

Adirondack Minstrel. Produced and directed by Jack Offield. Photographed by Richard Francis. 19 minutes, 16 mm., color. Distributor: Bowling Green Films, Inc., 1976.

Reviewed by William Thatcher

The Adirondack region of upstate New York has characteristically been an area rich in the folk traditions of the logging industry. The local ballads which were sung in lumber camps and the dance tunes which were played at neighborhood "house parties" are all part of a tradition which is in its own way unique to this area. Lawrence Older has been a part of this tradition, and his talent as a musician, as well as his first-hand knowledge of the Adirondacks, makes him the perfect candidate for a film entitled Adirondack Minstrel. The intention of this film--to pay tribute to Lawrence Older and to portray his music as a meaningful expression of the local history and culture of the Adirondacks--is a good one. Unfortunately, the film falls short of these goals as the film maker's romantic point of view and unnecessary concern for the opinions of outside "authorities" obscure the real subjects at hand--Lawrence Older and Adirondack music.

For the sake of review, the film can be sorted into three sections. The first of these is basically a series of performances in which Lawrence either sings with his own guitar accompaniment or plays his fiddle. Between these performances are inserted comments by people whom we are led to believe are "folk music experts," most notably Pete Seeger. There are several problems with this portion of the film, the first being the unusual and seemingly contrived settings in which Lawrence's performance take place. This is not a problem in the opening song, which is sung from a cedar deck porch overlooking a placid lake--a perfectly credible circumstance as well as a convenient combination of a domestic setting with the natural beauty of the Adirondack region. The problem arises, however, as Lawrence sings his second song while perched on the top of a stone wall in the middle of a cemetery. The viewer has every right to be suspicious of this scene, as it probably reflects the film maker's desire to romanticize traditional music. This "rustic romanticism" is brought to an obvious extreme as the directors next plopp their subject down on a pile of pine needles in the middle of a forest where he is then asked to play his fiddle for the camera. If the directors had had a concern for the appropriate setting, they might have listened to Pete Seeger's enthusiastic recollection of the evening he had spent years ago in the Older's kitchen, singing and swapping songs with members of the family. Instead of following Seeger's comment with an illustration of music as a domestic activity, the film turns to the other extreme: a public concert featuring Lawrence and his wife at the Blue Mountain Lake Arts Center.

Besides the choice of musical settings, another problem with this part of the film and with the film in general is the great emphasis which is placed on the comments of Seeger and other outsiders. This is not to imply that what these people say is not true; it just seems unnecessary to tell us things about Lawrence which we can easily find out by watching the screen. If other characters were included for the sake of interest, then why were not the peers of Lawrence Older consulted? Certainly Mrs. Older knows her husband better than anyone else does and yet she was silent. Comments from people who are close to Lawrence and part of the same tradition would definitely have provided better insight into the subject of this film.

This point is predicated on the success of the second part of the film, wherein Lawrence talks about his music and relates it to local history and to his own experiences as a young logger. His comments are quite meaningful and informative, as he is a self-conscious and articulate musician who expresses a genuine affection for the musical tradition of which he is a part. His personal reminiscence of the logging camps as they existed when he was a boy are accompanied by still photographs of the old-time loggers. For the first time in the film we are given a sense of historical depth; the only problem is that it doesn't last long enough.

The last portion of the film returns to the Blue Mountain Lake Arts Center where Lawrence

is performing for a crowd of people. Again the setting is inappropriate. Lawrence himself said in the second part of the film "I'm no entertainer; I just like to sing the old songs." Nevertheless, Lawrence Older, the "Adirondack minstrel," is portrayed in the coffeehouse setting with microphones, lights, and all the other paraphernalia that is included in this modern conception of a "folk" performance. Thus it seems that this film is probably more valuable as a reflection of the attitudes and values of the folk music revivalists than as a true representation of Lawrence Older and his music. For this reason, as well as others, the film perhaps should be avoided by instructors who are not prepared to explain these distinctions to their audiences.