

FOLKLORE AND ORAL HISTORY: AN HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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Mr. Siar addressed librarians on the topics of folklore and oral history during a Rural Librarians and the Humanities Workshop on April 2, 1982. He discusses the Shenango Project in Ethnic Studies and defines and explains what folklore is from the historians view point.

Recently a college dean asked what I considered to be the most important achievement after thirty-five years of teaching in the public schools and state colleges of Pennsylvania. My conclusion was that perhaps the most obvious contributions were associated with projects which demanded extensive reflective thought on the part of the students as well as the instructor.

Two projects which demanded reflective or critical thought included an oral history venture called the Shenango Project in Ethnic Studies, which was developed at Edinboro State College, Shenango Valley Campus in Farrell, Pennsylvania, (1975-1976); and a course in American folklore which was part of the curricula at Edinboro's main campus, (1976-1982).

The method of studying history which was used in these programs is not unlike that of science. It introduces a problem the solution of which demands that the students experience the higher adventure of conceptual learning through active participation. Thus, this exercise relies on the belief that the imagination can and should be cultivated through the interpretation of men and events which are associated with a specific problem in history.

The Shenango Project in Ethnic Studies is best described by Caroline Daverio, one of the advisors of the publication Shenango:

Shenango, a college publication, represents the dream of one creative history professor come true. About a year and a half ago Jim Siar read the book Foxfire and became so impressed and enthralled with it that he asked several of his fellow faculty members to read it. We did.

Our school, the Shenango Valley Campus of Edinboro State College, is located in the industrial steel area of Pennsylvania and populated by citizens from various ethnic backgrounds. Siar saw in this situation opportunity rich in "Foxfire" project possibilities. Faculty members Eugen Antley, Assistant Professor of Sociology & Anthropology, Edward Lindway, Assistant Professor in Science, and Caroline Daverio and Carmen J. Leone, Associate Professors in English soon became enthusiastic supporters of Jim Siar's ideas about the Foxfire concept for the school. Thus was born the project for ethnic studies at Edinboro - Shenango Valley Campus.

The Shenango Project in Ethnic Studies is carried out by means of oral history, one of the approaches to the preservation of the past. Oral history does not in any way supplant the traditional, documented recording of history. Rather, it is an enriching addition to the traditional method and can, conceivably, provide primary source material for documentation.

The students participating in the oral history project interview people with interesting ethnic backgrounds, and record, photograph and transcribe the interviews. They cull from the transcriptions one or more illustrated stories of individuals, rich in the culture of many lands and nationalities.

The Shenango Project has become much more than a college course to take or to teach, much more than searching for stories for the magazines, in fact, much more than the publication of the magazine, important as that is; it has become the means of a new awareness, a new appreciation of the contributions of all peoples to the culture of our American community - contributions of foods, customs, the arts in every conceivable form, ideas and philosophies.

Working in the the Shenango Project has revealed a new and exciting view of American cultures. The United States of America we have decided is not really a "melting pot" but a "bouquet of flowers." It is understandable that immigrants have not simply discarded the old for the new or forgotten the familiar for the unknown or the novel. Rather the immigrant has striven to save and protect the old and familiar, and at the same time, has added the new. Alex Kasich, interviewed by Kerry Generalovich, said it well in these words: 'American should be a bouquet of different flowers. Each group should contribute everything best they have to this country instead of unifying to one to erase everything.'

Those of us who were born in the United States to immigrant parents know that they came to America in search of a better, richer life for themselves and their families. We also know that though our parents still honor the culture of their fathers, they have readily espoused and cherished just as intensely the American ideals of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'

Beyond all this, the Shenango Project has not only brought new knowledge and increased appreciation of ethnic contributions to our American society, but it has provided an increased vision toward better understanding between

the generations and among the nationalities and races. And what is most significant of all, it has given us a greater respect for all human beings.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the school and community libraries which were associated with the two projects. During the oral history project students soon realized that interviewing is not possible without researching aspects of the various cultures in which they were interested. In addition it was soon apparent that certain basic techniques for oral interviewing had to be adopted for the Shenango Project. Participants used five essential considerations for the oral interview as outlined by Professor Martha Ross of the University of Maryland.

1. RESEARCH - Thorough preparation not only enables the interviewer to know what questions to ask but also is essential in establishing rapport with the interviewee, by demonstrating the interviewer is seriously interested in the topic. Research pays off during the interview, when the interviewer's knowledge of names, dates, and places may jog the interviewee's memory. Knowledge of existing information also permits the interviewer to avoid the time and expense of duplicating such information in the interview.
2. RAPPORT - Good rapport is established with the interviewee by approaching him properly, informing him of the purpose and procedures of the project, and advising him of his role in the undertaking and his rights in regard to it. A pre-interview visit to get acquainted and discuss procedures is advisable whenever possible.

3. RESTRAINT - The experienced interviewer maintains rapport by following good interviewing techniques: being efficient but unobtrusive with equipment, starting at the beginning and proceeding chronologically, asking open-ended questions, listening closely without interrupting, following up on details or unexpected avenues of information, challenging questionable information in a non-threatening way, and generally maintaining an atmosphere in which the interviewee feels able to respond fully and truthfully, regardless of what his response is.
4. RETREAT - Each interview session deserves a graceful closing, even when additional sessions are planned with the same interviewee. Asking a "deflationary" question, such as an assessment of the experience just discussed, is a good way to conclude a session. All sessions should be planned and scheduled so that they conclude before the interviewee becomes fatigued.
5. REVIEW - Interviewers should listen to their interviews soon afterwards, not only to pick up details to follow up in subsequent sessions but also to analyze their interviewing techniques and their impact on the success of the interview.

FOLKLORE AND AMERICAN MASS CULTURE

Following is an explanation of the principle aspects of folklore as redefined for a class, History of American Folklore, offered at Edinboro State College:

Not long ago Allen Nevins, one of America's greatest historians, stated that the most fascinating part of history, although the most difficult to obtain, is the record of how common men and women lived and reacted to the cultural changes of their times. It now seems certain that a better look at the plain people in American life will be achieved through the use of folklore sources, as well as through traditional local history.

Recently, the thesis has been established by such folklorists as Richard Dorson and Jan Brunvand that vital folklore, and legends in particular, reflect the major values, anxieties and goals of the period in which they are orally transmitted. This viewpoint contradicts the long accepted position established by the Grimm brothers of Germany, that folklore reflected the mind of primitive man. However, the Grimms' research did not relate to the central culture but to a marginal action within that culture.

Folklorists in America are now exploring the living culture of urban as well as rural areas, and the lore of industry as well as the usual hand crafts. Subject matter has changed. Modern folklorists record and analyze anecdotes, urban legends, graffiti, college songs, cartoons, and gag letters. This, along with the "non folksy" sex lore, drug lore, racial intolerance, and social protest, will help reflect the central action of American culture.

Tests must be applied to make certain that items gathered by the folklorist are indeed folklore: there must be evidence of oral circulation;

identification in the indexes of folklore motifs and types; and finally, similar examples in existing folklore collections.

Dorson, who coined the word "fakelore", has provided evidence to demonstrate that some writers have misled the public into believing that certain regional folk heroes existed when in fact no oral legends about these heroes have ever been reported. "Fakelore" includes material relating to such characters as Paul Bunyan, Joe Magarac, Bowleg Bill and Johnny Appleseed.

Armed with devices for determining the reliability of his findings the American folklorist must ask the question, "What is my own folklore?" In order to answer he must turn to the great movements of history which disclose the traditions of the Indian, the Yankee, the Negro and the immigrant. There are four periods of American history that folklorists study.

The Colonial Period, (1607-1776) is the time in history when one recognizes the English and Indian supernaturalism which is part of a great religious impulse. The era is loaded with motifs which are common to all levels of society as colonization is taking place.

The Democratic Period, (1776-1860) bares new folk heroes, with the westward movement providing favorable conditions for tall tales as well as fascinating humor. Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, Sam Patch and Yankee Jonathan all became national character types during that period.

The Economic Period, (1860-1960) is alive with lore associated with man's search for wealth. Motifs such as loyalty to ones' boss, hard work, great skill and tragedy are recognized in two waves of American expansion. The first wave involves those people traveling west and the flood of immigrants confronting a new culture; the second is industrialism with its urban response.

Cowboys, lumberjacks, coal miners, oil drillers and railroaders all provide sources for legends during this period.

Finally, the lore of the Contemporary Period, (1960-Present) has a new look. The motifs seem to center around a concern for humanity. Drug lore and anti-war folklore is prevalent among the baby boom generation. Much of this seems ugly to many Americans, but folklore does not have to be folksy to meet the folklorists' requirements.

Enlightened American historians may discover a greater use for folklore as another means of achieving a better understanding of common men. In order to do this they need to recognize that lore which meets the required tests reflects more about the central culture of America than it does of the fringes of society. Certainly all scholars will recognize the need to associate the abundant folklore of this country with the dramatic movements of American civilization.

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