

For half a century, Northern Sky Theater and its predecessor troupe (the Heritage Ensemble) have passionately pursued a unique mission: to solely create and produce original shows illuminating American culture (especially that of the Upper Midwest). All productions have been book musicals, musical revues, or concerts. Some have drawn on authentic folk songs or the work of significant musical artists, but recently most have featured newly composed scores and explore fascinating stories set in our region.

Launched in 1970, this professional company performs under the summer stars in the 650-seat amphitheater at Peninsula State Park. Its fall season, begun in 1992 at a local town hall, moved indoors recently to the state-of-the-art Gould Theater at Northern Sky's new Creative Center in the heart of Door County.

The story of Northern Sky Theater (NST) begins with Dave Peterson, a professor at UW-Extension who taught a one-month course about the folklore of the Great Lakes at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (UWGB) in January, 1970. His students rehearsed **Song of the Inland Seas**, an epic revue Peterson had recently written celebrating the songs and stories of sailors, settlers, and working people of the Upper Midwest.

Shortly before, while camping at Peninsula State Park in Door County, Peterson had come across a pine-rimmed theatre with a tree vaulting through a corner of its stage. The theatre was used for occasional naturalist programs. Feeling the magic in this beautiful wooded setting, he put together a cast of seven singers and instrumentalists and performed **Song of the Inland Seas** on the Peninsula Park stage for two weeks in the summer of 1970. Doc Heide, Northern Sky's co-founder, described it 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 soon to be known as The Heritage Ensemble. That troupe performed on the stage in Peninsula State Park until 1990.

During those 20 years, The Ensemble produced and performed original shows by Peterson and Heide covering many aspects of Midwestern lore, such as Carl Sandburg, Mark Twain, the settlement of the Fox River Valley, railroad workers, and Wisconsin's role in the Civil War. Each show became deeper and more complex as the troupe evolved toward a higher standard of quality.

"The songs and stories seemed to grow from the soil of the Wisconsin woodlands," said Heide, who joined the Ensemble in 1972 and now serves as Northern Sky's artistic advisor. A student of history and later a psychology professor in California, Heide wrote his first Ensemble show, **The People's Song to Sing**, in 1974 when he was a senior at UWGB.

Others who joined the troupe, including Fred Alley and Gerald Pelrine, became household names as summer audiences returned year after year to see what new shows the troupe had created. Performing conditions improved 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 (Dave Alley) in 1987 and a stage manager (Neen Rock) in 1988. In 1989, a dressing room was constructed with donations from loyal patrons.

The most dramatic change came in 1990, when Doc Heide and Gerald Pelrine inherited the theater from Peterson upon his retirement. Incorporating it as a not-for-profit, they changed the troupe's name to American Folklore Theatre (AFT) to reflect their intent to broaden its scope while preserving its roots in the traditions of populist culture. The word "Theatre" was added to clarify that its productions would be dramatic as well as musical. The following year, Fred Alley joined this duo as co-producer and Jeff Herbst as performer. Herbst, a childhood friend of Alley, had previously spent one summer with the Heritage Ensemble's troupe at Governor Dodge State Park and directed several Ensemble shows at Pen Park.

Theatergoers were soon thrilled by songs and tales of Native Americans in **Moon of the Long Nights** in 1991. It was the first of several folklore-based revues co-created by Heide and Paul Sills, founding director of Chicago's Second City. During rehearsal, the AFT cast learned improvisational theater skills from Sills, who had trained such notables as Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Alan Arkin, Ed Asner, and Alan Alda. The next year Fred Alley and composer James Kaplan created their first show together, **Fishing for the Moon**.

In 1992, AFT decided to continue into the fall season and started its Town Hall Series in Northern Door village halls with ensemble shows like the Fred Alley/James Kaplan collaboration **Goodnight Irene** featuring the songs of The Weavers. Jeff Herbst became artistic director in 1993. **Belgians In Heaven**, the metaphysical adventures of two Southern Door farmers, premiered in 1994 and went on to have ten productions. Alley and Kaplan's smash hit [Lumberjacks in Love](#) premiered in 1996 and has been reprised ten times. In 2001, a show about Door County women shipbuilders in World War II called [Loose Lips Sink Ships](#) drew record attendance nearing 900 at a several performances.

2001 would prove to be a monumental year for AFT. On May 1 AFT suffered the loss of Fred Alley, who had come to be thought of by many fans as the "face" of AFT. His beautiful tenor voice was emblazoned in the minds of all who heard him, he collaborated on more shows than AFT can count, and he was a key player in developing the company into what it is today. Fred was 38 when he died of a heart attack while on his daily run in Door County. His award-winning musical **The Spitfire Grill** with composer James Valcq had a successful Off-Broadway run and has since had over 600 productions worldwide.

Also in 2001, AFT received two major awards from the Peninsula Arts Association. The first, "The Visionary Award," celebrates the commitment of local organizations to the development of new programs. American Folklore Theatre received the award for its New Works program and for its help in launching Door Shakespeare. The second award,

“The Champion Award”, was presented to Fred Alley posthumously and renamed for him.

Ever since AFT emerged from the Heritage Ensemble, the growth of the troupe has been phenomenal. The annual budget has gone from \$20,000 to \$1,200,000. Company members perform regularly 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 expanded. The performances are enhanced by state-of-the-art sound systems. Northern Sky has a year-round administrative office. Over 40,000 people attend performances each year, making Northern Sky one of the major theatres in the Midwest.

[Lumberjacks in Love](#) has been received by sold-out audiences in Milwaukee and has been on stages as far away as Vancouver. The ice fishing musical [Guys On Ice](#), another Alley/Kaplan collaboration, premiered at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 1998 as part of Wisconsin’s sesquicentennial. It has been staged frequently coast to coast and was made into a popular special by Wisconsin Public Television. **Packer Fans from Outer Space** (by Doc Heide, Lee Becker, and James Kaplan) has had over a dozen productions around the state including at Milwaukee’s Marcus Center for the Performing Arts.

A new generation of writers and composers has contributed delightful shows to Northern Sky’s canon. These include the writing team of Dave Hudson and Paul Libman, two-time winners of the Richard Rodgers Award, who co-created such pieces as **Muskie Love, Cabin With A View, Main Traveled Roads, and Naked Radio**. Minneapolis-based writer Laurie Flanigan-Hegge, who joined during the Ensemble years, has co-authored **Loose Lips Sink Ships, See Jane Vote, and Boxcar**. **Victory Farm**, a deeply moving show inspired by the true tale of German POW’s laboring in Door County cherry orchards, was written by local folksinger Katie Dahl with composer James Valcq. Milwaukee-based writer Matt Zembrowski has contributed **Doctor! Doctor!** and the Packer-themed musical **Dad’s Season Tickets**. Other teams such as Richard Castle and Matt Levine (**Oklahoma in Wisconsin, Love Stings**) have co-authored shows from Los Angeles.

Many adoring Northern Sky fans memorize shows and buy recordings to learn the lyrics. Parents from around the country write to Northern Sky, saying their children sing and act out scenes from NST shows all year round. The charm of Northern Sky continues to be the original words and music that bring people and stories to life, creating empathy between theatergoers and performers. This 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 Northern Sky as a highlight of their vacation each year. Peninsula State Park officials note that years ago,

campers discovered Northern Sky performances to be good family entertainment, but now see the park as a prime destination because it is home to Northern Sky.

The founders of Northern Sky say that one secret to their success is that many of the troupe's members have worked together and shared the same vision for decades. "From the very beginning," says Heide, "it was a true theatre of the folk, carrying forth songs and 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 Northern Sky's ability to grow and thrive. In 1997 a community board of directors was formed, which provided additional strength and stability to the organization. In 1998 AFT hired a full-time managing director to allow the writers and producers more time to spend on creative projects. During the 2000 season, the first-ever Children's Theatre Workshops were launched. AFT began its first capital campaign in 1999 to raise money to build a new dressing room at Peninsula State Park in 2001. Another campaign aimed to raise funds to complete a new stage in time for the 2003 season. More recently, the Constellation Campaign raised over \$8 million dollars for the Northern Sky Creative Center, which opened on 40 acres at the corner of Highways A and F in August, 2019. After decades of having its functions scattered around the County, the badly-needed new facility offers a central place to rehearse and perform shows, conduct administrative functions, and build and store sets and costumes.

Although most members of the company write or perform elsewhere during the off-season, their time at Northern Sky is usually the highlight of their years. Unlike other venues, Northern Sky 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.