George Primrose and Lew Dockstader, "veteran stars of the minstrel world," according to *The Post-Star*, brought their show to Glens Falls in 1913.

Poster from the Library of Congress

CAUTION: This article quotes historical sources that used offensive language.

Adirondack Blackface

IN THE NORTH COUNTRY, MINSTREL SHOWS WERE POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT INTO THE 1960s. HISTORIAN AMY GODINE REVEALS THEIR PROMINENCE THROUGHOUT THE REGION

MAYBE YOU RECALL THE NEWS ABOUT A racist blackface cartoon on the cover of a SUNY–Plattsburgh student newspaper in 2015. Or the SUNY–Potsdam students who filmed themselves cavorting to rap music in black facial masks. Unsettling incidents, followed swiftly by hurt and fury, apologies and solemn editorials. The proof of blackface's unacceptability may be the lashing rage that greets it. Minus a few idiots, people do seem to get that this thing is just *messed up*.

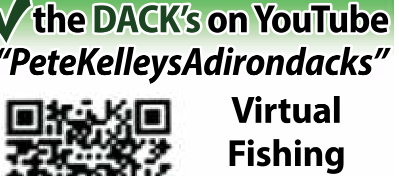
What is much less understood is Adirondack blackface when it was the opposite of unacceptable. When it was absolutely everywhere. Not just in the bigger cities around the region, but in towns as small as Port Henry, Clintonville or Long Lake. And everybody did it. Schoolkids and women's clubs, fraternal orders, firemen. Not, as college students do it now, for the thrill of messing with a stern taboo, but for comfort and community and love of a tradition whose essential racism went unheeded and entirely unchallenged.

But first, to the theft (or as the parlance has it now, the appropriation) that launched a thousand blackface revues. In the 1820s in Manhattan, a white actor, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, made a study of a brilliant dancer, a Black man, a stable hand. The man, never identified, was disabled, but the moves he made, both lurchy and elastic, syncopated, spry, turned his bad leg into an asset. And such a catchy chorus! "Weel about and turn jis so. Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow." With an eye and ear for novelty, Rice memorized the dance and song, and took it to the stage.

How big a deal was this? In two decades, Jim Crow dance, song and style—what became known as a minstrel show—had whirled itself into the nation's leading form of popular performance. Louisville, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and New Orleans would each declare itself its birthplace. By 1844, a blackface troupe, the Ethiopian Serenaders, was performing for President John Tyler in the White House. Pop critic Greil Marcus has called Thomas Dartmouth Rice, or "Daddy" Rice as the world knew him, the Elvis of his age, a polymath who wrote and acted all his skits, and developed characters both relatable and nuanced.

For good or ill, Rice's mimetic and dramatic gifts would not distinguish his successors. As early as the 1840s, minstrel routines began to stale. Black characters grew less rounded—still comedic but crudely stereotyped and ready-made to mock. Formula drove the skits; corny jokes were culled from newspapers. Minstrelsy, its sheet music, costumes, makeup and hand-me-down palaver, was commodified. This went for Black minstrel shows and white alike, both well-steeped in their routines when they finally ventured from the fringes of the Adirondacks to the harder-to-reach interior, riding in on new rail spurs, setting up in village opera houses and town halls.

Continued on page 50



ADIRONDACK BLACKFACE

Continued from page 41

Why its long appeal? After the devastation of the Civil War, blackface's cheerful skits about African Americans was, for white America, a solace and relief. In the South and North alike, Black Americans were pressing for equal opportunity and equal rights. Emancipation was one thing, but social and political equality was, for most of white America, too much, too fast, too far. The blackface stage, where childlike, impulsive Black people gratefully embraced their place, was more than funny. It consoled. It gave the two devastated white halves of the nation a little common ground, something that could ease their reconciliation. It gave them a vision, writ in rags and cork, of Black inferiority. And the more hungrily Black America pressed for political representation, social parity and voting rights, the more the counternarrative of Black servility delighted.

Regardless of the venue—rural, urban, east or west—blackface sought the same effect. It effaced the human individual and reduced character to type. Burnt cork and shoe polish, red paint and white smeared human features into a mask. Kinky wigs intimated wildness and lack of personal control. Costumes either foppish (for the character Zip Coon) or ragged (for the rustic goofball Jim Crow) spoke either of pathetic vanity or an uncomplaining destitution. And, of course, there was the minstrel's exaggeratedly rough speech, ranging from ungrammatical to outright nonsensical. This speech, maybe more than dance or gesture, was the thing that racialized the blackface character, vesting him with the helpless immaturity that justified white oversight. Give him fancy words, he'd mangle them to mud. Give him means to buy new clothes, he'd overdress and preen. The only help for it was to love him for what he was: a child-man in everlasting need of a father's patience, firmness and direction.

On stage, that parent-figure was the interlocutor, the always white, unflappable straight man who fed his Sambos and his Bones teasing questions that provoked the jokes and hokum that evidenced the lesser status of Black Amer-

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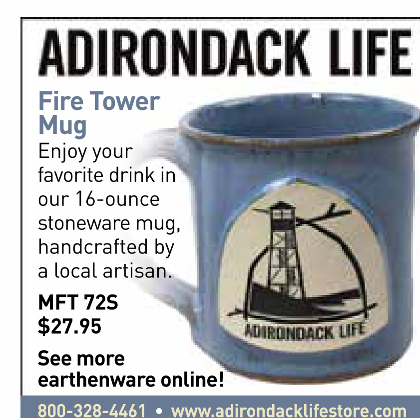

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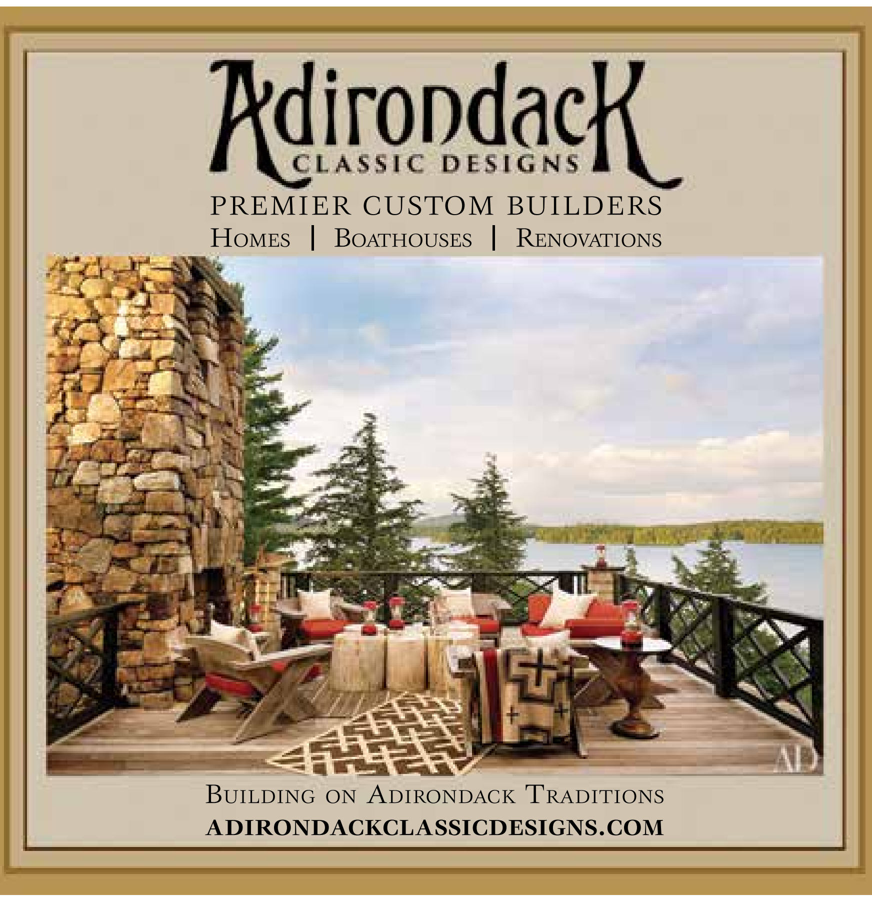
icans then, now, forever. But scripts are made to be subverted, and as blackface scholars insist, while blackface was inarguably racist, it was also something more, and this *more* mattered. While the style and form of blackface banter was predictable, the content was adaptive. Troupes both homegrown and from away made a point of wrapping local names and goings-on into their shtick, a tradition that made the audience experience interactive, something straight-up opera never did.

That was one kind of subversion. There were more. Since blackface characters stood for an underclass, their routines were often lightly seasoned with digs at local guardians of respectability, like bankers, school principals, town merchants. And through these takedowns on the safe space of the stage, blackface democratized—a feature that accounted for a good part of its popularity.

Which points to sex and sexuality, another feature of the blackface show that helped account for its appeal. Long before blackface emerged, Black men had been racialized by whites as randy and impulsive, Black women as promiscuous. Blackface skits reinforced these clichés through bawdy jokes and suggestive costumes. And where else was this allowed? Blackface couples, the women played by men, enjoyed a physical expressiveness unthinkable on other stages—and in these raucous dealings was the kernel of something relatable.

How much of this ribaldry actually infiltrated northern New York is hard to know. The scripts are gone. But smuttiness was enough of a threat to move several blackface promoters to declare that their Adirondack shows were free of all salacious content. Indeed, their ads could make you think that blackface's mission was strictly reverential. "Minstrels … capable of impersonating the genuine negro" brought throngs to Johnstown in 1891, offering an introduction to "the tints, lights, and shadows of darky life." The emphasis on craft and culture allayed concerns about blackface's unrespectability. Here was fun, sure, but also—folklife! A taste



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of the Lost South! A jolly land of music, dance and unassailable devotion to God and Massa. This was how 300 years of chattel slavery shimmered in the funhouse mirror of blackface.

The distortion was even more arresting when Black minstrel troupes, mostly Southern, held up the mirror and assured their audiences that yes, "Old Black Joe" and "De Camptown Races" got it right. Plattsburgh audiences in 1866 really would hear from the Georgia Minstrels "entertainments illustrative of Negro plantation life in the Southern States." And when Black bellboys and waiters threw a watermelon-eating contest in Warrensburg in 1901, they really would invoke "the sunny South and cotton fields" of their past.

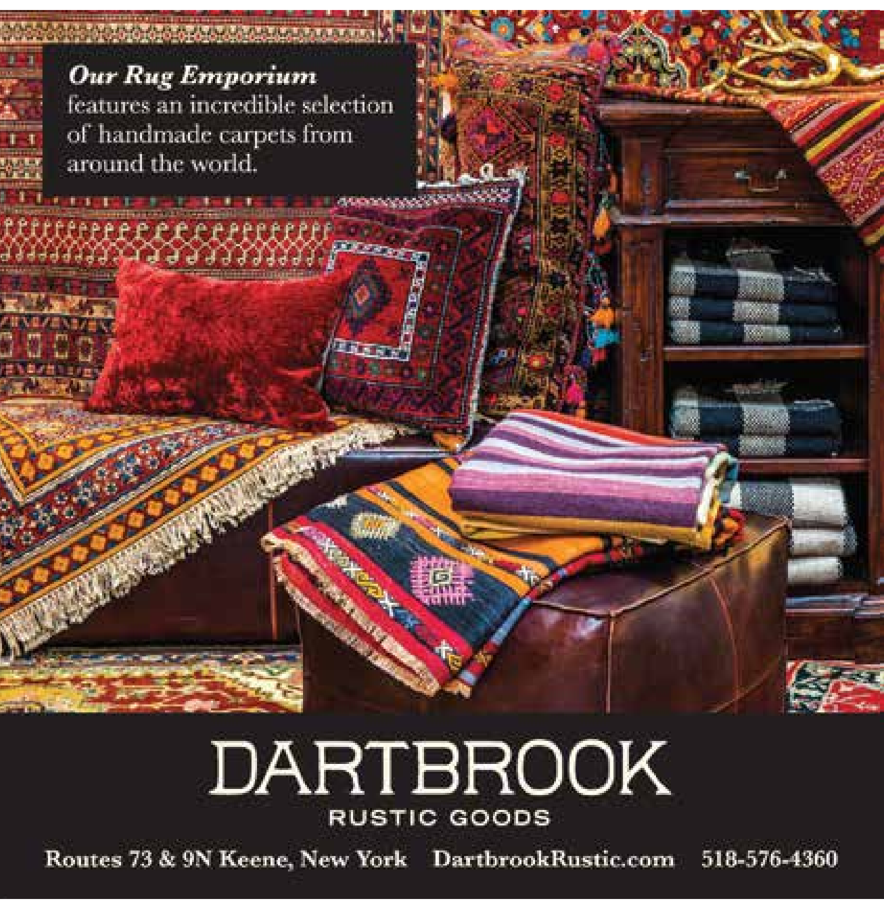
This was not their past. This was a market-driven, confected narrative of a preindustrial, racialized America. Which suggests that when Black minstrels served up the same cozy scenes of servility as whites, they, too, donned a kind of blackface, if minus grease-paint and burnt cork.

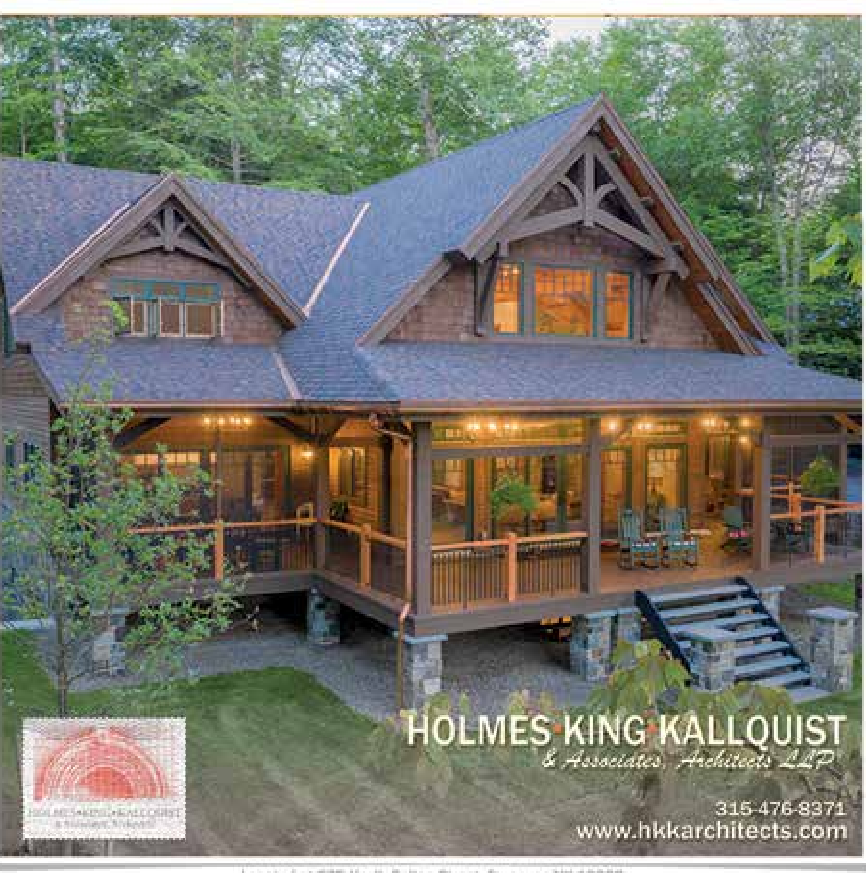
But more generations of Adirondackers knew minstrelsy as a white thing. Not only did it reach the region earlier, piggybacking as a side act with the circus, but its venues were more numerous, and its staying power more robust. Though the ad for the Patriotic Minstrel Troupe in Lake Placid in 1918 opened with "All Coons Look Alike to Me," the drophead reassured. "But these are different." Why? Because the performers were not "coons," but white. Under all the paint, still white faces you could depend on to look like your own: unique, individuated, human. "All-white performers," promised the flyer for the Hi Henry Minstrels when they played Sacandaga Park in 1903. The description put local readers on notice. Accept no substitutes. Whatever these colored outfits claim they do, we'll do better. This thing belongs to us.

That "us" tightened up as the 20th century progressed. It still meant white, but when small-town Adirondackers began putting on their own shows and giving the bigger city shows a run for their money, blackface also came to stand for home. Boasted the *Lake Placid News* about a 1915 Elks benefit at the crowded Happy Hour Theater (capacity 400): the "kings of minstrelsy" have nothing "on our local talent." The local blackface playbook was not much different from the city's (among the tunes were "Jungletown" and "Laugh You Little N—s"), but seeing neighbors playing rascals, strumpets, clowns—this was novel, and it drew. Some of these homegrown revues got so good they took it on the road, the Saranac Valley Grange Minstrels to Beekmantown, the Wilmington Grange Minstrels to Reber and Au Sable Forks, Jay's Whiteface Grange Minstrels to Keene, Whallonsburg and Peru. Black minstrel shows raised cash for Black colleges, farm schools and philanthropies; white productions poured earnings into community improvements. Blackface benefits fundraised for hot lunches in Vermontville. In Tupper Lake, for the Boy Scouts and the fire department. In Long Lake, for the Calvary Women's Society. A minstrel show visited Clinton Prison, in Dannemora, to raise funds for an inmates' recreation center.

Local productions bolstered non-sectarian community identity and pride. Protestants, Catholics and Jews (some of whose immigrant parents had been "othered" on their arrival), happily blacked up together for a cause. Children put on minstrel shows. At the Ticonderoga Playhouse, 1928, eight schoolgirls debuted as the Pickaninnies. In 1954, sixth-graders in Clintonville put on "The Crazy N—" for Halloween.

The stage alone could not contain this craze. It was too liquid, and too loved. It leaked into parades, dances, classrooms, hospitals, ice-skating galas and a Civilian Conservation Corps camp rec hall. In 1926, patients in a state hospital in Tupper Lake were entertained by a local women's troupe in blackface, playing "Bell-Hops and Southern Mammies in true cottonfield colors." The Dominion Days parade in Malone, 1935, featured a float from the "Darktown Fire Department," a blackface crew of firemen with hook-and-ladder. Tupper Lake's junior high organized a basketball game during World War II to raise funds for soldiers posted overseas:





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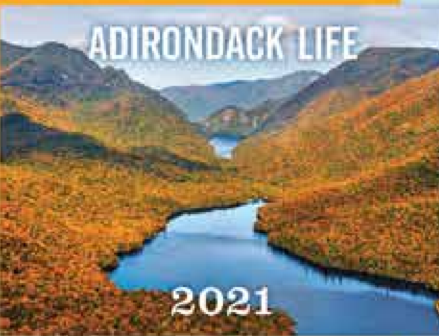

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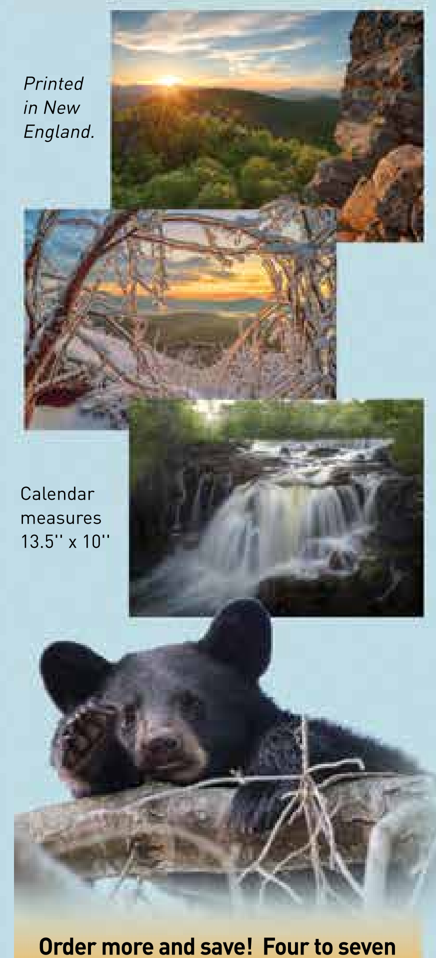

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one team wore clown suits, the other burnt cork.

Other iterations of blackface style, once removed, were found in Adirondack homes and lives: Mammy cookie jars. Wind-up toys of grinning bellhops. Cast-iron lawn jockeys, painted features racialized to the point of caricature. For the Christmas play in 1941, young students in Speculator, Saranac Lake and Ellenburg blacked up for the role of "N— Doll." In 1931, a St. Regis Falls newspaper offered home-decorating tips for boys' upholstery patterns featuring "colonial scenes of gaily bandanna'ed mammies picking cotton in the fields of the South."

In 2004, ethnomusicologist Susan Hurley-Glowa interviewed several older folks in Colton, an Adirondack hamlet in St. Lawrence County. This community hosted a blackface revue as late as 1969, and many of Hurley-Glowa's subjects recalled these shows with keen affection. All counted the experience as nothing but good fun, nothing racist about it, and anyway, how could it be, and how could they be, when none of them knew Black people?

But the reach of a prejudicial bias has no need of personal exposure or experience. When Hitler came to power, the Jewish population in Germany was less than one percent, yet anti-Semitism was the iron spine that stiffened Nazi ideology. In the United States, a derogatory idea of Blackness claimed a territory much wider than where Black people lived. From the first days of the slave trade and a Supreme Court ruling in 1857 that declared all Black Americans, free or enslaved, "beings of an inferior order," to humor columns in Adirondack newspapers that traded in dialect jokes, to the weekly badinage of the Amos and Andy radio hour, little Colton, no less than Brooklyn and Savannah, was carpet-bombed with white ideas about Blackness. And what blackface Blackness meant inside the Blue Line was what it meant all over. It meant less-ness. Less brains, poor character, no demonstrable capacity for citizenship, no value but in cheerful service.

What distinguished Adirondack blackface from urban iterations wasn't

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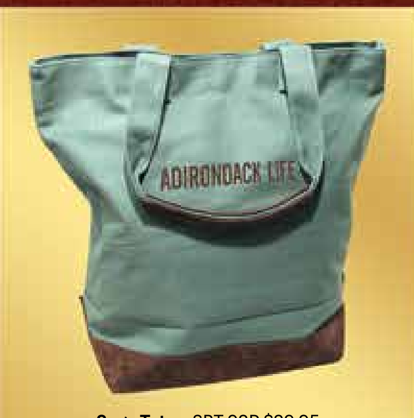

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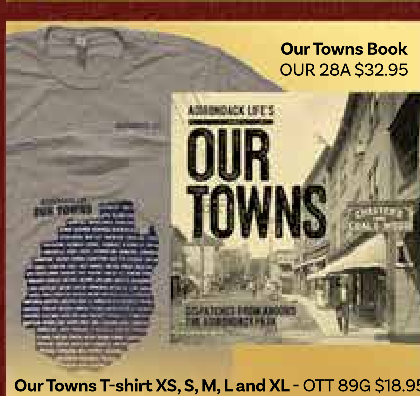

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the content or racial subtext of the shows, but how it came to be identified with public service and community building. Which may seem like a saving grace. But good works are less than lovable when they reveal a debt to a ritualized assertion of white supremacy, an assertion so cheerfully embedded in tradition it could seem almost incidental, just another "thing we do, we've always done, no harm meant, and no harm done."

No harm meant? Maybe not. But no harm done? For a century or so in Adirondack communities, democratic values of volunteerism, family fun, school spirit and town pride were annealed to an idea of Black inferiority, an idea so deep-sunk it seemed as natural as breath. Surely, harm was done to schoolchildren who grew up with images of Black servility and incapacity, vivid images that stick, sometimes for a lifetime. And harm was done to everybody when Black travelers, guessing how Adirondackers saw them, gave the region a wide berth.

As to blackface in the North Country today, my guess is we'll continue to see the odd incident and we shouldn't be surprised. Taboos will always drive young people to defy them, especially when they're so indifferently explained. And what does any Adirondack college sophomore know about blackface except it's A Thing You Shouldn't Do? Does she know the history? Know how it started, what it signified, how it worked? How would she, how would any of us, when the history isn't taught? Local and regional historians never wrote about it. No Adirondack museum has plumbed the popularity of minstrelsy inside the Blue Line. No high-school history curriculum has tackled it. Until it's owned as a shaping part of Adirondack history, how do we outdistance it? How do we expect that blackface incidents won't keep crashing in like microbursts, as if from nowhere?

Maybe by starting with an inconvenient truth. They aren't from nowhere. They're rooted in complacency, and a failure to reckon with a long uneasy past. The next-door past. Our own.