lomax’s 1938 Michigan recordings. The culminating performance took place May 9, 2014, in front of several hundred friends, family, and community members in the historic Traverse City Opera House, just around the corner from where Lomax made his 1938 Traverse City recordings.

The Quest concluded a five-year federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant to SEEDS, a Traverse City nonprofit. Community Learning Center grants provide “academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children.”²
The main goal of the Quest “is to empower youth to create change.” SEEDS literature continues: “Empowering youth means helping them tap into their own sources of power and supporting them as they find their own voices. As they gain confidence in one arena, they are able to bring a confident attitude to others.”

The 2014 Quest project highlighted here was the second of the series of “Quests,” immersive arts and education experiences organized around differing themes. In the pilot year, the theme was “Personal Resilience.” Year 2 leveraged the 75th anniversary of Alan Lomax’s Michigan folksong recordings. Year 3 (2015), “The Quest for Something Fresh,” explored the agricultural bounty of the region through music and art.

SEEDS has been working in northwest Lower Michigan since 1999, providing innovative hands-on learning experiences that help bridge the achievement gap between poor and rich schools. SEEDS focuses on local solutions to global problems—with an emphasis on energy sustainability, community-building, and ecological issues—and has a 15-year track record of weaving arts into their programs by partnering with two local arts organizations, Blackbird Arts in Traverse City and Earthwork Music Collective. For most SEEDS students, arts education has been partially or completely cut from the school experience or is available only to those who can pay extra. Through experienced and professional art educators, SEEDS provides youth “with opportunities to engage in the creative arts using the entire artistic cycle from inspiration to formation to production to performance or display.”

The Quest 2014—with its focus on local place and heritage inspired by the Lomax 1938 recordings—was the first SEEDS project to coalesce around an archival folksong collection. Throughout the spring semester, 80 to 100 middle- and high-school students from Benzie Central, Brethren, Forest Area, Frankfort, Kalkaska, Manistee, and Suttons Bay schools prepared for the project Finale by investigating local history, exploring personal journeys, learning songs from the Lomax archives, and writing new material for the concert production.

The Quest unfolded over four months, fostering a rich learning experience for participants. In addition to the Lomax materials, individual sites explored local cultural heritage in different ways. Suttons Bay students, for example, identified significant historic places in their county and then researched historic photos of the same locations. Their PowerPoint presentation—enhanced by audio from the Lomax Michigan Collection—ran as a "prelude" to the Quest Finale as audience members entered the auditorium. At Brethren, where students chose a lumberjack ballad as their muse, they visited a local historical museum and a still functioning Civilian Conservation Corps Camp. They also went to one of their local places—Tippy Dam, on the nearby Manistee River—and performed the song they had written for a fisherman they met there. Seth Bernard recalled that these local explorations "really added depth to the experience for the students.”

In addition to collaborative songwriting and place-based learning, students created original backdrops and a life-sized Lomax puppet for the Finale, incorporated sound recording technology, and shared their works in progress through a Dropbox. As Sarna Salzman, SEEDS Executive Director, explained to the Finale audience, “This is the face of 21st century education. This is reading and writing and core academics. This is STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math]. We’re dealing with sound equipment, amplification, and chord structures.... This is also community place making. This is the grand vision in action. This is history. This is intergenerational engagement. This is pride of place. And, most importantly, and what inspires me the most, this is the voice of youth. Our youth. These are their thoughts, their dreams, their reflections.”
The Quest emerged from a remarkable synergy of timing and organizations. SEEDS was in the final stages of its grant-funded collaboration with Earthwork Music and Blackbird Arts. Seth Bernard, co-founder of Earthwork Music, and Sarna Salzman of SEEDS were brainstorming about creating something wonderful for their last semester of funding. Enter Todd Harvey, curator of the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, and AFC’s project to digitize the 1938 Alan Lomax Collection of Michigan and Wisconsin Recordings.

The Library hoped these Michigan materials would inspire new models for making archival holdings accessible and interesting to new audiences, including young people. Todd knew of Earthwork Music, a group of Michigan singer-songwriters who believe in the intrinsic and historical power of music to raise community and self-awareness and facilitate and encourage original music, so he reached out to Seth at just the right time, offering to make the digitized recordings available prior to their planned public launch on the Library of Congress website.

Alan Lomax returned to Traverse City in more ways than one. Throughout the Quest Finale, the audience heard samples from the 1938 Lomax recordings that inspired the student work, listened to the voice of Lomax explaining his impressions of Michigan, and watched as three students manipulated a life-sized papier-mâché Lomax puppet, created with the guidance of artists from Blackbird Arts in Traverse City. Photo by Laurie Kay Sommers, courtesy of Michigan State University Museum.

The timing was serendipitous. Seth realized that the Lomax Michigan Collection could form the basis for an amazing student quest that would explore music, place, personal journeys, creativity, and collaboration. Seth had previously written a song titled “Keep Up the Quest” with lyrics that shaped his idea of “questing” as a trope for creative empowerment: “Whatever you do, it’s up to you, Don’t let them bring it down. Whatever you do, will come true. Once done, you can’t undo. Keep it collective, we love you. Keep up the Quest....” For Seth and the other project educators, collaborative songwriting was a “positive, fun, participatory” technique “to empower kids to find their creative voice and to develop a relationship with the creative process that works for them.”

Composing songs that explore the possible and the potential in students’ lives—although extremely valuable—is not inherently a folklore-in-education project. What folklore—and in this case, the
Lomax Collection—adds is the crucial connection to past and place. With Lomax providing the source material, the result, as Seth puts it, is “music that is true to the times that we live in and also dips into the rich, local cultural heritage.”

The Quest—A Celebration of Community represents a replicable case study for engaging students in community, history, and traditional music through collaborative songwriting. Cultivating youth empowerment is key. The project’s success derived from creative, experiential group learning in which students helped shape the project from start to finish. After a final public performance, students realize they can do anything—and then they do it again. The semester-long format allowed for deeper personal relationships to develop between educators and students. Some of the same students and musicians had been involved for several years in SEEDS afterschool programs, further enhancing trust and safe learning environments. Earthwork musicians came to see themselves as mentors: professional working musicians “showing up” and showing interest in students’ lives and creative potential.

Helping students find their creative voice and empowering them through all phases of an immersive, cooperative project has inherent value and can be organized around all kinds of themes. The critical piece of this project for folklore and education is the use of an historic folksong collection that has local relevance to the participating students. These students connected with Alan Lomax’s 1938 Michigan Collection. Other online historic folksong collections will resonate with students from other regions of the country (see American Folklife Center, Online Collections and Presentations). A growing body of research links increased self-esteem, pride, and ownership in accomplishments, increased student interest in learning and comprehension, and positive relationships between students, teachers, and the community, to the kind of learning evidenced in the Quest.

At the close of the Quest Finale, Seth offered his take on the benefits of the project. Through exploring their creative potential, students learned to support each other and take calculated creative risks. Through exploration of the historic songs in the Lomax Michigan Collection, they expanded their musical boundaries. As Seth told the audience, "It’s so wonderful when our circle of understanding and compassion widens. That's what the arts do for us." And when the students were told that their songs and performance were being documented and archived by the Michigan State University Museum (just as the earlier field recordings by Alan Lomax had been archived by the Library of Congress), everyone cheered. In the words of “The Presto Machine,” a collaborative song created during the project,