IS IT FOLKLORE OR HISTORY?
THE ANSWER MAY BE IMPORTANT

by Tom Crum

There is a great deal of history in folklore, and that’s good. There also is a great deal of folklore in history, and that’s not good. I suspect that many of you are either historians or folklorists. I am neither one. I am a lawyer, although I do have some friends in both camps. If you look around, you will be able to tell which people at this meeting are historians and which are folklorists. The folklorists are the ones who look smug and content. That is because they know that unless they are foolish enough to write about the history of folklore it’s impossible for them to make a mistake. They know that no one will ever accuse them of getting their facts wrong or of writing politically correct folklore and, of course, there is no such thing as revisionist folklore. If someone ever said that a folklorist got it wrong, all the folklorist has to say is, “that’s the way I heard it” and immediately he or she is off the hook and waiting for an apology. Sadly, it is not the same for historians; they are seldom off the hook and never receive apologies. It’s enough to make even folklorists sympathetic toward historians, and I am sure the more charitable ones are. I personally have never witnessed any concern on their part, but that may say more about the company I keep than folklorists as a group.

Although they would be hesitant to admit it, historians are much like trial lawyers, in that both historians and trial lawyers look at the world from a perspective a little different from most people—and certainly from folklorists. They have acquired the habit of skepticism, which W. J. Cash claimed, in The Mind of the
South, is essential to any generally realistic attitude. They seek proof, for they understand, like Thoreau, that no way of thinking can be trusted without proof.

In contrast, it’s not that folklorists are naïve or don’t care about the truth, it’s just that by the very nature of folklore the folklorist does not need proof or skepticism. In fact, in an article in the Texas Folklore Society’s publication In the Shadow of History, Radoslav Tsanoff tells us that folklore “falls to pieces under the stern touch of factual research.” Folklorists may search for folklore, but they never research for it. Their attitude is that if you have to research it, it ain’t folklore. Folklorists are so laid-back that if indeed Jimmy crack corn, they don’t care. They just blame it all on the blue tail fly.

If historians and folklorists have such different perspectives, how would their worlds collide? It is not the folklorist who has difficulty in navigation. Wilson Hudson writes in his preface to In the Shadow of History, “Every folklorist is aware of the interaction between historical events and popular imagination.” In his 1949 article “American Folklore,” B. A. Botkin tells us that “the relation of history to legend is close in America—and that the mixture of the two has given rise to a large body of unhistorical ‘historical’ traditions—or apocryphal traditions of doubtful exploits of historical characters and untrustworthy traditions of doubtful events.”

Francis Abernethy has defined folklore as the traditional knowledge of a culture. J. Frank Dobie claimed that an anecdote of doubtful historicity might reveal more about a man or a people than a bookful of facts. Joyce Roach states that folklore exists on two levels, one of which is historical myth. She describes these myths as “those stories which often explain a culture’s conception and birth and of the heroes and heroines who accomplished the deeds to bring it about. . . .”

These and other folklorists point out that to understand a culture you need to know not only the facts of its history but also its perception of that history. In her article in Texas Myths, Louise Cowan states, “One discerns a society’s vision of the nature and destiny of humanity through its legendary material, its folklore, its fairytales.”
Since there are many different cultures in any society, there are often many different stories or accounts passed on as traditional knowledge of any one historical event. As folklore, all of these stories or accounts are of equal value. However, although each of them may have some nodding acquaintance with the actual facts of the event, none of them may be factually true. The southern whites’ traditional knowledge of slavery and the antebellum South as passed on to them by their cultural ancestors may be very different from the traditional knowledge of the same subjects that was passed on to the descendants of slaves. The same could be said of the folklore of hundreds of different cultures regarding any historical event or period. There is likely some truth in each of the culture’s folklore, but to ascertain which is closer to reality you need the historical facts. As folklore, one culture’s traditional knowledge of its conception, birth, heroes and heroines is as valid as that of any other culture. Knowing this, a folklorist does not intend his or her work to be taken as historically accurate.

A people’s perception of their history is often formed not so much from knowledge of facts as from the traditional knowledge passed on to them through folklore. A great many people are much more familiar with folklore’s rendition of an historical event than they are with the actual facts of the event, and this forms their opinion of and sets the standard for “truth” as to the event. Yet, if these people were asked if they ever read folklore, they would probably answer in the negative.

Where do these people get the folkloric rendition of these events? Unfortunately, from articles or books passed off as historical accounts. Persons who have read Wilbarger, DeShields, a great many of the reminiscences of the Texas Rangers and other pioneers, some of the articles in Frontier Times and the former Texana Quarterly, many of the earlier accounts of reconstruction and the fall of the Alamo, or any of the books that cite these publications, has read a great deal of folklore, possibly without being aware of it. The folklore contained in these writings, which of course is perpetuated each time it is cited in another work, are excellent examples
of Botkin’s unhistorical “historical” traditions or apocryphal traditions of doubtful exploits of historical characters and untrustworthy traditions of doubtful events.

Some historical writings are not meant to inform but rather to persuade. By controlling the evidence, the writer supports his or her evaluations and interpretations. A writer might present only evidence that supports his or her position or only contrary evidence that the writer believes he or she can effectively argue against, ignoring all other evidence that refutes the writer’s position. We seldom read historical accounts in which the facts do not support the writer’s evaluation and interpretation. This is so because the writer is the only person presenting the facts. In other words, he or she controls the facts and if a writer can’t come to a logical conclusion using controlled facts, well, he or she is not much of a writer.

Historians are not the authors of all of the books in the history section of your library. The writing of an historical account does not make the writer an historian. He or she may be an excellent writer but still not an historian. However, there should be no criticism of a history writer’s evaluation and interpretation of accurate facts because after all, history is nothing more than an accumulation of facts about past events and an evaluation and interpretation of those facts. It is the historian’s primary objective to make a thorough search for the facts.

Other than having some agenda, what would cause writers of historical accounts to “folklorize” their accounts? As much as I dislike being the bearer of bad news, I must advise you that some of these writers are just plain lazy. These writers are easy to identify because they show a remarkable distaste for primary sources. Most of their research depends upon that of other historians. In other words they rely principally on secondary sources, which often are themselves the product of other secondary sources. If you trace them back you may never come to a primary source. This summer I read a recently published book concerning atrocities committed during the American-Indian War. The author, who by the way was a lawyer, used nothing but secondary sources. This writer also
labeled historical revisionism as false history.\textsuperscript{10} Of course, since he relied entirely on secondary sources he could never be accused of revising history, only of quoting or editing it.

Besides telling us that we ought to demand proof, Thoreau also gives us some good advice about travelers, which could apply also to writers who rely on secondary sources. Thoreau states, “He who is only a traveler learns things at second-hand and by the halves, and is poor authority.”\textsuperscript{11} The same would apply to those writers who rely on secondary sources.

The traditional knowledge of a culture serves some need or other useful purpose of the culture. It may be economic, defensive, or political, but no matter what purpose is served it may be harmed if such knowledge is questioned. If an historical article deviates from this traditional knowledge it is often labeled as “revisionist history.” That label is not meant to be complimentary. The folk don’t want anyone messing with their history, the emphasis being on their.

If someone writes something that really upsets the folk, they may not only call the writer a revisionist but also accuse him or her of writing “politically correct” history. They do not intend that to be a compliment, either. Of course, to them, politically correct history is any history that even implies that any historical accomplishment was the product of anyone other than a white (preferably Anglo-Saxon), Protestant, male (preferably southern); or, that casts any white (especially if he is Anglo-Saxon), Protestant, male (most assuredly if he is southern) in an unfavorable light. Usually, the history they complain about contains what they consider to be both flaws—that is, revisionist and politically correct.

We want Crockett to have fought to the last, dying only when overpowered by overwhelming numbers. We want Travis to have made his grand speech and to have drawn the line in the dirt, across which every Alamo defender except one crossed.

How Crockett died or whether or not Travis actually made his speech or drew a line at the Alamo is of no great consequence. Believing that Crockett fought to the end or surrendered thinking he could talk his way out of death, or that Travis did or did not make his speech or draw the line will not substantially affect the actions of
anyone, except perhaps in their writing hate mail to anyone question-
ing their belief. However, it is of great consequence when a writer of historical events intentionally or carelessly states something that advises his readers that a people are in some way either superior or inferior to another group of people. Since actions often follow beliefs, believing such statements can lead to serious consequences.

When the competent and respected historian Walter Prescott Webb tells us that there is a cruel streak in the nature of the Mexican that may be of Spanish heritage (and doubtless should be attributed partly to Indian blood), was he correct or factual? Was he politically correct? That was undoubtedly his scholarly interpretation of the facts as he saw them in 1935. Perhaps what he meant is that there is a cruel streak in human nature and that the Mexican, being a member of humanity, shares that streak with the rest of us. If that is what he meant, with my knowledge of the Sand Creek Massacre, the Mountain Meadows Massacre and the Porvenir Massacre; the labor trouble in Ludlow, Colorado; slavery and the countless lynchings, whether by rope or fire, of black Americans; the atrocities by the Germans against the Jews as described and pictured in the book, The Good Old Days; not to mention all of the court cases I have heard, I might agree with his interpretation of the facts. Was he politically correct in what he actually did say? I would say for his 1935, white, male, Protestant readers his political correctness was right on target. Many of them would readily accept his interpretation because it reinforced their feelings of superiority, and it is always good politics to tell the people what they want to hear, regardless of its truthfulness.

However, if some later historian were to interpret the facts that he or she had gleaned from a study of the past concerning the nature of Mexicans differently, he or she would certainly be accused by some of being politically correct and perhaps even a revisionist. As Jose Enrique de la Pena, who fought for the Mexicans at the Alamo, wrote, “Be very careful because it is very difficult to be a historian.”

Many historical writings are politically correct for their time. All writers want acceptance from their readers. One of the most...
effective ways to do this is to tell them something that they will agree with or to reinforce some opinion or prejudice that they have. If that’s not politics I don’t know what is! In the political arena, practitioners of this are usually successful in getting elected.

In a fifth and sixth grade textbook, *Workers and Wealth of Texas*, Texas school children were taught in the 1930s that “there is something about a cotton patch that seems to appeal to most Negroes. They look upon cotton picking as play, as a kind of game, rather than work. . . . But all people like to pick cotton after they are used it.” Are these statements of historical truths, or are they closer to folklore, and if folklore, whose culture? I suspect that like Dobie told us, they might reveal more about a people (in this case the school boards) than a bookful of facts. I believe it was Mark Twain who was first credited with saying, “In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then He made school boards.”

There may be some of you that have never had the good fortune to play in a cotton patch. For you, I will quote from a book by those revisionist and politically correct historians Thad Sitton and Dan Utley. They quoted an old cotton picker who told them, “You’d pick standing up until your back hurt so bad you could hardly stand it, and you’d get down on your knees and go along until your knees got to hurting so bad you couldn’t stand it, and you’d get back up and bend over again. Something was always hurting.” Which statements concerning picking cotton are closer to the historical truth, and which are closer to folklore?

Historian James Crisp has told us, “We should never allow even the most revered of our society’s ‘sacred narratives’ to be accepted as simple truths, nor to be mistaken for legitimate history. Myths offer the false comfort of simplicity. . . .” I suspect he was not just warning us about picking cotton but also about the folklorization of history. It is a warning we all should heed. Of course, when someone says that history has been folklorized, such a statement is really just a politically correct way to say that we have been lied to and that a revision is necessary in order to set the record straight.
[Portions of this article were taken from the author’s Presidential Address for the 2003 West Texas Historical Association Meeting, also published as “A Lawyer Looks at Historical Research” in the *WTHA Year Book*, Volume LXXIX, Ed. Monte L. Monroe, 2003, 170–178.]

**Endnotes**

7. Hudson, i.
11. Thoreau. 204.


A collection of paisanos (including a Mody Boatright paisano, bottom center) recently donated to the Texas Folklore Society Archive by Joyce Roach, TFS Fellow