

Ermina Pincombe: Music in an Adirondack Family

By Dave Ruch

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"I was born and raised in Wells, my father was born and raised in Wells, his father before him, and his grandfather, right back...to Moses Craig."

Benson NY Town Supervisor and resident Ermina Craig Pincombe can trace her family history in the Wells area back to the year 1796, when her ancestor Moses Craig came to "set up housekeeping". The first organizational meeting of the Town of Wells was held at his house on April 1, 1805.

That house still stands today, approximately 15 miles north of Benson on property backing up to the Sacandaga River. Just above the house on Buttermilk Hill, Moses Craig kept sheep. Ermina's grandparents would later take care of that farm; her father was born there with his grandmother acting as midwife.

Ermina was born on June 7, 1930 to Otto and Isabella (nee Buyce) Craig. The oldest of three children, she has early memories of going into the woods hunting with her father.

"When I was so little that I couldn't walk - - my legs were too short to walk in the snow - - he'd carry me in a pack basket. Yeah (laughs), I went every place my father went....he fixed up a hook and he had a little heavy string, and when I was in the pack basket he hung the dead rabbits over the edge of the pack basket on a hook with a little string and the little dead rabbit hangin' down there that I could reach way over and feel his fuzzy feet (laughs)."

The three Craig children were raised in the Pilgrim Holiness Church, where "most revelry was taboo, and you didn't enjoy yourself very much". Ermina remembers long Sundays inside the house or sitting on the porch after church "listening to mother read", or "counting the cars going by"; play was not allowed on the holy day.

She grew up with rich stories of life in the Adirondack woods from ancestors on both sides of the family. Her grandfather Buyce (b. 1882) went to work in the woods at the age of ten running errands, helping the camp cook, carrying lunches and water back and forth, and taking care of the horses. When he was a little older he drove the teams of horses, and went on to "ride the logs" as a riverdriver for many years. This was especially dangerous work because he never learned how to swim. According to Ermina, he used the traditional lumberman's pike pole not only to handle logs and break jams in the river but also to support himself when he fell. He would hold the pole horizontally in both hands to keep himself from going under.

"You won't hear that told by many people because they don't know it...that's what saved his life more than one time....he was so strong he'd pull himself right back upon the log by keeping pressure on the logs that were surrounding him with that pole in his hands."

Grace (nee Wood) Craig, Ermina's grandmother on the other side of the family, grew up with a woodsman father described as "a big drinker". After losing a sister to the whooping cough and her mother soon after to consumption (tuberculosis), Grace and her three remaining siblings went to live with their aunt Abby Nichols in the Piseco/Speculator area. Aunt Abby was married to Civil War veteran Abram R L Parslow (b. 1842). "Dad Parslow", as the Wood children referred to him, took the four siblings in and raised them along with one child of his own on his Civil War pension of \$10.13 a month. Ermina has his pension papers.

"He had some chickens, he had a cow or two so they had milk, every year or so he'd walk his cow someplace where there was a bull, they'd have a little calf to raise. He would butcher a cow or pig occasionally, he'd get a deer once in a while."

Ermina has taken an active interest in learning about her family's history in the area, and the history of the area itself. What she doesn't know from her wealth of family stories and papers, she researches. She also serves as President of the Hamilton County Historical Society.

"People will look at me and they'll say 'you're related to everybody'. Well, we've been here since 1796, I mean there's quite a few generations, they're bound to propagate. You're bound to know a lot of people"

Ermina Pincombe considers herself 100% Adirondack.

"I love the Adirondacks. I'm proud of it! Hunters, trappers, people that care for the woods. I'm an Adirondack native. I was born here, I didn't come here."

MUSIC

Like so many Adirondack musicians, Ermina grew up with music around the house. Her father Otto Craig played tenor banjo and fiddle, her Uncle "Pete" Archlus Craig and grandfather played the fiddle, her grandmother played piano and sang, and her mother also played piano. Grandmother Craig sang around the house, they all played for dances, and Uncle Pete even composed a few songs of his own. The Craigs also heard and sang "rousing beautiful songs" at the Pilgrim Holiness Church, and the children sang in Bible School from an early age.

Much of the family music can be traced back to Civil War veteran Abram Parslow, who was both a fiddler and singer. Parslow came back from the Civil War with many new pieces he'd learned there, and apparently played and sang "all the time". Ermina's grandmother Grace Craig was right there to absorb it all.

"They just sat around in the evening and, ah, peeled apples and sang. On a winter's evening, and the fire all nice and cozy. My grandpa Buyce did the same thing but he couldn't sing, he didn't have any songs. But they'd pop popcorn and sit in front of the fireplace and just visit. They didn't have much of anything, they just had each other, and that's what mattered to them. Those were hard times, too."

Grace Craig would go on to sing many of Dad Parslow's songs to a very young Ermina, who wasted no time picking them up when she was "just little". Indeed, the songs were part of daily life around the Craig house.

“She’d be sitting at a table and we had eaten and they used to just sit around and visit you know and she’d start singing a song. It was neat. Once in a while it would get my uncle and my father to get their instruments and they could play along with her a little bit.”

Grandmother Craig also related the stories behind the songs, as told by Parslow, to her granddaughter. Ermina recognized the importance of these old treasures. Once Grace Craig had passed away and Ermina had grown into adulthood, she found that she had “catches”, “whole sections” of the songs in her memory, but didn’t “have them all together”, so she researched and has found full texts for most of them.

The songs of Abe Parslow’s that made it down through Grace Craig to Ermina include a number of popular sentimental songs of the late 19th/early 20th century (Katie Lee and Willie Gray, The Old Wooden Rocker, When the Bees are in the Hive, Just Tell Them That You Saw Me) and a handful of Civil War songs (The Year of Jubilo, Old Johnny Smoker and Marching Through Georgia).

Grandmother Craig also passed some of her own singing repertoire on to her granddaughter. Ermina learned her grandmother’s unique version of The Lumberjack’s Alphabet, one of the most popular songs from the lumberwoods, at a young age. She sings it today just as she learned it, with her own guitar accompaniment added for good measure.

Grace Craig was also a fine piano player who played chords for many dances with her fiddling husband Rob Craig.

“She could play any chord, any key, perfect rhythm, but never picked up a stringed instrument of any kind.”

Even though she never fiddled herself, she had Abe Parslow’s fiddle tunes firmly lodged in her memory, and was able to hum or whistle them with great accuracy to her sons and granddaughter. Grace’s years of exposure to Parslow’s fiddling also left her with a sure sense of the “correct” tempo for each of the pieces he played. She would use her piano or simply her voice to convey these lessons to her sons, who learned fiddling from their father Rob Craig.

“When the boys played, she’d say ‘you’ve gotta get this a little bit better boys, it’s not just like that, listen to your mother.’ And she would do it again and again. My Uncle Pete got it (the rhythm) pretty good, he was better (than my father), but he couldn’t remember the names.”

Parslow’s sure sense of tempo and rhythm was also passed on to Ermina, directly from Grandma Craig:

“I know the difference between a hornpipe and a reel and a jig and all these different things. The tempo makes a big difference...you know, just playing, that’s not it.”

According to Ermina, her father’s fiddle rhythm “wasn’t what it should be”. Grandmother Craig was proactive in making sure that Ermina internalized the gospel of Abe Parslow.

“My grandma would take me on her knee when I was tiny, and she’d say ‘listen to me - this is the time that goes with that tune, not just exactly the way your Dad plays it’. And she’d trot her foot,

and me on her knee, so I got that rhythm, and she'd hang on both my hands, and she'd dum-de-dum-de-dum-de-dum like this, until it was drilled into my head. It was a heritage she was giving me."

Asked to explain the fiddling style of her family, Pincombe had this to say:

"They just played, I can't explain it, but they did no little trills, they did no little finger work, uh, they just plain played, just like if I just sat down and played my banjo or something and just picked out one note at a time and didn't chord anything mixed in with it, you know what I mean? They didn't develop their own style or anything, they just played. And in mostly G, and D. They never played in C, and I don't think they ever played in A, and I used to chord with them both (on the guitar)."

"(French Canadian fiddlers played) so many more fill notes. They do the little trills, they do the little runs into the next section of the tune. My father and my uncle never did that. Neither did my Grandpa Craig. They'd never been exposed to that. They didn't know anybody who did it, they didn't play with anybody, just themselves, and old grandpa was who they learned from, and he didn't do it so how would they know? They didn't know."

Ironically, there didn't seem to be any other families playing this informal, home-based music in Wells, or at least not during the 1930's and 1940's when Ermina was growing up.

"I wasn't associated with anyone else who played any music. Nobody around ever played it. They danced their feet right off, but not to pick up an instrument. They'd come and stand around our front porch and listen to it when we played outside."

Ermina's first stringed instrument was the banjo-ukulele, something her father brought home one day when she was just 5 years old. She took to it straightaway.

"He went out and sat down someplace and then it wasn't but a second, and I mean it was immediately I was playing, umm, (thinks...) Old Aunt Nabby!"

"But you see, I watched, and it's the same fingering as the fiddle, and as the tenor banjo, and so I knew where the fifth position was, and I just knew, and I just ran my fingers up & down those strings and I picked it right out. He comes around that corner and in there where I was - - 'I don't believe it', he said 'you are gonna be a musician like the rest of us'."

By the age of 9, Ermina was playing tenor banjo in addition to the banjo-uke, and the lure of the fiddle became strong.

*"My father's fiddle laid right on the dining room table. If he was home at lunchtime (from work) he'd eat his lunch, he'd go pick up his fiddle and play 2 or 3 tunes, and then he'd unstring the bow, just turn it back a little ways and lay it right back down there. I was told not to touch it, but when I got about 9 years old, one day he laid it down there, he says 'if you want to try that while I'm gone, you can try it, you won't hurt it'. That's how I learned to play. Three, four days went by, and he came home and he said did you ever pick that fiddle up and try anything, and I said 'yeah I can play a tune', so I played *Marching Through Georgia* (laughs), and he couldn't believe it. After that, he got me my own."*

Ermina thinks it was around this same time that she first learned to play the guitar. Not surprisingly, she met with instant success in spite of the fact that there were no other guitar players in the family. Uncle Pete had given Ermina's mother a guitar as a gift, but she soon got disgusted with it after *"not being able to instantly play it"*. The guitar was hung on the wall, and the kids were admonished not to touch it. One day when Ermina was home sick from school and her mother was out to the post office and the store, Ermina took the guitar down off the wall. She had found several chords before her mother got home.

"My Aunt Jenny had given me a book and it was cowboy songs, and over it there were chord formations. I had studied that, and I had that in the piano stool at the house, and every afternoon I'd lay there instead of reading a book, I'd study those chords. When (my mother) got back, (the guitar) was on the wall like nothing ever happened, she had no idea."

INSERT: Graphic: show picture of Ermina's "Cowboy Songs" book

About two weeks later, Ermina's father and Uncle Pete sat down to play music with Otto on tenor banjo and Uncle Pete playing fiddle.

"Dad said 'boy I can't wait till Ermina gets old enough to play an instrument with us. I just wish she'd play that damned instrument that I couldn't play'. I said 'well...(laughs)' and Dad said 'I've got a feeling somebody's been doing something when mother is at the store.' So he got it for me. I chorded with them. From then on every time they played I played with them."

Ermina went on to play as much music as she could throughout her growing up years, both with family members and on her own. She was able to put guitar chords to many of the songs Grandmother Craig had taught her simply by using her ear (*"I just always knew what the chords should sound like"*), and ended up playing out in the larger community as well.

"There was nobody (that played guitar) in the school, and when we had our senior play (it) was 'Aaron Slick from Pun'kin Crick', and it was like the name sounds – hillbilly – and they made moonshine and all this and it was a story built around that theme. Well, they needed a guitar player. Well, there was nobody else that could play a guitar, so I brought mine and played it. It was neat. I've always done that kind of stuff."

As a young adult, Ermina continued to play all of these instruments. Though she has always most enjoyed playing socially with other musicians, strictly for fun, she has done plenty of "professional jobs" at community events and festivals as well. She's played lots of dances too, but always as a guitarist backing up another fiddler; she prefers to keep her fiddling as a home-based and/or social activity.

In 1959, Admurl "Farel" Lambert came with his fiddle from Kingsport Tennessee to work building the dam in Wells. He and Ermina played music every night that entire summer, both recreationally and for area dances. One of the places they played was The Forks campsite at the confluence of the East and West Branches of the Sacandaga River, former site of a big dance hall. Lambert played "longbow" style with *"huge hands"* capable of making double stops (playing two notes in harmony at the same time) with one finger *"to make a blend of notes that was stupendous."* After Lambert returned home that fall, they remained long-distance friends

for some thirty years, with him coming up to a fiddler's event in Cobleskill each year and Ermina making occasional trips down south to visit.

Vic Kibler (link), a distant cousin of Ermina's, was another frequent musical partner.

"His music and mine are the very same. When I sat down with him for the first time he says 'you know these same tunes that I do! Usually a guitar player, I have to teach them'. The night that we went over to Sitting Bull dude ranch, just outside of Warrensburg, he and I played for three hours and never stopped. Those people just went wild."

According to Ermina, both Farel and Vic considered her the best backup guitarist they'd played with.

"I play rhythm guitar, I don't do any fingerpicking, I never learned that. I use a pick, and I have a dominant bass, and that's what you need for a fiddler to keep a steady beat."

She also likes to mention Randy Kerr of Greig NY, an octogenarian fiddler and musician with whom she loves to play when time and circumstances allow. Ermina considers Kerr's fiddling "pure Scottish", and claims to be one of his favorite accompanists as well.

Ermina plays what could generally be called "Carter Family style" guitar, playing individual bass notes on each downbeat and alternating those with rhythmic strums and short single-note runs to connect the chords. Asked today about the origins of her guitar style, given that there were no family role models to learn from, it turns out that radio and commercial recordings of the 1930's and 1940's played an important role.

"I bet I got it (my rhythm guitar style) from Lee Moore, because that's how he played...little runs, alternating bass...that's ideal for fiddle. That's what they need – the structure."

While neither of Ermina's two siblings picked up on any of the family music, her son David Pincombe certainly did. David is, like his mother, both a singer and instrumental musician, and has been known to perform duets with his mother that "sound like one voice coming from two people". A busy computer-aided design (CAD) operator in Gloversville, David doesn't find as much time for music these days as his mother might like. When we hear Ermina describe her son in musical terms though, it's hard to miss the similarities between David and someone we've already met - - his great grandmother Grace Craig.

"My son has music in him. Retentive memory. He hears anything, the entire song, he's got the tune. He can play chords on the mandolin (and piano) like you wouldn't believe; his rhythm is impeccable."

Ermina's current singing repertoire is a mix of old country, folk and Victorian-era sentimental pieces she's learned from radio, recordings, concerts and fellow musicians alongside some of the older family pieces she grew up with. She keeps several binders at home full of song lyrics along with set lists from past engagements and other musical notes.

The tunes she likes to play on fiddle, mandola or tenor banjo come from an equally broad spectrum, from Scottish and American fiddle tunes she's learned recently from Randy Kerr to

familiar dance pieces she's been hearing her whole life to a few old unnamed ditties handed down from Civil War veteran Abe Parslow.

Today, with her only child busy with work and other modern-day concerns, and few if any local musicians with whom she can play, Ermina has given herself over to long hours of work for the Town of Benson as Town Supervisor. Contrasting her area with Speculator, a nearby town where *"just about everybody played, every family had a musician"*, she admits some frustration, and worries that her family's legacy of homemade music may be coming to an end.

"I get hungry for someone to play music with me, because it's in me and I want to get it out. I wish it were like in Appalachia, I mean, they care, and everybody wants to join in. That's what's fun!"

At age 77, Ermina Pincombe is just as eager as ever to play music. With tenor banjo, guitar, fiddle and mandola at the ready in the cozy Benson home she shares with her son, she treasures the opportunity to make music with friends.

EPILOGUE:

One of the songs in Ermina's binders is a piece entitled "The West River Guide", composed by her uncle Archlus "Pete" Craig sometime around 1970. It's a local tale about The Whitehouse, a small old weathered woodframe building on the West Branch of the Sacandaga River where her grandmother Grace Craig used to cook and clean. Ermina explains that the hunting camp/boarding house was owned by Lee Fountain (famed Adirondack furniture maker) and his wife Octavia ("Ott"). The West River Guide was a man named Pat Conway, a Frenchman from Wells who served as hunting guide and general raconteur. The heyday of The White House was from the late 1920's through the 1930's; Ermina remembers going up there as a very young girl and being treated to freshly baked cookies in the kitchen.

THE WEST RIVER GUIDE

Now over the hills in the valley, nine miles of dirt road through the woods
Is a spot that will long be remembered, it's the spot where the old Whitehouse stood
Now it's gone but it left us some memories, all memories to share far and wide
Of that old Fountain home in that valley, and a home for the West River Guide

As you approached it and looked down that valley, it looked like a big western ranch
But 'twas only a farmhouse in history, built on that West River Branch
If you stand on the top of a mountain, and gaze in that valley below
You can picture that old redskin Indian, that claimed it for home years ago

'Twas a year around home for the Fountains, in summer a fisherman's dream
And a sightseeing ride in the evening, along that old West River stream
In the fall 'twas a home for the hunter, from cities they came far and wide
Each group had a cabin to stay in, 'n' there was one for the West River Guide

There was one guide we all loved to be with, he was rugged, he wore a sloughed hat

And all stories were topped 'round the fireside, by the West River Guide they called Pat
With all hunters that came to that valley, Pat was the favorite guide
He knew all of the trails through those mountains, and he knew where the big buck would hide

Now I love to go back 'n' just stand there, it takes me back years as I look
I can see Mother there in the kitchen, for she was the West River cook
I can smell that food now as it's cookin', I can see those big platters of meat
And the gang all around that old table, relivin' their days as they eat

The cook in the kitchen 'fore daylight, I can still hear that early morn' call
As they came from their cabins for breakfast, in the gusty fresh air in the Fall
'N' that old guide that owned that whole valley, he would tell us tales no one could b'lieve
But he grinned as he left us in wonder, a-wipin' his face with his sleeve

Now it's maintained for the wanderin' litterbug, the state finally owns that whole tract
But each time that I go to that valley, I wish for those Good Ol' Days back
Yes, there's memories we just cannot part with, those good times around the fireside
I know we'll all miss that old Whitehouse, and we'll all miss the West River Guide!

-Written by Archlus "Pete" Craig of Wells, New York c. 1970