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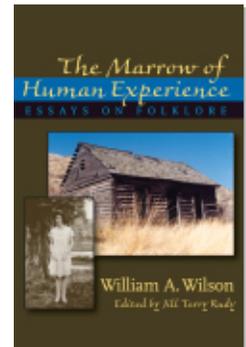
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“SOMETHING THERE IS THAT DOESN’T LOVE A WALL”

When Bert Wilson in 1991 delivered this talk, “Something There Is That Doesn’t Love a Wall,” the Folklore Society of Utah was holding its annual meeting in conjunction with that of the Utah State Historical Society, an arrangement that had then continued for twenty years. Bert had been the driving force behind this supportive agreement. At that time, the Folklore Society had a tiny membership and few resources, but the quality and interest of the folklore session made it annually one of the most popular and best attended at the meeting. The hospitality of historical society director Charles Peterson and of his successor, Melvin T. Smith, proved absolutely essential in providing the Folklore Society an arena for meeting, which in turn allowed it to survive, grow, and eventually prosper, so much so that we now have an independent annual meeting featuring as many as twenty-four papers by undergraduates and graduate students, several of which are published by the society.

Fostering cooperation in mutually beneficial enterprises is a hallmark of Bert Wilson’s work, within the universities he has served, in the public arena, and in his own intellectual life. That drive for cooperation and understanding is exemplified by “Something There Is That Doesn’t Love a Wall,” a title he borrows appropriately from the opening line of Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall,” with its frequently misquoted and even more frequently misunderstood line spoken by the next-door farmer, “Good fences make good neighbors.” In fact, the poem’s point is to question the building and maintenance of walls, whether between pine trees and apple orchards or between human beings.

Bert has devoted his career to tearing down walls where they exist and encouraging others to think past the walls that we create in our career, our institutions, and our thinking. At Brigham Young and Utah State universities—at both of which he increased course offerings in folklore, expanded the folklore archives, and encouraged the hiring of other folklorists—he has sought cooperative arrangements

This paper was a dinner address delivered at the combined meetings of the Folklore Society of Utah and the Utah State Historical Society at Park City, Utah, July 12, 1991.

with colleagues in English, history, and social sciences; with librarians and archivists; and with such institutions as the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at BYU, the Mountain West Center for Regional Studies at USU, and the Festival of the American West in Logan. In his teaching, his deeply interdisciplinary interests allowed him to intertwine perspectives drawn from a variety of folkloristic approaches along with those of written and oral history, the new historicism of literary theory, performance and contextual approaches from folkloristics (the theory and practice of folklore study), and behavioral and functionalist approaches from the social sciences.

The same can be said of his scholarship, nearly one hundred articles and several hundred public presentations on many topics, particularly Mormon and Utah folklore. His ability to place folklore within the context of the humanities, to demonstrate that folklore contributes to the quality of being human for all people, has helped scholars and the general public alike to appreciate the human potential for shared, cooperative, and supportive interaction. Rather than seeing folklore as something possessed, invented, perpetuated, or even lost by a group of "the folk," by those markedly different from the observer, Bert has shown us the universality of tradition, performance, and communication in all our lives.

As a builder of institutions and programs he has been exemplary. Not only has he helped to lower the barriers between folklore and history, he has also shown the ways folklorists and historians can achieve a common cause and a common goal while learning from each other. As a Mormon working in an academic discipline whose national and international membership is, on the whole, profoundly ignorant of Mormonism, he has collected, analyzed, and explained not the archaic lore of difference but the contemporary lore of similarity. His long service as the first folklorist appointed to the board of the Utah Arts Council helped immeasurably to increase the understanding and importance of folk arts among the arts community, and paved the way for later board members Barre Toelken and Meg Brady. His understanding and support of folklore in the public sector—the Folk Arts Program of the Utah Arts Council and of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fife Folklore Conference at Utah State University, the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada, and fieldwork in Nevada for the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress—has helped break down long-standing barriers between public-sector and academic folklorists.

This article exemplifies his multidisciplinary and humanistic approach. It encompasses the history of folklore studies and various theories concerning "the folk." It emphasizes the innate artistry and performative instincts of humans, an approach linked to contemporary developments in folklore theory. It demonstrates from an anthropological and sociological perspective that folklore occurs in social situations and that it is a vital component in the formation and maintenance of human groups. It shows the vitality and importance of folk history and the way it reflects values, hopes, and fears that written, verifiable history may not. And, near the end, it emphasizes the importance for every group of people and every community of a "common body of shared beliefs," what Bert calls a "value

center.” This value center, often expressed through folklore (stories, songs, jokes, customs, rituals, and other kinds of expressive culture), is at the heart of how we regard ourselves and how we regard others. Rather than creating walls between human groups or between academic disciplines, Bert argues, we need to seek out and to find the commonalities that link us.

—David Stanley

THE REALIZATION THAT WE CELEBRATE THIS YEAR TWENTY YEARS OF COOPERATION between the Folklore Society of Utah and the Utah State Historical Society has pulled my thoughts toward the subject I would like to address in this paper.

On March 6, 1971, Austin Fife, realizing that the Folklore Society of Utah had sputtered along for years, recommended that it disband, that it turn its records over to the State Historical Society, and that it encourage the historical society “to recognize folklore as an integral part of its activities.” On March 21, I countered by proposing that the folklore society seek closer cooperation with the historical society, that it meet jointly with the historical society at their annual meeting, but that it continue to maintain its independence and to pursue those activities peculiar to folklorists alone. We put the issue to a vote of our meager membership; by an 87 percent majority we voted to remain independent (Wilson 1971).

Officers of the folklore society then met with officers of the historical society on May 15, found them receptive to our initiatives, and planned a special folklore session for the historical society’s annual meeting to be held at Brigham Young University on September 18. In that session, Jan Brunvand spoke on Mormon jokelore, Thomas Cheney on the J. Golden Kimball legacy, and John B. Harris and I on Mormon missionary lore. Thus began a pattern that has continued until today with the folklore society’s participating each year in the historical society’s annual meetings—to the mutual benefit of both.

At the annual meeting the following year, I gave a talk, “Folklore and History: Fact amid the Legends,” which was well received, was published in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, and even received the Rosenblatt Award for the best general interest article of the year. That also was a beginning, as the *Quarterly* opened its pages to folklore articles and, in addition to individual essays, published over the years three special issues devoted entirely to folklore—one to Mormon lore (Wilson 1976d), one to ethnic lore (Brady 1984), and one to material culture (Carter 1988).

Elsewhere in the state, partly as a result of these initial advances, the marriage between folklore and history continued to grow stronger. Folklore courses at Utah State University have been cross-listed in the history department; the annual Fife Conference at USU has always welcomed historians; the Jensen Living History Farm brings together folklore and history; the Folk Arts Program of the Utah Arts Council has always endeavored to set its work in historical

context; the Western Folklife Center, based originally in Salt Lake City, later in Elko, Nevada, has attempted to increase our understanding of western history, especially through its work with cowboy poetry; and the state historical society, in its preservation efforts, has paid attention to folk architecture. A year from now, when I return from a leave of absence, I will assume the directorship of the Charles Redd Center at BYU, a step I hope will make the marriage of folklore and history still stronger.

In Utah, then, historians and folklorists have cooperated to a degree unknown in almost any other state. One hopes that the next twenty years will produce equally rich results. But before that can happen we must learn to understand each other still better. In spite of general good will on both sides, I sometimes fear we talk *past* each other instead of *to* each other.

Both historians and folklorists are interested in stories people tell about the past, but while historians are primarily interested in the events illuminated by these stories, folklorists are often more interested in the stories themselves—as artistic performances worthy of study in their own right; or folklorists are interested in the tellers of the stories and in the ways they use narratives to project personal values or to place themselves center stage in a world that has not often acknowledged their worth. Once these differences are understood, however, cooperation and mutual endeavors are still possible.

A much more serious problem occurs when folklorists and historians use the same words but attach different meanings to them, or when one camp views a term positively and the other pejoratively. I would plead, therefore, that the historians among you pay closer heed to definitions of terms folklorists have coined, including the word “folklore” itself, even if you eventually choose to use them in different ways; and I would urge folklorists to seek ways of making our language more palatable to historians and thus to cause them to view our work with less skepticism.

As I write these words, lines from Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” keep haunting me. “Something there is,” said Frost, “that doesn’t love a wall.” “Before I built a wall,” he continued, “I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out” (1969, 33–34). That’s what definitions are, of course—walls that can separate us from each other and hinder our cooperation. Still, if we are to do business with each other, we must have some mutual understanding of what we are about. I would like to consider two terms that have sometimes given us trouble—first “folk” and then “folk history.” As a folklorist, I must, of course, speak from a folklorist’s point of view, but by explaining that point of view to the rest of you, I hope to eliminate some of those walls that occasionally divide us.

The way some historians use the first of these terms, “folk,” will frequently set the teeth of folklorists on edge. Who are these people, “the folk,” who occupy our attention? Properly to answer that question, we must look briefly at the antecedents of contemporary folklore study. Serious folklore study began in Europe in the nineteenth century—on the continent under the inspiration of romantic nationalism and in England under the impulse of the idea of progress

and of evolutionary anthropology. The romantic nationalists considered the folklore which eager collectors were bringing to public attention to be relics, or survivals, from an earlier Golden Age; the evolutionists, on the other hand, considered this same lore to be survivals not from a glorious past, but from savage or barbaric ages of cultural development which all people had passed through or would have to pass through on their unilinear path to civilization.

Though divided on questions of folklore's ultimate origins, advocates of both these schools shared a number of views in common. Both believed that folklore had survived in and could be found only among the rural peasant classes or, as some put it, among the "ruder orders" who had remained relatively untouched by education and by the more sophisticated and cosmopolitan life in the cities. Both saw folklore as a tool for reconstructing the past—for the romantic nationalists a glorious past which they hoped to restore and for the evolutionists a savage and barbaric past which they believed most of the race had happily, and forever, left behind. Neither school would have given credence to the notion that folklore might help us understand the dynamics of the present or of the recent past, and both schools, therefore, would have found quite ridiculous any attempt to use folklore to better understand our contemporary world.

Almost all serious folklorists have long ago abandoned these nineteenth-century concepts. Though twentieth-century folklorists have made many theoretical advances beyond the monistic views of the previous century, three in particular are germane to our discussion. First, we now understand that folklore has come into being not just in the distant past but in all ages. Just as people in earlier eras generated and transmitted folklore in response to the circumstances of their lives, so too people in the present create and pass along folklore as they react to the strains, stresses, joys, and sorrows of their lives. Folklore expressions, therefore, are not static survivals, like potsherds, but dynamic responses to dynamic and current social situations. Even if these expressions have originated in the distant past, they will have been reshaped to meet the demands of contemporary life. In other words, folklore may have been born in the past but it lives in the present. Second, we now understand that folklore belongs not just to peasants and to rural people nor to the unsophisticated and unlettered but to all people. All of us, really, are the "folk." We generate, transmit, and enjoy folklore because these acts are imperatives of our human existence—that is, we tell stories, sing songs, recite proverbs, and participate in rituals because these are the ways we have as human beings of dealing with basic and recurring human problems, the social situations I mentioned above. Third, we now understand that while folklore is indeed universal, occurring throughout time and among all peoples, it is also culture specific—that is, those universal folklore forms available to us are given shape and meaning by the attitudes and values of the social groups to which we belong. Folklore study, therefore, helps us identify the universal in the particular. It teaches us what it means to be human while at the same time showing us what it means to be a member of a particular locality,

a particular ethnic or immigrant group, a particular occupation, a particular religion, a particular family. Since historians are interested in these same cultural groupings, folklorists and historians have good cause to cooperate.

The problem is that some historians—and notice, please, that I said *some*, not *all*—got stuck back in the nineteenth century in their understanding of folklore and never made the transition to the twentieth. They still consider the people who keep folklore alive as simple, unlettered country folk; and they view this lore as curious customs and usages, survivals from an earlier era. Consider, for example, the following two passages from Jon Butler’s *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, published in 1990 by Harvard University Press:

Significant evidence suggests that the folklorization of magic occurred as much in America as in England. As in England, colonial magic and occultism did not so much disappear everywhere as they disappeared among certain social classes and became confined to poorer, more marginal segments of early American Society. (83)

The legal activity against witchcraft demonstrated the broad range of early American religious expression. The persistence of belief in witches after witch trials had ended reflected the folklorization of magic in the twilight of early modern Western society on both sides of the Atlantic. Although upper social classes largely abandoned occultism, other colonists continued to believe in witchcraft, astrology, and the ability of wise men and wise women to find lost objects and cure disease. In this regard, folklorization prevented the complete suppression of occultism and magic. Opponents lacked the means to eliminate it completely, and magistrates and ministers tolerated its minimal expression, in part because such views seemed quaint and in part because they were held by the folk. (96–97)

No nineteenth-century English evolutionary anthropologist could have said it better. According to this nineteenth-century point of view, through a process Butler calls “folklorization,” as the majority of the population progressed out of the darkness of the past, elements of an earlier folk mentality supposedly persisted among uneducated, marginal, and lower class individuals.

These same ideas can be found in Ronald W. Walker’s “The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting” (1984), which places Joseph Smith’s treasure seeking in the context of practices current in Smith’s time. In this otherwise excellent piece, Walker, like Butler, still clings to the notion of the marginalized, unlettered folk versus the rest of us—as is evident in phrases like, “an immemorial but now forgotten world view” (430–31), “an old but fading way of life” (431), “myths” (431), “part of a significant but now largely forgotten belief system” (435), “old lore” (435), “surviving folklore” (443), “an old cultural system

that rapidly was passing into obsolescence" (450), and "the old way that eventually faltered before the onslaught of modern science and the triumph of a new world view" (452).

And these ideas become centrally important in D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (1987). Since I have discussed Quinn's work elsewhere (Wilson 1987b), I will not repeat myself here, except to point out that, like Walker and Butler, Quinn locates folk practices, especially magic and the occult, "in rural areas and among people with limited education" (21) and reduces the practitioners of traditional knowledge to "rural folk" (14), "the common people" (20), people among whom there existed an "indifference to the priorities of the educated elite" (11). Further, he finds in the folk mentality "a magic world view" that has persisted relatively unchanged from days of the ancient Egyptians, little influenced by circumstances of geography, culture, and history—a worldview which can be put behind us only through increased education and through accepting the more rational, scientific thought of the contemporary world.

The problem with the approach taken by these scholars is not their argument that as certain segments of a social group, for whatever reason, abandon once widely held beliefs and practices, other members of the same group will continue to adhere to them and will keep them at least temporarily alive. Of course this occurs. The problem is calling those people among whom the generally abandoned practices persist "the folk"—otherwise why the term "folklorization"—and thus assuming that the rest of the supposedly more enlightened population are not folk and consequently will have no folklore.

A related problem with the approach is that, since the model of these scholars does not allow for the persistence of earlier practices in a more educated world, they have not looked for them—as their badly outdated references to folklore publications will quickly make clear. It is difficult for me to understand, for example, that anyone can argue that treasure seeking is a thing of the past, a survival of an earlier intellectual climate, when tales of lost Indian or Spanish gold mines or of hidden outlaw wealth comprise one of the most vibrant themes in American, and particularly in Western American, folklore. When I taught at Utah State University, a fellow came into the archive who had heard stories of outlaws having once buried their ill-gotten gain somewhere on Samaria Mountain near Malad, Idaho. Having failed to uncover the wealth through conventional digging, he was now trying to raise money to find the treasure by bulldozing away the entire mountain. Such treasure legends are everywhere, as is made clear by the 1977 publication of Byrd Granger's *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures Applied to Redactions of Arizona Legends and to Lost Mine and Treasure Legends Exterior to Arizona*.

Folklorist Alan Dundes sees such legends as part of the ongoing American dream of "unlimited good." "It may be significant," he suggests "that most accounts end with the treasure still not recovered. This suggests that Americans think that America remains a land of opportunity, that boundless wealth is

still readily available to anyone with the energy and initiative to go dig for it” (1971, 97). One can certainly quarrel with Dundes’s interpretation but not with his awareness that the legends reveal much more than an earlier “folk” way of thinking.

It is also difficult for me to understand that scholars can consider the use of the divining rod, either to find treasure or water, as a practice that has faded with the advance of rationalistic thought. A quick walk through the BYU Folklore Archives should provide one with evidence that the practice is still alive and well in Utah. In their very important *Water Witching U.S.A.*, published in 1959, Harvard professors Evon Z. Vogt and Ray Hyman, taking a functional rather than a survivalist approach, argue that use of the diving rod has continued to flourish, even in a more sophisticated environment, because it gives its users a sense of control in an unsure world—that is, it persuades them that even in our arid West, where a high degree of uncertainty exists concerning the availability of precious water, means are still available through which one might hope to find this precious liquid (191).

This is precisely the point—that folklore arises in response to felt need—which Wayland Hand has made in explaining the persistence of magical folklore in a world that one would expect to be hostile to magic: “Folk beliefs and superstitions,” says Hand, “arise naturally out of situations of hazard and doom. . . . Physical hazard is bad enough; far worse, however, are pursuits fraught with psychological hazard such as the stage, stock market operations, gambling, and sports” (1983, 53). In other words, in certain desperate and trying circumstances, in both rural and urban life, and among the educated and uneducated, many of us turn to cultural means outside ourselves to save the day. The point I would stress is that these are not “folk” ways of dealing with life’s vicissitudes; they are human ways, common to the species, not just to a segment of the race. We call them folklore because they find their cultural expression within the different folk groups I have mentioned above.

For example, while the twentieth-century Mormon world is not the nineteenth-century world of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries, much remains constant. So long as present-day Mormons continue to believe, as did their predecessors, that through intercessory prayers and rituals they can manipulate supernatural powers to their advantage, they will continue to do so. Hence, though supernatural experiences are not the sum of their religious values, many Mormons today still divine the future, experience dreams and visions, invoke angels and spirits, exorcise devils, seek information from the spirits of the dead, heal the sick through ceremonial means, and use talismans to ward off evil.

I am not suggesting that all remains as it once was. Clearly, in response to changed cultural circumstances, some forms of folklore diminish or disappear altogether. But, and this is the crucial point, others develop to take their place—because folklore is fundamental to the human condition, arising, as I have noted, in response to recurring human situations. Another, and more serious, problem with the evolutionary approach to folklore, therefore, is that it

denies this fact and argues for the eventual disappearance of folklore altogether. For, if the folk are to be seen as marginal and unlettered individuals, bound together by their nonscientific and nonrational worldview, and if folklore is to be seen as the expressive manifestations of this worldview, then it follows that once the folk become educated, they will cease to be “folk,” and folklore will cease to be. If we accept this point of view, then we “wall out” from serious consideration not just magical and supernatural practices but also the folklore that exists all around us and is part of all our lives. And we hinder, in the process, the cooperation that should exist between folklorists and historians as they seek to understand the social groups that make up our society.

Students often bring these older notions of the folk to introductory folklore classes. When they learn that they must actually collect folklore as part of the course requirements, some panic, thinking they must head off to some hinterland to uncover quaint and curious stories and practices. Others grow ecstatic when they are able to discover potential informants so old they are just about to totter into the grave. When I suggest that they forget such enterprises and begin by interviewing their roommates or people at their work places or in their families, they often look at me in amazement, never having considered that they or their acquaintances might know any folklore. They have been conditioned to think of folklore as something belonging to people other than themselves—to those strange, or exotic, or quaint “folk.” By midsemester, however, they wonder not where they will find folklore but rather how, for their research papers, they will cut out a narrow enough focus from the world of traditional material that surrounds them.

One student, convinced she could never locate any folklore, came to talk with me. “Where do you work?” I asked. “In my father’s office.” “What does your father do?” “He’s a doctor.” “All right, then, put together a collection of doctors’ folklore.” And she did. By semester’s end, she had gathered a rich body of medical lore collected from her father and his medical colleagues (Barton 1974).

Though doctors and nurses must work closely together, they do not always admire each other and frequently tell stories that reflect and warrant their opinions. Thus from doctors we often get stories like the following (nurses, of course, will have their own stories about doctors):

This doctor was in the hospital, and a nurse came by to get a urine specimen from him. She left the specimen bottle with him and told him that she would be back in a few minutes to collect it. Well, this doctor had just had some visitors, and they had brought him a jug of apple cider, so the doctor decided to play a trick on the nurse. He filled up the bottle with cider. The nurse returned a few minutes later, and he asked her how she thought the specimen looked. The nurse looked at it and it seemed OK to her. But the doctor took it and held it up to the light. “Looks a little cloudy to me,” he said.

“Let’s run it through again”—accompanied by a hearty drinking-it-down gesture. (Barton 1974, no. 25, 26)

One morning, the silence in the hospital was broken by a patient, running down the hall, pursued by a nurse who was wielding a large pair of scissors, followed by an intern, who was calling out, “No, no nurse. I said slip off his spectacles!” (Barton 1974, no. 23, 24)

Doctors also tell stories about dumb patients, who do not know where to put suppositories; they tell war stories about heroic operations; they engage in rituals initiating new medical students into the field; they develop strategies for telling some patients they are going to die; and they use a jargon that goes far beyond standard medical terminology. A careful study of the full range of doctors’ lore will give us an understanding of their strains and stresses, joys and sorrows, values and attitudes that we are not likely to get in other ways—just as, for example, a study of the full range of the lore of the Mormon missionaries, from faith-promoting stories to trickster escapades, will help us better understand their world (see Wilson 1981). What a pity it would be to miss collecting and studying this lore because its possessors somehow seem to be people more like ourselves than marginal, or rural, or old, or unlettered “folk.”

If folklorists are occasionally troubled by the definition some historians ascribe to the term “folk,” historians are on occasion equally troubled by the use some folklorists make of the term “folk history.” And thus definitions once again “wall us in” or “wall us out” from the cooperation that ought to exist between us.

I have always been dissatisfied by the term “oral history” because it seems to include under one heading what strike me as two kinds of history, each of which yields a different sort of data about the past. So when I wrote an essay for the recent book *The Mormon Presence in Canada* (1990), I tried to distinguish between these different forms of oral history. I wrote:

Folklorists had been collecting and studying oral history for at least a hundred years before Allan Nevins set up the oral history program at Columbia University in the 1930s and thus set the course many historians in subsequent years were to follow with increasing enthusiasm. If what these scholars study is oral history, what, then, have folklorists been studying all these years? Well, another kind of oral history. To avoid confusion, I would suggest the terms “personal history” and “folk history”—both of them oral. Personal history is comprised of accounts of historical events collected from people who observed or participated in the events they describe. Folk history, on the other hand, is simply history that circulates within a community by word of mouth—that is, accounts of historical events collected from people who learned the stories

from others and who did not themselves observe or participate in the events they describe. (1990, 155)

These comments passed muster with most reviewers, but one historian took angry exception to my comments. Taking me to task for muddying the waters of historical research by inventing a new term, “folk history,” where other, already existing, terms would serve better, the reviewer said, “Folk history in the way he [Wilson] uses that term is rather more appropriately called folklore or myth. It is not history” (reader’s report to Utah State University Press on Wilson’s manuscript, 1989).

Well, I really can’t take credit for inventing the term. It appears at least as early as 1957 in the important “A Theory for American Folklore,” written by Richard M. Dorson, folklorist and distinguished professor of history at Indiana University (210). The same mail that brought the reviewer’s comments brought an advertisement for a book entitled *Eats: A Folk History of Texas Foods* (Sewell 1989), and a collection of essays on oral narratives that arrived from Finland about the same time contained a piece by a prominent Finnish folklorist called “What the People of Sivakka Tell about Themselves: A Research Experiment in Folk History” (Knuuttila 1989). So the term has been around awhile.

The reviewer’s suggestion that I avoid confusing readers by simply calling what I have termed “folk history” folklore would be akin to suggesting that we could avoid confusing the musical world if we would only call pianos nothing more than musical instruments. Of course, folk history is folklore; but it is part of the whole, not the whole—and it was the part I was trying to define.

I could devote many pages to the reviewer’s use of the word “myth,” but that will have to wait another day. I will say simply that his or her suggestion that I seek instruction on how to use folklore for historical analysis by turning my attention to books like Henry Nash Smith’s *The Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) reveals the conceptual chasm that can separate the work of folklorists and historians and frustrate what ought to be common efforts. I have read *The Virgin Land*; I have even assigned it to students; it’s a great book; the only problem is that it contains almost no folklore. As Richard Dorson, a contemporary and friend of Smith, has noted, “Smith made extensive use of unconventional sources, such as dime novels, but he did not dip beneath subliterate into the wells of oral tradition” (Dorson 1964, 225). And again:

The folklorist goes to folk sources, to word-of-mouth utterances, to people in their homes or business places or leisure spots. The cultural historian goes to the library, to the writings of intellectuals. Even when Henry Nash Smith plows through hundreds of dime novels to extract popular conceptions of Western heroes, he is reading the productions of professional writers, of intellectuals. The people who write for the folk are not the folk. (Dorson 1969, 231)

As I reworked my essay in response to the reviewer’s comments, I tried to clarify my definition by changing it to read: “Folk history is . . . simply a view of the past that circulates within a community by word of mouth.” Otherwise, I stood by my use of the term “folk history,” and the press stood by me.

Later, as my own anger cooled for having so patronizingly been taken to school again, I pondered over why the reviewer had responded to my rather innocuous definition as though hit on the toe with a large hammer. The reviewer was probably a decent enough person who loved his or her spouse and treated the family dog well. Why the anger? So I read the review again and discovered another of those walls that keep us apart when we should be working together. And the fault was as much mine as that of the reviewer—in this instance, I had not paid close enough attention to the way at least some historians use their language.

The reviewer stated:

The basic facts of history are verifiable through documents created in the past or through the memory of people who participated in those events. Far from avoiding confusion, the use of the term “history” in connection with folklore or myth *creates* confusion by leaving the impression that the facts alluded to in the narrative are verifiable when they are not. What is verifiable is that the ideas conveyed in the folklore or myth are believed by the informant. (reader’s report)

Therein lies the crux of the problem—verifiability. Working from my own comfortable propositions and having in the past written primarily for people who accept those propositions, it never occurred to me that anyone would take my references to folk history as references to verifiable past events. I was speaking, I thought, of nothing more than what people believe the past to have been, not necessarily to what it really was—though I would not want to leave the impression that the details of folk history can never be verified; sometimes they can. I certainly agree with the reviewer that what is verifiable in folk history is that people believe the stories they tell about the past. That I had made such an argument seemed self-evident. Obviously, I was wrong—and in my error “walled out” someone who may actually share more common interests with me than differences.

I do not intend to quit using the term “folk history”—even if I did, others would continue to use it. But in the future, I will more carefully define my terms. For this evening, let me, in the words of a former president, “make myself perfectly clear.” Real history, at least from the point of view of the reviewer, is a story of the past whose details are believed by the person who puts them together because these details can be supported—that is, verified—by documentary evidence. The ideological commitments and the worldview of this person will, of course, influence how he or she interprets the details. Personal history is the story of a past event told by someone who has witnessed or participated in

that event. Personal history must be used with great caution, given the fallibility of memory, but at least it has the validity of the eyewitness account.

Folk history, on the other hand, is third-person history, a story of the past whose details may or may not be verifiable, but which are usually believed by the person who passes them along to others because this person has confidence in the individual from whom he or she heard them. Because folk history is kept alive not by print but by the spoken word, it follows that there can be no official version. Each teller, influenced by his or her own interests and psychological makeup, as well as the circumstances of the storytelling occasion, will tell a story at least slightly differently from the way anyone else tells it. From the many recountings within a social group of a folk historical narrative, one can, nonetheless, abstract a consensus view. More on that later.

In space remaining I would like to explain why some of my fellow folklorists and I consider stories that cannot always be verified and that are not fixed in form are worthy of study and would like to plead that we not let language barriers keep us from a fuller understanding of our culture.

Anyone who would like an exercise in verifying accounts of past events should drive a few miles north of Preston, Idaho, and visit the monuments located near the highway commemorating the Battle of Bear River. I say monuments (plural), because, standing a few feet from each other are two placards recounting the battle. The first, erected by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers in 1953, states:

Attacks by the Indians on the peaceful inhabitants in this vicinity led to the final battle here January 29, 1863. The conflict occurred in deep snow and bitter cold. Scores of wounded and frozen soldiers were taken from the battle field to the Latter-day Saint community of Franklin. Here pioneer women, trained through trials and necessity of frontier living, accepted the responsibility of caring for the wounded until they could be removed to Camp Douglas, Utah. Two Indian women and three children, found alive after the encounter, were given homes in Franklin.

The other placard, erected recently to give an account closer to the Indian point of view and entitled "Bear River Massacre," states:

Very few Indians survived an attack here when P. E. Connor's California Volunteers trapped and destroyed a band of Northwestern Shoshoni. Friction between local Indians and white travelers along this route led Connor to set out on a cold winter campaign. More than 400 Shoshoni occupied a winter camp that offered ideal protection in Battle Creek Canyon. But they suffered a military disaster unmatched in Western history when Connor's force struck at daybreak, January 29, 1863.

How might historians and folklorists try to reconcile these accounts? I hesitate to speak for historians, but I assume they would be fully aware of and interested in the way different ideologies inspire different interpretations of the Battle of Bear River, that they would realize the full story of what transpired before and during the battle can probably never be recovered, that they would nevertheless attempt to come as close as possible to that story, and that they would do so through the use of verifiable, documentary evidence.

Folklorists would also be interested in what really occurred at the battle, but their principal interest would be in oral narratives underpinning these two accounts, narratives circulating among the people that would reveal what members of the opposing camps believe precipitated the battle and took place there. Why this interest? Because people govern their lives not on the basis of what actually happened in the past but rather on what they believe happened—that is, on folk history—and because these beliefs will have important consequences in the lives of those who subscribe to them, as well as on the lives of those who must deal with those who subscribe to them.

For example, I recently collected stories from a man whose grandfather had worked at the Winter Quarters Mine near Scofield, Utah, shortly before the disastrous explosion that killed some two hundred miners in 1900. Because the grandfather was active in attempts to organize a union, the company evicted him and his family from their home in Winter Quarters and deposited him, his furniture, and his family in Scofield in midwinter. After explaining this, my informant added: “They [the family] never did join the LDS church because of this eviction—the mine at that time was owned by the church. Being dumped there in the wintertime, they had some bitter feelings. In fact, my uncles had quite bitter feelings all the time because of this” (Herlevi 1986). Though the church, according to my historian friends, did not own the mine, the family believed it did and remained antagonistic to the church because of these beliefs. In other words, their behavior was determined not by actual, verifiable history but by folk history, by an explanation of the past kept alive in family stories.

Whether or not the LDS church owned the mine is a fact that can be verified. The following story told by the same informant cannot:

My grandfather, when that mine explosion happened, he’d been working up there in Winter Quarters; and his dog used to always walk with him up to the mine and wait and then come home with him when he got out of the mine. That morning the dog wouldn’t go with him, and my grandfather said he had a funny feeling about going to work. He said, “If that dog doesn’t want to go, I’m not going to go”—because that dog every day would go up there and just wait for him. And so he didn’t go to work that day, and that’s when the mine explosion happened. . . . Otherwise, he’d probably been in the mine and gotten killed. (Herlevi 1986)

There simply is no way to verify this account—it lives only in family stories. As a result, some scholars might accept it as a bit of interesting local color but then dismiss it as inconsequential for serious analysis. But the family believes the story just as steadfastly as it believes the LDS church owned the Winter Quarters Mine. The one story justifies family hostility to the Mormon church; the other persuades family members that a kindly providence once smiled on them and kept their grandfather from being killed—a fact that might also persuade them that he was a decent person in spite of his unpopular activities as a union organizer.

Sometimes folk history can take a much more vicious turn. In his *Dynamics of Folklore* (1979), Barre Toelken recounts a story in which a young white boy is attacked in a drive-in restroom by members of a minority group and is then castrated. Toelken traces the story, or one like it, to a number of U.S. cities and centuries back in time. In some instances, members of the minority group are Indians, in others Mexicans, in others blacks, and in one occurrence they are even hippies. Though something akin to this event may have happened at one place at one time in history, Toelken's comparative study clearly demonstrates that we are dealing with a migratory legend that could not really have occurred in all the places where it has been reported.

Yet many of the people in these places believe this nonverifiable story, believe that Indian, or Mexican, or black thugs actually committed this dastardly act against a fine young white youth. Toelken argues that the story keeps “cropping up in cultures where minority groups of one sort or another have posed a threat to the security of the majority group,” providing “a succinct and usable traditional experience for any majority group that wants to rationalize and vivify its symbolic fears of the minority group” (176–78). I would add that it not only symbolizes majority fears, it also provides, or can provide, members of the majority the evidence they seek to justify repressive measures against the minority. In a society still charged with racial tensions, if we dismiss stories like this because they cannot be verified, we do so at our own peril.

Toelken's account should remind some of us of events that took place in Utah during late 1969 and early 1970, during the months preceding the April General Conference of the LDS church. At that time, blacks had not yet been granted priesthood privileges and the church had come under sharp attack for its racial policies. At the same time, apocryphal prophecies about racial wars and bloodshed to precede the last days spread widely through the area. As a result, many Mormons became convinced that black-white conflict was imminent and would reach its peak during the April conference. Stories that justified this belief spread like wildfire throughout the intermountain region. The following account is typical:

Did you hear about the kids who were on their way to California and got jumped by some blacks as they stopped for something to eat? I think it was in Nevada somewhere. Anyway, they were going

to eat. They stopped and were jumped by some blacks who happened to see their BYU sticker on their car. They messed up the car and drove it off the road and then beat up the guys and did who knows what to the girls. It’s weird that they would do that just because they saw a BYU sticker, don’t you think? (Ryan 1970)

Other stories claimed that cars with Utah license plates were not safe out of state, that carloads of blacks were on the way to Salt Lake, that the Black Panthers were sneaking into the city with guns, that all the hotels around the temple were filled with blacks, that the Lake Shore Ward Sacrament Meeting had been interrupted by blacks, that the SDS and the Panthers planned to blow up Mountain Dell Reservoir, that black children were to sell candy bars laced with broken glass, that two bombs had been discovered on Temple Square, and that blacks would storm Temple Square during conference.

Conference came and went—peacefully. The stories proved groundless, or at least nonverifiable. But in the days before the conference they had a powerful influence on many who believed them. Some formed neighborhood defense groups; others stored guns and ammunition; and some who had planned to travel from elsewhere to attend the conference remained home. And in all these instances it was not actual history, verifiable accounts of what had really happened, but *folk history*, what the people believed had happened, that governed their lives (Bowman 1972; see also Wilson 1973a, 57–58).

One final point here. The reviewer of my article did admit that studying folklore is important in comprehending the mentality of a group. I would insist that it is folk history which will give us some of our best insights into that mentality. For example, a young Mormon missionary in Canada had a frightening experience which he and his companion at least believed to have been an encounter with evil spirits. He recorded the experience in his journal and related it to a few close friends. Three years later, now a member of my university folklore class, he decided to do a class project on the folklore of his mission field and began collecting stories from recently returned missionaries. Much to his surprise he collected versions of his own experience from informants who did not know that he was the missionary in the story. He was amazed to discover that the further the story had moved from his original telling of it, the more he and his missionary companion, who had done nothing wrong, had been converted into rule-breaking missionaries who, because of their misconduct, had become subject to the power of evil (Vernon 1968, nos. 15–27, 15–21). One can quibble about whether or not the missionary’s frightening experience was really an engagement with an evil spirit, but the experience itself, whatever it was, was real enough. In just three years, that personal experience had, through the process of oral transmission, been transformed into the folk history of the group, serving now as a cautionary tale to warn other missionaries not to step out of line lest they too be subjected to the buffeting of Satan.

What we must remember is that changes like those in this missionary account do not occur randomly but are dictated by cultural determinants. Every group of people, every community, will have what I have called a *value center*, a common body of shared beliefs—what my reviewer called a “group mentality.” It is this value center which determines what is retained and what is changed in narratives as they are passed from person to person; it produces that consensus view I mentioned earlier. Whether a story is a migratory tale, like the account related by Toelken, or a personal experience that becomes the shared possession of a group, like this missionary story, it will be shaped as it is passed along, usually unconsciously, to conform to the group’s value center, to express group members’ interests and attitudes and to meet their needs. For example, considering the discomfort the earlier practice of polygamy brings to a fair number of contemporary Mormon women, what needs might be met, or attitudes expressed, or behavior governed through the telling of the following stories:

This man had one wife, and he was going to take a second one. The first wife went with the couple to the temple to see them married. They lived a day or two from the temple. On the way there the man slept with his first wife in the wagon, and his little fiancée slept on the ground under the wagon. But on the way back from the temple, the wives reversed positions. The second wife slept with the husband in the wagon and the first wife slept under them. (Campbell 1970a, no. 3, 3)

I heard once about three wives who were helping their husband push a new piano up the hill. They stopped to rest for a moment at the top of the hill and the husband said, “You know, this piano will belong to Martha.” “What about us?” the other two said. “No,” said the husband, “it’s for Martha alone.” So the two wives jumped up, pushed the piano down the hill, and watched it bust into a thousand pieces. (Hansen 1971, no. 26, 30)

Readers can draw their own conclusions. Whatever they might be, it should be reasonably clear that the stories people believe and tell about events in the past—that is, their folk history—can and should provide valuable data in our attempts to delineate the behavioral patterns and the mentality or ethos of the social groups to which they belong.

Just as it would be a pity to avoid studying the lore of certain groups because their members do not happen to be unlettered agrarians, so too would it be a shame to neglect a community’s own view of its past because the stories which embody that view may not always be verifiable. By no means am I suggesting that we abandon attempts to authenticate accounts of past events. On the contrary, I am suggesting instead that in our attempts to understand

ourselves and our culture, we should view the pursuit of both verifiable history and folk history as mutually supporting endeavors.

I end with the plea with which I began. As we move into the next twenty years of cooperation between Utah’s folklore and historical societies, I urge historians seeking additional ways to augment their understanding of the past to pay serious attention to contemporary folklore study and to discover what folklorists really have been about. Of the nine references to the *Journal of American Folklore* in Michael Quinn’s *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, the most current is from 1932. Had Quinn paid attention to cutting-edge, current folklore study, he might have avoided any number of pitfalls. At the same time, I would urge folklorists to pay more careful heed to the conceptual frames from which historians work and to make their own work more understandable within those frames. And I urge all of us to be less defensive, more willing to listen, less territorial. I recently delivered BYU’s annual faculty lecture. By examining the stories my mother had told about the frontier community in which she spent her youth, I tried partly to recapture the life of that community but primarily to view my mother’s stories as projections of her personal worldview and as statements of her own self worth. Afterwards, some friends wondered whether my interpretation had been historical, literary, or folkloric. I answered with a question: “Did you learn anything?” “Yes,” I was usually told. “Then what difference does it make? Why worry so much about disciplinary boundaries? Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”