

FOLKLORE IN THE CLASSROOM: A Symposium

S. J. Sackett, Moderator



It is easy for folklorists to become optimistic about the growing acceptance of their field, but there are some signs which even cautious observers can interpret as evidence that folklore may finally have arrived as an academic subject.

Theoretically, expansion of academic interest in folklore should not come as a surprise. When one considers the extent to which culture is oral, even in our society but to a much greater extent in less literate ones, the high proportion of interest devoted to literature, art, music, etc., as revealed by the vast panoply of courses in those areas, compared to the infinitesimal offerings in folklore, is really a case of the tail wagging the dog. If we begin with the premise that the goal of cultural studies is the understanding

of mankind, then we can see that that goal can be achieved more rapidly and more surely by studying folktales than novels, folk verse than poetry, folk music than art music, belief and superstition than philosophy, folk art than painting and sculpture. From this point of view, literature courses should be an appendage to folklore, rather than the other way around.

The day that happens is still long in the future. But in the meantime, there are at least indications that folklore may be coming into its own. One is the gradual increase of college folklore courses, as may be seen in the steady advance of such programs as those at Indiana, Pennsylvania, UCLA, and Texas. In my own experience at Fort Hays Kansas State College, the loosening up of graduation requirements to allow wider student choice has resulted in booming enrollments in folklore classes—so much so, indeed, that we really need to expand the folklore program to handle the number of students. The courses in Folksong and Ballad and in Superstition, Magic and Witchcraft, as well as my wife's intersession course in Folk Cooking, are in such

demand that it is hard for us to find time for our more traditional and conventional, and hence less eagerly sought after, course in American Folklore.

Interest in folklore is also reaching into the public schools. According to Richard M. Dorson, folklore has in California reached the status of being considered a separate subject for purposes of teacher certification. While it may take a considerable period of time for this status to spread to the other 49 states, there is another movement in today's secondary schools which is enhancing their use of folklore—modular scheduling. Instead of signing up for a rigid year-long block of "junior English" or "senior English," the student may sign up for a number of modules, usually four, which he selects from a list. Whenever modules on folklore have been made available to students, they have shown great interest in the subject. And, of course, in addition to the growing use of modular scheduling, there is also a growing tendency to include oral literature in the conventional English textbooks, using "Barbara Allen" or "John Henry" as examples of poetic narrative, for instance.

Approximately ten years ago the Kansas Folklore Society held a symposium on the educational applications of folklore, the results of which were published in a booklet entitled *Teaching Folklore in the Classroom*. I was chairman of one of the panels of that symposium. Now, today, we are returning to that topic. Speaking only for myself, I feel a difference in the atmosphere or mood of the two discussions. A decade ago the mood was one of innovation; we felt that we were introducing a new idea and that it took some salesmanship on our parts to convince teachers that using folklore was reasonable and proper. Accordingly we were at some pains to point out the benefits of the use of folklore—that the history teacher could use folklore as evidence in social history and in assessing popular reaction to historical figures, events, and movements, that the elementary teacher who sent her students out to collect materials from older citizens of the community was giving the children a sense of the tradition from which they had sprung, etc.

Today, however, I sense a different mood. The schoolteacher is already interested in folklore and does not need so much to be sold on it as to be helped in its use. I feel something of an atmosphere of assessment: now that we have been using folklore in the classroom, how well has it worked and how can we use it more effectively? Where ten years

ago we were discussing how folklore might be taught, now we are considering how it has been and is being taught. My natural optimism may have distorted my perceptions, but this is what my intuition tells me we are meeting in this room today.

Accordingly we have invited two successful high-school teachers of folklore, Gladys Crawford of Russell and Joyce Stevenson of Lawrence, to describe their experiences to you; and also Marjorie Sackett of Fort Hays Kansas State College and Larry Danielson of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle to discuss folklore teaching at the college level.

After the panel has concluded its work, we hope that you will bombard us with questions, comments, and testimonials of your own experience. The Society hopes to publish the results of this panel, as it did the earlier one I mentioned, and I will be taking notes on the discussion to include in the publication along with the four papers that you will hear this morning.



*A Kansas Balladeer sings to children.
(Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society.)*