



ISLAND FOLKLORE REVISITED

A Review by Gerry Mantel

Peter Oikarinen's *Island Folk: The People of Isle Royale*, first published in 1979, is back on the streets again, expanded-and-improved by the University of Minnesota Press, including an updated preface and additional chapters.

I bought the first edition way back when the “Oikarinen-Calumet” combo caught my eye as I began a deep-dive into my Finnish-American roots, coupled with my fledgling fascination for U.P. trout. Pete's stuff was right up my alley: a fast-paced collection of short profiles based on oral histories, with a simply worded, unpretentious appeal. And although the lives of commercial fishing families dominated, I also appreciated the allowances for the supporting casts (like Capt. Roy Oberg, who long delivered people, cargo and mail) and peripherals—such as the tales of the old mining camps and rambunctious resorts, as well as the intrusion of the Feds during the island's gradual transformation into a National Park.

Over the next three decades I even managed to forge a friendship with the author. Indeed, Pete is of a rare breed exhibiting an “extra dimension” that I actually try living up to, the sort of character who, almost invariably and certainly not coincidentally, hails from the same Lake Superior basin that is still the epicenter of my life despite my often-knotty relationship with it.

However, when a refurbished *Island Folk* appeared a couple months ago, I was eagerly game to reevaluate this work; once again, I found myself mesmerized by the sharply resonating, life-risking perils of fishing the Greatest Lake and still amazed by the “island-crazy” mentality (to quote one of Pete's subjects, Elizabeth Kemmer) that persevered the hair-raising hardships. But the new edition has special treats of its own, particularly the introduction of Grant Merritt, a Minneapolis-based hero of the Reserve Mining lawsuit who provides a *great* story or two regarding he who is often considered the quintessential Yooper, John Voelker a.k.a. Robert Traver. For me, the 2008 version also serves as a

fresh reminder of how Pete's telltale photography puts this book, as well as his creative output in general, in a class of its own.

Not only that, but I concurrently got to play "Island Folk" myself upon Pete's invitation, doing so for the very first time this past May. Peter's close relationship with the island was underscored by his family-like familiarity with its staff—an impressive, entertaining & informative crew that helped provide for a spectacular adventure highlighted by the opportunity to bob for lake trout, *keppu-style* (under the instruction of the "Fish Slayer of Isle Royale," Tapiola's Dave Paavola), to take full-length cruises of the island (courtesy of cool Ken Irwin), and to catch sight of some *Island Folk* landmarks along with a virtual gamut of wildlife. Bestowed upon me, too, were the revelations that there are three subspecies of lakers indigenous to the island, not to mention two distinctive tribes of coaster brook trout, those inhabiting Tobin Harbor and those of Siskiwit Bay!

I've lived through some drastic changes in man's strong-arming of the Lake Superior environs, and despite any dog-chasing-tail overtones, those decisions to manage the lake as a sport fishery and maintain places (like Isle Royale) as "unspoiled" wilderness are policies that I can't argue with. But the island has an intriguing human history that's not to be denied, one with a rich, unique legacy aptly addressed by Oikarinen's engaging book, which provides a perspective not to be missed. Besides, those human imprints continue to be laid by the fine National Park personnel, their associated infrastructure, and their visitors, like it or not.

Or as well-respected fisheries expert Karl F. Lagler puts it (in *The Fishes of Isle Royale*, 1982):

The seasonal commercial fisheries of Isle Royale have declined over the years. Their presence on the island is not undesirable and is of considerable interest to the visitor. At Isle Royale they conflict little with recreational fishing under current laws, and the presence of long-established fishing families adds to the historical lore of the islands in the Park. Prior to the advent of the Park, the only real success that man ever experienced on the island was in fishing for food....

You bet, dude!

PHOTOS of Peter Oikarinen and friends,
during the reviewer's May 2008 visit to Isle Royale

Gerry Mantel
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