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# Folklore in Archives: The Norman Studer Papers and the University at Albany Experience

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# Voices

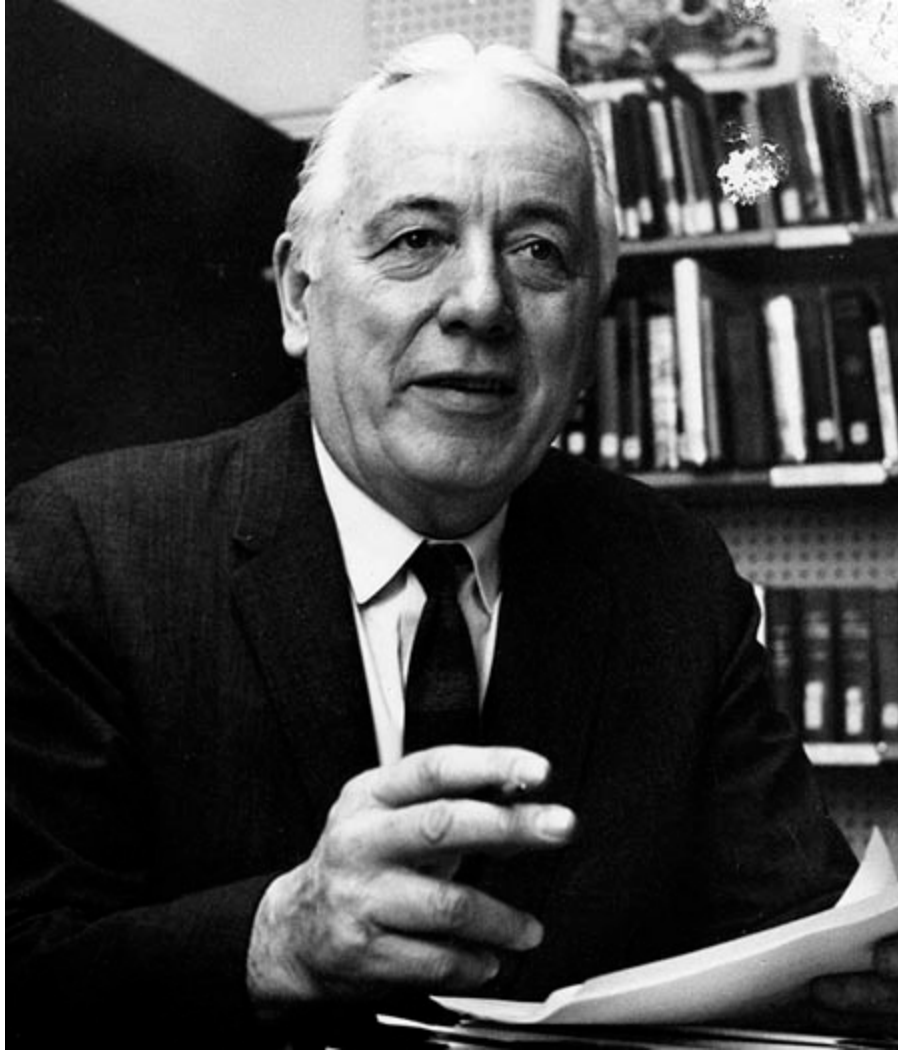
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## FOLKLORE IN ARCHIVES

### How the Norman Studer Papers Came to the University at Albany

**BY AMY C. SCHINDLER**

**The papers of Norman Studer** document the career of a progressive educator and folklorist at Camp Woodland in the Catskill Mountains and the Downtown Community School in New York City from the 1930s through the 1970s. Their original custodian, Joan Studer Levine, recognized that her father's papers needed to be permanently housed in a repository that could both preserve the materials and ensure access for researchers. The collection came to the M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives at the University at Albany in May 2001, and the work of cataloging and preserving its contents is ongoing. Important associations and connections between folklorists and archivists—in particular, their common interest in documenting the history of individuals, organizations, and the folk traditions of New York State—suggest opportunities for future collaboration.



**Norman Studer, late 1960s**

Norman Studer was an educator, folklorist, and author who spent most of his life documenting and educating New Yorkers. Born in Ohio, Studer moved to New York City in the 1920s to become an editor of *The New Student*, a newspaper that called itself "the voice of the student revolt movement" in the city. After a brief teaching stint in Erie, Pennsylvania, Studer returned to New York City to teach at the Little Red School House, a cooperative, experimental school founded by Elisabeth Irwin in lower Manhattan. Studer was attracted to the school's experimental and progressive curriculum, which influenced his own educational philosophy in succeeding years when he taught at the Elisabeth Irwin High School. Still later, as director of the Downtown Community School from 1951 through 1970, Studer brought his interest in ethnic studies, folklore, field trips, and racial integration to this progressive, cooperative school, which had been founded in 1944 by a group of parents and educators.

Along with Rose Sydney, Regine Dicker (Ferber), Sara Abelson (Abramson), and his wife, Hannah, Studer founded Camp Woodland in the Catskill Mountains in 1940 and served as director until its dissolution in 1961. Camp Woodland endeavored to bring together children of various religious, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds to experience the ecology and culture of the Catskill Mountains in a summer camp setting. The curriculum and activities at Camp Woodland were deeply rooted in the folklore and folk culture of the Catskills. The campers became Studer's assistants in the collection of local folklore, music, and traditions. Folklore was an integral part of Studer's education methodology—it was both an instructional instrument at Camp Woodland and entertainment for the campers, employees, and

local residents. The summer camp concluded each year with a weekend folk festival of music, drama, dancing, and storytelling. This annual folk festival attracted such musicians as Pete Seeger, Bessie Jones, Norman Cazden, and Herb Haufrecht as well as local talent that included Grant Rogers, Harry Siemsen, George Edwards, Ernie Sagan, George Van Kleeck, and Etson Van Wagner (Runge 2003; Johnson 2002).



**Norman and Hannah Studer worked together for decades to share their passions for folklore and progressive education at Camp Woodland and the Downtown Community School.**

## **Accession of the Papers**

In 1978 Studer's papers were transferred by his daughter, Joan Studer Levine, to the Carl Carmer Center for Catskill Mountain and Hudson River Studies in the Department of English at SUNY New Paltz. Prof. Harry Stoneback acted as the collection's guardian during its residence in New Paltz until 2001, when the university closed the Carl Carmer Center. They remained at the center even after funding for the preservation and use of the Studer papers was reduced and eventually eliminated. The English Department's move to smaller offices in 2001 made the continued housing of the papers at SUNY New Paltz impossible, so a new repository was needed.

After consulting with the staff of the New York Folklore Society, Levine contacted Gerald Zahavi, a professor in the Department of History at the University at Albany whose research had previously touched on Norman Studer. Zahavi was aware of Studer's work as a folklorist and educator and his peripheral involvement with labor unions.

He put Levine in touch with Brian Keough, then the curator of manuscripts in the Department of Special Collections and Archives at the University at Albany. Zahavi had a working relationship with members of the department's staff and had previously assisted in the transfer of labor-related collections to the repository.

As part of Joan Studer Levine's initial consultation with the New York Folklore Society, James Corsaro, an archival consultant, met with Levine at SUNY New Paltz to evaluate the papers of Norman Studer and make recommendations for their transfer to an appropriate repository. Arrangements were quickly made to move the materials from the Carmer Center to the M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives at the University at Albany by May 2001. A memorandum of agreement was also negotiated and signed between the donor and the repository at that time. A standard instrument in archival practice, the memorandum of agreement (also called a deed of gift) legally transfers title when no monetary considerations are part of the arrangement. Such agreements establish conditions governing the transfer of title and specifies any restrictions on access or use requested by the donor. Access to this collection was left relatively open, to enhance accessibility for researchers and fulfill the mission of the repository. The typical agreement also includes provisions for the rights held by each party, such as copyright and privacy rights, and in this case the copyright of Studer's unpublished materials was transferred to the University Libraries.

Besides the papers and photographs housed at SUNY New Paltz since 1978, Joan Studer Levine and her family had custody of films, audiotapes, Norman Studer's library, additional paper records, and traditional Catskill tools collected by Studer and campers for the folk museums created at Camp Woodland and the Downtown Community School. The donor and the repository's archivists discussed the possibility of depositing these implements in another repository or museum where they would more likely be displayed as well as relate to exist all these materials were transferred to the Department of Special Collections and Archives by the Levines during subsequent visits to Albany, and photographs of the implements were provided along with the tools themselves.





**The folk culture of the Catskills was an integral part of the Camp Woodland experience, which concluded each summer with a folk festival of musicians, storytellers, and local traditions. This photograph is believed to date from 1946.**

## **Contents of the Collection**

The Norman Studer Papers consist of more than two hundred reel-to-reel audiotapes, ten 16 mm films, three cubic feet of photographs, and eight cubic feet of additional paper materials, including Studer's diaries, publications, research material, and related items. A selection of books from Studer's library were also deposited with the department. Together, these materials document his work as director at the Downtown Community School and Camp Woodland through administrative records and objects collected, used, and produced by the students and campers. Studer's utilization and integration of folklore as both activity and learning tool is apparent through students' and campers' publications, field trip notes, drawings, dramas, and compositions. Studer's own published and unpublished writings draw largely on the folklore and history of the Catskills, and his research files are an excellent source of information on New York, particularly concerning Catskill Mountains history.

Photographs in the Studer collection document the activities of campers and students at Camp Woodland and the Downtown Community School. Many have little or no identification, but as former students and campers continue to visit the department to use the collection, information is gathered on more and more images. The photographs of the Downtown Community School, largely from the 1960s, were used in school publications and depict students in classrooms. Many of the images from Camp Woodland were taken by Helene Pragen, a professional photographer who was both a parent and a counselor at Camp Woodland. She was hired in 1946 to document every aspect of camp life, including performances of Herbert Haufrecht's cantata "We Build a Land" and Catskill resident George Edwards's storytelling and singing with campers, as well as typical summer camp activities. Pragen's photographs were the subject

of an exhibit in a New York City gallery in fall 1946; Norman Studer used the exhibit catalog to introduce viewers to Camp Woodland and its philosophy.

Once deposited, the Studer papers had to be processed so that they could be used. The collection was approached in a manner similar to any other collection of its size and breadth. Peter Runge, the graduate student assistant who completed the arrangement and description, is not a folklorist, but he learned what was necessary about Norman Studer, his interests, and accomplishments to arrange the collection logically and describe its contents. Multidisciplinary experience can actually benefit the processor because he or she can recognize and assess topical areas of a collection perhaps not previously considered by subject specialists—in this case, folklorists.

## **A New Subject for the Archives**

The M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives at the University at Albany did not initiate the acquisition of the Studer papers, and there was no prior connection between the university and the Studer family. In fact, before the papers arrived, of the 450-plus manuscript collections deposited in the department, only three included at least a minimal relationship to folklore, and folklore had not been a focus in the collection development policy or past collecting efforts. The University Archives was created in 1971 to document and preserve the institution's history. Materials that related to the German Intellectual Émigré Collection and the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy became the department's other major collecting areas, along with general manuscripts, unique books, and the Miriam Snow Mathes Historical Children's Literature collection.

The mission of the Department of Special Collections and Archives is broad, however: to acquire, preserve, and make accessible materials in a wide range of formats and subject areas. Holdings with folklore content include the papers of Edith Cutting and Louis C. Jones, both of whom had connections with the university. Edith Cutting, who wrote about the folklore of New York and created scrapbooks documenting her career as a folklorist and educator, graduated from the university when it was still the New York State College for Teachers in 1938, after earning a bachelor's degree in library science. Cutting's papers include manuscripts detailing her deep interest in the folklore of New York State and her correspondence with Harold Thompson, a founder of the New York Folklore Society, and with others about folklore and the society. Louis C. Jones, another founder of the New York Folklore Society, was an instructor at the college from 1934 through 1946. His papers primarily contain correspondence with students serving in the military during World War II but also feature drafts and offprints of his publications about folklore and particularly the supernatural. (Jones's personal collection is now part of the Archive of New York State Folklife at the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown.)



**The Downtown Community School, photographed here in the 1960s, was founded in 1944 as a progressive, cooperative, racially integrated school. Studer served as the director for most of the years it was in operation.**

In neither case did the department seek out those collections because of their folklore content. Rather, it was Jones's correspondence with college students during World War II and Cutting's status as an alumna that prompted the acquisition. The department's general manuscript collection also includes a scrapbook about the English writer and folklorist Andrew Lang.

Although folklore is the primary topic documented in Norman Studer collection, his experience as an educator fit within the collecting focus of the department's Archives of Public Affairs and Policy, which was established to document the work of individuals, community organizations, and political interest groups concerned with New York State public policy issues in the twentieth century.

As the collection was arranged and described and the breadth of the folklorist's work became evident, additional topics of relevance to the department's collecting policy appeared. The research Studer conducted about the Catskill Mountains included its changing communities and geography, which was then used in activities and lessons at Camp Woodland and the Downtown Community School. These materials are of interest to researchers working on topics related to the environmental movement and conservation issues in New York State. The administrative records from Studer's four decades as an educator also are of broad interest, particularly the student publications, which include *Our Voice* from the Little Red School House, and *The Downtowner* and *The Scribbler* from the Downtown Community School. Thus the educational, environmental, and political content of the papers is of interest to established users of the department's collections, but the folklore content of the collection—its primary strength—is attracting new users.

## Special Challenges

At the time of acquisition, the Studer tapes were the largest single acquisition of reel-to-reel audio recordings by the Department of Special Collections and Archives, and providing access to them raised an issue that staff had not previously been required to consider. The recordings document Catskill folk festivals, interviews with informants and performers at Camp Woodland, and education conferences at the Downtown Community School. Their reel-to-reel format necessitated an investment in equipment—a reel-to-reel player and software to digitize audio—and staff are now seeking appropriate servers and a search interface for the digital audio files that will be created. The preservation concerns surrounding reel-to-reel tapes and digital formats as well as the condition of the master tapes also required that the staff draw on the expertise of professionals in advanced audio preservation.

Rights to the recordings are another concern. Although the copyright for Studer's unpublished materials was transferred to the University Libraries when the materials were physically transferred to the



Department of Special Collections and Archives, the audiotapes of musical performances and interviews are another matter. No signed agreements between Studer and the performers or interviewees acknowledging who holds the rights have been found, and it appears that no such documents were ever created. The department has established policies for researchers who wish to access and publish from its collections and is prepared to deal with requests from researchers for access to materials with unclear rights issues. Copyright can be one of the most challenging aspects of accessioning and providing access to folklore collections for archivists.

The [New York Folklore Society's publications](#) on folklore and archives have been important tools for staff, particularly as increasing precision was required by the creation of bibliographic records for the collection in the University Libraries' and national online catalogs. These publications have also offered insight into future acquisitions considerations and decisions by the department and evaluation of rights issues.

## **Lessons for Archivists and Folklorists**

The M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives is not an established folklife center or archives, as are the Vermont Folklife Center Archive and the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine, both of which seek to preserve the folk history of their respective states. The Vermont Folklife Center Archive, for example, is a multimedia ethnographic collection that emphasizes the preservation of the spoken word and contains research materials generated by the organization's two staff folklorists, outside researchers, oral history collections from local historical societies, and commercial sound recordings of Vermont music.

Even though the Department of Special Collections and Archives at the University at Albany may not aspire to create a folklore collection as diverse and extensive as that of the Vermont Folklife Center, its holdings demand the same consideration, preservation, and accessibility. To ensure future access to important collections, folklorists should encourage the preservation and long-term accessibility of those materials. Donors should seek a repository with an appropriate collecting policy, proper facilities, trained staff, and a willingness as well as ability to preserve collections and provide access to researchers. Partnerships between folklorists and archivists—like that which has begun at the University at Albany—will grow in importance, and it is the responsibility of folklorists and archivists to continue to explore and expand those relationships.

The arrival of the Norman Studer Papers in the Department of Special Collections and Archives has created a mutually beneficial relationship. This acquisition has been publicized through online finding aids, the University Libraries' online catalog, and other outlets. And placing the papers at the University at Albany has brought the repository and all its collections to the attention of researchers who may not previously have had reason to explore the department's holdings. This positive and mutually beneficial relationship bodes well for the Department's involvement with folklorists to preserve folklore collections by individuals and appropriate repositories.