

"JUST CALL ME SANDY, SON":  
POET JEEP WILCOX'S TRIBUTE TO SANDY IVES

by Margaret R. Yocom and Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox

To hear Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox tell his stories in front of a roomful of tourists at the Rangeley Inn, or an audience at the Maine Festival, or a reporter for National Public Radio, you'd never know he was ever uncomfortable on stage.<sup>1</sup> But he was—once. And he credits two men with helping him become the poet and storyteller he is today. One is his friend and fellow artist, chain saw carver Rodney Richard, Sr., for whom Jeep wrote several poems.<sup>2</sup> The other is Professor Edward D. "Sandy" Ives.

Jeep had been thinking up poems since he was seven or eight and writing them down wherever he could.<sup>3</sup> He started out on tree fungus and birch bark. "I used to leave a lot of poems on the trees when I was in the woods," Jeep told me in the fall of 1998. "What started it out—I'd come to a toadstool [*that*] grows on the side of a tree. They all have that certain, half-round shape, you know? And I discovered . . . all you need is a little twig. And the material that [*the toadstool's*] made out of, you just do that," Jeep paused, as he mimicked writing on tree fungus with a twig, "and it's like a pencil. It leaves very clear marks."<sup>4</sup>

"Maybe I got an idea from—remember the old story: 'Daniel Boone killed a bear on this tree?'

"So, I started out with 'In this valley at quarter past nine / I shot my buck with points of nine.' Or, something like this. . . . Things that I had done or seen, or that my imagination would have let me do. And I would leave it up there."<sup>5</sup>

In fact, he spent so much time rambling the woods around Range-





Jeep Wilcox amid his favorite trees, the spruces, in Rangeley's western Maine mountains, October 1998. Photo by Margaret R. Yocom.

ley that his father hung the nickname "Jeep" on him. "From the day I was old enough to walk," Jeep confided, "the woods and the mountains, [were] just like a magnet, you know? In fact, I really feel I had the biggest dooryard of any kid in the world. Because you could go anywhere you *want*. I mean Spotted Mountain, and Chick Hill, and Burnham Hill, and Saddleback Mountain—all of this was dooryard, as far as I was concerned. Playground.

"And I lived on a farm, and, of course, work is never done on a farm. Chores are endless. . . . And my mother had thirteen children. . . . Whether it was haying season or planting season or harvesting the garden or getting the winter wood—always! And I might get to thinking about it: 'Gee I'd like to be up on Saddleback Mountain, I'd like to be looking down on Rock Pond, or I'd like to be going somewhere,' you know? And I used to keep sneaking off, and going up, and my father could never find me.

"And right about that time, the World War II jeep got to be popular. [It] was called a 'GP,' a 'general purpose vehicle.' . . . And soldiers and everybody started calling it 'Jeep.' . . . It was the first well-known, four-wheel drive jeep that could go anywhere—through the mud, off the trails, down over anything. . . . And it got to be really famous.

"And one time my father was looking for me and couldn't find me, and he made the remark: 'The goddamned boy's worse than one of them goddamned jeeps! Every time you want him, he's going down in the woods somewhere, [down an] old logging road or something!' . . . And then he just started calling me Jeep. He said, 'Anybody seen Jeep? Can't find the Jeep? Don't know where the Jeep is?' And even the teachers all through school called me 'Jeep.' . . . It's the only name I've ever known."<sup>6</sup>

Jeep kept right on walking and writing in the woods: "As I got older, in my teenager years, every time I'd see the white birch tree with the white bark, that always left a good [mark]—and I'd fool around and leave a few on there."<sup>7</sup> After he married, his wife, Janet, would find little slips of paper with parts of poems in his pockets, so she began to check Jeep's clothes thoroughly before doing the laundry.

Once, when I was talking with Rodney Richard, Sr., and Jeep Wilcox about their creations in wood and words, Jeep told us about the time that inspiration hit and the only thing close by was



a paper bag: "I was going up the hill, going out of town; . . . I'd gone to the store and got a bag of groceries, so—I'm going up, and I guess I was weaving around the road a little bit. Next thing I knew, ahhh, a blue light come up and was flashing. The guy pulled me over. What I was doing? I had the bag of groceries setting on the seat, and I was thinking of something, so I stopped—and I was writing a poem on the bag of groceries. So I'd look down and write a little bit, and then I'd look up. And I wasn't paying too much attention."

"While you [*were*] driving?" Rodney laughed, surprised.

"Yeah, putting along, you know. So they thought—I guess—I'd been in the sauce a little bit. So when they see I hadn't, and . . . I showed them the bag [*and*] what I was doing, they just laughed. But they said, 'Bud, you'd better pull over if you want to write.'"<sup>8</sup>

Jeep's poems memorialize town events and herald the beauty of his western Maine homeland. He's written about his love of the mountains and the natural beauty they encompass in "Beauty All Around" and "Reflections."<sup>9</sup> He's lamented the flooding of several towns when the state built Flagstaff Lake; as a young man he, like many in Rangeley, felt very torn as they earned much-needed money by cutting and burning the surrounding woodlands. In "Wooden Gold," he's brooded over timber practices during the time he worked in the woods, especially on his beloved Saddleback Mountain. In several poems that he's given to local loggers, he pokes fun at the "devil machines"—John Deere skidders and Mack trucks—that both help and hinder work around Rangeley. Most recently, he's eulogized his older brother Robert, who died in 1998. It was Robert who saved young Jeep's life, and Robert who chose Jeep to help him break the log jam on the Dead River. It's with good reason that Jeep is a town favorite. The Rangeley Lakes Region Logging Museum, the Rotary, Garden Club, Historical Society, and other area organizations have asked him to perform again and again.

But when Rodney Richard and his son Stephen first proposed Jeep to the Maine Festival, and brought him to the attention of Professor Sandy Ives, Jeep didn't think he wanted any part of it.

"Steve knew Sandy," Jeep told me, "and he was telling me a little bit about him . . . and thought that I would enjoy Sandy. But once Steve pointed out that [*Sandy*] was a college professor, [*I*

*said,*] 'Oh no. No, no. No way.' [*laughs*] I'm picturing . . . [*someone*] strict and demanding, stuffy in his ways, you know? So anyways, I told Steve right off quick, 'Huhnn-uhh! Nothing to do with anybody that's a college professor!'"<sup>10</sup>

But Jeep did give the 1983 Maine Festival—and Sandy—a try. When I asked Jeep to tell me about the first time he met Sandy, he chuckled: "This could be a little humorous. . . . I had always been a fan of Marshall Dodge, his dream, and the basic idea he recognized that there was interesting Maine talent all over the state. And these backwoods towns such as Rangeley, if you could reach out and get them and get them all together under the same roof, it would be a great thing. . . . So I really wanted to be a part of it, if I could.

"First, it was my very first time that I had ever done something like this on a stage or in front of a group of people. And needless to say I was quite nervous. And I drove from [*Rangeley*], all the way down." Jeep sighs, remembering how he felt. "I came through Topsham, and down over the bridge and up around the loop, and headed up the main street of Brunswick. And when I got half way up the street [*and saw that*] big banner—'Maine Festival'—I almost turned around right there and went back home. Almost did.

"So, anyway, I finally got up to Bowdoin College. . . . I checked in where I was supposed to go. I was there a little bit early, and I wandered in to the—ummm, the little boy's room. . . . and Sandy was in there. . . . He didn't know me, and I didn't know him. And I said, 'Hi. Nice day' or something like this. But if I remember right, he had on pretty scruffy pants—they weren't new, or they weren't a suit type of pants. I think he had on a sweatshirt of some kind. Gray curly hair, you know. And, just the way he talked—I never realized . . . *he* was master of ceremonies. I was talking to Steve or Rodney [*as Sandy walked toward us,*] and I said, . . . 'Well, who's that guy?' They said, 'That's Sandy Ives.'

"And that was my first shock. He wasn't the stuffy old professor, even in the men's room. You would have thought they'd have their own men's room or something like that. [*laughs*] A college professor demands respect. They're almost like a minister, you know—they're in their category.

"Had he not been the way he was, I don't believe I could have



even stepped on the stage and got going. . . . You take a little backward country boy that had never been in front of more than a family reunion and doing something like that, I never would have got through that first day. . . . I realized the kind of person Sandy is: down to earth, every day. He can be a well-educated teacher, but he can also be a common, everyday person, and I guess that's what it takes to make another common, everyday person at ease."

The experience of meeting Sandy Ives had such an effect on Jeep that he found himself composing a poem about him. "It was afterwards," Jeep explained, "that evening, I was in the dorm and thinking about the whole thing, and that's when it all hit, you know. I kept thinking about Sandy—'My God, how wrong I was!' And . . . the words to the whole story came so quick that the next day I did tell it on stage, with Sandy there.

"Basically, [my story] pretty much told just how wrong I was in my impression. I made believe that I had to go to Orono, to the University of Maine to see a college professor by the name of Sandy Ives. And I dreaded it because, like I explained, my interpretation of college professor—I didn't want nothing to do with [them]. And I found my way to Orono, and I walked on to the campus, and I didn't know where to go. So I saw a man laying underneath the tree on the lawn, . . . leaning up against it. So I went and talked to him . . . to ask him . . . where to find Sandy Ives. And . . . the way he was dressed and leaning up against the tree, [I thought,] 'Here's an everyday, common man that must be one of the custodians or something. So me being a common working man, I went right up to him and started talking to him. And [I was] explaining why I was there and [that] I was nervous because I had to see a stuffy old college professor. Then, . . . when I got to the end [of the story], I said,

Well, I got to go.  
By the way my name's Jeep. What is yours?  
And can you imagine my surprise  
When he said, 'Just call me Sandy, son.  
I'm Professor Sandy Ives.'"<sup>11</sup>

Jeep and Sandy have been together many times since that first weekend. They've worked at other Maine Festivals, they've brought



Jeep Wilcox (left) and Sandy Ives look at the logging photographs of Jeep's stepfather, Lee Violette, at the Rangeley Lakes Region Logging Museum Festival, July 1986. Photo by Margaret R. Yocom.



their talents to the Rangeley Lakes Region Logging Museum Festival, and they've pored over old logging photographs of Jeep's stepfather, Lee Violette. As Jeep thought back over these many years of knowing Sandy Ives, he told me that he credits Sandy with helping him understand why his poem-making and oral recitation is important. He once asked Sandy:

"I can understand [why] you in folklore [like my poems], . . . and I also understand the importance of stories being handed down from generation to generation. And I also understand that storytellers can come in many different ways and forms, but I still didn't understand that anything that I [did was] anything at all."

"And Sandy said, 'All of these stories that get passed down from generation to generation are very important. Somebody's passing the story down, and it gets changed a little bit, and it keeps being told. But somewhere, somehow, somebody's got to create a story. Somebody's got to start one, or it couldn't be handed down, you know?'"

"And I got thinking about that a little bit," Jeep recalled, "and I guess it's right. Picture all of the ballads of Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett. Somebody had to start them somewhere."

"Then, I began to see things a little different."<sup>12</sup>

1 My thanks to Jeep and Janet Wilcox for welcoming me into their home. My thanks, also, to the family of Rodney Richard whose gifts to me and others throughout the years are beyond measure. When I visit with Jeep and Rodney and walk with them in the Rangeley woods, I always feel I am in the presence of great spirits whose poetry, art, and philosophy nourish us all.

2 See "Exuberance in Control" in this volume for more information about Rodney Richard, Sr., of Rangeley and his woodcarving father, William. Also, see Margaret R. Yocom, "If we don't joke with each other, we won't have no fun, will we?": Storytelling in the Richard Family of Rangeley, Maine," in *Traditional Storytelling Today*, ed. Margaret Read MacDonald (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 416-427; "'Cut my teeth on a spud!'—Rodney Richard, Mad Whittler from Rangeley, Maine," *Chip Chats* 41,1 (1994): 17-19; and "'Awful Real': Dolls and

Development in Rangeley, Maine," in *Feminist Messages*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 126-54.

3 For more information on poets such as Jeep who compose their poems orally, base their creations on local events and people, and see their fellow homelander as their primary audience, see L. Karen Baldwin, "'My Name is Nothing Extra / But the Truth to You I'll Tell': Assessing the Personal Use of Traditional Poetry," *Canadian Folklore Canadien* 15,1 (1993): 89-108; Jens Lund, "'Cows and Logs': Commonality and Poetic Dialogue Between Northwest Loggers and Cowboys," in *On'ry Propositions: Cowboy Poets and Cowboy Poetry*, ed. David Stanley and Elaine Thatcher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); and Robert Walls, "Logger Poetry and the Expression of Worldview," *Northwest Folklore* 5,2 (1987): 15-45. For related local singing traditions, see Edward D. Ives, *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), and *Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

4 Contributing to the writing experiments of some anthropologists and folklorists—especially feminists among them—I have interwoven the words of Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox, my informant-consultant and co-author, with my own instead of placing his thoughts in indented, block quotations. Through such writing practices, borne of an awareness of the politics of authorship and textual representation, we seek to enact a greater equality among all those who help construct a text. We strive for a more dialogic presentation of detail, since it is in dialogue that ethnographic practice itself proceeds. And we call to mind the linkages among fiction, creative non-fiction, and ethnography. See Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993); Ruth Behar, "Introduction: Out of Exile," in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1-29; Kevin Dwyer, *Moroccan Dialogues* (1982; reprint, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1987); Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992); Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and Margery Wolf, *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).



5 Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox, interview with Yocom, Tape WIL-98-9-28-2, Rangeley, Maine, 29 September 1998. In editing the tape-recorded words of Jeep and others, I've omitted some false starts and repetitions. I've used ellipses to indicate larger omissions as well as sentences that I moved from one location to another in the same transcript. I've used bracketed italics to indicate words that were unclear on the tape, or that I added to clarify Jeep's meaning.

6 Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox, interview with Yocom, Tape WIL-98-9-28-1, Rangeley, Maine, 29 September 1998.

7 Ibid.

8 Rodney Richard, Sr., and Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox, interview with Yocom, Tape RR15JW, Rangeley, Maine, 1 March 1985.

9 These two poems, printed with Jeep Wilcox's color photographs and then framed, are on sale in many of the stores in Rangeley and Oquossoc.

10 Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox, interview with Yocom, Tape WIL-98-10-4-1, Rangeley, Maine, 4 October 1998. Jeep explained to me that he probably saw college professors as he did because of his experience with a very "prim and proper" high school teacher whom many called "the Professor."

11 Jeep hasn't been able to find a copy of the poem stored away in one of the boxes in his attic, though he could recite this last section. Searches through the archives of the Portland Performing Arts, the Northeast Archive of Folklore and Oral History, and several folklorists' tape collections haven't turned it up yet, either. Thanks to Bau Graves, Steve Green, and Jeffery "Smokey" McKeen.

12 Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox, interview with Yocom, Tape WIL-98-10-4-1, Rangeley, Maine, 4 October 1998 and Tape WIL-98-9-29-2, Rangeley, Maine, 29 September 1998.

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