Preface

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Preface

Folklore’s place in academe was a natural subject for my first Publications of the Texas Folklore Society (PTFS). I love school. This statement would probably surprise many of my junior and senior high school teachers, some of whom recommended that I be asked to leave school a time or two, but it’s true. I didn’t go to college immediately after high school, instead deciding to “discover myself” for a couple of years in the U. S. Air Force, but I couldn’t stay away from the classroom for long. Once I found my way back in, I knew I never wanted to leave again. I remember walking across the Texas Tech campus to turn in the final copies of my master’s thesis to be bound and suddenly being nearly overwhelmed by a feeling of uncertainty. Or perhaps, it was certainty that I’d no longer have a good reason to return to the campus or any other. Luckily, I made up my mind right then that I would continue on and get my doctorate, no matter how many bad guys I had to deal with in my job at the Lubbock Police Department in the meantime. That choice, I’m sure, led directly to my sitting here and writing this now.

Back to the subject of this book. “Academe” at first sounds rather stuffy, eliciting images of ivory towers and institutions of higher learning. However, the term includes many things—indeed, practically anything—to do with education. As I was reading through potential papers for this book, I found a reference to...
Mody Boatright’s “Folklore in a Literate Society,” which was published in PTFS XXVIII in 1957. I realized that, according to Boatright, one might substitute “educated” for literate. Practically everyone in America gets a high school education, whether they want it (or deserve it) or not. The same goes for college, and folklore can be found in every part of the learning process. As secretary-editor of the Texas Folklore Society, headquartered at Stephen F. Austin State University, I have had the pleasure of once again teaching the introductory folklore course here. Boatright’s article is a good way to convince the students that they are interested in folklore, even if they don’t know it yet. I’m a back-to-basics kind of guy, so I’m ready to go back to the beginning, to start over by referring to the standards set by Jan Harold Brunvand, Mody Boatright, J. Frank Dobie, and other principal folklorists, but also to use whatever tools necessary to make the study of folklore interesting and useful to everyone possible.

We learn from everything and everyone around us. Much of our learning is formal, but a lot also comes from family, friends, or other people or organizations not necessarily associated with education. Unlike a previous PTFS that examined teaching folklore (Between the Cracks of History: Essays on Teaching and Illustrating Folklore, PTFS LV, 1997), this book shows how folklore plays a fundamental role in the learning process in many areas, from lessons learned in the home and day cares to the more traditional academic environments of elementary and high schools, as well as college. School is a major part of our lives; it is where we form lasting relationships, establish ourselves as individuals, and learn the skills and knowledge that gets us through the rest of our lives. This learning process is vital to us, and we share stories, rituals, and beliefs with fellow learners, and these become part of our academic culture at every level. This book covers folklore in education over the past century, with narratives about teachers in small school houses, as well as ghost stories at major universities. There are humorous anecdotes, family sagas, and some rather sophisticated studies of folklore. Some articles include accounts of oral
narratives that would otherwise be lost forever. Several examine unique traditions and ceremonies of high school and college life. Some look at ways in which we utilize folkloric methods to learn certain things better, including, as Hamlet says, “Words, words, words”—understanding them and learning how to use them more effectively.

The five sections of this book follow a practical, chronological order of sorts. The first contains articles pertaining to the early years of learning, in more than one sense of the word “early.” A couple of them focus on very young children, before and just after they enter kindergarten. One article tells how young boys learn important life lessons in fun ways through traditions taught in the Boy Scouts. Lou Rodenberger recalls her parents’ schoolwork from a time when teachers taught with limited resources in one- or two-room school houses. The first two articles in this section provide a foundation for the rest of the book. “Folklore 101” takes a very basic look at what we do: study folklore. Boatright’s article is included for a couple of reasons. It completes the basic definition of what we mean by “folklore,” and it also shows that folklore is still relevant, no matter how “educated” or sophisticated we become.

The other sections progress through high school and eventually on to college, ending with a section of more erudite articles on various topics, from linguistics to a comprehensive examination of folklore scholarship itself. It is interesting to see how influential even the simplest things can be. Yearbooks capture cultural elements from a cherished time in people’s lives. Cheerleading and the rituals associated with it teach young girls dedication, social skills, and the value of hard work. There is no secret about the significance of football in Texas or the myths that often surround legendary programs or coaches. One article looks at how education affects Mexican Americans in unique ways, particularly when they are caught not only between two ethnic groups but also between generations and differing academic beliefs. The section on college life has ghost stories, memories of wise advice given about the
importance of getting an education, and stories about former professors and their antics. These days, we have Internet sites that rate professors, recording their eccentricities and issuing warnings about them before students enroll in courses. My, how times have changed. The last article has been resurrected from the dust of James Bratcher’s files. Written roughly thirty years ago, it has been updated and concluded to serve as a thorough review of folklore scholarship from its earliest incarnation.

One entire section of this book is dedicated to Paul Patterson, one of our most charismatic and recognized members. Three of the papers on Paul come from a panel dedicated to him at the 1990 meeting in Kingsville. Paul has been many things: a cowboy, a poet, a storyteller, a mentor, a writer, and a public speaker. But of the numerous papers written about him, the common theme that I found in all of them is that he is a **teacher**. A book on folklore and its place in education would not be complete without this tribute to Paul Patterson’s influence on the many students he has taught over the years. Together, these sections show how relevant folklore is to our basic learning practices at all levels. More importantly, they show that folklore never stops. My son and daughter transferred to a new school this year, and they almost immediately began telling stories they’d heard about how Miss Nettie Marshall still haunts the school that bears her name. In one way or another, folklore affects everywhere and every way we learn.

I won’t spend a lot of time discussing how I became the secretary-editor of the Texas Folklore Society and therefore, responsible for this publication. Let me just say that it is truly an honor. Ab wrote in the preface of his first PTFS (back in 1972) about the “umbilical” nature of these volumes. He carried on that life-sustaining tradition for three decades, and I hope to continue his tradition of excellence in this and future publications. Putting this book together has certainly been challenging at times, but it has also been tremendously fun. Through the efforts of several key people already mentioned elsewhere, we were able to keep the TFS headquartered at Stephen F. Austin State University. I trust that this
relationship will continue to be favorable to all involved. As with any transition, there were minor bumps here and there, but I’ve settled in now, and I find SFA to be a very productive atmosphere. After living in Lubbock for nineteen years, Nacogdoches is a perfect fit for our family, and we’re adjusting to medium-city life. As an organization, we have many great achievements for which we should be proud: we’re the third oldest academic organization in the state of Texas, the oldest continuously running state folklore organization in America, and we’ve produced over sixty volumes of solid academic research while keeping it accessible to the common reader. However, I feel this is just the beginning. What can we do next? I want to increase membership, attract younger members, appeal to people of varied ethnic groups, and explore new ways to collect, preserve, and study folklore and all that is associated with it. I think the possibilities are endless.

I give thanks to many people, including Barbara Carr, Chair of the English Department at SFA, and Robert Herbert, Dean of Liberal Arts. Special thanks go to Heather Gotti, the TFS office secretary. Working on this book has, appropriately for its theme, been a learning experience for both of us—no pun intended. I also want to thank my family. Their enduring patience and understanding has allowed me to fulfill all of my dreams, and now we’re able to fulfill our dreams together. Of course, I thank Kenneth W. Davis, who encouraged me to attend my very first TFS meeting just ten years ago. For those who read the newsletters or hear me speak at meetings or other public venues (or even in my classes), my thanks to him may seem somewhat repetitive by now. Well, when I stop benefiting from his wisdom, humor, and friendship, I’ll stop thanking him at every opportunity.

Finally, fittingly, I want to dedicate this book to Francis Edward Abernethy, a driving force behind the Texas Folklore Society for thirty-three years—and then some. Don’t think he’s done yet. I hope he’s not. Ab has been, among many things, a remarkable educator. I hear stories from people I meet everywhere I go about how they remember Ab as a musician, a storyteller, a civic
leader, an actor, a hunter, a fisherman . . . an adventurer. However, the most heartfelt stories—and the ones people remember most vividly—are about Ab as a teacher. I hear these tales from people in the grocery store, people at the theater, from people who are now teachers themselves, and even from my insurance man. He has also been a great teacher to me and still is every day. Thanks, Ab.

Kenneth L. Untiedt
Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, Texas
May 22, 2005
Passing on words of wisdom at the 2004 meeting in Allen, Texas.