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Austin and Alta Fife, Pioneer Folklorists

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Austin and Alta Fife devoted much of their lives to interpreting the Mormon and western culture that had produced them. Just as their parents and grandparents had helped pioneer the West, they broke new ground in American folklore scholarship—in the study of Mormon folklore, cowboy and western folksong, and material folk culture—and charted a course others were to follow.

As Austin told me in an interview conducted at his home (31 May 1972), he was born in 1909 and attended public school in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and in Logan, Utah. He entered Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University) at Logan in 1928 and then from 1929 to 1932 served as a Mormon missionary in France, where he developed an abiding love for French literature and culture. When he returned from his mission, he reentered Utah State and there, in his junior year, met his bride-to-be, Alta Stephens.

Alta, three years younger than Austin, never completed her degree at Utah State because, in 1934, Austin won a fellowship to Stanford University and the couple moved to Palo Alto, California. In the decades to come, they became one of the most successful husband-and-wife research teams in American scholarship. With good cause, most of their major publications list Austin and Alta as coauthors. As Jill Terry Rudy has said in assessing the work of Alta and other “nonprofessionals” in an increasingly professionalized discipline, “Alta Fife’s work at the borders of professional training stands as a contribution, and subtle challenge, to folklore studies. Because [she] held no academic degrees nor university positions, and because most of her published works were coauthored with her husband, acknowledging Fife’s work and assessing her contribution requires an understanding and reassessment of the place of collaboration and family life in the conduct of scholarship” (p. 2).

After Austin finished his undergraduate degree in French language and literature, he remained at Stanford to complete a master’s degree in French literature, moved on to Harvard and a second master’s degree in Romance philology, then returned to Stanford to earn a doctorate in French and Spanish, which he completed in 1938. He began teaching at Santa Monica City College in 1939. Following the outbreak of World War II, he served in the military and then returned to teaching in 1946, this time at Occidental College in Los Angeles.
From there Austin and Alta moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked as a program officer for linguistic research with the U.S. Department of Education. In 1960, they came back to Utah State University, Austin to teach French language and literature and to serve later as head of the Department of Languages and Philosophy. Not until 1970–71, only a few years before his retirement, did his administrative duties ease enough to enable him finally to teach the subject for which many know him best—folklore.

Throughout Austin’s academic career, he and Alta had pursued research in an area very different from Austin’s teaching duties: collecting, documenting, archiving, and publishing the folklore of the American West. During his doctoral work at Stanford, Austin had served as research assistant to the distinguished scholar of Hispanic-American folklore, Aurelio Espinosa, Sr., who became something of a father figure to his young charges. Working with Espinosa on Cuentos populares, the folktales of Spain, Austin struck upon the notion of applying the methodology of folklore to his and Alta’s own cultural traditions, those of Mormons in the Intermountain West. Thus, during school breaks and vacations, Austin and Alta began the collecting excursions into Mormon country that they eventually extended to most areas of the West. In fact, during Austin’s wartime service, Alta continued collecting Mormon materials in and around West Bountiful, where she was living with her parents, as well as in Centerville, Manti, and other Utah communities.

As novice collectors, the Fifes developed a method of breaking down barriers and establishing trust between themselves and their contacts that would serve them well throughout their travels. Realizing that in Mormon Country everyone seems somehow related to everyone else, they used this interconnectedness to establish their credibility, as Austin said in the 1972 interview:

I’ll tell you about our method to interview an old-timer by the name of Zeke Johnson. . . . We finally got his address and called on him. I knocked on the door and said, “I’m Dr. Fife, here representing the Library of Congress collecting old-time stories.” He stepped back a pace and looked at me and said, “Fife, huh? What relation are you to Jeanette Fife?” I had looked the genealogy up a little bit because I knew it would be a help in some communities. So I said, “Well, Jeanette Fife is my grandmother’s sister.” And he said, “Well, son, Jeanette Fife was my father’s third plural wife.” So he put his arm around me and hugged me, and then we were kinsmen. From then on there was no problem about his singing the songs or telling the stories we wanted.

In the collecting itself, Austin and Alta worked closely together: “Alta did steno-graphic work, so together we would get them talking about lore and tradition and pioneer reminiscences, and Alta took it down [first] in shorthand; later we got an acetate recording machine, portable. . . . We always explained to them that we were taking it; we never recorded without the people knowing that they were
being transcribed either stenographically or by machine.” Hector Lee recalled in his introduction to Exploring Western Americana, Alta’s edition of Austin’s essays, that “Austin would ask the questions, and Alta with her shorthand notebook would sit or stand discreetly in the background and take down what was being said. This technique was particularly effective when the material was sensitive and personal, such as accounts of supernatural experiences or superstitions. Many informants, when revealing intensely personal matters, could be intimidated by the too-obvious recording process but were not distracted by Alta’s unobtrusive notations” (p. xvii). The Fifes’ collecting endeavors led to an important article by Austin in the Journal of American Folklore in 1940, “The Legend of the Three Nephites among the Mormons,” a piece that quickly caught the attention of prominent American folklorists and would surely have led to more publications had World War II not intervened.

Following the war, Austin and Alta resumed collecting in earnest, devoting much of their free time to the effort during Austin’s tenure at Occidental College. Then in 1951, Austin won a Fulbright Exchange Professorship to France, where he was attached to the French National Museum as researcher and lecturer. In France, Austin called on Arnold Van Gennep, author of the influential Rites of Passage, “to get the feel of a great intellectual.” Of Van Gennep he later said, in the same 1972 interview:

Most beginning teachers in folklore give you folklore as material—as folksongs, as ballads, proverbs, superstitions; and you [can] know a hell of a lot of proverbs and yet not learn from them a damned thing about mankind. Van Gennep said this is all nonsense and said you must see these materials as a catalogue of the logical arrangement of human ideas, and you must look at it as it functions as a body of materials in the formation of values in a culture—items of inventory that make up the personality of the individual human being.

From Van Gennep, Austin developed organizing principles and cultural insights that would thereafter inform his interpretation of Mormon folklore. For he and Alta were attempting to demonstrate that the stories, songs, and customs they had collected were not just curious novelties of little consequence, as some believed, nor mere “items” to be recorded and catalogued by the scholar. They were, rather, vital functioning forces in Mormon society, shaping the values and practices of individual Mormons, as they said, “from the cradle to the grave.” From studying this lore, one could indeed learn a great deal about mankind.

On returning to the United States, the Fifes took up the work once more. In 1953, Austin received a Rockefeller grant to do fieldwork, and they decided that the Moab area in southeast Utah was a promising site. At the time, the Fifes’ daughters were six and twelve years of age, so the entire family packed their camping trailer and drove from Los Angeles to Moab. Alta described the trailer and their collecting in a 1992 interview with Anne F. Hatch:
[It] was very commodious for that date. It unfolded with beds on either side and had cupboard and stove and so on. And we brought it . . . thinking that after we collected, we would go do some camping . . . , and we were planning on living in a motel in Moab. And when we got there, there were two movie companies that were actively making movies, and there was no space in a motel whatsoever, so we parked our camper in an apricot orchard and spent seven weeks in town. . . . The movies had rented the only swimming pool in the town from the city, and they also needed all the ice . . . in the city to keep the cameras cool. . . . [I]t developed that Austin was related to almost everybody in town. So we had no problems with collecting there.

Finally, in 1956, some twenty years after they had first begun knocking on doors in southern Utah inquiring after Mormon stories and songs, they published Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore Among the Mormons. Much has been written about Mormon traditions in the years that have followed, but the Fifes’ work still stands as the major study of Mormon folklore and one of the classics of American folklore scholarship. The book not only brought Mormon folklore to the attention of the scholarly world, but it also helped establish the validity of “American” folklore. To scholars overly concerned with locating European antecedents for American folk traditions, Saints of Sage and Saddle vividly demonstrates, as did all the Fifes’ work, that the American experience has generated a rich body of indigenous lore.
During World War II, Austin had served as historian for the Thirteenth Airborne Division in the South Seas, collecting personal reminiscences and writing unit histories that were “loaded with folk material.” He became especially interested in the songs he heard soldiers sing in their spare time, accompanied by banjos and guitars. Just as his and Alta’s developing interest in folk narrative had turned them toward their Mormon heritage in the 1930s, so, too, did his experience with folksong in the military move them toward research into their western heritage in the 1950s.

While collecting their Mormon material, Austin and Alta had also recorded a substantial number of cowboy songs and other songs of the West. With Saints of Sage and Saddle now off the press, they turned to this material in earnest, though they continued to record other Mormon lore as they encountered it. In 1958 and 1959, with the assistance of a Guggenheim fellowship, they traveled the country, assembling a manuscript collection to complement their extensive field recordings of cowboy songs. Among other places, they visited libraries and archives in Iowa, Illinois, New York, Washington, D.C., Kentucky, Virginia, Arizona, and Idaho.

In collecting the cowboy material, both in the field and in the library, the Fifes were motivated by the desire to weld the disparate songs into a cowboy epic. Austin believed, according to his friend Wayland Hand (personal communication), that “in its own beauty and grandeur, when all the cowboy materials are pieced together, you would have an equivalent of a grand epic of the American cowboy—attested to in thousands of verses, floating verses that if properly analyzed and brought together, would constitute something that would
be comparable to Homer’s epic.” The Fifes’ intention was to create such an epic from the field recordings and manuscripts they had collected, or, perhaps more modestly stated, to create a variorum edition of cowboy songs.

But before the work could be seriously undertaken, the Parkinson’s disease that had plagued Austin for years worsened, and his long-held dream had to be let go. Instead of producing a variorum edition, he and Alta now had to do the next best thing: they began anthologizing their material, publishing in rapid succession a revision and commentary of N. Howard “Jack” Thorp’s 1908 collection Songs of the Cowboy (1966); Cowboy and Western Songs: A Comprehensive Anthology (1969), which Austin considered their most important work; Ballads of the Great West (1970); and Heaven on Horseback: Revivalist Songs and Verse in the Cowboy Idiom (1970).

Even though Austin and Alta had had to abandon plans for the variorum edition, as late as 1972 Austin still hoped to continue their study of some of the best individual cowboy songs. He said, “I want to write scholarly articles on ten or twelve of the great cowboy songs using my own 4 x 6 card catalogue before someone else uses it and becomes the scholar I should have been—making the 4 x 6 cards and then never using the damned things.” This hope, too, had to yield to his debilitating illness.

But Austin himself did not yield. In the long process of gathering their materials and of editing, collating, and writing their books, he and Alta had assembled one of the finest archives in America—an archive that could, they realized, make possible the continuation of their work by a new generation of scholars and the eventual fulfillment of their dream. In the 1972 interview, Austin gave a glimpse of the careful thoroughness that characterized his and Alta’s work and revealed his understanding of its ultimate importance:

If you’re going to say something about the history of a song, doggone it, you’ve got to research the thing out even in the most esoteric publications you can find. And it’s in that domain . . . that our archive will be quite meaningful because we’ve got many thousands of cards, up to five or six hundred cards on a single song, which will make it possible for myself now, and for other scholars later, to say something definitive about the dissemination and origins and cultural impact that a given song may have. We have been in-the-field folklorists. We’ve talked to hundreds of people, and we’ve recorded this material, and the study comprises the archival form [of] those interviews and library research, where we’ve done it. . . . And it involves principally an index of western and cowboy song which comprises bound volumes of actual transcriptions, stenographic or machine or otherwise. It involves the tapes that we have actually made in the field. It involves the 4 x 6 comprehensive index bringing all those materials together and all of the books or other published encounters with those songs. So, for example, I could go to, let’s say “The Strawberry Roan” . . . and pull out one hundred 4 x 6 cards which will give me every manifestation of “Strawberry Roan” that I have had in my life’s career as a researcher—a singer in the field,
a book, an LP recording, an old 78 r.p.m. recording, any of them at all. So in a sense I could, if I were a doctoral adviser, launch a student on any one of one hundred Ph.D. dissertations just by saying, “These are the cards; now take off from there.” I would have every manifestation that I have encountered, every article that’s been written that’s critical about it, every remark a politician has made about it, if it made print, and so on—it’s there. And the back-up is there, either in our bound volumes from our field collecting . . . or in the tapes that we have made . . . [of] the actual singing. And by the way, all the tapes, nearly, have been transcribed into musical notation. We have the melodic line transcribed by an ethnomusicologist, with even sometimes a paragraph of description of the musical problems involved.

The Fifes’ passion for documenting and archiving expressions of western culture extended beyond story and song to folk material culture, to the material forms that had been imprinted on their minds as they grew up in the Great Basin and as they had traveled through the western landscape. In 1948, with his cousin James Fife, Austin published an article in Western Folklore titled “Hay Derricks of the Great Basin and Upper Snake River Valley.” Thus began another phase of the Fifes’ documenting efforts. Over the years, they photographed, documented, archived, and carefully indexed thousands of images of material objects of the American West, from ranch fences to stone houses. (These slides and indexes, as well as the Mormon and cowboy collections, are now housed in the Fife Folklore Archives at Utah State University.) In 1968, Austin organized a regional conference of the American Folklore Society at Utah State University, focusing primarily on material culture; in 1969, he, Alta, and Henry Glassie published the proceedings of the conference as Forms Upon the Frontier: Folklife and Folk Arts in the United States. Until more substantial texts became available, Forms Upon the Frontier served for several years as a textbook in the rapidly developing field of material culture studies. And Austin and Alta had once again been pioneers.

Early in his career, Austin translated what became The Borzoi Book of French Folk Tales (1956) by Paul Delarue. It is fitting that his final publication was a translation of Van Gennep’s Manuel de Folklore Français Contemporain. Sandwiched between these products of his beloved French culture are the works—in Mormon folklore, in cowboy and western song, in material culture traditions, and in archiving—that have made a lasting contribution to our understanding of the American West. Between them also was a life of professional activity. Austin helped found the California Folklore Society and served as vice-president of the American Folklore Society and president of the Folklore Society of Utah. He was also a fellow of the American Folklore Society and of the Utah State Historical Society. Alta, too, served a professional organization as secretary-treasurer of the Folklore Society of Utah.

After Austin’s death in 1986, Alta collected many of the essays and articles that he had written with her assistance and published them as Exploring Western Americana, a fitting tribute to the Fifes’ love of travel, of fieldwork, and of their
collaboration as scholars. Alta continued assembling the field collections, editing and preparing articles for publication, and indexing photos and tapes until the end of her life in 1996. And as Barre Toelken revealed in his obituary for Alta in the American Folklore Society Newsletter (26, 2; April 1997), “... those who knew the couple well knew that in their fieldwork each considered the other absolutely indispensable; those who were more closely acquainted with them also knew that Alta was the writer, a fact she adamantly refused to acknowledge in public” (p. 3).

It would be tempting to comment further on the significance of all this work—on the feelings of the Fifes toward the people they studied, on the impact of their work on these people and on themselves—but it’s probably more fitting to let Austin comment himself:

Above all, I would like to say you can’t be objective as a teacher or scholar unless you respect the belief of the person who told you that particular variant of [let us say, the Mormon legend of] the seagulls and the crickets. You’ve got to respect that. You don’t have to say it is true and absolutely true and nothing but the truth, but you have to respect him for his attitude toward the legend as he told it. If you can’t do that, then objectivity doesn’t mean anything at all. I think I have inspired a few people to look objectively at their own culture without any sense of humiliation. And maybe to make them see. Juanita Brooks paid us a compliment when she said, “Austin has made us see things that we hadn’t seen before in our culture.”

It goes right back to my hitches with the church in my young manhood. If I look at the thing over the long stream, it’s the fact that any group of people living together with an ethnic identity can substantiate itself or find itself in jeopardy in about equal portions. If I were an Aleut ... , my mythological system would be just as valid and just as subject to criticism as was my own as a young Latter-day Saint. So this makes me absolutely noncultural, if you want to call it that, or perhaps it makes me the other extreme, omni-ethnic, which I hope.