FOLKSY, BUT DEVOUT, BOOKKEEPING
by George Wilmeth Ewing

When I recently looked back at the folklore textbooks I read a good many years ago, I realized that though some mentioned a little about folk materials in the text of the Bible, nothing was said about the folk attitudes toward the physical or material book itself. Yet, hardly a day goes by that I do not see or hear a reminder of some commonly accepted cultural (not religious) view involving this document. True, some relate to beliefs probably not held by the many who no longer expect to meet an evil spirit that could be warded off by a Bible waved in his face, or who need one when traveling or sleeping to bring good luck, but how about kissing a Bible as a declaration of love? Some still do! There is, I have been told, a secret verse that can be used to stop bleeding, or lower fever, but it has been kept a secret from me. Do you still believe that in times of trouble, one may prayerfully close his eyes, open a Bible and place his finger on a verse which will help him solve his problem? I admit that a few times I, like many preachers, have successfully used the same method to discover a sermon topic. And don’t forget that if a Bible is stacked with other books, or placed in a backpack or book satchel, it must be on top of the others. Everybody knows that!

I wondered about placing a right hand upon a Bible to insure truthfulness, for I still hear folks saying, “I’d swear on a stack of Bibles.” So I called our county court, and was assured that witnesses in a trial are no longer required to do so, “but we still use a Bible when swearing some new official into his position!” Recently,
I attended a wedding in which the couple took their vows with hands on the Bible.

Admittedly, I live in a very religious city (Abilene, Texas), and most of the people I talk to are Protestant Anglo-Americans, so my findings about the book may not reflect accurately the ways of the total Texas population with its many Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Orientals of varied beliefs, but I’m sure I’m into a folksy subject that others may find interesting.

For example, I have now asked hundreds of all kinds of people, “Have you ever thrown away or destroyed a Bible?” The Gideons International do admit that they destroy worn and incomplete copies, but so far, only two ordinary people have said that they have done such a thing—a woman who sounded almost apologetic as she explained that the old book had come to pieces and many pages were lost so that it could not be rebound, and a Biblical scholar who tossed one from which he had cut many passages that he pasted in his personal commentary. One man in a somewhat shocked tone, said, “I once saw one in a dumpster!” Several have told me that the Bible, like a worn-out United States flag, should be buried or burned (cremated?), but certainly never trashed.

Since copying machines have become commonplace, I am guessing that we will not see much more cutting and pasting of this respected document, but I am reminded of a preacher many years ago who shocked his audience by tearing a page from his Bible and waving it before his audience to show them the scriptural proof of his statement. Another preacher of my childhood told of a woman who, when shown a passage that disagreed with her religious view, ripped that page from her Bible, wadded it up and threw it in a wastebasket.

Well, what do we do with old Bibles? Not surprisingly, since it is the most widely owned book in the world, many copies are lost. During World War II, when I was hitch-hiking into Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to go to church, I was picked up by a couple of obviously drunken women, and after twenty minutes of a terrifying, swerving, eighty-mile-an-hour ride, when the car stopped I
hopped out so quickly that I left my overnight kit and my Bible on
the back seat, and they were whisked away before I had a chance to
reach in and recover them. Probably that is the only Bible I have
lost, but nearly every church building I enter will have a number of
unclaimed copies of the book, usually on a shelf in an entry hall-
way. I am guessing that inn-keepers, airline attendants, and bus and
taxi drivers could tell us a good bit about lost (or found) Bibles.

Nearly every used-book sale I have attended has a row of
Bibles, and though I am seldom a customer at garage sales, I have
been told that there are quite a few Bibles in them, but since Bible
societies give away new copies, I doubt that used ones bring high
prices. More often, old Bibles are preserved. Some are rebound,
but far more go up on shelves—in closets or unused cabinets—and
one woman told me that she had a big box of old Bibles in her
garage, but had no idea what she ought to do with them.

Maybe we keep them because memories can make treasures of
many things. Lying in a little wooden holder on our TV is my
mother’s baby spoon, dating back to 1893. Every time I see it, I
recall that when I was three, I helped her rake among the ashes of
our home that had burned to the ground the day before and saw
her tears as she recovered this precious object—which, incidentally,
was the only sterling silver we had during the Great Depression
that came a few years later. Memories also gush up whenever I bore
a hole with the “new” brace and bit, which I first used in 1928, or
make a measurement with the carpenter’s rule that belonged to my
father who died forty years ago. A friend of mine recently men-
tioned the memories produced by a baby toy that he has kept
eighty-four years—the first Christmas present he ever received.
Should we be surprised, then, if we feel an emotional surge when
we try to throw away a Bible—worn, but enriched with memories
of special occasions or people? Recently, when I visited a nursing
home and observed an old Bible in the hands of a decrepit man, he
said, “This was my mother’s Bible!”

How many may bring back wartime memories? A man from
the Gideons International assures me that they are still trying to
see that every person in the armed services receives a pocket-sized New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs, and I quickly recalled the ones we carried during World War II, many of which had a metal plate over one cover, supposedly strong enough to stop a bullet. I never went overseas, and never had to duck anything more dangerous than a Florida seagull’s droppings, but recently a friend, who is certainly not a profound Bible believer, told me that he carried his testament all the time he was in the combat zones—but in his duffel bag rather than his pocket. A fellow English teacher said that when he was in the invasion of Europe, he saw the bullet hole in a testament that had probably saved the life of one of his buddies. My sister’s husband, a Marine who was in the battles on Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Saipan, and Guam, had been given a prayer book by his Catholic mother and a Bible by his new wife. When crouched in a jungle foxhole surrounded by the enemy, he wrote, “I have thrown away my prayer book, but I’m hanging on to my Bible!”

More and more Bibles are likely to outlive their owners, for sales of Bible covers and carrying cases are going up. Most bookstores now are stocking these in various sizes and materials (leather, plastic, or heavy cloth over something like cardboard), with zipper or Velcro fasteners to hold them closed. I’m seeing these increasing among churchgoers. These may often be “study Bibles,” and this raises the question “How can you mark in a Bible?” Underlining and the use of highlighting pens are generally acceptable, and writing in the margins is commonplace (though one man told me, “I never mark on the textual pages of my Bible”), but how about doodling with meaningless scribbles or comic figures or faces? So far, I have found no one who will admit to doing such a thing, but one librarian said he saw an old Bible with a tttat-tat-toe game on one blank space. Two people must have sat together during a boring sermon!

Some Bibles are disposed of at the funeral of the owner. A local funeral director told me that about twenty percent of his customers want the selected book, preferably a small edition, in the casket
Bibles come in many forms to appeal to a variety of readers

during the visitation and service, but many are removed and given to a near relative before the box is sealed and covered. Where should it be in the casket? One woman told me her father was buried with his Bible in his hand, but usually it is under the arm of a man, but under the crossed hands on the breast of a woman. One second-generation preacher I knew used the same Bible his father had used and marked for many years, adding several years of his own notes in the margins, and this book was left under his head, like a pillow, when he was buried.

Other special occasions are enhanced by Bibles, likely gifts from friends or relatives. Groups performing christenings often see that the child will own a Bible; many churches give Bibles to new converts, and brides still often carry one, but not as often as a few
years ago, a bridal shop manager told me, “for weddings are becoming more secular!” White satin covers were often made for the bride’s Bible, and bookstores still carry a number of “bridal Bibles,” usually small and white, as well as some white decorated covers for gift Bibles with dark binding. (So far, I have heard nothing about Bibles in divorce proceedings!)

The public school librarians that I have talked to say that several versions of the Bible are in the libraries, but they mentioned no Korans, Books of Mormon, or similar documents. Some churches give Bibles to members that are moving away, adding pages of personal notes and signatures. I was recently shown one with well over a hundred names of fellow members. Imagine the memories that this may arouse years later. The Gideons see that Bibles also appear at graduations, whether from the fifth or sixth grades or from high school, “but now we cannot take them into the buildings, so we stand outside and hand them to the students as they come out.” One representative found it weird that they cannot place Bibles in schoolrooms, but can put them in prison cells, “but only soft-covered ones—no hard covers!” (Can they be used as weapons?) I am also told that some schools keep a “school Bible,” which is passed from the president of the graduating class to the president of the next year’s class.

Incidentally, most of these gifts are the King James Versions, having the text that sounds “more biblical” to many people, but lately more and more Spanish and bilingual versions are being used.

I was surprised when several people mentioned rebinding Bibles—“my great-great-grandmother’s Bible,” or “my great-grandfather’s Bible”—so I called a local bookbinder and was told, “Yes, we do between a hundred and two hundred a year, for about two or three hundred dollars each.” Some thirty or more of these, he added, may date back to the period between the Civil War and the advent of the automobile, a hundred years or so ago, a period when a big family Bible was considered a mark of achievement, and might cost $50 or more—equal in purchasing power to close to a thousand today! Since rebinding costs so much, I feel confident
that there must be a lot of old Bibles in their original covers in Texas homes.

So far, nearly everyone I have asked has admitted to having a “household” or “family” Bible in his home. We will define the first as a Bible that is readily available to anyone for reading or study, and a “family Bible” is one that has a generation or more of family names and relationships written on pages, usually between the testaments. My house has a lot of Bibles, but few have many family names in them, and the ones more than thirty or forty years old have mostly been passed on to friends and descendents, I guess. Knowing that my mother’s family has strong ties to the past, I called a distant cousin that I knew was interested in her ancestry, and was told that the Bible purchased about 1825 and brought to Texas in a covered wagon in 1845 by my great-great-grandfather J. B. Wilmeth, is now in the home of an eighth-generation descendent. It is a large, leather-bound book, probably about fourteen inches high, containing pages of family names and dates, which (my cousin told me) became important during the days of the establishment of Collin County and McKinney, Texas. Back before the days of birth certificates and the like, Bible records could be legal documents, she said. She also assured me that there were other very old family Bibles among the Wilmeths, and that my great-grandfather J. R. Wilmeth once was displeased with his daughter Edna’s behavior and cut her name out of his family Bible, but later restored it.

Since family Bibles are obviously an important household item, where should they be kept? Many homes once had a small table in the parlor on which the Bible was centered, sometimes on a slanted, two-winged shelf that held it open to the family records or a favorite passage like the 23rd Psalm. Some homes today still have one on the coffee table in front of a couch in the living room or on a mantle over the fireplace. Does its prominent position assure us that it is read? Seventy-five years or so ago, I recall an itinerant preacher’s telling of staying a few days in a good Christian home, and when he returned to it a year or so later, he opened the family Bible and
removed the dollar bills that he had placed there as a test of their use of the book. They were still marking exactly the same passages.

Today the family Bible may also be under a lamp on an end table by a couch or bed, or, maybe uncomfortably, on top of the TV. Precious old or worn copies may be placed under the glass top of a coffee table or stood open in a glass cabinet by a wall, but many are on protected bookshelves, or in a box on a shelf in a closet or storeroom, awaiting burial with the current owner, or more likely, being passed on to a caring descendent. If the family has been active in church, civic, or academic affairs, their Bible may end up in a city, school, or church library.
Obviously, this book is a cultural artifact that is still catching our attention, but what does this mean? Its sales and distribution unquestionably place it far beyond any other publications, including textbooks, comic books, or pornography, yet booksellers, librarians, and others have told me many times that, though it originated the eighth commandment, it is the most often stolen book in the world! The book’s chief villain must be still around, I guess!

The Secretary-Editor’s Bible, stuffed with notes and reminders
Meredith Abarca teaching her students by sharing stories with them