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## The Survival of Blackface Minstrel Shows in the Adirondacks Foothills

**BY SUSAN HURLEY-GLOWA**

**Long after most Americans had found blackface minstrelsy demeaning,** performances continued in isolated rural areas, with no apparent racist intent. In one declining community in New York’s North Country—a place whose residents had virtually no contact with African Americans and no reason to feel uneasy about “the other”—minstrel shows may have served to honor a folk tradition and to express community solidarity in the face of economic hardship. Respect for the show’s directors and self-conscious reflection on the town were additional factors. I explore the meaning, structure, and function of blackface minstrel shows in the context of Adirondack community life.



[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Putting on blackface allowed the local community to mock itself in an open and unconstrained way, something that seems to occur whenever people put on masks.

In the back of my grandparents’ closet in Colton, New York, where we sought out old prom gowns for dress-up games, was a relic—a wood silhouette in the shape of a banjo. It had strings painted on the front and lines of text on the back. My father told me that it had been my Grandfather Hurley’s stage prop when he played a blackface character called Tambo in Colton minstrel shows in the 1950s, and that the words on the back were entrance cues.

Shows in blackface are undeniably hurtful and demeaning. Recent scholars have argued that racism alone does not explain their popularity, however, and foremost among the functions they served their white audiences (Lott 1993; Averill 2003) was enabling actors to comment on their own culture in an uninhibited way. Musicologist Charles Hamm (1995) has taken this analysis further, suggesting that the persistence of blackface minstrel shows in small-town America was a nostalgic idealization of nineteenth-century values and a rejection of twentieth-century multiculturalism. Based on interviews with living participants and a study of scripts, scores, and photographs, I maintain that there were other important reasons why the people of Colton participated.



Charles Palmer from Norwood, N.Y. as Al Jolson in the October 1958 Colton Community Minstrels production **23 Skidoo: A Musical Revue of the Nineteen-Twenties**. Photo courtesy of the Colton Historical Society.

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## IN THE MINSTRELS' WORDS

**Evelyn Riehl:** It was 1948 when Bill [Riehl] and I came, and we both joined the Eastern Star and the Masons, which were Masonic things. We were approached as musicians to put together a money raiser for the Masons and Eastern Stars. And that's what we did. In those days, you'd just let the word get out—sometimes you'd put it in the paper—that we were getting together a show, and people would show up and people would volunteer to do the things that they did well. And that blackface minstrel format was what they were used to. And so we did it for years, and these were just wonderful people. A man, Ova Bancroft was his name, he played piano, he was one of those folks...he was a huge man—did you ever hear him sing? He was a huge man, and he had a voice to match. And he had the biggest heart in the world. And he played piano, anything you wanted in any key! You know, one of those wonderful musicians? So we relied on him for the beginning of them. And everybody came to the shows, men and women. Actually, there were no women on stage in the circle because that was not traditional, they were all men. But as time went on, I noticed in the later ones we had women in them.

**Interviewer:** Yes, I saw Kate Klein was in them.

**Riehl:** Well, Kate was always a star performer of one kind or another. And I can't remember whether she ever

Hamm studied Tunbridge, Vermont, where the last blackface minstrel show was produced in 1991. Colton and Tunbridge resemble many small communities of the Northeast: They are sited along rivers that once powered small mills and industries; they have harsh winters, short growing seasons, and rocky soil unsuitable for large-scale agriculture; their white, working-class populations have never included a statistically significant number of people of color.

...

## Blackface Minstrel Shows

Blackface minstrelsy in America began with blackface song-and-dance routines in the 1820s. Full-length minstrel shows performed by whites for whites were formalized by the early 1840s and quickly became popular across the United States (Henderson n.d.). Countless professional groups formed, and these barnstorming troupes reached northern New England and New York State by 1850. They were particularly popular in small cities and rural areas.

North Country historian Linda Casserly (1998) has documented the annual arrival of minstrel show troupes by train in Canton, New York: The performers would announce themselves with a midday parade and then play to packed houses for many consecutive nights. Such troupes toured until the late 1920s. As they disappeared, amateur community groups took up blackface performances, finding new homes in fraternal organizations, summer camps, civic clubs, and churches.

...

## Persistence of Blackface

Hamm suggests that the survivals of blackface minstrelsy in Vermont are the last cry of a threatened subculture that strongly identifies with the past and clings to nostalgic notions of nineteenth-century morality and mentality...

...Can the Colton shows be understood as the “last cry” of townspeople clinging to the memory of more prosperous times, when blackface minstrelsy was a favorite entertainment? Do they represent a rejection of multiculturalism, or worse yet, the embrace of racist views and political ideologies?

...

In August 2003, I met with the original music directors for the shows: Evelyn Riehl (who with her husband Bill revived the local tradition in 1954), and Cindy Hennessy, both music teachers. These elders of the community were somewhat uncomfortable discussing the minstrel shows because they know that blackface is now taboo. They described the show as part of a tradition: it was family and community oriented, involving people of all ages and professions; it raised money for local scholarships; it was good homespun entertainment that allowed townspeople to laugh at themselves. ...According to them, the shows were not about “making fun of blacks,” they were just the style of musical comedy that suited them best.

The desire to portray “the other” was as important an aspect of these blackface shows as in other theatrical reversals—from the annual outdoor “Winnetou” reenactments in Bad Segeberg, where Germans don cowboy and Indian garb to create an imaginary American West, to the northern New York cross-dressing [mock wedding ceremonies described by Brenda Verardi](#) (2002)...



sat in the circle. I hope you know what we mean by the circle. The curtain would open, and Mr. Interlocutor would be on some kind of a big seat, and the black men were around on either side. That is what was known as the circle.

**Interviewer:** He would be in whiteface, right?

**Riehl:** Oh yes! And he was dignified; he had a dress suit on. He was Mr. Interlocutor, whatever that happened to mean, I don't know.... And he was always the one who was straight up and down; a straight-arrow kind of a guy, and those men who were in blackface [the end men] were atrocious. They were totally free to do any silly thing that they could dream up as we developed the show. Then after the circle was completed each one of the end men had some kind of a musical number or a monologue, or something; whatever their strong point was. At the end of that circle, there was intermission. I think that the cake walk was part of the second section. And that Olio, it was just a series of solos and dances after the intermission.

**Interviewer:** The perfect format for a small town because everybody could do something.

**Riehl:** Absolutely. It fit for everybody. [To Cindy Hennessy] Can you remember how you adapted what we had done?

**Cindy Hennessy:** We turned it into more of a variety show.

**Riehl:** And you called it a variety show, didn't you?

**Hennessy:** It was called Colton Community Musical but we still followed the format by at first having end men, in whiteface. And we used the same old jokes that you used, the same [published joke] books. We just changed the names and the circumstances.

**Riehl:** Well, there were some



The Colton Community Minstrels present the Second Annual Old Time Minstrel. October 20-21, 1955. The 4th adult (front row left) is Steve Hurley, and the "banjo relic" from his house is at the far left of the same row. Mr. Interlocutor (Bob Flavin) is seated in the center in whiteface, and the musical directors (Evelyn and Bill Riehl) are standing behind him. Courtesy of the Colton Historical Society.

...the shows were ideally suited to small-town talents: The format was flexible enough to allow contributions of all sorts, from tap dancing and square dancing to barbershop quartets and traditional ballad singers. The shows' survival without blackface makeup suggests that the community-based form of the production was perhaps more important than its portrayal of blacks... The *Historical Historical Colton* show from 1959, which was not performed in blackface, contains deliberate nostalgic references to the past...the shows preserved some of the oldest Anglo American folk traditions around: the repertoire of the Adirondack storytellers, woodsmen balladeers, and fiddlers—the Colton culture bearers documented in folklorist Robert Bethke's (1981) book *Adirondack Voices*. Ham Ferry, a well-known local storyteller and folk poet, contributed a recitation to each show, and Bill Smith, the highly respected Adirondack storyteller and basketmaker, participated in at least one show as a young man.

*23 Skidoo: A Musical Revue of the Nine-teen-Twenties*, of 1958, was also nostalgic: ...actors impersonating blackface performers like Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson, and Helen Morgan appeared as acts at the hotel. Here, the Colton musicians were not representing blacks; rather, they were portraying professional white singers who sometimes sang in blackface.

### The Meaning of Minstrel

Like the shows in Tunbridge, Vermont, Colton's minstrel shows were full of contradictions and mixed messages. Actors portrayed plantation slaves, yet the interviewees believed the performances were not about race. They performed in blackface, but their performance style was only marginally influenced by African American music. Their jokes primarily made fun of locals, but some songs were clearly racist. Eric Lott (1993) has pointed out the complex racial relationships in minstrel shows: Some scholars suggest that whites have often borrowed or stolen aspects of black performance to enrich and vitalize their own performance styles. It has also been noted that taking on the persona of "the other" can help a group deal with social tensions or express sincere interest in a different culture...

...Blackface minstrelsy is no longer acceptable, and it is hard to imagine that anyone would mourn its passing. Although it may be difficult for outsiders to view these blackface minstrel shows as a bona fide expression of folk theater, it is much easier to see how they served the needs of Colton. The minstrel shows helped establish community solidarity through music, strengthening bonds by involving citizens of all ages and occupations and providing an opportunity to reflect on Colton's past and present. Putting on blackface allowed the local community to mock itself in an open and unconstrained way, something that seems to occur whenever people put on masks.

...I think that the lyrics from the 1963 opening number, sung to the tune of "On Top of Old Smoky," provide a glimpse of what the Colton Community Minstrels thought they were doing with their shows. How they will be judged by the outside world is yet to be determined.

Gather round all ye people, and listen to me  
I'll try to tell you, how we happen to be.  
Now as I recall it, it was nine years ago  
That a group of good people put on the first show.  
They had to have talent, yes, all they could fine  
And among all you people, they found the best kind.  
They needed suggestions and gimmicks to try,  
From telling true stories to telling white lies.

good jokes in those books.

**Interviewer:** I still laugh at them.

**Riehl:** Yes, it is awfully hard not to go through them and read them and chuckle!

**Hennessy:** And we used the same songs that you used, basically. At the intermission, we'd have a sing-along.

**Riehl:** Yes.

**Hennessy:** Everybody sang right out.

**Interviewer:** So a lot of times you'd use songs everybody knows, but change the words to them?

**Riehl:** Well, in the circle, that's it. We always poked fun at local folks. That was part of the routine. You had to pick the ones you love—Blanchard Howe, and just a whole list; they are all in there. Because they were people that people loved, you just poke fun at them. And everybody was perfectly gracious about it. Actually they were tickled to death to be named in the show!

**Hennessy:** Oh, people really laughed their heads off when they heard their family name said in there.

They told jokes on Piel Farmer, Kate Klein did a dance,  
And poor Harley's coffee did not stand a chance.  
They blackened their faces, they let down their hair,  
And hoped they'd be welcomed, to come back next year.  
Now singing's a pleasure, rehearsals are fun,  
You're welcome to join us, we need everyone.  
Thru meeting together, there's one thing we found:  
The world's greatest people live right around town.



Sophie Tucker from the October 1958 Colton Community Minstrels production **23 Skidoo: A Musical Revue of the Nine-teen-Twenties**. Photo courtesy of the Colton Historical Society.

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