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Folklore in a Literate Society

by Mody C. Boatright
There will, I predict, be readers, particularly among those who teach English composition to college freshmen and have made the frustrating discovery that Johnny can’t read, who will maintain that this essay can have no reference to the United States. Yet, that is the reference intended. For even though Johnny can’t read as well as his teacher wishes, and even though Americans read fewer books than the British, the scripts they listen to have been written by somebody. Besides, nearly everybody reads something—if not the Philadelphia Bulletin, then the Readers’ Digest, the Wall Street Journal, the Dell Comic books, or the Rex-all Almanacs. But even if there is an American who reads nothing at all, he lives in a culture whose most important determinant is the written word.

What happens in America, therefore, has a significant bearing on what happens to folklore in a literate society.

When you read, let us say, Louis Adamic’s description of a peasant wedding in Yugoslavia, with its mock fight for possession of the bride, suggestive of a remote antiquity when marriages were made by capture, you say, “How quaint. This is folklore.” What do you say when you read about the weddings reported in the society pages of your local newspaper? Here are a couple of examples:

Given in marriage by her father, the bride wore a white crystal waltz length gown with inset eyelet crystalette panels and bouffant skirt. The shoulder length veil of illusion was held by pearlized orange blossoms. . . . Following the ceremony, a reception was held in the fellowship hall of the church. After a trip to Florida, the couple will live in——.

Given in marriage by her father, the bride wore a floor length dress of lace over taffeta designed with a basque bodice, brief
sleeves and a tiered skirt. Her fingertip veil was attached to a cap of Chantilly lace re-embroidered with pearls and sequins.

[Honor attendants] wore waltz length dresses of seafoam green chiffon over taffeta and net with matching crown headpieces and carried baskets of majestic daisies and English ivy.

Are the American weddings any less folkish because the bride and her mother had the advice of Emily Post and Neiman-Marcus rather than, or in addition to, that of the village elders? At least the veil remains, though its antique function has long been forgotten.

Other questions arise. When a carpenter learns to frame a roof by serving an apprenticeship and receiving instruction by word of mouth from a man who has received his in the same way, you may call his art a folk craft, that is, a tradition that has been handed down orally. But suppose the carpenter has studied a book on roof framing? Or—what is often true these days—he has gone to school and can prove the Euclidean propositions upon which the craft is based?

I have read in collections of folklore descriptions of Czech beer parties in honor of a christening. But I have never found in what purported to be a collection of folklore a description of a publisher’s cocktail party in honor of an author’s latest book. Yet, each follows a historically determined pattern; each is a custom of a group with a common body of tradition. This is not to say that the traditions are of equal duration, or that they have been transmitted in exactly the same way.

One effect of literacy is high specialization and another is nationalism. As a nation gets bigger, its people become increasingly divided into occupational and other groups. Folklore has been mainly concerned with certain of these groups, to the exclusion of others. It began in Europe as a study of “vulgar errors” or “popular antiquities,” and even after Thoms proposed the term *folklore* in 1846, its content, for the most part, continued to be the social anthropology of European peasants and later of “primitive” people of other continents. Thus arose the concepts of survival and arrested development.
Thus arose too the idea that a “folk” must be a primitive group isolated from the contaminating influence of modern civilization. Mary Austin, for example, was able to find only three folk groups in the United States: the Red Indians, the Southern Negroes, and the Southern Mountaineers. These are all isolated geographically or socially or both. But there are other kinds of isolation, and there are many groups within the mass. An occupation, for example, unites its members, and at the same time partially separates them from the mass. Each occupation has its lore—partly belief, partly custom, partly skills—expressed in anecdotes, sagas, tales, and the like. Each individual in a literate society plays a multiplicity of roles, belonging as he does to more than one group. Take for example the railroad conductor who is also a baseball fan. He has a body of tradition appropriate to each role. He knows how to behave in each role, and he knows the verbal lore of each. He knows the witticisms that pass between conductors and passengers. He can tell you apocryphal tales about Jay Gould and Collis Huntington; he knows about Casey Jones and the slow train through Arkansas. He knows too about Casey at the bat and has at his command all the formulas for heckling the other team and the umpire. Our culture is the richer for this pluralism.

Yet, the mass in the United States may, I think, be properly referred to as a folk. For in spite of divisive influences of specialization, of geography, of race, the American people have more in common than in diversity. Charles Wilson and Walter Reuther are divided by class interest. Wilson believes that what is good for General Motors is good for the United States. Reuther believes that what is good for labor is good for the United States. One believes in the trickle-down theory of prosperity; the other in the seep-up theory of prosperity. But they both believe in prosperity. They speak the same language, have much the same concept of the mission and destiny of America, and neither is a conscious enemy of capitalism. One cannot assert that there is any one belief that every American accepts, but the presence of dissent does not prove the absence of a common body of tradition.
Even in a preliterate society tradition is never wholly static. One consequence of literacy is an acceleration of change. Learning develops not only new techniques but new values as well. As long as the American Negro saw no prospect of sharing in the white man’s rising standard of living, his folklore concerned the values available to him. Charms took the place of the medical service he could not afford; superstition took the place of the education that was denied him. He consoled himself with tales covertly satirical of the white man and with the hope of justice when he crossed the River Jordan and was gathered to Abraham’s bosom. Once convinced of the possibility of sharing in the good things about him, however, he announces without regret that Uncle Tom is dead—but not Uncle Tom’s music, which he will cite with justifiable pride as a major contribution to American culture. This shift in emphasis is illustrative of one change folklore undergoes in a literate society.

Another change involves the crafts. The first effect of the industrial revolution is to drive out the folk crafts. Blankets from New England mills take the place of homemade quilts. Brussels and Axminster carpets appear on floors once covered by hooked rugs and rag carpets. Furniture comes from Grand Rapids rather than from the shop of the local cabinetmaker. In time, however, certain countervailing influences assert themselves. There is a revolt against the monotony of both the mass-produced article and the routine job by which most Americans earn their living; and as the shorter work week, the expansion of the service industries, and the availability of household appliances create leisure, and often boredom, people take up hobbies, and hobbies germinate new industries serving them. Markets are found for textile mill-ends, and the Rose of Sharon and the Wedding Ring begin to appear on beds; department stores display yarn and burlap, and hooked rugs reappear. The makers of power tools put on do-it-yourself campaigns, and men begin turning out coffee tables and four-posters in their basements. Most of the craftsmen will work from patterns furnished by their suppliers or the hobby magazine, but a few will create their own designs.
New crafts appear. Teen-aged boys learn that by doing certain things to their motors they can increase the noise, if not the power, of their jalopies. When this activity spreads over the country, somebody realizes that here is a clientele for a new magazine, and *Hot Rod* appears on the newsstands. Then machine shops begin making the parts and selling kits to non-craftsmen, who, if they can afford to, may have their mechanics install them.

Even so, for the first time since the Stone Age great masses of people have opportunity to give play to the instinct of workmanship, to find relief from the monotony of their jobs, and, in some degree, to express whatever individuality they are endowed with.

As has been suggested by reference to the wedding veil, not all old customs perish. In a culture dedicated as ours is to a continuously rising standard of material well-being, a custom is likely to survive, though with a changed significance, if its observance increases the sales of goods and services. Readers of Keats know that at one time a girl could, by performing certain rites on the Eve of St. Agnes, see a vision of her future husband. The rites are no longer performed. They required no purchasable equipment. Not so with the suitable observance of Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter—and now Halloween, for of late we bribe the tricksters with store-bought candy. We invent Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, spacing them carefully so they will not come too close to other already established occasions for spending money.

The pageantry that used to be associated with other occasions—the tournament for example—will be adapted to the publicizing of local products. The Queen of Love and Beauty becomes the Queen of Goats:

FREDERICKSBURG [Texas], July 25 (CTS)—A beautiful queen, as much at home in ranching jeans as in regal robes that denote her reign over the Mohair Realm, will officiate at the 38th annual coronation, show and sale of the Texas Angora Goat Raisers’ Association here Aug. 1, 2, and 3.
Her Mohair Majesty, we learn, will have the title of “Angora Queen of the Universe,” will be attended by “a score of attractive duchesses,” and will receive the homage of the queen of the South Texas Fairs and Fat Stock Shows, the queen of the Gillespie County Fair, and the Farm Bureau queen.

In a literate society, verbal folklore will be disseminated not only by loggers, cotton pickers, oil field workers, and traveling salesmen but also by historians, biographers, fictionists, and journalists, not to say folklorists. Songs, tales, and proverbs will be published and read and some of them put into a wider oral circulation. In this process, narrative lore, in particular, will undergo change. In the 1920s, the journalists discover Paul Bunyan, who by this time is not only a logger but also an oil field worker and begin writing about him for the general magazines. In order to make their material go as far as possible, they invent some tales and rewrite others long in the oral tradition, including many that have no connection with either logging or oil field work. In the meantime, the loggers and oil field workers have become skilled manipulators of machines—power saws, power loaders, tractors, rotary rigs, and the like—and have lost interest in Bunyan. He becomes a national rather than a local or occupational folk character, standing for little more than bigness and strength. As Richard Dorson has observed, the journalists take him from the folk and give him back to a larger folk but with a changed character and significance. And this will be true of any hero who attains more than local fame. Without the aid of writers, he cannot move out of the province in which he has been created. The writers in moving him out must remold him into a type intelligible to the larger audience. Thus bad men become Robin Hoods, cowboys become knights-errant, backwoods politicians become symbols of militant democracy, and lowly animals become symbols of lowly folk. Incidents are reported and transferred from one region to another. The journalists who covered the first oil boom, for example, garnered a considerable sheaf of rags-to-riches stories. Later, journalists reported the same stories from other fields and often in good faith, for the stories
appear sometimes to have come from Pennsylvania to Texas first by word of mouth.

This essay will have achieved its purpose if it has raised more questions than it has answered. It has been written on the assumption that the processes which create folklore do not cease when a society becomes literate and that folklore of any culture will reflect the values of that culture. If it has demonstrated anything, it is that the oral and written traditions are not most fruitfully conceived as separate and distinct. Each is continually borrowing from the other as the processes of adaptation and creation continue.

Mody Boatright, secretary-editor from 1943–1963, hard at work.