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Folklore in Motion

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PREFACE

We're all travelers of some kind. Many of us have traveled great distances, roaming all across this nation or even to foreign countries to explore cultures that vary widely from our own. Some of us have come from faraway places to get to where we are. Americans in particular are travelers—this country was founded by people from other places. The history of our state was written by adventurers who came from many different places: Thomas J. Rusk, Stephen F. Austin, Davy Crockett, Sam Houston. The same is true for many key individuals in the Texas Folklore Society—half of our secretary-editors were born in other states, and none of the men responsible for establishing the organization were native Texans. As a group, the members of the Society value the experiences of our travels, and the travels of our ancestors, because those experiences are what make us who we are. Many of the stories in *The Family Saga*, one of our most popular publications, are about how we (collectively) got here.

Travel affects—and is affected by—many things: economics, social customs and interactions, superstitions, and personal beliefs. Folklore itself travels, and changes as it does. As we move from one place to another we take our customs and beliefs with us, and we share them with others. However, sometimes they are what compel us to embark on journeys in the first place. Travel—and the many various means of transportation—is a big part of the traditional knowledge of any culture. The adventurous spirit of Texans has led to much travel lore, from stories of how ancestors first came to the state to reflections of how technology has affected the customs, language, and stories of life “on the go.” As travelers, we are all involved in crossing barriers, invading territory, and continuously effecting change everywhere we go.

During the Folklore session at the 2005 meeting of the Texas State Historical Association, Joyce Gibson Roach shared a traveling

anecdote that got me thinking about how folklore moves about. A traveling anecdote is not necessarily about travel; it is a story that moves around from place to place, and it can be serious, didactic, or humorous. However, some traveling anecdotes are actually about travel. I remember fondly an account Paul Patterson shared during a hootenany once, of one of his boyhood moves (an excerpt from his *Crazy Women in the Rafters*), when he so eloquently stated that he was “small for his age and dumb for his size.” That was a hook; I’ve been a fan of Paul’s wit ever since. From days of traveling by covered wagon to the twenty-first century, stories of the road are equally compelling. In “The Traveling Anecdote” (*Folk Travelers: Ballads, Tales, and Talk*, PTFS XXV, 1953), J. Frank Dobie relates many traveling anecdotes, and he explains that they will always exist, no matter how advanced we or our forms of travel become.

Traveling has changed significantly for the average American, just in terms of advances in automotive technology. One could view these changes as positive or negative. I remember family vacations with nine of us in a car during the sweltering heat of summer, cramped and unseatbelted, entertained only by songs we taught each other or made up as we went along. We covered hundreds of miles, played games without the aid of electronic devices, told stories and, probably, wore our parents’ nerves pretty thin. Do I now appreciate our minivan and our children’s personal CD players or Gameboys? Yes, I do. Still, traveling was once much easier and, therefore, probably more enjoyable. Before Homeland Security placed restrictions on where and how we get from one place to another, limiting what we can take on airplanes or who can fly them, people viewed trips as adventures, not just tremendous inconveniences. But neither technology nor government regulations will really affect our desire to travel or the lore that surrounds it.

The preface for *From Hell to Breakfast* (PTFS IXX, 1944) reads, “How Far is it From Hell to Breakfast? Out in the cow country a man upon returning from a trip might say that he had traveled from hell to breakfast. Nobody could tell you in miles just how far he had been, but everybody would know that he had trav-

eled a far piece and covered a lot of territory.”—Mody Boatright and Donald Day. Texas is a vast territory, and the folklore of East Texas is different from that of West Texas. The roads within this state cover not just land, but also the cultures of each area they cross. This Publication of the Texas Folklore Society features articles that examine all kinds of lore about travel. These articles examine people and the places they go, and the methods of travel used in getting to those places, as well as the vehicles (including wagons, trains, cars, and boats), the traditions, the food, the songs and games, and the stories along the way. The first chapter examines how folklore is related to travel, specifically in Texas (or for Texans). The title of the second chapter—Back in the Day—is a new folk expression that stands for something from days bygone, and it features articles that relate how some authors’ ancestors came to the state—traditional “Gone to Texas” accounts. Also included are articles about methods of travel that are no longer prevalent, although their influence lingers on.

Another chapter is dedicated to trains and cars, two machines that changed the face of our entire nation. This year’s throwback article, Newton Gaines’ “The Ford Epigram,” tells about creative signage painted on car fenders. The art of customizing vehicles is probably more popular today than ever, as can be evidenced by looking at a car frequently parked several blocks from my home; it is emblazoned with large metallic letters across the rear quarter panels identifying its owner as “Cut Dawg” in stylized script. (The ridiculously large tires are another folk way of modifying, and thereby personalizing, the appearance.) The last chapter includes articles that examine the lore associated with different types of modern transportation, including two-wheeled machines, machines that fly, and machines that scream across the land at dangerous speeds. It concludes with articles that consider how we fuel our machines and ourselves, and the rituals in which we engage when we’re on our way from here to there.

Readers interested in Gretchen Lutz’s article on drag racing may want to revisit Hermes Nye’s article on drag strip speech in

Tire Shrinker to Dragster (PTFS XXXIV, 1968), as well as the other article that gives that volume its title, E. J. Rissmann's "The Tire Shrinker." Those two articles, as Wilson Hudson notes in the preface of the book, show just how far we've come in a short time. Everyone has a horror story or two about the old days of traveling, and those days are not far gone. Although my school wasn't several miles away from my home (or uphill, whether going to or coming from), I can honestly share with my children the story of how I walked to school one bitterly cold morning when the temperature was seventy degrees below zero—with the wind chill, of course. We would never subject our children to such dangers today.

Jim Harris's "Texans on the Road: The Folklore of Travel" was not the original inspiration for this publication, but it does fit well with the topic and is, therefore, the kick-off article. It is an overview of all that follows: unique places around the state, family vacations, folk expressions about life on the road, modes of transportation, and the very motivation people have for deciding to hit the road at all. In the article, Jim suggests many ideas for further study, which I also encourage readers to consider. Hopefully, all of our books provide impetus for or generate further interest in continued research on a particular topic. Remember, these publications are not the final word on the research of the various topics, but rather just the beginnings.

I give thanks to several people, including all of the contributors, my colleagues and administrators at Stephen F. Austin State University, Karen DeVinney and the staff at the UNT Press, and especially to Janet Simonds, who continues to provide innovative ideas that breathe new life into this organization and its publications. We used a slightly different process for collecting submissions for this book: email. It was extremely effective, and we will continue to solicit contributions this way in the future. Everyone who reads a Publication of the Texas Folklore Society should know that anyone can contribute to the publications, and all are encouraged to do so. These books are created by the Society's members, and the more that contribute the better. Not only does it make my

job easier by giving me more selections from which to choose, but it makes the publications better because they are more diverse and personal.

This publication is dedicated to all the members of the Texas Folklore Society who travel across this great state each year to attend our annual meetings. Gathering in a different city—big or small—each year is an added bonus to membership in this organization. We get to see interesting exhibits, visit historical sites, and experience distinctive local culture in a different location each year. In addition, we get to experience all the sights and sounds and foods and culture of all parts of the state along the way. I know that for many who attend, the trip is a much anticipated event, perhaps the most enjoyable one all year. As always, I look forward to seeing you all again next Easter.

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