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Lessons of Summer: The Fife Folklore Conference

Barbara Lloyd

Early in the 1930s, a young man sat traveling on a train in France. He watched a man and a woman across the aisle from him as they shared a single cigarette, passing it from one mouth to the other, entwined by breath and smoke, passing it as lovers whose lips lingered and explored. This was more than merely smoking a cigarette, this was private coupling—sensual and intimate.

It was clear to the young man that this way of smoking a cigarette was very different from anything he had ever seen in his own hometown in southern Idaho, deeply different, culturally different. He never forgot the image, and its impact along with other life experiences helped propel him into the study of folklore. The young man was Austin Fife, who at the time was serving as a missionary for the Mormon Church.

It is not inconsequential that the word “fife” refers to a small, high-pitched flute used primarily to accompany drums in a marching band or parade. Austin Fife, like some magical pied piper of folklore, captured many of us, but perhaps more importantly, he captured the attention of Utah State University department heads and the humanities college dean. His vision and effort in the 1960s and ’70s led to the establishment of the folklore program and archives at USU.

Austin and Alta Fife (see chapter 5) met at Utah State University. As a married couple, they began folklore research together in the late 1930s when they were living in California, where Austin was a graduate student at Stanford University, serving as research assistant to the distinguished professor of Hispanic-American folklore, Aurelio Espinosa, Sr. After teaching in California and working for the Department of Education in Washington, D. C., Austin—accompanied, as always, by Alta—returned to Logan in 1960 to teach French and, eventually, folklore. In the mid-1970s, as Austin began planning his retirement, he negotiated with the Merrill Library to establish the Fife Folklife Archives and to find someone who could continue teaching his courses.

During this same period, Glenn Wilde, called “Reddy Kilowatt” by some who knew him well, was associate dean of the College of Humanities. For a number of years, Wilde had been directing the Western Writers Workshop every
summer. It had been very successful, and in an effort to branch out, Glenn and Patricia Gardner, then a professor in the English Department, established the Fife Conference on Western Folklore in 1977. Guest faculty members of that first conference included Austin Fife, William A. “Bert” Wilson, Barre Toelken, Jan Harold Brunvand, Hal Cannon, and Thomas Carter.

Wilde, representing the College of Humanities, was also looking for a folklorist to replace Austin, and Bert Wilson, with a Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University and a personal knowledge of the Intermountain West (see chapter 10), seemed the ideal candidate. Indeed, Bert was Austin’s first choice as someone who could provide strong leadership for the new archive and who had the right kind of vision for the future, for what the USU folklore program could become. When USU offered the job to Bert, he agreed to help direct the second Fife Conference in 1978—though Glenn Wilde and I did most of the preliminary work while Bert was doing fieldwork in Nevada.

This was a time when Foxfire books were becoming very popular nationally, and we brought Eliot Wigginton, editor of the series, as one of the guest faculty members in 1978. That year the students visited the Jensen Living Historical Farm and Wilde hosted a pig roast in his backyard for the guest faculty members. Book publishers were invited to attend the conference and a display of folklore publications was featured in the USU Bookstore. This conference started a tradition for Utah State University Press and its staff, who often set up book displays on a sales table during breaks and, over the years, became part of USU’s folklore family with a strong commitment to publishing books on folklore and the Intermountain West.

The basic format for the conference included a welcoming picnic supper and songfest for the faculty on Sunday evening; five days of lectures, workshops, demonstrations, and performances interspersed with evening concerts; and, after a few years, the Fife Honor Lecture. On Friday, the afternoon was given over to conferences with students, who then went home to complete a summer fieldwork project of collection and analysis. Once the project was submitted, the student received three hours of undergraduate or graduate credit. And the conference always concluded with a farewell dinner for faculty and staff.

In 1978, 1979, and 1980, the Fife Conference was held in August in order to correlate with the Festival of the American West. During 1979 and 1980, a National Endowment for the Arts grant supported some regional fieldwork, and folk artists from Utah demonstrated their skills on the veranda on the west side of Merrill Library. Carolyn Rhodes and Polly Stewart were the fieldworkers in those years. When Stewart was doing her work, she located singers and storytellers who put on an engaging evening program. From that time on, with support from the Folk Arts Program of the Utah Arts Council, the Fife Conference regularly scheduled evening performances—Tongans from Salt Lake City, an African American gospel choir from Ogden, a dance featuring Utah’s own Salsa Brava. These performances were open to the public and offered a colorful array of traditional music and dance.
In 1979, guest faculty members were Barre Toelken, Sylvia Grider, Jan Harold Brunvand, Suzi Jones, Roger Welsch, and David Hufford. During one evening, mid-conference, the guest faculty members had assembled for supper and socializing at a home in River Heights, located on a bluff across a ravine from campus. As the group began to disperse, Welsch and Hufford decided they would walk back to campus and the University Inn where they were staying. (This was the year that Hufford wore a three-piece pin-striped navy blue banker’s suit and Welsch wore bib overalls.) It was after dark on a night with no moon, and they had no flashlight. But they assured the rest of us there would be no problem as they started their walk back to campus.

From this point, there is a bit of variation between Hufford’s version of the story and Welsch’s. Hufford’s is something like this:
We somehow found a path leading down the River Heights bluff, through the Thrushwood neighborhood and over to the spot where the land again rises sharply up to 400 North. Fortunately, we did find another path leading up the steep climb. But as we followed the path, we came nose-to-metal with one of the corrugated steel retaining walls that keeps 400 North from crashing to the bottom. This is a massive ridged structure that looks straight upward for roughly twenty to thirty feet. We decided this was the end of our path. I thought it best to bushwhack our way to where the path must surely continue; Roger, on the other hand, concluded that this WAS how the path continued and commenced scaling the cliff, like some huge bear working his way paw-by-paw up a tree. When Roger finally reached the top, sweaty and exhausted and in some real danger of falling, I was there waiting, calm and collected, to extend a hand to Roger and guide him back to the hotel.

Welsch’s version of the same story runs as follows:

A proud moment for American folklore . . . was the time I was faithful guide for a very loaded Dave Hufford in getting back to the dorms. Dave wanted to climb the mountains to the west . . . at night . . . in sandals . . . so I took him by the hand and said I’d walk him over to the dorms . . . right over there . . . we could see them from our host’s backyard. What neither of us knew, of course, was that we had to go down that damn cliff, across a raging mountain river, and then scale the cliff at the other side and up to campus. We did it . . . drunk . . . and survived. At the dorm there were a lot of worried faces. . . . I think we got there about 3 or 4 A.M. To this day no one believes we scaled that damn cliff from the river up to the campus. We couldn’t have done it sober.

Nineteen eighty-one was a significant year for the Fife Conference. It moved from meeting in August to meeting in June, and this was the year that the western folk arts coordinators began having their annual meetings in conjunction with the conference. This was also the first year for the Fife Honor Lecture, which was given by Wayland Hand (see chapter 4).

Bert Wilson started the practice of the Honor Lecture as a way to pay tribute to outstanding folklorists, and later, under the direction of Barre Toelken, the honor was extended to include anyone who was doing interesting work in folklore or folklore-related fields. The group of lecturers has included Hector Lee, Lynwood Montell, Roger Welsch, Barre Toelken, Bert Wilson, Archie Green, Bess Lomax Hawes, Alan Jabbour, Elliot Oring, Alan Dundes, Emory Sekaquaptewa, David Hufford, Wolfgang Mieder, Patrick Mullen, Henry Glassie, Hal Cannon and Teresa Jordan, James Griffith, Jan Harold Brunvand, Margaret K. Brady, Burt Feintuch, Carl Lindahl, and me.

Choosing the faculty for the Fife Conference was no easy task. We had to choose first-rate folklore scholars from around the country, but, as Bert Wilson
wrote me, “Some first-rate folklore scholars are dreadfully dull in their public presentations.” We wanted to pick people who could hold the attention of a very mixed audience ranging from beginning to advanced students, both young and mature, undergraduate and graduate, and who could inform students of major issues in folklore in a meaningful way. It also became clear early on that it helped to bring in scholars with a certain “sex appeal” or charisma.

I asked Bert Wilson, who directed the Conference until 1984, for his impressions. He wrote:

It was a helluva lot of work, especially for a paranoid person like me. I made sure we had two slide projectors available at every presentation, just in case one failed. A couple of days before each conference, I would call each airline our presenters were using and reconfirm their reservations. Paranoia? Yes, but paranoia that paid off. One year the airline Roger Welsch was flying on to Salt Lake City had no record of his reservation—I’m still not sure whether that was the airline’s fault or Roger’s, probably Roger’s. In any event I secured a reservation for him and got him to the conference to give another of his brilliant performances.

A lot of work? Yes—but work that enriched my life immeasurably. I was always thrilled to be able to honor Austin and Alta Fife with a conference named after them. I took great pleasure in helping open up the world of folklore to public school teachers, librarians, local historians, folklore students from other universities, senior citizens who drifted in, and just about anyone with a zest for learning. Conference events all sort of blur together in my memory—folk arts presentations in front of the library, evening programs, steak fries up the canyon and singing afterwards around a blazing fire, conference faculty dinners at our home, visits to the Jensen Historical Farm, and brilliant . . . faculty lectures.

[T]he personal relationships I was able to develop with conference faculty members were immensely rewarding. I count those good people who stood at our lecterns and shared their knowledge and their beliefs with us as my best friends. The morning after a conference was over and everyone had returned home, I always had an empty feeling. I knew we would have another conference the following year. But each conference developed its own personality and took on a life of its own, a life that had existed only once for a few short days and would never come again.

After everyone had left, Bert and I would go sit together in the cafeteria over a Pepsi and sometimes literally cry because the conference was over. And these feelings continued for Barre Toelken (see chapter 11) and me after we became directors of the conference in 1986—the same sense of having experienced something wonderful, the same emptiness at having it end. In later years, others served as conference directors, too: Steve Siporin, Star Coulbrooke, Jeannie Thomas, Randy Williams, and Jan Roush, often working in pairs, as we did, to
share the workload. They seemed to have many of the same experiences and feelings. The conference was a perfect time for us to gather together people we loved, to talk about ideas we loved, and nothing else really mattered. It was and is a brief and shining moment for folklore.

In 1984, Bert decided to leave USU to return to Brigham Young University, although he and I continued to codirect the conference in 1984 and 1985. Barre arrived in 1985, and he and I codirected the 1986 conference. Steve Siporin directed the conference in 1987 and 1988, then Barre and I did it from 1989 to 1996, when I moved out of state. After that, Barre and Randy Williams were codirectors through 2001. Barre and Star Coulbrooke collaborated in 2002, and then, after Barre’s stroke, Jan Roush and Jeannie Thomas organized the 2003 and 2004 conferences.

When I asked Barre to tell me something of his memories of the Fife Conference, he responded with a kaleidoscope of images, including

sitting with Wayland Hand, Hector Lee, Austin Fife, and Bert Wilson, telling J. Golden Kimball stories and laughing ourselves silly; Elliott Oring and Simon Bronner singing a bluegrass song together facing each other nearly head to head; all of the many meals we shared as a group in Logan Canyon, at the Jensen Farm, at the Coppermill Restaurant, and in so many different homes that many of you generously opened to the conference over the years; trips to Bear Lake to collect raspberry milkshakes; the wonderful public sector fieldtrips throughout northern Utah and southern Idaho that were known as “grazes” as in “eating-your-way-across-the-land”; the work of Jean Irwin and
Barre tells the story of when native Louisianan Barry Ancelet came to Cache Valley. Ancelet was in awe of how the mountains rimmed the valley and of the fact that snow still covered some of the higher foothills. After the Saturday debriefing brunch at Barre’s home, Ancelet took off on foot in shirtsleeves for a walk in the hills. After a long while, Barre became concerned about how long Ancelet had been away and decided someone better go after him. Barre found him walking back down the mountain with a plastic bag, obviously heavy and dripping water. “What have you got there?” asked Barre. “Snow,” said Ancelet. “I want to take it home to my children. They’ve never seen snow before.” And then Ancelet said, “It’s cold up there.” And Barre responded, “It isn’t called the snowline for nothing.”

There were some funny, strange, and poignant times at the Fife Conference, times that some of us still recollect with a bit of nostalgia and amusement, such as remembering the student who brought her baby to class with little bells on the baby’s shoes, which jingled all five days, or the time conference participants were hypnotized and led from the room in a stupor, or once when a student told us about a ghost who had lived with her family in southern Utah for a number of years. Then there was the time when a male stripper joined us right after lunch and performed a happy birthday strip-tease greeting for someone who was turning forty that year; and I always hope to be able to remember seeing Barre Toelken, Hal Cannon, Dave Stanley, and Steve Siporin with their pants legs rolled up as they tried to dance the hula with our Hawaiian folk performers. And there were extraordinary times when someone performing or presenting was so captivating that total silence enveloped the room. In particular, I remember Kathy Neustadt’s presentation, “Don’t Put That in Your Mouth, You Don’t Know Where It’s Been: Food, Philosophy, and Body.” What Kathy focused on was “licking,” and through her presentation she had us all thinking a little differently about ourselves and food. And I remember quite vividly another time when a handsome young sign interpreter gracefully signed for an equally beautiful coed, and together they distracted us all as we watched a dance of hands.

I call this essay “Lessons of Summer” because some of the greatest lessons in folklore were available to be learned at the Fife Conference—some of which are about folklore, some not. I learned how Bert Wilson can worry a carpet threadbare with his pacing, while at the same time he can speak—like no one else—about family. I learned from him that the separations between fine art and folk art, between high-brow literature and folk narrative, are so minimal that it would be much more accurate to speak of all literature and not make the separations that we do.

From Fife, Lee, and Hand, I learned about the stuff itself—our folklore—and how it matters, even how texts can matter apart from context or performance.
Traditional performers at the Fife Conference often requested audience participation. In 1986, the Halau Hula o Keola Hawai‘ian Dancers of Salt Lake City coerced folklorists David Stanley, Barre Toelken, Hal Cannon, and Steve Siporin (left to right) into attempting the hula—without success.

(which may fly in the face of the thinking of many folklorists today), and how any context is magnified and often enriched and nourished by the traditional elements it may contain.

I remember the first time I heard David Hufford speak of liminal time. He was talking about celebrations, such as Christmas or Thanksgiving, and about how such events for that moment take time and move it from the horizontal plane in which we usually travel to a vertical stacking of time that creates a timelessness. He suggested that perhaps one of the important aspects of a recurring celebration was this aspect of past and present and future being combined, across years, across experiences, surmounting place and age, to connect generations and to connect our own individual experiences of life. Perhaps one reason why celebratory traditions of this kind continue is for this very reason—that through them we are removed from our daily lives and become, for the moment, initiates living in a liminal state between our own past and our own future and between whatever combinations of life or age or significant others they may hold.

From Roger Welsch I learned many things, but one small thing that has been significant in my life has to do with a story Roger told of the time when he was to be head dancer at a gourd dance with his Omaha Indian friends. He knew the day the dance was to take place, but he didn’t know the time or place. In the morning, he tried to contact some of his friends, but no one was around. He got
in his truck and drove through town but couldn’t find anyone who knew where and when the event would happen. Finally, after a lot of searching, he stopped for a moment and sat in his truck and thought, “Where would my friends be this Saturday, how would I think about this if I were Native?” He figured he might find some of them at a local baseball diamond, so he drove over there and, sure enough, he saw a truck that belonged to his friend Clyde Sheridan. He parked and went into the stands and sat beside Clyde, and asked where and when the dance was going to be, but his friend said he didn’t know and suggested that Roger sit and watch the game.

Roger reasoned that if he just stuck close to Clyde, someone else might come along who’d know when and where things were going to happen. When the game finished, they looked around and there were all their Omaha friends in their cars, talking. Clyde said, “Well, looks like we’re all here, so we might just as well have the dance here and now.” Roger said, “As a white man, I was frantically looking for facts that didn’t at the time exist. They didn’t exist until about three minutes after the last out of the ninth inning.” And with that story, Roger told us what I consider to be a great lesson, which was: “Some questions we ask do not yet have answers.” Roger helped us realize that there are differing visions of the world, and he encouraged us to think in terms of centers of power rather than edges of power.

There are so many presenters whom I remember with great appreciation and fondness for what they taught. I think of Elliott Oring speaking on culture and humor, and remember his individual generosity to students and colleagues. There was Bonnie Glass-Coffin, who shared her own personal experiences working with a woman shaman in South America. Because of her field research experiences, Bonnie had succeeded in finding a balance between her own bright and engaging mind and her intricate and amazing lived experiences that seemed to defy logic. The examples Bonnie shared with us offered a unique view of the nature of folk culture juxtaposed with academic analysis, revealing the layers of living that resulted in both intellectual strength and experiential knowledge.

Meg Brady has been a frequent guest faculty member at the Fife Conference; her lively presenting style is filled with humor and insight. Conference participants loved her comments both as a lecturer and later when she would sit in the audience responding with her own ideas or asking questions. In Meg I found an example of fearlessness in one’s pursuit of knowledge and life, and I learned meaningful lessons about human warmth and interpersonal generosity.

Through Wolfgang Mieder I discovered, in one simple lecture, the power of proverbs, completely alive and well in today’s society. From Carol Edison, I learned about working hard and being supportive and loyal. I especially appreciated Carol’s many presentations on Hmong culture, on Utah cemeteries and gravestones, on celebrations in rural parts of the state. Carol, along with Craig Miller and Annie Hatch, were and are terrific partners in furthering folklore studies throughout the state, and they brought to the Fife Conference a vast and talented array of folk performers who enriched us each year with music, song,
and dance. From Jan Brunvand, I discovered that someone could actually make some extra money and garner a bit of fame as a folklorist. But also his wonderful little book, *A Guide for Collectors of Folklore in Utah*, was one of my first “reads” in the field and had a lot to do with my becoming a folklorist.

The first year that Eva Castellanoz was a guest faculty member was perhaps the most powerful Fife Conference I’ve attended. The topic was “Folklore and Traditional Belief,” and in her natural and holistic way, Eva taught all of us something about how human experiences, relationships, spirituality, and the natural world are organic and connected. After her first presentation, everyone in the room was crying—all of us sat there feeling somehow blessed by her words and her presence.

Each year, we also learned from the students who attended the conference and offered their own insights and comments, which helped to create the sense that each conference did indeed, as Bert Wilson said, have a life of its own. Some of these students later became presenters at the conference, including Lloyd Walker, Kathy Johnson, and Roseanna Walker.

Working side by side with Randy Williams, I learned that in life things are often the opposite of how they may appear, and so it helps to step back and invert your vision for a moment in order to see clearly when you again look right side up. In some ways, the Fife Conference is like this, because for one week, in spite of the hard work and a year’s worth of details and planning, the conference offered us all a chance to stand outside our regular day-to-day lives and our regular ways of learning things. For a time, we could immerse ourselves in education at its best and experience it the way we wish it could always be. The Fife Conference puts students together with some of the brightest lecturers in the field to share an immersion in the traditional and meaningful stuff of our lives.

From Barre, I learned about the power of embracing people, of opening arms and homes to everyone. Maybe it is because he is an only child who was reared by a father with high expectations and a mother who was gracious and funny and adored him, but Barre learned how to make people sense his love for and interest in them. I learned something about not being afraid of people who are different from me. And I learned that for some, folklore is not a field or a discipline but a way of seeing the world. This vision, once it is made known to us, continues with us through our lives.

When I teach an introduction to folklore course, I tell my students on the very first day that studying folklore will change their lives. This is not a class for sissies or the weak of mind or heart. Our folklore reveals something about us humans at our worst and at our best, at peak moments and at times of daily grind. It is, as Bert Wilson would say, the art of being human.