

# *Our Story Bridge:* Engaging Folklore in the Digital Age

BY JERRY Y. HUNTLEY, MLS, AND JANELLE A. SCHWARTZ, PHD

“My name is Russell Banks and I’m a writer, but this is not a story about me.” On September 6, 2019, internationally acclaimed author Russell Banks recorded his own true story about a singular afternoon he experienced 25 years ago in Keene, New York. He was at the post office, the proverbial water cooler for picking up the news in our small town, when he saw his

friend and fellow writer, Alex Shoumatoff, with 24 Rwandan refugees in the back of his pickup truck. “This is not a normal sight in Keene,” he admitted. A rural, mountain town with 1,100 mostly white residents, Keene sits in the heart of the High Peaks in the Adirondack Park of upstate New York. As Banks continued, these Rwandans “were of all different ages. Men

and women, boys, and girls, young and old, and Alex was taking them all out for pizza and asked me, ‘where can [I] get a pizza for 24 people?’” “I actually didn’t know how to answer him,” Banks recalls with a laugh” (Banks 2016).

It turned out that Shoumatoff, who is married to a Rwandan woman, had arranged for his wife’s extended family to



School buses in back of school, 1945, with Steve Feinberg, Milton Hartsow, Ernest LaPine, and Vincent Beede. *All images used with permission from the Keene Valley Library Association Archives.*

receive visiting visas to the United States; it was 1994, during the Rwandan genocide between the Hutus and the Tutsis, and as Banks tells it, the family of Shoumatoff's wife "were all under dire threat of being butchered because they were Tutsis." Shoumatoff managed to bring them to safety in New York—at the time, however, the United States was not accepting victims of the genocide in Rwanda as refugees. They couldn't stay in Keene.

This oral story, with its bullish, charming conclusion, is titled "Refugee Crisis in Keene" and can be heard among the many three-to-five-minute stories being recorded and collected as part of a grassroots oral history project, *Adirondack Community: Capturing, Retaining, and Communicating the Stories of Who We Are* (<http://www.my-adirondackstory.org/>). Sponsored by the Keene Valley Library, *Adirondack Community* is an ongoing local story project that collects and organizes audio stories and related photographs from Town of Keene community members through an online platform. Since the project's launch on June 15, 2019, to the time of this article's writing, online access remains free to its over 225 posted stories and 18 curated podcasts, with more being added regularly. By collecting the stories of our local region, from the old generations and the new, *Adirondack Community* has quickly become a shared and treasured resource, a valuable teaching tool in schools, and a powerful ameliorative in times of crisis. Debby Rice, a long-time resident of Keene, reveals that "on cold winter evenings in our harsh Adirondack climate, I often felt sad, so I'd listen to stories on *Adirondack Community* and hear about people in this community helping each other through multiple disasters and challenges. The stories warmed my heart and helped me get through two COVID winters" (Rice 2021).

### **"A repository of community memory"**

In 2013, after visiting the Adirondacks season after season for most of her life, Jerry Huntley bought a small cottage in

Keene Valley, New York, a rural hamlet within the Town of Keene. She retired one year later and now spends half of each year in Keene and the other half in Washington, DC. After a lifetime of volunteer work, intermingled with heavy family and career responsibilities—including work in the New York State Assembly and the US House of Representatives—as well as early career work as a school librarian and teacher in New York, Huntley found that her energy and skills would best serve our Keene Valley Library by providing fundraising assistance as a volunteer for their Capital Campaign. After the campaign's successful conclusion, she and Keene Valley Library Director Karen Glass talked more about the needs of the community and how best they could continue to work together. Like many rural areas across the country, the small towns and hamlets and villages of the Adirondacks (Keene included) suffer a twofold challenge: on the one hand, we continue to experience population declines among the younger generations due, in part, to a perceived lack of opportunities and a very real dearth of civic resources, such as affordable housing, childcare, and reliable internet connectivity. Many young adults from the Adirondacks who leave the region to pursue college or other endeavors often don't return. Attracting new, young professionals to settle in the region is equally problematic. On the other hand, the older generations, who themselves can often attest to a wealth of opportunity, experiences, challenges, and innovations in the region, are aging and passing away. Their rich cultural histories are being lost because their stories are going uncollected.

With this challenge in mind, Huntley and Glass developed the idea of an online story project, as a way to bring the library and its resources into the 21st century and strengthen our community at the same time. They would tap into the intrinsic durability of folklore and give it a digital twist. By highlighting, acknowledging, and celebrating the Town of Keene's myriad histories as a collective of individual lives lived, *Adirondack Community* would indeed

"capture, retain, and communicate the stories of who we are." The story project would seek to make the oral histories of our New York town simple to collect, shorter than their longer counterparts that otherwise sit neglected in archives, and easily accessible to the community-at-large. The project would meet their audience where they are: online. Incidentally, this project would also spark new interest in the library's extant and extensive archival resources: not only would it put historic photographs to immediate use as visual companions to the oral stories; it would also attract students, teachers, scholars, and the general public to (re)explore and add to the holdings.

Huntley and Glass immediately enlisted the help of local archivist Elizabeth Rogers, MLS, and together, they discovered that another local resident, Louis N. Bickford, PhD, had the answer for how to coordinate a dynamic digital collection of the community's stories. For over 20 years, Bickford has worked in the field of international human rights, and in 2016, he founded the online platform *Memria*, which develops partnerships with "community libraries, oral history projects, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, and others committed to listening to each other," in order to help them "collect, manage, and share personal narratives and testimonials from people in their own voices" (<http://www.memria.org/>). With generous grant assistance from Humanities New York, the Glenn & Carol Pearsall Adirondack Foundation, and the Northern New York Library Network, *Adirondack Community* became a fully realized project of the Keene Valley Library in less than a year after its conception. In her role as volunteer, Huntley took over and still serves as Director for the project, assisted now by a dedicated group of volunteers. Members of the town also ensured the maintenance and growth of *Adirondack Community* by giving it sustaining financial support through at least 2026. Frank Owen, American abstract painter, fine arts educator, and another long-time resident of Keene, praises this Adirondack/New



Firefighters from numerous departments and towns try to save the Keene Valley Grocery.

York story project as “a rich gift to the community... in a real-time collection.” It acts as “a repository of community memory... a building block of memory being created and stored” (Owen 2020).

### “The specialness of this place”

The stories of the Town of Keene bridge many categories—from arts and culture to catastrophes, work, people and daily life, to outdoor activities and the natural and man-made environments in which we live, work, and play. The people who tell these stories are as old as 98 and as young as 13. We have come into our own as a town of storytellers and rekindled our drive to preserve and share community memory. “I love how I get to see my neighbors in a new light,” says

Katherine Brown, Director of the Little Peaks Preschool Program in Keene. “It just gives me a greater sense of the specialness of this place” (Brown 2020).

Rooted in the dynamic personal histories and goings-on of Keene through generations of residents and visitors, both year-round and seasonal, *Adirondack Community* champions storytelling culture. It reveals in what Owen demands is the exigency handed down in the town “to be able to tell a story—trance and enchant and challenge other people” from “various social classes, and groupings, and economic backgrounds, and histories” (Owen 2019). As Owen tells it:

My father-in-law, Adrian [Edmonds], was born in 1909, and grew up in a

culture of storytellers. That was the main entertainment. You read alone off on your porch... or in your bedroom. But socially... you were rated as to whether or not you were a good storyteller as well as a good listener. It was all part of your social identity. Adrian was an excellent storyteller and remembered mountains of stories. [When a] family came together, there would be stories. (Owen 2019)

Stories were a community affair, told at home after sundown around a wood stove, neighbors sitting in favorite chairs with their lanterns hanging on pegs outside the front door. They were told at the local tavern or roadhouse, and at hunting camp. Today they are told at the post office, the local tavern, and inside homes, as well as at the school, community center, and



Local firefighters were ultimately unable to save the Keene Valley Grocery, which was destroyed by fire on March 11, 2018.

medical clinic, and in libraries, at the gas pumps, in grocery and hardware stores, and on trails and roadsides. Stories endure as the chinking that fortifies our everyday. They remind us of where we have been and inspire us toward where we can go.

Betsey Thomas-Train presents an endearing provocation to the debate of familial roots in her story, “Who Is the Newcomer?” She and her husband moved to Keene in 1981, raising three children here. Her story opens by revealing her husband’s

family’s long recreational history in the region, with her husband “spending every summer here from when he was a baby” (Thomas-Train 2019). As a result, Thomas-Train (who grew up in New Jersey, on the shore) always felt like the “newcomer”—until serendipity flipped her script:

I was walking down the street one day and passed the library and saw a poster for part of the Monday night lecture series in the summer. This was a lecture to be given by Pete Nelson,

and it was called “The Great Legacy of Charles Brodhead, The Surveyor.” And I thought to myself, “Charles Brodhead.” Well, I have a beloved, or had a beloved uncle named Charles Brodhead, and my grandmother’s maiden name is Brodhead. My brother’s name is Robert Brodhead Thomas, and honoring that name, my son is Asa Brodhead Thomas-Train. So, I got in touch with Pete, and I got in touch with my brother, who’s the historian of the family, and they each did their own research, and I learned that in fact I was a 12th-generation descendant of this Charles Brodhead. ... Then I learned further that Charles Brodhead, the surveyor, is the first recorded white man to stand on top of one of the Adirondack High Peaks... that was Giant Mountain... in 1797. [My husband’s] father had bought a house in Keene Valley in 1947. So clearly, he was the newcomer, not I. (Thomas-Train 2019)

In “The Morning Routine at Route 9N Bus Stop,” Olivia Dwyer transforms a precarious roadside bus stop into a nostalgic touchstone of childhood mischief and joy:

There were four kids in my family, I’m the second oldest. ... [At the bus stop in the 1990s] we came up with a bunch of games to keep ourselves entertained. We would kick sand that had washed downhill on Irish Hill Lane into the storm drain by the stop sign ... We’d kick rocks to the other side of the road ... And then there were a lot of 18-wheeler trucks that would drive by in the morning, and we’d all stand there lined up by the stop sign and just pump our arms furiously in kind of a fist pumping motion to get them to honk their horns ... and it’d be this loud blasting air horn, and then we’d jump around and cheer. ... And then, as we got a little bit older, the kids stopped getting as excited or as orderly about catching the bus, so we’d always be running late. ... And, of course, sometimes someone would scream “Bus!” and there was no bus there, and they’d just be laughing hysterically by the time everyone ran out. ... My mother still lives in that same house at the bottom of Irish Hill Lane, and her delivery box for the *Press Republican* [newspaper] is right out there at the corner, so every



time I'm visiting her, and I go out to get the paper, I pass that same spot and I'm reminded of all the time I spent on this patch of pavement with my siblings (Dwyer 2019).

In "The Valley Gro: Rebuilt with Community Love," another Keene kid, who has since grown up and is currently the special education teacher and varsity softball coach at our local K-12 school, recalls the horrific day when her family's (and the town's) grocery store burnt down—and how the community rewrote this tragedy into a regenerative tale of "love and kindness and support":

My name is Sunny Reed, and our family business is the Valley Grocery [in Keene Valley, New York]. The Valley Grocery was started by my grandfather Richard Hall and a group of other

entrepreneurs. My mom has worked there as long as I can remember, and when [her dad] passed away, she took over as the owner. On March 11, 2018, after a long day of skiing at Whiteface [Mountain], I got a phone call about the Valley Grocery being on fire. ... There [were] billows of smoke and flames coming out of the windows and out of the roof, and I embraced my mom with a long, heartfelt hug ... There were eight different fire departments that were involved in this miraculous dance of fighting a fire. ... The fire was caught between a flat roof and a new pitched roof that was put on, and it just kept circulating. ... It took many hours and many firefighters. ... [Valley Grocery was] closed for 11 months and one day, and on the day of the reopening, there was a line of community members, about 30, with their Valley Grocery bags waiting outside for the doors to open (Reed 2019).

Recounting another story of community catastrophe and repair, Linda Deyo, also a lifelong resident of Keene, tempers dread with levity. It was August 28, 2011, and Tropical Storm Irene was blowing through town:

My partner Tom and I were hanging out at my home ... watching the water rise in the backyard from the heavy rains. ... We moved our cars up next to the road and quickly moved items of value or importance upstairs in both the house and the garage. We packed a getaway bag in case we had to leave. ... Then there was the matter of the horses. ... the barn cat Belfry was in the overhead hayloft, and I thought he would be safe there. ... The water was now waist-high in the backyard. We then went back into the house, put on dry clothes, got a beer for Tom and a glass of wine for me, and waited and



Interior photo of the damage from the Keene Valley Grocery fire.

watched the water rise. It wasn't long before we knew we had to leave.

The water had now reached the top of the front porch. It was coming up faster than I had ever seen it. There were trees, huge white pines, floating behind the house. We secured the two house cats upstairs, and took our two large dogs and left for my son David's nearby house on much higher ground. As we were leaving, we spotted our neighbor, Gary Manley, sitting in his truck with his dog. ... He had a bewildered look on his face. He wasn't sure where to go. So, we said to follow us, and we all went up to my son's house and spent the night there. None of us slept well. We got up early and walked back to the houses. The foundation of my house on the riverside had collapsed. Three feet of water had gone through the house, rearranging all the furniture, and covering everything with stinking flood mud.

The addition we had put on was torn away from the older portion of the house. The woodshed and all it contained was torn away from the garage. The river side of the garage had collapsed and fallen down. ... Most shocking of all, the barn was totally gone. It had been ripped off its foundation and floated away, ending up in pieces in the Gallagher's yard. There was no sign of the barn cat. ... Ironically, my partial glass of wine had floated around the living room and came to rest on the living room windowsill covered with mud. ... The Resuscitation Annie doll used by the fire department had floated down and was in our pasture. We put Annie on our now useless lawnmower, which had also floated there. The next few days were spent cleaning up what could be salvaged. I had the help of family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers. ... The good news was that the barn cat had made it out of the barn as it fell apart and had somehow managed to climb up a huge pine tree. We coaxed him down. He was fine (Deyo 2021).

Then there are stories of personal triumph, such as Tommy Biesemeyer's "Olympic Dream Fulfilled," which details his experience in 2018 as a member of Team USA for Alpine skiing:



Alan Washbond and Ivan Brown with their bobsled, during the 1936 Winter Olympics.

Far and away, my most memorable moment from my career was the opening ceremonies from the Pyeongchang Olympics. I cannot avoid sounding cliché, so I won't. It was an honor, a dream come true, and it gives me chills talking about it. There is not one moment that I can pinpoint to illustrate the opening ceremonies. It was the whole process. ... It was the first time I felt like I was an Olympian (Biesemeyer 2019).

And Charity Marlatt's remembrance of her father, Alan Washbond, who was an Olympic American bobsledder 82 years

earlier. He won gold at the 1936 Olympic games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, and protested Hitler at the same time:

Of course, the very first thing that happens at the Olympic games is the Parade of Countries, and all of the participants from the United States were determined that the flag would not be dipped in honor of the tyrant, Adolf Hitler. So, my dad would tell with great pride that that never happened. They never dipped their flag, and they never looked his way either (Marlatt 2019).

We meet Charles Lindbergh on the other side of a muddy handshake with an unsuspecting golf caddy from the local Ausable Club in Paul Martin's story, "Who Was That?":

When I was about 12 or 13 years old, I started caddying at the Ausable Club, as many boys did from the area. ... Mrs. Jerome Hunsaker, from time to time, used to come over in the morning and ask if she might have two of the young boys to come over and work in her flower garden. Her husband Jerome C. Hunsaker was head of Aeronautics at MIT and used to summer at the club every year. Well, one particular morning she happened to get the two Wilson boys, Kenneth and Wesley; they were two farm boys. They lived on the Crawford farm down at the intersection of 9 and 73, and they liked going over there. ... At about 10 o'clock, Mrs. Hunsaker came out on the porch and yelled, "boys, boys, come up please." So, off they go and they're standing there with their hands dripping with mud and she yells, "Charles, Charles." And out comes this tall gentleman with receding hair, very thin, big smile on his face. And she said, boys, "I'd like you to meet Charles Lindbergh." ... When they came back to the caddy shack, I was just coming in from the round that I had been [caddying for] that morning; it was about one o'clock in the afternoon. And Wesley Wilson comes up to me and he says, "Paul, who the hell is Charles Lindbergh?" (Martin 2019).

And, in one final example, *Adirondack Community* collected the story of CorrieAnne Stoner, titled "Even Here: A Discussion of Race in the Adirondacks." Stoner is currently completing her senior year at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and majoring in Criminal Justice. During the 2017–18 academic year, however, she was a cashier at the Valley Grocery and a high school senior at Keene Central School. She was "the only black female through all [her] school years," and her classmate Miles Warner was "the other student of color." Together, they gave a presentation one fall evening in the school's auditorium to over 300 adults

and students; it was centered around an incident involving Stoner's self-described "dear friend," who is white and had graduated the year before:

One thing growing up that was incredibly clear to me was that there was almost no one in my community that looked like me within the K–12 school. ... Growing up around Black jokes and always hearing them was kind of a frequent part of conversation. Early on I became kind of desensitized. ... I had never been one to speak up on the race issue. ... Senior year, a dear friend of mine, who had graduated the year before me, kind of became the headline by accident. She made a grave error, being too comfortable with the language she'd use regarding people of color and the jokey humor she'd picked up within the very safe place of Keene Valley.

She used it at the school that she was at, and it became the breaking point for an already hurting local college campus facing a huge issue of race. I watched as her face was plastered across the campus and the news. People sending her and her family death threats. The community, who I'd always seen as loving, kind of turned on her. Mostly, adults came at her with like hatred and anger. However, I noticed that a lot of my friends and peers and angrier people in the town stayed kind of quiet on the subject. A lot of them didn't know what to say. This was someone just like them. Someone who had been loved by the community. ... So, I decided instead of yelling about it, it was time to talk about it.

I wrote a letter to the town that blew up overnight. It grew into a much deeper discussion, talking about what was happening at Keene Central School. ... It talked about how we must face the issue of race that was happening within the Adirondacks and the communities around us. I think that, over time, it has led to allowing the classes after us to really feel comfortable. I can see it. They're kind of social justice warriors and much quicker to talk about it and fight for different causes. Our presentation had 300 people in attendance who were all eager to see change and work towards a change. People are, I feel like, in the Adirondacks, feeling more and more empowered, especially to

talk about their experiences as people of color and the change that they want to see. The energy has definitely spread from Keene Valley to other surrounding communities. Every time I return and see the organizations that are popping up to fight the diversity issue, I can see that the movement is growing. I truly think that it will take time and possibly even another generation; but I also truly believe a change is going to come, even here (Stoner 2020).

What all these stories and more have in common are the sincerity that undergirds their recollections and the cumulative pride of place exposed through both ordinary and extraordinary details. From one individual to the next, these stories ultimately reveal the strength, resilience, humor, and happenstance of a community. They tell of a community's character and its desire to acknowledge its past and grow into its future.

## **"Everyone's story is important"**

Less than six months into the *Adirondack Community* project, Jery Huntley realized the intense value in what had been created. Coupled to its goals of story preservation and dissemination, *Adirondack Community* had opened a new and vital avenue into fostering inclusivity, empowering intergenerational voices, and cultivating empathy within the community. So how could this same opportunity be extended to towns and cities across the country? From this question, *OurStoryBridge* was born.

With community support and the Keene Valley Library's continued sponsorship, as well as grants from Cloudsplitter Foundation, the Adirondack Foundation's Lake Placid Education Foundation, the Glenn & Carol Pearsall Adirondack Foundation, and the J. M. McDonald Foundation, *OurStoryBridge: Connecting the Past and the Present* (<http://www.ourstorybridge.org/>) launched to a national audience on September 29, 2020. Huntley founded and built this free, online resource as a model and a tool kit, in order to encourage communities to produce their own



crowdsourced story projects. “We all have a story to tell, many stories,” declares the *OurStoryBridge* website:

Life is a narrative, woven out of experience and emotion. Think of *OurStoryBridge* as the loom on which the fabric of your community’s narrative comes together. Each thread, each story binds the fabric tighter and tighter, creating intricate linkages between individuals, groups, organizations, events, environments, locales, and more. In other words, *OurStoryBridge* offers a user-friendly framework on which to mount your community’s story project; but the shape this project takes and the content it captures and communicates remain yours to construct. We want to help. *OurStoryBridge* will guide you through how to collect the nuanced histories of your community, to preserve its stories and pass their characteristic wisdom from mouth to ear by going digital (*OurStoryBridge* 2021).

Using *Adirondack Community* as the template and ongoing proof of concept, *OurStoryBridge* offers a comprehensive, do-it-yourself resource, one that is iterative

and empowering to any community wishing to create a story project of their own. This includes a downloadable User Guide to help plan, implement, and sustain individual digital story projects, which itself delivers a detailed planning timetable and covers personnel, budgeting, grants and fundraising, partnerships, technology recommendations, how to recruit storytellers, and how to collect, process, and post stories, as well as approaches to communications, marketing, and public relations. This web-based resource also includes how-to videos to complement the User Guide, as well as FAQs, links to the story projects of individual communities, downloadable sample documents, and a popular Teacher’s Guide—complete with story selection chart, story summaries, and sample assignments. As of the writing of this article, the User Guide has been downloaded over 500 times, the website boasts over 180 new users per month with over 3,700 unique visits since its launch in late 2020, the e-newsletter has over 950 subscribers, with more added each day, and the project itself enjoys a robust following on social media.

The logistical goal of *OurStoryBridge* is twofold: capture stories before the storytellers are gone and get students involved in and proud of their community, using media accessible to both young and old. Because more than two-thirds of the storytellers for *Adirondack Community*, for example, are over the age of 65, the stories told are readily adopted into school curricula at both the secondary and collegiate institutional levels. Brad Hurlburt, a social studies teacher for grades 9–12 at Keene Central School, recognizes the impact this “wonderful tool” has “in connecting [his] students to their neighbors ... giving them a much deeper sense of and appreciation for their community” (Hurlburt 2020). The stories enhance classroom lessons by providing students “with firsthand historical knowledge, including models of local civic engagement” (Hurlburt 2020). Likewise, *Adirondack Community* stories have been taught in courses at Paul Smith’s College and Clarkson University, and *OurStoryBridge* now partners with the University at Albany (Huntley’s alma mater) to offer credit-bearing internship opportunities to those completing their Master’s in Information Science.

On September 29, 2021, *OurStoryBridge* celebrated its one-year anniversary, with several communities across the country already developing their story projects. The first project to adopt the *OurStoryBridge* model was *Our Bear River Valley Stories: Our Heritage in Story* (<http://www.ourbrvstories.org/>). Based in Tremonton, Utah, and sponsored by the Tremonton City Library in the Bear River Valley, *Our Bear River Valley Stories* started gathering stories in December 2020, and released their website on January 27, 2021, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. They invite participation through their website, with the inviting call, “We’ll see you at the Story Bridge!” With over 30 stories collected to date and posted with associated pictures, this new project has helped focus national attention onto *OurStoryBridge*. “Everyone has a story, and everyone’s story is important,” says Debbie Carter, Assistant Librarian at the Tremonton City Library. “How amazing it is to be

able to hear the stories of these people and know ... the impact it will have on future generations. ... We can't wait until we get to our 500 stories!" (Carter 2021).

With rapid succession, two more *OurStoryBridge* projects launched in summer 2021. One circles us back to the Adirondacks, to Lake Placid, New York, where the Lake Placid–North Elba Historical Society revived a 2017 project, *North Elba Narratives: Telling Tales Oral History Project*. (<https://www.lakeplacidhistory.com/programs/>), using *OurStoryBridge* to ensure its success. Another can be found over 3,400 miles away, in southwestern Alaska, in the Yup'ik Tribal Village of Igiugig, on the southwest end of Lake Iliamna, Alaska's largest lake. *Niraqutaq Qallemcinek* ("Bridge of Stories") (<https://www.igiugigstorybridge.org/>)

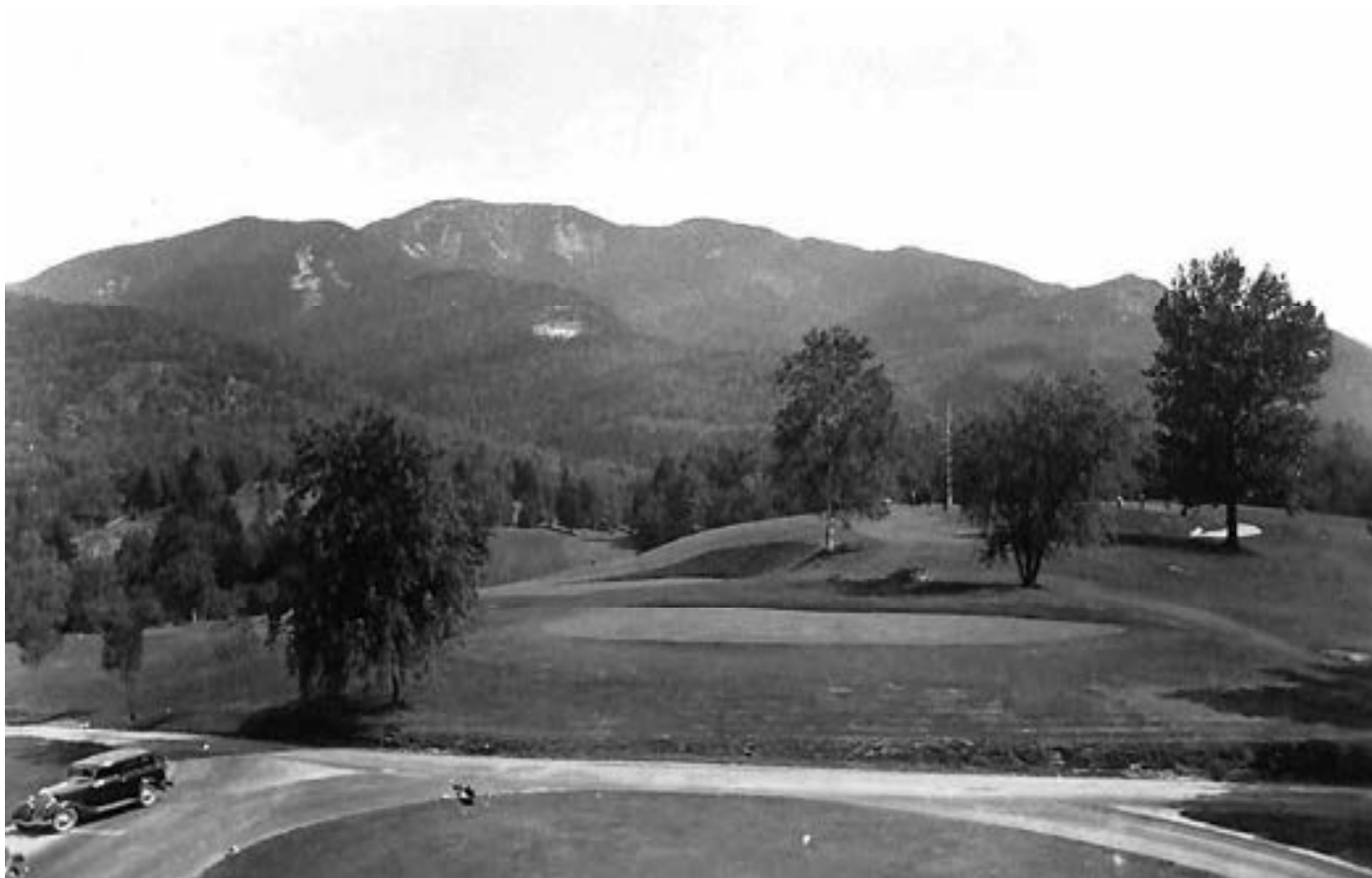
is the digital story project of the Igiugig Tribal Library and embodies the idea that "we grow stronger when we share our stories" (Salmon 2021). During a 2021 Web-Junction webinar with Huntley and Carter, A. J. Gooden, Supervisor of the Igiugig Tribal Library, attested to this new digital model's ability to "directly support Igiugig's mission to connect generations through stories, preserve local knowledge, and revitalize traditional language" (Gooden 2021). To support Yup'ik language learning, the collected stories of the village's rich social and cultural histories are being made available in Yup'ik as well as in English. Both Gooden and Carter also reveal how easy the *OurStoryBridge* methodology is to use and how forgiving its process is to collect stories from even the most nervous of storytellers.

By promoting confidence and celebrating spontaneity, *OurStoryBridge* uncovers the natural storyteller in all of us. With additional projects launching and being planned in California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Vermont, as well as more in both Alaska and New York, *OurStoryBridge* has proven itself the juggernaut of crowdsourced, community-building story projects. Its quick adoption and endorsements from libraries, historical societies, and issue-oriented organizations throughout the United States, such as the Adirondack Mountain Club and John Brown Lives! in New York, affirm that there is deep historical value in this endeavor and many captivating stories to be told. Moreover, *OurStoryBridge* has engendered a fast-



Ausable Club, 20th century.





Ausable Club golf course, with Giant Mountain in the background.

growing network of community stories across the country, demonstrating the relevance and resonance of all stories beyond any one community's border. In 2022, resulting from its tremendous growth, *OurStoryBridge* incorporated as its own non-profit organization with the blessing of the Keene Valley Library. Enhancing the folklore that brings us and keeps us together, this project is helping to engage and capture the indelible voices of Community.

### **Coda: “We grow stronger when we share our stories”**

Remember the story about the golf caddy unknowingly shaking hands with Charles Lindbergh? As it happened, the most stunning detail from that particular story was not Lindbergh. In what reads as coincidence-turned-fate, when Tremonton, Utah, began collecting their community's stories, the first ten of these stories were recorded by Hunsakers, a name shared by the aforementioned story from

Keene, New York. Further research, with the help of Hunsaker descendants, revealed that a collateral ancestor of Jerome C. Hunsaker (the MIT aeronautical engineer who spent his summers in Keene) was Abraham Hunsaker (1812–1889). Together with Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Abraham and his wife Eliza left New York and traveled west in covered wagons. After the death of Joseph Smith, Abraham Hunsaker and his wife continued onward with Brigham Young and helped to start the Church's settlement in Utah—making the Bear River Hunsaker storytellers descendants of Abraham Hunsaker, who in turn is related to the Keene Hunsakers. Imagine the surprise of Hunsaker descendants and general listeners alike when they learned of this familial connection in New York from an *OurStoryBridge* project in Utah!

The delightful, performative capacity for *OurStoryBridge* to uncover just how immediately stories connect and strengthen us doesn't stop there. In fact, it is clear that

connections like these are only just beginning to emerge. As a result of the exposure that Huntley gained through her work on *Adirondack Community* and *OurStoryBridge*, she was contacted by a woman who had researched the Huntley family and its connections to Schroon Lake, New York. In a flurry of emails exchanged in February 2021, between Huntley, her son Jay, and Susan Repko (editor of *I Remember Schroon Lake*, a collection of childhood stories written by her mother, Leona Huntley [1922–2008]), the Huntley family history wove through descendants who came to the United States from Scotland via England in the early 17th century and ultimately revealed a common 7th great-grandfather, Aaron Huntley. This led to the discovery of John Huntley, who married Jane Bennett Curtis, whose father William Curtis emigrated to the United States from Essex, England, around 1632, thereby making him a 9th great-grandfather to Huntley's son, Jay (née John). While Huntley herself bears no biological relation to

this evolving family tree (having kept the surname of her ex-husband), she seems to be her own divining rod for dowsing and unearthing stories. Her son next inquired with his mother about one of her contemporary Keene Valley neighbors and *Adirondack Community* storyteller, William Curtis, V. Could he be related to the 9th great-grandfather William Curtis? Curtis, already in the middle of a genealogical project of his own, is now researching this possible relation. And so, the story continues, as it comes full circle to—and creates a bridge between—the founder of *OurStoryBridge* and the very histories she is helping to collect.

For more information, email [createyourstory-project@gmail.com](mailto:createyourstory-project@gmail.com) 📧

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Since the writing of this article, *OurStoryBridge* has incorporated as an independent 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit and is excited to be assisting more and more local projects across the country.



Jery Y. Huntley received her Master of Library Science at the University at Albany, but her career took a different turn after her early start as a school and public librarian. She moved back to Albany to work for the NYS Assembly, then headed to Washington, DC, for a position in the US House of Representatives. This led to opportunities in environmental lobbying, issues management, 20 years as a trade association CEO, and volunteer work as a trainer in meeting facilitation and with Habitat for Humanity International. She lives in Washington, DC, and Keene Valley, New York, and her volunteer work now includes *OurStoryBridge* and *Adirondack Community*, political campaigns, and the DC and Essex County Medical Reserve Corps for COVID-19 test and vaccination sites. Photo courtesy of the author.



Janelle A. Schwartz brings over two decades of experience as an interdisciplinary educator, program developer, and creative consultant to her work as a freelance project strategist, writer, and editor for JAS Creatives. She received her PhD in literature and the history of science from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and has published widely on literature and ecology, social justice, the Adirondacks, pedagogy, natural philosophy, and more. She taught literature and environmental studies at Loyola University New Orleans and Hamilton College, and founded and directed the Hamilton Adirondack Program, a place-based, experiential semester. She also helps 8th and 12th graders at Keene Central School tell their stories. When not working, Janelle can most often be found in the garden or in the woods, leading the search for the friendly forest yeti and bog behemoth with her young daughter, husband, and dogs. Photo courtesy of the author.