



THE CLOSET



In 1957 Fulton Fryar arrived at Schroon Lake's Seagle Music Colony with a dream. He found that even in the Adirondacks he couldn't escape segregation

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WHEN SOUTHERN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WERE SEGREGATED, Clinton, North Carolina, educated its black high schoolers at Sampson High. Sampson is closed now. But in 1957, when Fulton Fryar went there, its hard-pushing music department enjoyed an epic reputation. The school choir had performed for President Truman in the White House. It sang for the New Farmers of America national convention. Choir practice seemed perpetual—Fryar, 78, recalls needing to show up “365 days a year.” When he wasn't singing, he was practicing his alto sax for the dance band, his clarinet for the concert band, and his trumpet

for the marching band. He helmed a jazz combo, too. But voice was the great love. Fulton Fryar had a tenor that could make you sit straight up in your chair. All the Fryars loved their music. Fryar's father, Reverend Willy Roosevelt Fryar, a circuit rider with five churches on his watch, was steeped in the shaped-note tradition of black southern gospel, a musical notation system with roots in rural New England. Fulton Fryar's teacher was so proud of his prize student he brought him to Rotary. Fryar dazzled the white worthies of his town with spirituals, light pop, a little Harry Belafonte. Rotary recommended him to a wealthy lady with an ear for rising local talent, and she set him up with an audition with opera buff John Seagle. That fall Seagle was in Raleigh, mentoring North Carolina's Opera Guild. On sabbatical from Trinity College in Texas, he listened closely to this untrained prospect. In 1915, his father, Oscar Seagle, had opened a teaching colony for aspiring opera singers in the Adirondack hamlet of Schroon Lake. On Oscar's death in 1945, John Seagle and his wife, Helen, took charge of this small colony. Said Seagle to Fulton Fryar's friends and boosters, If you can raise the money to get this young man to the Adirondacks, we'll take it from there.

BY AMY GODINE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARRIE MARIE BURR

This was a tall order. Fulton's family could not pitch in. Just one generation out of sharecropping, this clan of six was poor. Fulton Fryar had three pants and three shirts to his name, all matching, so if one got mussed he always had a spare. His father painted signs when he wasn't pastoring his flocks, and was banking on Fulton staying home that summer, working at a tobacco farm. The Fryars needed that shot of cash. The prospect of Fulton vanishing up north was not particularly welcome. But the word was out, and the mood was hopeful. Fulton Fryar, going north! Going to make himself a new Caruso! Going to do old Clinton proud! Fundraisers to help Fulton Fryar get to Seagle brought big crowds to Sampson High, and several white people—business types, professionals, music buffs and civic leaders—chipped in, too.

Earlier in 1957 Sampson High's glee club went to Newark for a big competition. So Fryar had got a taste of the North and may have felt prepared. Luck was in his corner now—it would be one sweet break after another. There would be trees where he was going, but good Yankee trees—no strange fruit there. No Ku Klux Klan, no Jim Crow, no segregation either. His teachers would be white mostly, and his fellow students, too. To them, he'd be another student. That's how the North was.

The bus trip from Fayetteville to Schroon Lake was endless, with long stops in Newport News, Washington DC and Manhattan. Happily, someone from the Colony was waiting for Fryar at the Schroon Lake bus stop to drive him to his summer home. Weary as he was, Fryar was still thrilled to meet this green new world. He saw the men's bunkhouse near the main building; it looked roomy, and very nice. But this wasn't where he was taken. He had his own place, it seemed—a narrow shed-like structure on the side of the laundry building. One window, no curtain, and just wide enough for one slim cot, a chair, a little bookcase, a small space at the end for clothes. A music student was pounding in the last boards as he neared.

It was Jim Crow, Adirondack-style. Lessons, meals, rehearsals and performances, he was welcome. But from the sanctum sanctorum of the bunkhouse, where jokes were swapped and the bonds of lasting friendship were hard-set amidst the wisecracks and the homesickness and the ghost stories at night, the black youth was excluded, dispatched to his quarters just as firmly as he would have been directed to the balcony in the movie house back home. Nor was it lost on Fryar that his shed was up where Hattie Mae, the African-American cook, lived with her young family.

Fryar had done some sign painting with his father. He put this skill to use. He painted the built-in cabinet and wood plank walls of his new home with pictures: a Bible here, a vase there, some ornate leaves and curtain pulls, lines of verse from Tennyson, a few bars of music in a bold Gothic hand. And on the outside door he wrote in an elegant calligraphy, Welcome to "The Closet." His choice of words, and all too apt. A closet is where you put things you don't want to be seen. A place for storage. A place where things are kept in the dark.

I met Fulton Fryar when the director of the Seagle Colony invited him to come up from his New Jersey home and see the place in September 2017. It was his first time back in nearly 60 years, and in all those decades, the Closet never housed another camper. It was just another fixture of the place, a beat-up storage space with odd things painted on it, destined for demolition. And as so often happens, it took the fresh gaze of an outsider to grasp the value of this artifact for Adirondack history. Jonathan Green, an opera buff, was visiting the Colony and inquired about this strange structure called the Closet. Learning it might come

down any day, he contacted Adirondack Architectural Heritage (AARCH) and Adirondack Experience (formerly the Adirondack Museum) to advocate for the Closet's preservation. Green's fast work paid off. This summer, Adirondack Experience puts Fulton Fryar's Closet on permanent display.

Fulton Fryar, a big, deliberate man not given to careless banter, doesn't like to dwell on injuries of the past. He concedes that when he first got to Seagle, he certainly expected different. Because it wasn't just the fact of segregation. It was the insult of the space itself, the tacit point that a place this tiny, careless and uncomfortable was all he could and should expect; that this was his just portion, and that racist feeling among Seagle's guests, patrons and employees counted for more than his own hurt. All this he took in at a glance, along with his own awareness that this was a battle he wouldn't fight, not in Schroon Lake, not just then. As he explained to me, "I was here on a mission. And it got better when I got more engaged with my learning." Better because...? Fryar ponders. "I put blinders on to see the object I wanted to get to."

Fryar worked hard at Seagle, and it paid off. He got a good role in Massenet's French comic opera *Manon*; he sang in *Pinafore*; he worked on light music, H. T. Burleigh spirituals, and

songs by Henry Purcell. He also worked on set painting (once again, his family talent with painting signs coming in very handy). Like all his fellow colonists, he hoped to make a long career in opera. John Seagle hoped so, too. After Fryar's second summer at the Colony, Seagle won an audition for his prospect with the legendary Marian Anderson. But Fryar's anxiety got the best of him; the audition was a bust. Seagle arranged for Fryar to enroll at the Texas college where he taught voice. Trinity University was segregated then, and Fryar lived off-campus. In Texas, this was no less than what he expected. What was surprising was what happened in his next audition. Fryar couldn't sing. "I didn't know what was happening. I couldn't push out the notes."

Fryar might have chosen to retrain his changing voice for a different kind of sound. It's a road not taken he now regards with rue. But back then, he was young and proud and beset with doubt. His words for it: "I fell into a dark place within myself"—and he knew he had to haul himself back up and into someplace better fast. He left Trinity, joined the Air Force, and spent five years in the Philippines and Vietnam doing technical work on

planes and jets. Sometimes he sang at the Airmen's Club, and later, when he was working at St. Agatha's Home for Children and other psychiatric centers, he helped children sing and play the piano. He also sang in church, and he still does. Hymns are an abiding pleasure. But opera is the past.

He loved the Seagle Colony, though. Not for the friends he made. (In truth, there weren't so many. At mealtimes when friendships gelled, he and the other scholarship student, who was Mexican, were often working in the kitchen.) And not for the glories of the region. He only visited the hamlet of Schroon Lake once. White people standing around staring at him? This he didn't need. But the family of birches outside his shed delighted him, and the revelry of chipmunks, and the jogs up Charley Hill Road... And he loved learning, every bit of it. For all the sting of where he slept, he counts the two summers he spent at the Seagle Colony as a great time in his life.

Was it like this all over the Adirondacks? It seems that in this era, black visitors experienced a range of responses. In a few white-owned summer camps and colonies, African-Americans (Continued on page 74)

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Last September Fulton Fryar revisited the cabin where he had been assigned, separated from the white students at Seagle Music Colony, 60 years earlier. "The Closet," as he called it, will be on permanent display at Adirondack Experience, the museum in Blue Mountain Lake. Facing page: Fryar, third from top right, with his Seagle classmates.



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THE CLOSET

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were integrated into every aspect of daily life, bunkhouses included. In others (private clubs, elite hotels, residential associations), segregation reflected conscious choice and reflexive habit. (The Lake Placid Club would not admit black people as members, guests or staff.) In 1957 and '58, the Seagle Colony invited a poor black southern youth to participate in a stunning educational experience. This was a Colony first, a lasting point of pride. But rather than offend the sensibilities of white students and supporters from the South, Seagle sequestered its new guest in a shoebox on a hill. It's a complicated picture. A principled egalitarianism made a bold start, but convention overtook it in the end.

The joint work of AARCH, Adirondack Experience and the Seagle Colony to save the Closet is a happy instance of three institutions embarking on a rescue mission. Visitors to Adirondack Experience besotted with the world of Great Camps and private railroad cars, brilliant boat builders and visionary conservationists, will find their view of the region challenged and enlarged by an encounter with another Adirondack tradition: racism and its insidious expression. Some may find it dissonant or awkward. I would say it's overdue. The South has no dearth of material evidence that "shows" the work of racism in daily action. Klan robes, signs for Colored Only water coolers, photographs of lynch mobs.... Because the Adirondacks did not abound with visible proofs of white supremacy, it's easy to conclude this legacy had no stake inside the park and was no part of Adirondack life. The 11th-hour retrieval of Fulton Fryar's Closet—and from such a culturally progressive and relatively enlightened institution—makes the guessed-at undeniable. It challenges a regional narrative of proud exceptionalism. It says, Here's the story, here's the proof. Here's how it was. Right here. ▲

Amy Godine joins a panel discussion on Adirondack black history at Adirondack Experience, August 6 at 7:30 p.m. Learn more at www.theadhk.org.