



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Marrow of Human Experience, The

William Wilson, Jill Terry Rudy

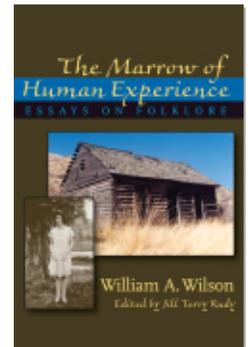
Published by Utah State University Press

Wilson, William and Jill Terry Rudy.

Marrow of Human Experience, The: Essays on Folklore by William A. Wilson.

Utah State University Press, 2006.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/9290](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9290).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9290>

## DOCUMENTING FOLKLORE

A series of serendipitous events led me to Bert Wilson's Introduction to Folklore class in fall semester 1977, and by the end of the semester I wanted to be a folklorist. I succeeded and became the first permanent archivist in the BYU Folklore Archives, since renamed the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives. Like so many others, I owe my profession to Bert's influence. Bert once told me that he sometimes thought he should have been a full-time archivist rather than the myriad of roles he played throughout his career. I'm glad that wasn't the path Bert chose. For despite his innate ability to document and catalog folklore, Bert himself would be an archivist's nightmare—no one term defines him or his contributions. To identify Bert as a master teacher inadequately states his ability to instruct and guide students. To characterize him as an excellent scholar still minimizes his passion for the discipline of folklore studies. To emphasize his respect for the archiving and documenting of fieldwork—particularly student fieldwork—fails to show how teaching, scholarship, and archiving work together in Bert's contribution to the field and to the training of his students. As the archivist in the Wilson Folklore Archives, I find my work revolves around the philosophies outlined by Bert; "Documenting Folklore" almost serves as a blueprint for my career. The article shows that Bert Wilson is more than a skilled writer and teacher—he is an archivist. Bert's love of archives may be traced to solitary late night walks through the halls of the Finnish Archives when he researched there as a Fulbright Scholar. What began as a pile of boxes in Bert's office has blossomed into two major folklore archives; Bert was instrumental in founding both the Fife Folklore Archives and the Wilson Folklore Archives. Using a numbering system partially derived from the Finnish system, Bert developed a method of cataloging folklore that allows for endless variants while still imposing order. As students who have worked in the Fife and Wilson archives have progressed in their careers, Bert's system has influenced other archives as well. He has contributed significantly to the role of university folklore archives around the United States.

---

Published in *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*, 225–54, ed. Elliott Oring (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1986). Reprinted by permission of Utah State University Press.

This article also states Bert's reasons for teaching beginning folklore students how to collect, document, and archive folklore, specifically so they will "look more analytically at the folklore which surrounds them than they might have otherwise." Further, the article explains that archiving collected folklore with contextual data allows the researcher to more fully understand the experience of the collector and the informant. For Bert the importance of students' documenting folklore is twofold: first, for their experience in observing and understanding folklore, and second, for the resulting traditional items preserved in archived collections. Bert sees folklore archives not only as repositories but also as laboratories. In his classes students contributed their own fieldwork to the archives and also visited and read what other students submitted. As a teaching technique, Bert would explain a concept, then follow with a student-collected item, including the context, to reinforce the principle to be taught. As a result students would learn the concept and also become familiar with collected items and how they contribute to scholarship. Archive materials were used not only for research but as a class text as well.

While "Documenting Folklore" prepares students to submit fieldwork findings so that they will be of benefit to archival researchers, the article also provides an excellent functional definition of folklore that can be easily understood by new students so they can recognize and understand the lore that influences their lives. Bert's classic statement in this article that folklore is "things people make with words (verbal lore), things they make with their hands (material lore), and things they make with their actions (customary lore)" finds its way into many lectures defining folklore. A skillful storyteller, Bert knows the value of a good tale, exemplified by the opening dinner party story about the "poisoned" cat. By looking at how folklore functions socially and culturally in his own experience, Bert also invites students to see the significance of what they are collecting and helps them to better understand the importance of folklore in everyday life.

—*Kristi A. Young*

NOT LONG AGO I ATTENDED AN INFORMAL DINNER PARTY WITH A NUMBER of faculty members and spouses. Midway through dinner the associate dean of my college said, "Bert, tell us some folklore." I replied that I would rather experience folklore than tell it. He looked at me blankly for a moment and then turned his attention to the obviously more intelligent faculty member seated across the table. They were soon engaged in an animated discussion of Southeast Asians who kill and eat their own dogs as well as those of their unwary neighbors. A few minutes later, as we complimented our hostess on the excellent fish she had just served, her husband, a fine poet and an even better storyteller, told us of another serving of fish at another dinner party in his native Wales. An up-and-coming young businessman and his wife, friends of a relative of our host, had thrown an elaborate party which they were sure would guarantee the husband's entry into the elite business circles in their community. A few minutes before the guests arrived, the family cat jumped on the table

and ate a hole in the beautifully prepared and garnished salmon which was to serve as the dinner's main course. Horrified, the wife threw the cat outside and camouflaged the hole with parsley and other condiments. The party was a success—no one discovered the damage. Convinced that a good reputation among his colleagues was now assured, the husband bade farewell to the last guest and then walked outside, where he discovered the cat dead by the driveway. Mortified, he called everyone who had attended the party, confessed that they, with the cat, had evidently eaten spoiled fish, and urged them to rush to the hospital to have their stomachs pumped. The next morning, as the husband was contemplating his ruined career, his neighbor came by and apologized for having run over and killed the cat the night before. So as not to bother the dinner guests, he explained, he had quietly placed the cat by the driveway and waited until morning to tell what he had done. The story both shocked and amused the people at our dinner party. Most of these aspiring professionals felt genuine sympathy over the tragedy that had befallen the aspiring businessman. I smiled at my wife but said nothing.

The next day I photocopied a story called "The Poisoned Pussy Cat at the Party" from Jan Brunvand's *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (1981), and copied an entire article from *Western Folklore* (Baer 1982), which discussed widely told stories about Southeast Asians stealing and eating dogs. On a piece of paper, I scribbled, "See what I mean!" and sent the note and the photocopied pieces to the associate dean. He replied that he did not see and that in the future he would be careful what he said around me.

More than almost any other subject, folklore must be experienced directly in actual life, as I experienced these narratives, to be properly understood. In twenty years of teaching, I have discovered that my students can listen to my lectures, can read assigned books and essays on the subject, and can still leave the course not understanding folklore unless they have encountered it in the actual settings in which it is performed. I encourage students to achieve this end by keeping their eyes and ears open to what is going on around them—even to pay close attention to dinner party talk; and I make sure they do this by requiring them to submit, first to me and then to the university archive, folklore they have collected themselves. Writing up these collections carefully enough to help potential archive users understand the substance and significance of the material submitted requires students to look more analytically at the folklore which surrounds them than they might have otherwise. The byproduct of this collecting, of course, is the development of folklore archives to support folklore research. But the main benefit is the increased understanding that comes to the students themselves.

If you are a beginning collector in search of this understanding, you will want to work closely with your teacher or with the archivist to whom you will submit your work. What follows is designed to supplement, not supplant, what they tell you. As you face for the first time the somewhat bewildering task of actually collecting and documenting some of the subject matter you will study,

you must develop fairly clear notions about where to collect, what to collect, how to collect, and how to write up your data.

### THE TRADITION BEARERS

The essays in this book should have taught you that the study of folklore seldom leads to the strange and exotic, but rather to much of what you have already known and experienced but not recognized as folklore. The essays should also have shown you that folklore is transmitted through time and space, not just by old, rural, uneducated, and ethnically different people, as is often believed to be the case, but by the doctor next door, by the fellow computer programmer at work, by the members of your religious congregation, by your younger brothers and sisters, by friends at a dinner party, and often by yourself. To collect folklore, then, you needn't pack your bags and head for some exotic place (as exciting as that might be); the lore you are after may be no further away than your workplace, your church, your mother's kitchen, your sister's playground, a casual gathering of friends, or your own memory.

As you try to decide where and from whom to collect, think of the different social identities (shaped by the social groups to which you belong) that make up your own personality. You are probably a student. You may belong to a religious group and live in a constant swirl of religious traditions and religious legends. You may have learned to view the world through ethnic or immigrant eyes. You probably have hobbies. You may already belong to an occupational group and may have learned much of what you must know to succeed not from job manuals but from traditional knowledge passed from person to person at work. You may live in a small, homogeneous community. You belong to a family. You have been a child and may still have close ties with children. Think for a moment of the rhymes, the chants, the songs, the games, the riddles, the superstitions, the traditional rules of conduct, and the taboos that you could collect from these youngsters with little difficulty. Other groups you are familiar with share equally rich lore. Though it is possible, and often rewarding, to collect from members of social groups different from your own, the price you will have to pay to establish rapport, win trust, and avoid violation of cultural taboos may be too high for the beginner. You will probably be more successful if you will do your first collecting among people you know. Once you have mastered collecting techniques and gained a better understanding of folklore in general, then you can turn your attention to people whose lifestyles and worldviews differ from your own.

Folklorists customarily refer to the people from whom they collect, whether from their own groups or not, as "informants"; some prefer a more deferential word like "consultants." What you should remember, whatever term you use, is that the people sharing their knowledge with you are the tradition bearers and should be treated with respect. That means you must never collect from them in secret and without their permission.

## THE TRADITIONAL WORLD

As you think about the particular social group from which you wish to collect, try to determine what is traditional within that group. What are the behavioral consistencies and continuities? Ask yourself as many questions as you can: Are there rites to initiate new members? Are there superstitions and taboos connected with the group? Are there stories of group heroes or antiheroes? Are there jokes and anecdotes that ridicule outsiders with whom group members must carry on social exchange (doctors versus patients, for example)? Are there jokes about members of subgroups within the same larger social organization (doctors versus nurses)? Do group members wear distinctive clothing, eat distinctive food, use a distinctive and often highly specialized vocabulary? Is there a traditional code of conduct? Are there ways of punishing violators of the code? And so on.

You may find it useful to divide the folklore these questions will call forth into three broad categories: things people make with words (verbal lore), things they make with their hands (material lore), and things they make with their actions (customary lore). Such a division is, of course, highly arbitrary, but it does help order the materials of folklore and get you thinking about what you could most profitably collect. The following lists drawn from these categories suggest some, but certainly not all, the folklore awaiting the collector's hand:

*Things people make with words (verbal lore):* Ballads, lyrical songs, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, curses, insults, retorts, teases, toasts, tongue twisters, greetings, leave-takings, autograph-book verses, limericks, graffiti, epitaphs.

*Things people make with their hands (material lore):* Houses, barns, fences, gardens, tools, toys, tombstones, foods, costumes, and things stitched, woven, whittled, quilted, braided, and sculpted.

*Things people make with their actions (customary lore):* Dances, instrumental music, gestures, pranks, games, work processes, rituals, and community and family celebrations such as weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, funerals, holidays, and religious ceremonies.

Many forms of folklore, of course, overlap these categories. For example, a song is an item of verbal lore and a quilt material lore, but the singing of the song and the making of the quilt are customary practices. In many folklore events, all three media merge. At a birthday celebration, the making and decorating of the cake are customary practices, and the cake itself is an item of material lore; the singing of the birthday song is a customary practice, and the song is an item of verbal lore. What this means, as we shall see, is that you really can't, or shouldn't, collect individual forms of folklore isolated from the other forms that surround them. You can, obviously, record only the words and music of a birthday song, but if you do not describe the setting in which the song is performed, including at least a brief description of the other forms of folklore also present, your recording really will not help you or a potential

archive user properly understand the significance of the song in the lives of its performers.

### COLLECTING FOLKLORE

This brings us to the issue of how actually to collect the folklore, how to record it so that archive users will recognize the importance of the lore to those who express it.

You will probably do a better job of collecting if you are fortunate enough to be present when folklore is performed naturally, without any prompting from you. Sometimes this happens by accident, as it did with me at the dinner party. More often you can arrange to be present where you know the kind of folklore you are interested in is likely to occur—at a bridal party, for example, where you will collect wedding or shower games. At times you may be able to bring a number of people together who will probably generate the lore you are after. If you arrange a skiing party, you will surely hear a lot of skiers' lore before the evening is over.

The value of this kind of “participant observation” is that you have the opportunity to observe firsthand what sparked the performance of a particular item of folklore, how successful the performance was, and what impact it had on the audience (including the impact it had on you). When you write up the event for submission to the archive, you may first want to interview other members of the audience for their responses to the performance, but, if you have observed carefully, most of what you need to describe of the social setting will already be in your own head.

The difficulty with this kind of collecting is that in many instances you will not be able to record the actual performance as it occurs. You can, of course, set up a tape recorder in advance at a bridal shower or a skiing party and record what takes place there. But if you hear a good story at a dinner party, you will have to go back to the narrator later and ask him to tell you the story again. When you do this, you may want to bring along a couple of people who have not heard the story before so the narrator's retelling will be as spontaneous as possible.

Much of the collecting you do will be by “direct interviewing” from the beginning. Once you have decided what kind of lore you wish to collect, then you must determine which people are most likely to possess the information you are after. As you collect using this method, you will be collecting folklore not from firsthand observation but from other people who were firsthand observers—from somebody else who has been at a bridal shower, skiing party, or dinner party. In this instance, you will have little trouble recording the folklore but will have to work much harder to get the necessary contextual background. You will have to elicit from the person who was present at the folklore performance what you would have observed had you been there yourself.

Don't hesitate at times to interview yourself. Without reaching far into memory, you should remember all kinds of folklore events in which you have

taken part. You may never be able to discover completely how a folklore performance affected someone else, but you do know how participation in folklore events affected you. If you were once initiated into a fraternal order, you cannot only describe the initiation, but also tell how it made you feel. Some of our best contextual data come this way.

As you begin to gather material, you should understand at the outset that you can't record *all* the information every potential archive user may one day need to interpret a body of lore. This is why serious folklorists, while using archive data, will collect much of their material in the field—it's the only way to get exactly what they want. But you can record enough data to make your document useful. No matter what kind of lore you collect, you should always ask yourself a number of important questions. First, what is there about this lore that is pleasing? What makes it artistically powerful, or persuasive? Second, how does the lore function in the lives of the people who possess it? What needs does it meet in their lives? Third, what does the lore tell us about the values and attitudes of individuals and the groups to which they belong?

### *The Art of Folklore*

In many ways the performance of folklore could be called an exercise in behavior modification. Through the things people make with their words, hands, and actions, they attempt to create a social world more to their own liking. When they tell a story, or make a quilt, or perform an initiation ceremony, they are usually attempting, through the power of artistically successful forms, to influence the way people act, including at times themselves. We cannot hope to understand the artistic impact of these forms unless they are recorded as precisely as possible as they live in actual performance.

*Verbal lore:* To capture the art of verbal lore you should, where possible, record your material with a tape recorder, especially free narrative forms in which the wording and presentational style may change strikingly from telling to telling. It is possible to take down material with pen or pencil, but this usually impedes the performance and brings you a truncated bit of reality. The following tape-recorded "scary story," told by an exuberant fourteen-year-old girl at summer camp, captures the essence of the real narrative with an exactness seldom matched in handwritten recordings:

There was these couples that ran away from home to get married, and they were driving out on the desert, and all of a sudden he ranned out of gas, and she says, "Well, I told you to get some gas at that last town, but you just wouldn't listen."

And he goes, "Well, I'll walk back and get some." And he goes, "Now lock all the doors and windows, because they've heard about this hook man who goes around the desert trying to kill people." And he goes, "Now lock all the doors and windows and don't let it open for anyone or anything that you hear."

And so she locked them all and started listening to the radio. And she heard more about that hooked man that went around killing people. And so she got really scared. So she turned it off and she fell asleep. And during the night she woke up and she heard a scratching sound. And, and she got kind of worked up about that and so, so she just went back to sleep. And all of a sudden she woke up and she was wondering what woke her up. And there was that hook man outside, and he was sitting there trying to get in the car. And she just kind of got really scared and everything, but she didn't dare try to get out of the car or move. And so she fell asleep just sitting there.

And so, when she woke up again he was gone, but there was still that swishing and thumping sound kind of on the roof of the car, but she didn't dare open it.

Pretty soon she was getting worried about her boyfriend because he hadn't come back all night. And so she fell asleep again because she was really tired.

And pretty soon a cop came—it was in the morning—and he sat there knocking on the windows. And she woke up and she saw the cop and, and he goes, "Open the door."

And so she opened the door.

And he goes, "What do you know about this?"

And she goes, "Know about what?"

And he pointed in this tree above their car—they parked by a tree. And there was the guy, there was her boyfriend hooked to the tree, and he'd been all clawed up by that hooked man.

One of the values of the tape recorder is that it frees you to write down information which *should* be recorded on a note pad, information about the circumstances of the storytelling situation: the setting in which the story was told; the nature of the audience; movements and hand gestures made during the telling; responses and promptings of the audience; everything, in short, to help the reader of your document not only hear the story but also visualize the setting in which it was related.

While the collector of the above item claimed to have recorded it word-for-word as it was told, I suspect that a few false starts and an occasional "uh" were edited out. Many collectors of oral documents, in fact, encourage editing. Folklorists do not, at least not for the archive document. It should be recorded just as it was spoken. If one later wishes to edit the piece for publication, at least the original remains available for scrutiny in the archive. Above all, when you prepare a document for archive submission, be sure to tell whether the item recorded is a verbatim transcription, an edited transcription (tell the extent of the editing), a close (but not totally accurate) shorthand recording, or a paraphrase of the original.

Good transcriptions are hard to make from unclear tape recordings. You should understand that you needn't be an expert or own expensive equipment to get a satisfactory recording. You must, however, use a machine with a separable microphone (in-machine microphones record mostly the whirring of the drive belts), keep the microphone within a foot of the speaker's mouth, and avoid touching or moving the microphone wire during the recording (each stroke of the wire will be transmitted to the tape).

*Material lore:* Beginning folklore collectors seldom focus on material lore—not because the things people make with their hands are any less worthy of study, but because accurately documenting them is a difficult task, not easily achieved by the novice. This is not to say that if you are interested in ranch fences, quilts, barn styles, or sculpted gravestone motifs, you should not set out to document them. But you should realize that the task will not be particularly easy.

To help archive users understand what is artistically pleasing about the artifacts you document, you must begin with accurate pictures of the objects. Occasionally, you can record these pictures with line drawings just as you can occasionally record verbal lore with a pencil. I have seen excellent sketches of folk toys—rubber guns, sling shots, clothespin pistols, handkerchief dolls, cootie catchers—which vividly depict these objects. But in most instances, you will need to record material culture with a camera, and a good one at that, preferably a 35mm, single-lens reflex camera which can be set for varying light intensities and distances.

You may take either color slides or black-and-white prints. Just as your sound recordings will reveal narrative texture, so too must these pictures display the stylistic and textural features of the artifacts being photographed. That means you will need to take a number of shots of the same object. If you were documenting a quilt, you would want a photograph of the entire quilt so that the overall design would be clear; you would take a close-up of individual blocks in the quilt; and you would want a still closer shot of the needlework in the block. If possible, you would also take pictures of different stages in the quilt making, from assembling the quilting frames to removing the quilt at its completion; and, because material objects are made to be used, you ought to get a picture of the quilt on the bed for which it was made.

Through your photographs, you should give an accurate view of material artifacts as they exist in actual life. To do this, you will have to do more than take pictures. You will need also to submit written texts that explain in considerable detail what appears in the pictures. A photograph of a well-crafted saddle, for example, without an explanation of its different parts and their functions, will be of limited value.

*Customary lore:* If the pleasure derived from verbal and material folklore comes principally from hearing and seeing, the artistic satisfaction derived from customary lore results primarily from participating in action. Customary practices range broadly across the full spectrum of human activity, but they tend to focus on ceremonies and festive events which tie people more closely to their family, ethnic, religious, occupational, and regional groups; on rites of

passage which move people through transitional stages of life such as birth, puberty, marriage, incorporation into new social groups, and death; and on work processes which make easier and more enjoyable the hours people spend earning their bread.

Customary lore is a good place to begin collecting because you will often have to go no further than your own memory and because attempting to understand the significance of the traditional activities which make up your life will help you discover significance in the practices you collect from others. The following excerpt from a Swiss-American student describing Swiss Independence Day (August 1) in her Minnesota community should stir memories of important ceremonial events you could record from your own life:

Between one and two hundred Swiss-Americans will gather at one of the homes (lately, my family's) and sing traditional songs, play traditional music, dance, eat bratwurst, good Swiss bread and cheese, and drink wine. As the sun sets, the highlight of the evening is reached. A huge bonfire is lit, and everyone gathers around it to soak up its warmth and glow and to sing late into the night—until the fire has died down to a pile of glowing coals.

The creation of this bonfire is a task undertaken with care and great enthusiasm. The men build it, using scrap lumber and carefully balancing and arranging them teepee style till the structure is about 10–15 feet high. The lighting of it is made to be spectacular (with the help of gasoline) and worthy of the long “oohs” and “ahhs” it inevitably gets.

The bonfire is a very old tradition in Switzerland for celebrating Independence Day. Neighborhoods and towns will get together to create one. It is important for the Swiss in America to continue to celebrate the day in this way, for the very reason of being so far from their homeland. The closeness, the oneness, the nostalgic comfort that building and standing around the fire fosters is an important binding force among the Swiss-American group.

When you collect customary practices, the camera will once again serve as a useful tool to record steps in processes like branding cattle, felling trees, preserving food, playing games, and celebrating Christmas. But you must, above all, observe keenly and describe accurately the action itself and the interplay of people involved in the event described. The following description of a fraternity birthday celebration, witnessed for the first time by a new pledge, catches in exemplary fashion both the actions and the joyful spirit of the occasion:

After everyone had finished dinner, one of the brothers started to sneak away from the table, at which time another brother yelled out that it was that guy's birthday. Everybody grabbed him and

dragged him into the living room (he didn't fight too hard). Everyone was having a fun time of it. They put the guy face down on a table and then carried out the following rite, which I have recorded as I witnessed it:

Every brother got the chance to paddle the birthday brother. The paddles were the ones given by the pledges to their Big Brothers. [This point needs further explanation.] Every brother had a favorite paddle and talked about how each one was most effective at inflicting pain (much to the dismay of the birthday brother). The brothers got their chances alphabetically. They were allowed one swat apiece, but the swing was only allowed from the wrist (so as not to do much damage). A painful swat could still be achieved by most. Most of the swatters would put up the act that they were about to wail on the birthday brother. Some of them would, but others would take it easy and just let the paddle flop down. When hit hard, the swatee would cry out pledges for vengeance. When hit softly, he usually called the swatter a gentleman and gave him sincere thanks. After everyone got their chance, somebody gave the birthday brother a beer. Then they all started singing the following song while they shook his hand:

Happy birthday to you; happy birthday to you.  
 Happy birthday dear \_\_\_\_\_; happy birthday to you.  
 May you live a thousand years.  
 May you drink a thousand beers.  
 Get plastered, you bastard; happy birthday to you.

After the song, everyone joined in the following cheer:

Rah, rah, rah, Phi Kappa Tau!  
 Live or die for Phi Kappa Tau! Rah!

*Meaning and aesthetic judgments:* As you record data to help the archive user better understand the meaning or artistic significance of the material collected, try to give the tradition bearer's own point of view, not yours, of why something is meaningful or aesthetically pleasing. People who sing working songs, braid hackamores, and ritually celebrate the birth of a child know what pleases them and what does not. And if you ask the right questions, they will tell you.

This is not a particularly easy task. If someone tells you a moving family story about her grandparents keeping the bodies of children dead from the flu in the woodshed until the weather finally warmed enough in the spring to dig the frozen ground, and you respond by asking, "What does that story mean to you?" you will probably be considered both stupid and bad-mannered. But if you can get her talking about the occasion on which she heard the story, those on which she tells it, and her reasons for telling it, you should gain a fair notion of what the story *means* to her. Similarly, if you can get a quilter to tell

you why she chooses certain colors for her patterns, a housewife to explain why she arranges food on the table in a given way, a rancher to explain why he prefers to rope calves for branding instead of using a cattle chute, you will have recorded at least some aesthetic judgments. These judgments, to be sure, are usually shaped by the tradition bearer's larger community or social group, but the group aesthetic can be generalized only after the responses of numerous individuals have been documented and archived.

You will discover that while the people you interview, like everyone else, make artistic judgments on formal criteria (the pleasing interrelationship of parts), they also judge folklore creations on functional and associational grounds. A rawhide rocking chair that does not "set well," or does not rock (function) properly, will not be judged artistically successful by the craftsman and his community, no matter how handsome it might appear to the outsider. Similarly, folklore which does not call forth the proper associations will probably not be valued as much as that which does. Children insist on celebrating Christmas the same way each year because doing so brings forth pleasant memories of Christmases past. A housewife continues to use the same decorative pattern in her pie crusts, not because the pattern itself particularly pleases her but because she learned it from her mother as a child and almost feels her mother's presence as she now decorates her own pies.

When I asked a quilter one day which of all the wonderful quilts she had shown me she liked best, she picked out one which to me seemed no more distinctive than the rest. She then explained that she had made the quilt while recovering from an arthritis attack and had hurt more during the quilting than she ever had before. The quilt reminded her of her triumph over pain—and was therefore beautiful. A young woman in my folklore class, expecting her second child and experiencing considerable discomfort, collected and submitted a joke which she found especially funny. It was a joke about a pain machine that supposedly transferred the pains from a woman in labor to the father of the child. The night the baby was due, the doctor hooked husband and wife up to the machine and, as the labor intensified, gradually turned the machine up to its limit. The wife's pains disappeared, but for some reason the husband felt no discomfort himself. The baby safely delivered, the husband returned home, opened the door, and found the milkman dead on the kitchen floor. I thought the joke passingly funny because of the cuckolding of the husband and because of the surprise ending. My student commented, "I found this joke to be very funny. It is funny because it demonstrates to women that men cannot stand as much pain as a woman even though they think they can." As you collect and document folklore, you must discover, through careful questioning, the *tradition bearer's view* of why the quilt is beautiful or the joke is funny.

### *The Social Function of Folklore*

Folklore persists through time and space because the things people traditionally make with their words, hands, and actions continue to give pleasure and

satisfy artistic impulses common to the species. Folklore persists also because it continues to meet basic human needs. This means that to properly document folklore you will have to record not just a proverb, or a recipe, or a game, or a story about a poisoned cat at a dinner party, but also the social settings in which these items were performed—not just what was said or made or done, but also the circumstances that generated the performances and the participants' responses to them. The following description of a recitation of a traditional rhyme points the direction you should take:

Sara [age 62, the collector's maternal aunt, a Swedish immigrant] currently babysits small children in her home for a living. She enjoys her work because she is always around children and always says that she's just a kid herself.

Sara is one of the funniest ladies I've ever known. She's always joking about how she's going on a diet and that we won't even recognize her when we see her next. She has a lot of funny rhymes and a poem for every occasion.

One Thanksgiving Day (last year) she came to Idaho for dinner in Pocatello. We were all just finished with dinner and everyone was letting out their moans and groans from eating too much. Nobody was saying too much at the time because of the agony of bloating ourselves. We were all family members, my mom and dad, some of my sisters, and about three cousins. The little incident that happened wouldn't have been nearly as funny if a couple of our friends (nonfamily members who are considered "high class") had not been there.

What happened was that Sara let go with a *loud* burp. I quickly looked over to see the expressions on the faces of the "high class" friends. It was a little embarrassing for us all, but Sara really smoothed things out well when she said this little rhyme immediately afterwards:

It's better to burp and bear the shame,  
Than not to burp and bear the pain!

After she said it, we *all* had a good laugh, even the two friends who normally wouldn't laugh at such a thing.

Note what the collector has told us in this description. We know a little about Sara's personality; we know what the occasion for the gathering was; we know who was present and something about the way they related to each other; we are aware of the embarrassment caused by the burp; we learn how Sara dealt with the embarrassment through reciting a traditional rhyme; and we learn what impact the recitation had on the others.

Because of what the collector has told us about the social setting in which the rhyme was used, we can now move beyond the rhyme, which by itself could

be dismissed as an interesting bit of trivia, toward a better understanding of the way folklore, skillfully used, can help people affect the social environment to their own advantage. One description of one rhyme will not bring us to this end, but enough good descriptions of enough folklore performances will. Again, this is the function of an archive, to keep on file the folklore you collect until enough of it is available to move from descriptions of individual folklore performances to generalizations about folklore's larger social uses.

Just as you should let those from whom you collect interpret their folklore, so, too, should you allow them to comment on their reasons for performing it. I once listened to a tape-recorded story of a family supernatural legend in which the narrator became so emotionally involved in the story that she broke into tears. When the narration ended, the collector, evidently remembering that she was supposed to record information about her informant's attitude toward her narratives, asked, "Now, do you believe the story?" The woman was highly offended, and rightly so. Of course, you will want to know what the tradition bearers believe about their material, but if you will listen and observe their performances carefully enough, and if you will get them to describe the social settings in which they have performed, or might perform, their lore, then you won't have to ask boorish questions to get your information. Certainly in the following illustration there can be little doubt about the attitude of the tradition-bearer, a rodeo cowboy, toward the tradition he describes:

Many competing cowboys like myself believe and practice this rule whenever competing in a rodeo. The belief is that if you have ever been injured in a certain piece of clothing, whether it be a pair of stockings, Levis, or a shirt, then this article of clothing has been cleansed of bad luck and now every time you wear it, it shall bring you luck.

I got in a fight on a Friday night several years ago, and I was beat rather badly by my opponent. But I was to compete in a jackpot rodeo on the following morning, even though I hurt everywhere. So I took the opportunity to wear a pair of "Wrangler Jeans" that I had been beat up in the night before, feeling that it would be a good omen. And I won the jackpot with one of the classiest bareback rides I have ever made.

### *The Cultural Background of Folklore*

Perhaps the most difficult data to collect is that which places folklore in its larger cultural context. And in this instance, collecting from your peers may be a disadvantage, primarily because the tradition bearers from whom you collect will probably speak a cultural language you already understand; and further, trapped by your mutual understanding, you may feel little need to explain the language for the cultural outsiders who may one day study your collection. For

example, the following supernatural legend from Mormon tradition will be rich in meaning for most Mormons but may make little sense to non-Mormons:

This man and woman was going through the temple doing work for the dead, and they got out to Salt Lake, and they had kids. And at the last minute the babysitter didn't come, and so they had to take their kids to the temple with them. And they were standing outside the temple waiting to get in, and they didn't know what they were going to do with their kids. There was no one around there they could leave them with, and they didn't know what they were going to do with them. While they were standing there, this strange man and woman came up to them and introduced themselves and said they would tend their kids while they went through the temple. The man and woman tended their kids, and the couple went in and did work for the dead, and that couple tending their kids turned out to be the couple they did the work for. When they came out of the temple, the man and woman were no longer there.

The individual who collected this narrative submitted it to the archive with the name of the teller attached plus a brief description of the storytelling setting, but with no information to help the non-Mormon user of the archive understand what is really happening in the story and happening in the minds of those who tell and listen to it. He should have included a statement something like this:

Mormons believe they have an obligation to save not only themselves and, through missionary work, their neighbors, but also all their kinsmen, who have died without benefit of gospel law. Thus, they seek the names of their ancestors through genealogical research and then in their sacred temples vicariously perform for these ancestors all the saving ordinances of their gospel. In this particular narrative, the couple evidently came "out to Salt Lake" to participate in temple activity because one of the church's limited number of temples is located there. The man and woman who tend the baby are spirits of the dead who have probably long been waiting for saving ordinance work to be performed on their behalf. In a neat turn, the deceased husband and wife take care of the physical needs of the baby while the baby's parents attend to their spiritual needs. A story like this will be considered very sacred to many Mormons and should be treated with respect.

As any Mormon readers of these lines will know, we could still say a good deal more about this story, but the above information should place it in a cultural context making it at least partially intelligible to non-Mormons.

As you record cultural data for your folklore documentation, you should always ask what behaviors, ideas, and concepts people bring to the social setting in which a folklore performance takes place. And then you should include your answers to these questions in your document. What attitudes about Southeast Asians, for example, did the member of the dinner party bring to the discussion of Southeast Asians eating dogs? What feelings about the importance of national heritage did Swiss-Americans in Minnesota bring to their celebration of Swiss Independence Day? What concept of salvation did the teller of the temple story bring to his narration?

If you are collecting from members of your own group, you may already know the answers to these questions and can pull from your own head the information necessary to make the folklore clear to an outsider. If you are not a part of the group, you will have to get this information by learning as much about the group as possible before you begin collecting and then by asking the tradition bearers themselves to explain what you do not understand in the folklore they give you. In the illustration above, asking no more than “What’s the difference between a temple and a regular house of worship?” and “What is ‘work for the dead?’” would probably produce enough information to make the story understandable.

Because the controlling concepts and the value center of any group are, in the final analysis, the composite concepts and values of individuals in the group, you will need to record as much information as possible about the tradition bearers themselves. You should elicit information that relates directly to the lore being collected—ethnic attitudes from people who tell ethnic jokes—but you should also gather general information: sex, age, ethnic ancestry, education, religion, occupation, hobbies, and so on. And it’s probably better to record too much than too little, since you can’t know the uses to which your collections might be put in the future. Writing down the occupation of a teller of sexist jokes may seem unnecessary at the moment of collecting, but to the researcher who will one day use your material to study sex role attitudes of different male occupational groups, such information will prove crucial.

## THE FOLKLORE DOCUMENT

Once you have brought together the kinds of data discussed in the sections above, your final task will be to write up your material for submission to the folklore archive. You should visit the archive to see where your collections will finally be located, to glimpse the range of materials filed there, to gain a better understanding of the contribution you can really make through careful work, and especially, to review the documentary forms used by the archive. In the absence of specific requirements from the archive or from your instructor, you may want to use the format below (a format used, in varying degrees, by a number of university archives). Remember that your ultimate goal is to capture on paper what took place in a particular folklore performance. Let the format

be your servant, not your master. Follow it as closely as possible, but alter it if necessary to meet the demands of the material collected.

1. In the upper right-hand corner, in three lines, put the name of the informant, the place the lore was collected, and the date it was collected. If you submit lore culled from your own memory, write "Myself" for the informant's name and then record where and when you learned the lore.

2. In the upper left-hand corner put the form of folklore collected and, when possible, a title for the lore which suggests its content.

3. Three spaces below the title, at the left-hand margin, write "Informant Data:" and then give general biographical information about the informant and any details, including personal comments, which would give a clearer picture of the informant's relationship to and understanding of the folklore recorded. If you are your own informant, give the same kinds of details about yourself as you would for someone else.

4. Three spaces further down, at the left-hand margin, write "Contextual Data:" and then give both the social and cultural context for the folklore.

Under social context describe the circumstances under which you collected the folklore and under which your informant originally learned it, focusing, as already noted, on such things as the people present when the folklore performance occurred, the circumstances that generated the performance, the way people present participated in or influenced the performance, and the impact of the performance on them. Be sure to indicate if the folklore is normally performed at specific times and before certain people (at family reunions, for instance, or before women only). Other methods failing, you can often get good information about the social uses of folklore by asking for a description of a hypothetical context in which the informant might tell a particular story or take part in a particular ritual. Under cultural context, give information about the informant's culture which would make the folklore understandable to outsiders.

5. Three spaces further down, at the left-hand margin, write "Item:" and then present the folklore collected. Be sure to tell how the lore was recorded and to what extent the words on paper faithfully follow or depart from those of the informant.

If you collect folksongs, try to record both words and music. Put at least one verse directly under the music.

If you submit line drawings or diagrams of steps in an action (finger games, for example), test the accuracy of these drawings before you submit them; see if a friend can perform the actions you have illustrated in the drawing.

If you collect folk speech, or jargon, explain the words and expressions submitted and use them in sentences which communicate the meaning.

If you submit photographs or slides, clearly identify each one and key it to the accompanying written document.

6. In the bottom right-hand corner, give your name and age, your home address (including street number), your school address if you wish, your

university (if applicable), the course for which you are submitting the folklore (if applicable), and the semester or quarter and year (if applicable).

Each folklore document submitted to the archive, then, should contain the following:

Genre	Name of the informant
Title	Place the folklore was collected
	Date the folklore was collected

Informant Data:

Contextual Data:  
Social Context:  
Cultural Context:

Text:

Your name and age  
Your home address  
Your school address  
Your school  
Course number  
Semester/quarter and year

The three examples given below (drawn from Utah State University and Brigham Young University folklore archives) follow the format quite closely: each does a reasonably credible job of describing the folklore submitted, although each could be improved.

The collector/informant of Sample #1 describes well enough the hunting practice he witnessed, but does not comment on its impact on him personally, something he could easily have told us since he serves as his own informant. How does he feel about hunting in general? Does he share the attitude of his companions about the manliness of the sport? What kind of verbal teasing accompanies the shooting of the clothing? Did others (insiders) in the party who failed to bag a deer shoot up their clothing? How did they seem to respond to the ritual? Was he, an outsider, treated differently from them? Did he actually shoot his own hat or coat? How did this make him feel? Did he wear the wounded article of clothing during the year? When and where? How did this make him feel? Did he go hunting again?

(Sample # 1)  
Hunting Custom  
"Shooting Hunting Clothing"

Myself  
Spanish Fork, Utah  
October 1979

**Informant Data:**

Walter Jones was born in Richland, Washington, on July 8, 1960. His father was in the military and moved around the country a lot. Walter's background is basically western. His family origins are northern European. He is a member of the LDS (Mormon) church. Walter is married and is a junior at Brigham Young University.

**Contextual Data:**

Walter attended BYU back in 1978 and 1979, before entering the armed forces. He lived with a family in Spanish Fork, Utah, and became very close to them. During the month of October, Utah holds its annual deer hunt. The family in Spanish Fork participated in the hunt the same way as most residents of the state, with much enthusiasm. The family invited Walter to participate, and he went along. He had never been on a deer hunt and was ignorant of the great fervor that surrounds it. He and a few others in the hunting party did not shoot a deer and had to go through the punishment described below. The members of the group are a hardy bunch who pride themselves on being very manly. Not bagging a deer is considered not manly, and the person committing the sin is humiliated as a means of punishment. The evidence of humiliation is worn throughout the year to prompt the individual to do a better job in hunting next year.

**Item:**

If, at the end of the deer hunt, a person hasn't killed a deer, he must take off his hat or coat and lay it on the ground. He is then ordered to shoot the article of clothing and put it back on. When you wear the hat or coat, then everyone will know that you didn't get a deer. The only way to earn the right to wear a good hat or coat is to shoot a deer the next hunt.

Walter Jones  
373 N. 400 W.  
Provo, Utah  
Brigham Young University  
English 391 Fall 1985

The collector of Sample #2 records not only a belief (superstition), but also a story (in the informant's own words) about the belief. Whether the informant has actually "gotten over" the experience related we may never know, but at least we know, through her excellent little narrative, how it once affected her behavior. Beyond the narrative itself, we do not learn much about the informant and the role of folk belief in her life and in the rural Mormon community

where she lived. For people who may have never seen anything but a gas or electric clothes dryer, the collector probably should have explained "leaving clothes out on the line."

(Sample #2)

Belief  
"Diapers on Clothesline"

Chris Sorenson  
Logan, Utah  
Feb. 5, 1983

Informant Data:

Chris Sorenson, 51, was born (1932) and raised in Roosevelt, Utah. She is an active member of the Mormon church. She has two children and four grandchildren. She presently owns and manages a dress shop. She has a heart of gold and would give anything to her family if she thought it would make them happy.

Contextual Data:

Chris said she heard this a long time ago, when she was about seven. What happened made a big impression on her. She says she knows the event could not really have happened, but it took her a long time to get over it. This is what she said, taken down in shorthand as she spoke:

"When I was little, people told me that if anyone left their clothes out on the line over New Year's Eve, someone in their family would die during the year. One year me and a few of my friends were talking and one of them said, 'I don't believe it, and just to prove it, I'm gonna leave ours out.' In those days we used to have to leave the clothes on the line for quite a few days before they were dry, especially during the winter. Anyway, this girl left their clothes out over New Year's, and a few months later her brother died. This made a really big impression on me. For many years I'd call around to everyone in the family on New Year's Eve and remind them to get their clothes in."

Item:

If you leave your clothes on the line on New Year's Eve, someone in the family will die the coming year.

Mary Sorenson  
234 Maple  
Logan, Utah  
Utah State University  
Hist 423 Winter 1983

The collector of Sample #3 gives fairly good information about the social setting but very weak information about the cultural background. He describes the informant's religious feelings and activity, though he does not explain how someone of Jewish ancestry happens to be a Mormon. He describes the natural setting in which the informant told his story, elicits a good statement of the contexts in which the informant would recount the story, and gets at the intensity of the informant's feeling about the story, partly through an ill-advised question which brought informative results. He should also have asked the informant to describe the circumstances under which he originally learned the story. Further, since the collector is Mormon himself, and was a participant observer during the narration, he should have said something about his own response to the event.

The collector tells us almost nothing about the culture that shapes and gives meaning to the narrative. What are a mission (a two-year proselytizing endeavor), an elder (an office in the lay priesthood), a ward (a local congregation), a sacrament meeting (the weekly ward meeting in which the sacrament ordinance is administered and certain members are assigned in advance to give inspirational talks), and the Nephites (ancient American followers of Christ who, according to Mormon tradition, wander the earth helping the faithful in time of need)? Why does the collector call this account a Nephite story when the word "Nephite" is not mentioned in the narrative itself?

Finally, the collector has not just relied on his memory of the story told in the church meeting but has correctly gone to the teller later and had him tell the story again. Unfortunately, he has not recorded the story on tape, and we are therefore denied a verbatim transcription.

(Sample #3)

Legend

"Nephite Story: Missionaries Rescued"

Chad Newman

Pasadena, California

September 1970

Informant Data:

Chad Newman is my brother-in-law. He was born in Pasadena, California, in 1948 and has lived there all his life. He is currently in electrical engineering at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. He is of Jewish ancestry, but no one in his family practices Judaism, and all but his father are active members of the Mormon church. Chad has not served as a missionary, but he is an elder and at USU lives in the Delta Phi house, built by the church and run by the "returned missionary" fraternity. His home address is 5473 Cheery Pl., Pasadena, California.

Contextual Data:

Chad told this story as part of a talk he gave in sacrament meeting in the Pasadena Ward, as an illustration of the ability of the Lord to

protect those who place their faith in Him and live good lives. As nearly as I could tell, everyone present took the story in the way he intended it. Of course, I can not be sure if they all believed it to be a true story, but Chad himself was completely sure of its veracity. I later asked him (somewhat ill advisedly, as it turned out) if he really believed it, to his immediate indignation. He said he knew it was true because it had happened to a companion of someone a friend of his had known in the mission field. He said he didn't know very many Nephite stories, so he couldn't be sure if they were all true, but that he very definitely does believe the Nephites are somewhere here on the earth and have a mission to perform such as told in this story. When asked when and where else he would tell this story, Chad said only to people who were members of the church and who would probably believe in the Nephites and understand what their purpose was.

Item:

[I have recorded the story here not exactly as Chad told it in that particular sacrament meeting, but as he told it to me again in September 1970. I took notes as he told it, and it is close to his version, but mainly in my own words.]

Two missionaries in the Canadian Mission were driving home from a discussion meeting one day and there was quite a bad storm going. They were clear out in the middle of nowhere when their car broke down, and they were unable to repair it. They decided that they would just freeze to death if they stayed there, so they got out of the car and started walking down the road. After a couple of hours they were pretty badly frozen anyway and could tell they weren't going to be able to go much farther. Just then they heard a car coming behind them. It stopped and the man opened the door, and they got into the back seat. They were so cold they just laid down on the floor and didn't even look at the man. Finally they came to a service station, and the man stopped the car at the side of the road to let them out. They got out and stumbled over to the station, but they still hadn't really got a look at the man in the car. When they got up to the station, the attendant looked surprised, and asked where they had come from. They said, "From the car that had just stopped out in front." He said, "There hasn't been any car come along here for a couple of hours." They went out to the road and looked, but there weren't even any tire tracks.

Bill Henry  
Route 1, Box 212  
Moses Lake, Washington

364 E. 8974 S. #7  
Provo, Utah  
Brigham Young University  
English 391 Spring 1971

## CONCLUSION

I have not yet documented the story of the poisoned cat that I heard at the dinner party, but I intend to. I have arranged a gathering at my house, have invited my poet friend, and will ask him to tell the story again, this time with a tape recorder turning. If I am then able to follow the instructions I have given above, I will soon turn into the archive a document which may one day prove valuable to a researcher interested in contemporary legends. And I will in the process have increased my own understanding of folklore and its significance in people's lives. Through collecting and documenting folklore, you too can make an important contribution to folklore research and, in the process, increase your understanding of what it means to be human.

