



american
FOLKLORE
T H E A T R E

Our Story &
Past Productions

The Story of American Folklore Theatre

“Come all ye bold people that live by the lakes . . . I sing the story of your forebearers.”
– From *Song of the Inland Seas*, first performed in 1970 at Peninsula State Park.

“The acorn never falls far from the tree” ... and so it is with American Folklore Theatre, still playing on an outdoor stage at Peninsula State Park and on indoor stages across the state, its actors still equipped with guitars and voices that tell stories of legend and lore. Since 1990, this troupe has been providing original musical tales about some of America’s most intriguing people.

Shows have involved the adventures of John Muir, father of our national parks, in *The Mountains Call My Name* and the music of James Taylor in *Sweet Baby James*. Humor comes to life as AFT’s playwrights and composers concoct characters like brothers Leo and Roger in *Belgians in Heaven* and ice fishermen Lloyd and Marvin in *Guys On Ice*.

The story of American Folklore Theatre (AFT) begins with Dave Peterson, a Madison, Wisconsin, professor who taught a one-month course on *Folklore of the Great Lakes* at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay in January of 1970. He and his students wrote the *Song of the Inland Seas*, an epic to celebrate the American heroes of the Upper Midwest.

Soon after, while camping at Peninsula State Park in Door County, Peterson came across a pine-rimmed theatre with a tree vaulting through a corner of the stage. The theatre was used for occasional slide shows or naturalist programs. Feeling the magic in this beautiful wooded setting, he put together a cast of 18 singers and instrumentalists and performed *Song of the Inland Seas* on the Peninsula Park stage for two weeks in the summer of 1970. It was described as “one part Peter, Paul and Mary, one part Broadway show tune, one part folksy Wisconsin, and the rest pure cornball spunkiness.” The show was a hit and was presented on the Peninsula stage for the next two years by the newly formed company known as “The Heritage Ensemble.” The Heritage Ensemble performed on the stage in Peninsula State Park for the next 20 years.

During those 20 years, the Ensemble produced and performed original shows covering many aspects of Midwestern lore, like the history of Milwaukee, the settlement of the Fox River Valley, shows about Carl Sandburg and Mark Twain, railroad workers and miners. Each show became deeper and more complex as the troupe evolved toward a higher standard of quality. “The main thing was the material. The songs and stories seemed to grow from the very soil of the Wisconsin woodlands,” said Fred “Doc” Heide, who joined the Ensemble in 1972 and now serves as AFT’s Artistic Advisor and a member of its Board of Directors. Heide, a student of history and now a psychology professor, wrote his first Ensemble show *The People’s*

Song to Sing in 1975, when he was a senior at UWGB. Others who joined the troupe, like Fred Alley, Jeff Herbst, James Kaplan, Paul Sills and Gerald Pelrine became household names as summer audiences returned year after year to see what new shows the troupe had created.

Performing conditions continued to improve during the 1980s. After years of changing costumes in the mud behind the stage and having inadequate lighting and sound equipment, the company built a technical booth and hired a sound technician in 1987. In 1989, a dressing room was constructed with donations received from loyal patrons.

The most dramatic change came in 1990, when Doc Heide, Gerald Pelrine and Fred Alley, all long-time members of The Heritage Ensemble, helped the organization move to a new level of professionalism. The group's name was changed to American Folklore Theatre (AFT) to reflect their intent to broaden its scope while still depicting its roots in the traditions of populist culture. The word "Theatre" was added to clarify that its productions were both dramatic and musical. Theatergoers were thrilled to hear songs of Native Americans in **Moon of the Long Nights** in 1991, and were enchanted by the Northwoods love story **Northern Lights** in 1993. The hit show **Lumberjacks in Love** premiered in 1996 and was so popular that AFT has brought it back to the stage in Peninsula State Park 7 times; it has also played to sold out houses in Milwaukee.

In 1992, AFT decided to continue its music making into the fall season and started its Town Hall Series. They began playing in several Northern Door town halls with ensemble shows like the Fred Alley/James Kaplan collaboration **Goodnight Irene** featuring the songs of The Weavers. Their ice fishing musical, **Guys On Ice** proved to be such a sensation that AFT took it to the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 1998 and 1999, and has since been staged at the Green Bay Community Theatre, Third Avenue Playhouse in Sturgeon Bay and the SC Grand in Green Bay. In 2003 **Guys on Ice** came home to AFT's stage in the park for the first time ever. At all venues and times of year this musical has played to sold out houses, creating news stories and a cult following everywhere it is seen. **Guys on Ice** has played in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin; Ashland, Oregon; and Detroit & Chelsea, Michigan. In 2001, **Loose Lips Sink Ships** became AFT's single season best-seller with record audience attendance nearing 900 at several performances.

2001 would prove to be quite the year for AFT. It was on May 1st of that year that AFT suffered the loss of its co-founder Fred Alley. Fred had been involved with AFT since 1980 and had come to be known as the "face" of AFT and for many was the face of the arts community of Door County. His beautiful tenor voice was emblazoned in the minds of all that heard him, he collaborated on more shows than AFT can count and he was a key player in developing AFT into what it is today. Fred was 38 when he died of a heart attack while on his daily run in Door County.

Also in 2001 Fred and AFT received two major awards given by the Peninsula Arts Association. The award for institutions, entitled the "Visionary Award," celebrates the commitment of local organizations to the development of new programs. The inaugural Visionary Award went to American Folklore Theatre for its New Works program and for its help in launching Door Shakespeare. The award for individuals, "The Champion Award" was presented to Fred Alley posthumously in this year. As further recognition of his impact on the community, this award was renamed "The Fred Alley Award".

Since AFT emerged from the Heritage Ensemble, the development of this troupe has been phenomenal. The annual budget has gone from \$20,000 to over \$850,000. AFT conducts professional auditions in New York and company members now perform regularly on and off-Broadway and at major regional theatres throughout the country. The summer main-stage season has expanded to three or four shows in repertory, and the fall season has been added and expanded. The performances are enhanced by a state-of-the-art sound system. AFT has a year-round administrative office. Over 40,000 people attend performances each year, making AFT one of the major theatres in the Midwest.

Many AFT shows have been memorized by adoring fans who buy the complete works on cassette tapes and compact discs and learn the lyrics. Parents from around the country write to AFT, saying their children sing and act out scenes from AFT all year-round. The charm of AFT continues to be the original words and music that bring people-stories to life, creating empathy between theatergoers and performers. That remains true to the company's mission "to develop and present professional dramatic productions of a cultural and/or educational nature that will further the knowledge and appreciation of the heritage of the United States..."

The effort has not been lost on the thousands of families who see AFT as a highlight of their vacation. Peninsula State Park officials note that years ago, campers discovered AFT performances to be good family entertainment, but now see the park as a "destination" because it is home to AFT.

The founders of AFT say the secret to their success is how many of the troupe's members have worked together and shared the same vision for so many years. From the very beginning, says Heide, "it was a true theatre of the folk, carrying forth themes that had found their way here in the canoes of French voyageurs or the holds of iron ore ships. To offer these gems under a swirl of stars with the smell of campfires warming your soul, priced so that anyone who hankered to could come, this was vision indeed."

Planning for the future is essential to AFT's ability to grow and thrive, according to Heide. In 1997 a community board was formed which provided additional strength

and stability to the organization. In 1998 AFT hired a full-time general manager to allow the writers and producers more time to spend on creative projects. AFT launched its first very successful capital campaign in 1999 which raised money to build a new dressing room at Peninsula State Park in 2001 and a new stage to be designed and built in time for the 2003 season. During the 2000 season, the first ever Children's Theatre Workshops were launched by the group. The 2010 season marked the 20th anniversary of American Folklore Theatre—with many special happenings.

Although most members of the company write or perform elsewhere during the off-season, their summer performance season is usually the highlight of their year. When asked why they continue to be a part of AFT, they respond, "AFT is a place where theatre is still close enough you can touch it." As long as the audience keeps coming back, they will continue to gather under the stars each summer to tell stories and sing songs.

American Folklore Theatre Production History

2014:

Summer: Strings Attached – Premier, Guys On Ice, Packer Fans from Outer Space
Fall: The Bachelors

2013:

Summer: Windjammers – Premier, Muskie Love, Loose Lips Sink Ships
Fall: Victory Farm
Holiday: Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring The Rhode Sisters

2012:

Summer: Victory Farm – Premier, Belgians In Heaven, Cheeseheads, the Musical
Fall: Cheeseheads, the Musical, And If Elected
Holiday: Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring Doc Heide, Claudia Russell & Chris Irwin

2011:

Summer: BING! The Cherry Musical – Premier, Lumberjacks in Love, Guys & Does
Fall: The Spitfire Grill, Guys on Ice
Touring: Guys & Does, Guys on Ice
Holiday: Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring Katie Dahl, James Valcq & Karen Mal

2010:

Summer: Life on the Mississippi – Premier, Cheeseheads, the Musical, Bone Dance
Fall & Touring: Guys & Does (Tour: Oconomowoc PAC, Madison Overture Center)
Holiday: Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring Eric Lewis, Doc Heide & Holly Feldman

2009:

Summer: Cheeseheads, The Musical – Premier, Sunsets & S'Mores – Premier, Muskie Love
Fall & Touring: Guys & Does – Premier (Tour: Green Bay Community Theater)
Holiday: Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring Eric Lewis & Doc Heide (guest Holly Feldman)

2008:	
Summer:	Fishing for the Moon, Lumberjacks in Love, A Cabin With a View
Fall:	Sometimes a Song: The Music of Dan Fogelberg, And If Elected
Holiday:	Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring Eric Lewis & Chris Irwin
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2007:	
Summer:	A Cabin With a View – Premier, Belgians in Heaven, Guys on Ice
Fall:	Main-Travelled Roads – Premier
Holiday:	Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring Scott Wakefield & Claudia Russell
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2006:	
Summer:	See Jane Vote – Premier, Loose Lips Sink Ships, Belgians in Heaven
Fall:	Fish and Whistle: The songs of John Prine
Holiday:	Home for the Holidays with AFT, featuring Scott Wakefield & Claudia Russell
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2005:	
Summer:	Muskie Love, Lumberjacks in Love, Bone Dance
Fall:	Goodnight Irene: The Music of the Weavers
Touring:	Guys on Ice (Third Avenue Playhouse)
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2004:	
Summer:	Muskie Love – Premier, Guys on Ice, When Dogs Could Talk
Fall:	Eric Lewis and Friends, Guys on Ice, And If Elected
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2003:	
Summer:	Packer Fans from Outer Space, Ya, Ya, You Betcha! – Premier, Guys on Ice
Fall:	Old Friends
Touring:	Packer Fans from Outer Space (Meyer Theatre, Green Bay), Guys on Ice (Frank's Dinner Theatre, Green Bay, November), The Bachelors (Frank's Dinner Theatre, Green Bay, January)
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2002:	
Summer:	Packer Fans from Outer Space – Premier, Beneath the Northern Sky, Loose Lips Sink Ships
Fall:	The Bachelors, The Spitfire Grill, Eric & Andy: Live In Fish Creek
Touring:	Guys on Ice (Frank's Dinner Theatre, Green Bay)
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2001:	
Summer:	Loose Lips Sink Ships – Premier, Song of the Inland Seas, Lumberjacks in Love
Fall:	The Bachelors, Bob Dumkee's Farm
Touring:	Guys on Ice (Frank's Dinner Theatre-Green Bay)
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2000:	
Summer:	A Kettle of Fish, Lumberjacks in Love, Moonlight and Marshmallows, Belgians in Heaven
Fall:	Guys on Ice, Sweet Baby James
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1999:
Summer: Fishing for the Moon, Fool Me Once, Belgians in Heaven
Fall: Guys on Ice
Touring: Guys on Ice (Green Bay Community Theater)

1998:
Summer: Belgians in Heaven, Bone Dance, A Little Folk Music, Lumberjacks in Love
Fall: Guys on Ice

1997:
Summer: Lumberjacks in Love, Northern Lights, Tongue N' Cheek
Fall: Old Friends

1996:
Summer: Lumberjacks in Love, Goodnight Irene, The Mountains Call My Name, Belgians in Heaven (1 show)
Fall: And If Elected

1995:
Summer: One Night in Frog Station, Bone Dance, Belgians in Heaven
Fall: Harvest Moon

1994:
Summer: Belgians in Heaven, The Passage
Fall: Goodnight Irene

1993:
Summer: Malarkey, Northern Lights
Fall: Malarkey

1992:
Summer: Tales of the Midnight Sun, Fishing for the Moon
Fall: And if Elected

1991:
Spring Tour: The Mountains Call My Name
Summer: Moon of the Long Nights, Tongue N' Cheek

1990:
Summer: Song of the Inland Seas, Mule for Breakfast Again
Fall Touring: The Mountains Call My Name
