Folklore
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Every evening about 5:45, a white pickup turns onto a caliche street on the edge of town in George West, Texas. The pickup creeps down the secluded street, turns to the right toward the fence, then backs into its self-assigned parking spot on the caliche driveway, almost but never quite hitting the small barbecue pit with its back bumper. The driver leisurely opens his door, eases out, and ambles to the bed of the pickup where he lifts one end of his ice chest lid and takes out two beers. He slides each into its own fat, Flying W Caprock Ranch rubber koozie (the only kind of koozie he’ll use), closes the cooler, and walks toward the garage. Just before reaching the garage, he sets the two beers on the stop-sign table, using the beer cans to anchor his scratch-off tickets. From there, he opens the garage door and takes out a white plastic chair. Back at the table, he sets the chair in front of the two beers, sits down, and waits—in the same spot every day. As he waits, he pops the top of one of the beers and takes a long sip. He takes his snuff can from his shirt-front pocket and arranges it on the table beside the koozies. Then, he takes out his pocket knife and scratches some of the tickets, which according to his superstition must be done while he’s alone. That done, he sips again, scratches a few more tickets, and waits. (If he scratches them all at once, it’s bad luck.) Each time he hears a vehicle on the paved road, he looks up to see if anyone is turning onto the caliche street. Meanwhile, he watches the birds and other wildlife in the yard and the goats across
the fence. He also watches with a skeptical eye the neighbor to the north. He’s convinced the man is part of the witness protection program because he lives behind three locked gates, has security cameras strategically placed on his property, and never acknowledges anyone. Thus, as he waits for company, he’s got plenty to occupy his time: wildlife and secretive neighbors.

Sometimes the owner of the house at the end of this caliche street is home; sometimes he’s not. It doesn’t matter—Johnny Campbell’s routine is the same whether Bill Phillips is there or not. Even if Bill is in the house, he may or may not sit with Johnny at the table in his driveway. Visitors have jokingly accused him more than once of being antisocial. When Bill is home, so is his dog. For a number of years he had Little Dog, who would join Johnny and the others in the evenings. Now it’s Daisy, a fully grown black standard poodle who eagerly greets the late afternoon guests, chases her ball when someone will throw it, and chews Johnny’s ABC gum after Johnny has chewed the flavor out. When pals Punkin and Dominga visit with their owners, young Daisy has a high time playing chase. One afternoon as Bill and Daisy puttered into the driveway in his 1987 faded-red Chevy pickup, Johnny observed with a grin, “That man and that dog do not go together.”

In time, a vehicle turns off the paved road onto the caliche. Its occupant may be any one of many possible evening guests at Bill’s. Regular visitors include Johnny’s brother Billy the craftsman, David Huser the insurance salesman, Gene Chapline the attorney, Bobby Alaniz the restaurateur, neighbor Nona Schorp the landman, Johnny’s son Cody the refinery worker/rancher, and me, Cody’s wife the school teacher. Others are frequent visitors, like Johnny’s son Casey and his fiancée Kody, or Gene’s wife Josie the nurse/school board member. Representatives of other professions, families, and local color stop by once in a while for a visit, including cowboy Kenneth Gerfers, who might share a story about putting together a bunch of steers or having to ride some rank old horse no one else would ride, or offshore drilling rig motorman Randy “Mudcat” Bramblett and his girlfriend Pam, who may recount one of the four times she’s been snake bitten. Even Bill’s
mother Lib graces the gathering now and then. Lib is known as “The Gray Lady,” not so much for her beautiful hair but because, as Cody explains, “she’s an unreconstructed Confederate; she’s still convinced we won the war.” Everyone snaps to attention when Lib is around. Discussing why people come over to Bill’s, Billy observes that “the main reason people show up [is that] if you don’t show up, they’ll talk about you,” to which Bill adds, “and you don’t leave early.” Occasionally Bill will look up, though, to find himself surrounded by Campbells. He rubs his head, chews on his cigar, and shrugs. He says, “Well, I was Charles Cecil’s adopted son, anyway.” He adds emphatically, “And besides, he left me his boots and hats—because they wouldn’t fit either of you.” (Charles
Cecil was Johnny and Billy’s father.) Bill points out about the evening gatherings, however, that “it happens to be my house, but they’re not comin’ to my house; they’re comin’ to their grounds. If I ever sell this house, that’s part of the deed.”

This gathering has various monikers—the Round Table, the Twilight Gang, the Lagarto Club, the Liar’s Club (a name, Gene points out, that is already taken by Mary Karr), the Board Meeting, and possibly more. Whatever it is called, the group is a delightful assemblage of knowledge, experience, expertise, education, and heritage. Passersby might wonder what this group does every day in that driveway. Well, they catch up on the latest community news, tell stories of days past, watch the birds that come to the yard each season, play with Daisy, have a few beers and, in general, relax and enjoy one another’s company.

Whenever I have a local history question, I seek the collective memory and wisdom of this group. The regulars range in age from their mid-thirties to mid-sixties. What they have not lived through or personally experienced, they have heard from those who preceded them—or, they have made up. And they relish telling and retelling (and often retelling again) stories of people and events of their area. Billy contends that “it’s interesting how many times you can hear the same story but it’s never told the same way twice.” They tell stories much like those who gather at the local Dairy Queen or coffee shop in George West or in any other town. The main difference in the make-up of the group at Bill’s, though, is that they include women whereas most DQ and coffee shop groups are exclusively men. No one brings coffee, either. “It’s bad for you,” quips Johnny.

Their campfire (their front porch) is a driveway where they sit in plastic chairs—most of which have at least one duct-taped mended break. (Bill complains that his guests could at least buy him “chairs that don’t break so easily.”) They sit in these chairs around an old stop sign that used to sit atop a cable spool but now rests on a fancier white octagonal table David brought one day from a trash pile behind a local convenience store. Bill says that
the old spool rotted, so when David saw the “old display table, [he] dug it up,” loaded it into the back of his pickup, and hauled it over to Bill’s. Most members have their usual places around the table. They are a predictable lot. Their feelings are hurt if anyone parks in their spot or sits in their place. Most people realize their mistake soon enough, however, from the looks on the regulars’ face—and move.

They tell funny stories on others, on each other, and on themselves. Likewise, they speak of tragedy and loss. They offer advice to the younger ones. Together, they comprise a wealth of information—whether it is where to find good used tractor parts, who might have hay for sale at an affordable price, how much it rained in any given spot in the county last night, where so-and-so is buried, who built the first concrete water trough in the area, who ran for sheriff in 1946, how many children Henry and Gertrude had and whatever happened to each one. Maybe someone will ask a question such as, “Who started the saying around here ‘He’s all dressed up like Puss Erwin’s hack driver’?” Inevitably someone in the group will remember. Once in a while, they are stumped, so to speak, on a question. “If a family branch is missing,” muses Bill for example, “Bill Hardwick or Judge Holland has to be called in to set it straight.” Robert “Judge” Holland knows all the family trees in all the neighboring counties. Bill also adds that if anybody needs to know the name of a local football player up to 1960, Bill Hardwick is the man with the answer. This group also discusses movies, often quoting entire sections of dialogue. They chat about whatever sport is in season (local teams, regional teams, national teams), about hunting of almost all kinds, current state and national events, how many cows were at the livestock sale that week and what the market was like (not to mention who brought in the biggest load), books, movies, relatives, and local gossip. If I have been out of town a few days, you can guess where I go to catch up on what I have missed.

Some of the storytellers are fond of center stage and will sabotage the story of another to gain or regain that attention. Recently,
David was telling about a young man from Beeville who wanted to be a rodeo clown until he met with an experience that made him change his mind. As David was relating the incident, Bill chimed in with a sly smirk, “Being a circus clown would have been a lot safer,” folded his arms and placed his cigar back between his teeth, looking around to ensure that everybody had heard him. Distracted, and perhaps a bit perturbed, David looked at Bill with an almost hurt look and, with a sigh, resumed his story about the rodeo clown wannabe, the punch lost. One of David’s storytelling assets is his uncanny ability to mimic the language and oral mannerisms of a host of individuals. He can have us doubled over in our chairs with our eyes watering from laughing hysterically at stories accompanied by his accurate personality portrayals of the characters. Bill maintains that another of David’s assets is knowing where to find sweet corn. Bill says, “Huser pinpoints all the sweet corn in the county for the corn boil. Huser and the owner are the only ones in the county who know where it is, and sometimes only Huser knows where it is.” And Huser does not reveal the secret. He does not keep all of the corn for himself; rather, he shares it with his friends.

To verify his corn authority, David tells of the time when two brothers near Beeville had quite a stand of sweet corn, and they had a family wedding one Saturday when the corn was ready. Since David had been invited to the wedding, he knew that the Mass was at 3:00 and the reception started at 5:00. He says, “I knew they may not all go to the wedding, but about 5:30 they’d ALL be at that reception drinkin’ beer and not thinkin’ about that corn.” He laughs his jolly laugh: “Everybody had corn that year!”

Poor Billy rarely can get a complete story told to the entire group because someone—usually his brother Johnny or his friend Bill—will start a story after Billy has begun his. Thus, two stories are going simultaneously. Others at the table will not get either complete story, trying to be polite to both tellers at once, looking back and forth from teller to teller as though watching a tennis match. Johnny and Bill apparently do this on purpose to make Billy mad, but he finishes his story despite their attempts at sabotage
and does not get mad because he is used to it. His view of the situation is “When they interrupt me it’s usually because the other turd isn’t listening or can’t hear.” Many of Billy’s stories concern his days as a star athlete at George West High School and as a football player for the University of Houston Cougars. In fact, Billy was the first athlete from George West to ever play college ball. Other favorite topics of his pertain to his current leather or woodworking project or, as Johnny adds, “fighting major wars around the world since 1501.” Sometimes, however, Billy and Bill turn on Johnny. Bill observes, “It kills Johnny because Billy and I team up on him sometimes. We high-five after a good comeback!” Gene, David, Bill, and Johnny come to Billy’s creative defense by eagerly mentioning that Billy is the only one who makes rosaries out of horsehair and rawhide and that he is the “only living beer tab artist in the world—and he’s running out of material.”

Billy’s not the only teller to have his stories interrupted. My son J. Michael observes that “Cody is funny, too, but when he tries to tell a story, Johnny or Bill interrupt with a funnier story than
Cody has. It is like a competition.” It is a competition to them, but a friendly, entertaining one.

Having been a working cowboy most of his life and a ranch foreman, Johnny has many stories dealing with those experiences. In fact, he has published many of them in his two books of poetry and one novel (he has another on the way). Often his stories turn to day-working cattle with fellow cowboy and friend Bob Dougherty. Because they worked cattle together on ranches and smaller places throughout South Texas, Johnny has plenty of these tales. One, in particular, involves a group of spoiled cattle owned by a farmer of Polish descent. The cowboys had to rope each one in the herd, making for a long, tedious day. Johnny’s finale to this story is: “Bohemians shouldn’t be allowed to own cows. They can have all the pigs they want—but no cows.” He also likes to talk about the days on the Ward Ranch near Vanderbilt where he was foreman. Actually, he speaks daily on a myriad of subjects.

But Johnny has stories told on himself, too. One of David’s favorite Johnny stories is about the Christmas David talked Johnny into delivering sausage with him. Every year in December David goes to Karnes City and has sausage made, which he gives to his friends for Christmas. Their last stop that evening was at Bill’s house (evidently no gathering that particular evening), already after dark. David could tell nobody was home, even though he saw Bill’s wife Judy’s car in the garage, so he got out of the pickup to leave some sausage in Bill’s deep freeze. Since he thought nobody was home, Johnny paid no attention to what David was doing. David says, “He was fiddlin’ with his snuff can or somethin’ and wasn’t watchin’ what I was doin.’” When David returned to the pickup, he said, “Did you see Judy come to the door in that negligee? Man, you could see right through it!” Johnny never missed a beat. He said, “You don’t have another link of that sausage, do you?”

Sometimes the Campbell brothers tell a story together. One family story they like to tell involves a relative and stolen horses. Sometime in the early 1900s, a cousin named Ethan stole a bunch of horses from the Army. He smeared mud across the US brand on
the horses’ shoulders and took them to his father’s place in Live Oak County. His father ran him off; meanwhile, the Army tracked the horses to the father’s place and retrieved them. Mysteriously, nobody knows whatever happened to Ethan. Another popular subject of the Campbell brothers is the great GWHS football team that went to the state semifinals in 1959. Billy is quick to point out, however, that “everybody’s football team had the best team there ever was.” Because they’ve been sharing stories for so long, each brother makes sure the other is telling a story correctly. Bill maintains, “Billy and Johnny are each other’s spell checker on stories.”

Another regular at Bill’s, Gene, shares stories about growing up in Houston and about court cases he has worked. As you can imagine, this group often finagles free legal advice. Gene also is an active Boy Scout leader, and his boys were among the first, as part of an organized activity, to talk to astronauts in the International Space Station. Bill brags that “other scout leaders from all over call Gene to learn how.” Indeed, Gene is one of twelve mentors worldwide for amateur radio communication with the space station, and he has published a how-to article on the subject. Evidently, Gene missed his true calling, though, because he is a fanatical editor when he reads. He even went so far as to pen a five-to-six-page handwritten letter to Larry McMurty, pinpointing the proofreading errors he found while reading *Lonesome Dove*. McMurty wrote Gene back, saying, “I can’t read my own proofs, & no one else seems to bother.” Gene does.

In addition to being knowledgeable and entertaining, the group is culturally diverse. Because his father was an Air Force officer, Bill has lived in places such as Guam and Japan. In addition, he has been a ranch foreman not only in Texas but also in South America. Thus, he has much worldly experience to bring to the group. Bobby brings his Mexican heritage and culture, plus his restaurant management knowledge, to the conversations, while Josie shares her Filipino culture, especially with the delicious food she prepares and shares with the group on occasion. Others also bring dishes to share sometimes. For example, Bill likes to fry up his corn tortillas that he has had a bit too long. Bobby once told
Bill that he can use the grease longer if he fries white corn tortillas rather than yellow because the white corn has more gluten in it, knowledge Bill shared with me as I watched him fry up a package of tortillas one evening.

As these people discuss various topics and issues, they are maintaining and, indeed creating, the folklore of their area. Some more snobbish members of the community may look down their noses at this daily gathering as just an excuse to get together and drink beer. However, it is much more than that. Not everyone who attends even imbibes in alcoholic beverages. On the surface this group is entertaining. They make me laugh at their stories and the way they feed off one another. On a different level, they are enlightening and informative. They keep oral history alive, and as long as younger people continue to join their group, even occasionally, the oral history will continue to live. For example, Gene’s son Grant, a young banker in Beeville, spends an occasional afternoon enjoying the company at Bill’s. Quite often, my ten-year-old son J. Michael or Cody’s eight-year-old daughter Maggie or Bill’s grandchildren will be there to hear these stories, this lore of the folk of Live Oak County. Sometimes, when Bill’s daughter and her children come to town and his mother comes over, four generations of his family are seated around that table sharing stories.

Indeed, lore is passed from generation to generation when we listen to the stories of those who are older than we are. Groups like the one at Bill’s in George West, Texas, keep alive the oral tradition, the stories, and the legends. In addition, though, these folks create lore when they recount their own experiences and events they have witnessed. The next generation listens and will one day tell the stories to their children and grandchildren. One generation—represented by Johnny, Billy, Bill, Gene, and others—tells the stories they heard from their parents and grandparents. In turn, the next generation—Cody, Grant, and myself—recounts these same
stories as well as adds the experiences we have had ourselves, to our own children—J. Michael and Maggie. Thus, oral history lives, legends grow, and oral tradition thrives. As long as that white pickup backs into that same spot every day and this group continues to gather, the folklore of Live Oak County will live.

[With approval by and contributions from the participants, June 2003.]