

American Folklore Theatre: Home is where our play is

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By Emilie Coulson

It's been six years since I've spent a summer in Door County, where I was raised and spent every summer before that. Then a couple weeks ago, I arrived here for rehearsals of *Victory Farm*, the new show at American Folklore Theatre that I wrote with Katie Dahl and James Valcq, and this trip has felt more than anything like coming home.

I grew up down the road from the AFT rehearsal barn in Fish Creek. Not only did we go to the park to see the shows each summer, but my sisters and I would ride by on bikes and hear music or watch sets being built. In 1997, when I was thirteen, Fred Alley came over and auditioned my younger sister, Hannah, then eight, for the role of the little girl in the AFT production *Northern Lights*. I'll never forget that evening because it brought all that was special about AFT into our living room and lives, and it hasn't left. Around the same summer Hannah performed, I befriended another young AFT fan, Katie Dahl. Katie, like me, knew all the words to the songs and felt as at home at the theater in the middle of the woods as anywhere else. We became the best of friends, meeting up every summer in Door County, where she would come to visit her grandparents.

Katie and I both volunteered at AFT throughout school and have worked in various roles at the theater. But even as our plans took us elsewhere, we wanted to stay a part of this place we loved. We looked back on shows full of heart, shows that had made us laugh and cry within minutes and sometimes at the same time. Pursuing writing in our own ways—Katie as a singer-songwriter and me teaching writing in San Francisco—we began to write our own story for the stage.

Victory Farm is about a mother and daughter running a cherry orchard in Ellison Bay, cherries being much a part of what Katie and I knew of our Door County home as AFT. Katie's family has had a cherry orchard for generations, and I spent years serving cherry-stuffed French toast and local history at my parents' restaurant, The White Gull Inn. The play is set during World War II, when, with local men overseas and migrant workers unable to travel because of rations on gasoline and rubber, 2,000 German prisoners of war worked one season of cherry picking in Door County. In a time of what could have been fear and mistrust, the POWs and orchard workers found common ground, often through shared German heritage. But POWs' accounts also tell of a comfort, a sense of home, that they found in the beauty of Door County, and these accounts inspired the POWs who arrive at the orchard *Victory Farm*.

Katie and I started to research *Victory Farm* in 2006, and in 2010, we teamed up with James Valcq, who composed all the music. One of the first shows Katie and I had seen at AFT was *The Passage*, which James had written with Fred Alley, and working alongside James only deepened our commitment to the theater. Finding a permanent home in Door County himself at the time, James understood our love of this place and its history, and *Victory Farm* came together.

Victory Farm is a story about finding common ground, but it's also a story about home. It came out of the home I love and that Katie and James love, and the home that you can find in a generous community and a beautiful place. We hope you'll come out to the park this summer and find it too.



Emilie Coulson co-wrote the book and lyrics with Katie Dahl for "Victory Farm," which has its world premiere at American Folklore Theatre summer 2012.