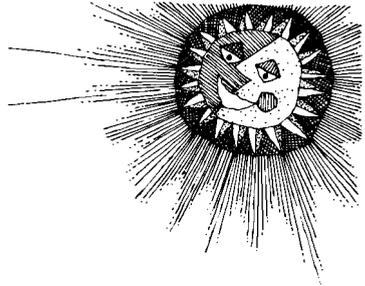


THE STUDY OF FOLKLORE IN THE STANDARD PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

by Larry Danielson

It would be misleading to suggest that folklore study in the public schools is a sure-fire method of enlivening literature and social science courses and of captivating bored children and blase adolescents. But it would be even more ill-advised to ignore its exciting possibilities. Teachers may be unaware of folklore as a valuable educational

source, or they may hesitate to incorporate it into their courses. However, the accessibility of folklore publications and effective means of acquainting students with unfamiliar traditional materials are not serious problems.



One may study folklore for its own sake in the public schools, the examination of folk tradition serving as a pleasant, illuminating end in itself. Many traditional songs, stories, and games are lively entertainment and recreation for children today, even though they are members of a mass media generation. It is obvious, but nevertheless fascinating, that much of this lore is so old and widely distributed throughout many societies that we can only guess at its origins. Its age and continued widespread popularity indicate the attractiveness and meaningfulness of the lore to men over long periods of time and in seemingly disparate cultures. The folktale pattern known to us as "Cinderella" has been popular for many centuries in Europe, where some five hundred versions have been collected. It has been told by the people of North Africa, the Western Sudan, Madagascar, the island of Mauritius, Brazil, Chile, and in North American Indian societies. In fact, a literary version of the tale appeared in China about 800 A.D.¹ And the story continues to captivate many of us, whether played out in dress-up clothes by children, animated on the film screen by Walt Disney, or read from a folktale collection. The tradition endures in various forms,

and still gives us pleasure. We may not be conscious of the psychological functions of the tale, but we still respond to it.

Folkloric materials can also be used to provide new insights and exciting introductions into more orthodox subject matter, for example, literature, history, and geography. Using folklore as a means toward these ends requires some preparation, but not onerous, painstaking research.² I hope that the following suggestions will illustrate how folklore can be used within the standard public school curriculum, especially in the junior and senior high school classroom.

The literature course can provide numerous opportunities for the study of traditional verbal art—the folk ballad, various forms of folk narrative, the riddle and the proverbial expression. These traditional genres can serve as unusual and entertaining introductions into the standard textbook studies of poetry and the short story, or the problems of analyzing structure, symbol, and figures of speech. Literature texts, for instance, commonly initiate the reader into poetry with a few obligatory Scotch-English ballads, e.g., “Barbara Allen” and “Edward.” But how often are the song texts discussed in the classroom? What can a teacher interested in folklore do with them?

The Viking Book of Folk Ballads of the English-Speaking World,³ edited by Albert B. Friedman, provides an intelligent introduction to the traditional ballad, a diverse selection of texts, occasional melodies, informative headnotes to each ballad, and a useful bibliography. “The Twa Sisters,” a widely distributed ballad of great age, is included in Friedman’s collection and is a good example of a traditional text that can be profitably examined in the English class. Its vigorous narrative and vivid plot elements—jealous sisters, murder, and supernatural intervention to mete out justice—are immediately interesting for many readers. After a discussion of the story, the students can examine structural elements, for example, rhyme scheme, rhythmic patters, repetition, refrain, and narrative montage, as well as the literary topics of theme, commonplace or cliché, and imagery. Friedman publishes four different versions of the ballad in his collection and evaluates sections of certain narratives aesthetically, thereby raising questions of criteria in judging poetry as “good” or “bad.” Few folklorists would advise that the folksong be read rather than listened to. Numerous performances of “Twa Sisters” can be found on

1. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), pp. 126-128, passim.

2. Three very useful introductions to folklore studies with helpful bibliographies are Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), and *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965).

3. New York: Viking Press, 1963 (paper).

record, including traditional, art song, and folk-rock renditions of the song.⁴ The differences in performance style can be discussed, and the complex topic of style in general might be introduced.

Friedman's topical categories include ballads of the supernatural; religious ballads; romantic tragedies; love and sentiment; pastourelles; domestic tragedies; tabloid crime; criminals' goodnights; ballads of the Scottish border; historical ballads; accidents and disasters; outlaws, pirates, badmen, and heroes; songs of the forecastle and lumber shanty; cowboy and frontier ballads; and humor.

The folktale supplies a similar type of introduction to shorter forms of narrative fiction. The excellent folktale series from the University of Chicago Press⁵ contains authentic texts, detailed scholarly introductions (for the instructor), and headnotes. The class could examine narrative structure, plot development, character, point of view, and theme, using any number of tales from this series, perhaps the same tale type (plot) as found in different cultures. When these same topics are studied in the sophisticated art forms of narrative fiction, a discussion of the differences in their presence and elaboration in the latter and in folk literature would be possible. Perhaps few junior high and high school students will delight in studying the folktale. However, interest in traditional Native American narrative at present is strong in many age groups. Selections from a collection like *American Indian Prose and Poetry*, edited by Margot Astrov, or *Tales of the North American Indians*, edited by Stith Thompson,⁶ may be used quite easily in the classroom. One could stress the significance of narrative in traditional Amerindian society; its importance in that context as religious document, educational device, and entertainment art form points to the different functions of narrative in our own society.

Another folklore genre easily tapped is that of the short traditional expression, for example, the riddle and proverb. Student collecting projects, especially in grade school and junior high, can bring in hundreds of these folk expressions. These collections can be used to provide an entertaining introduction to the study of metaphor and simile. Too, the field collection activities serve to alert students to the

4. See e.g., "The Two Sisters," *Child Ballads Traditional in the United States*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson, Library of Congress, AAFS L57, Vol. 1, side A, band 1; "The Two Sisters," *Anglo-American Ballads*, ed. B. A. Botkin, Library of Congress, AAFS L7, side A, band A5; "The Two Sisters," *Folk Ballads of the English Speaking World*, sung by Paul Clayton, ed. Kenneth S. Goldstein, Folkways Records, FA 2310, side 2, band 7; "The Cruel Sister," *Cruel Sister*, by Pentangle, Reprise Records, RS 6430, side 1, band 4.

5. The series titles in paper include narrative collections from China, England, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Japan, and Norway.

6. *American Indian Prose and Poetry* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962) and *Tales of the North American Indians* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1966), both in paper.

aptness and color of folk speech and the continued liveliness of the proverbial expression today.

The social science class is another appropriate laboratory for teacher-student attention to folkloric subject matter. One can introduce foreign cultures, perhaps at first alien and unreal to students, and vivify these cultures through the practise of certain traditional arts or the playing of traditional games popular in the society under study. For instance, a grade school Native American studies unit could be initiated with a session on traditional string games in American Indian society.⁷ "Cat's cradle" games are not only amusing for many children, but can also lead to several important discussion topics. Besides giving students a first-hand experience at an activity practiced in a foreign society, the recreation introduces them to the concepts of cultural universals and cultural diversities, and to the relationships between traditional activity, religious belief, and dominant human concerns.⁸

Folklife studies are especially useful in geography courses. Traditional arts, crafts, and architecture, folk cookery, agricultural techniques, medical beliefs and customs, and seasonal and familial celebrations are some of the topics that can be studied in the geographic context, new world or old. *Folklore and Folklife*, edited by Richard M. Dorson,⁹ contains helpful essays on these diverse topics, as well as introductory bibliographies. Some regions, of course, have been more thoroughly investigated by folklorists than others. Appalachia is one such area, and the two *Foxfire* books,¹⁰ compilations by high school folklore collectors in Rabun Gap, Georgia, give a lively introduction to technology, architecture, arts and crafts, cookery and food preservation, weather and planting signs, hunting stories, and snake lore, to name a few topics. Besides being informative, the books serve as "how-to-do-it" manuals. Excerpts from the works combined with more orthodox geographic data about Appalachia will illustrate effectively the intricate relationship shared by topography, climate, flora, fauna, and man's daily life.

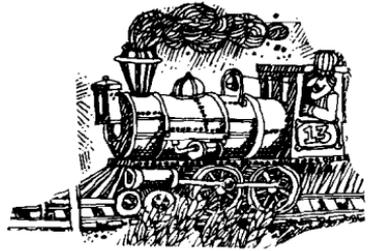
7. See, for example, the entertaining paperback reprint, Caroline F. Jayne, *String Figures and How to Make Them* (New York: Dover, 1962).

8. Note, e.g., Martha Warren Beckwith's introduction to Joseph S. Emerson, *Hawaiian String Games*, in *Vassar College Folk-Lore Foundation Publications*, no. 5 (1924), 3-6, in which she refers to the use of Hawaiian string games to recall local history and the representation of mythological scenes in New Zealand string figures.

9. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

10. Eliot Wigginton, *The Foxfire Book* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1972) and *Foxfire 2* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1973), both in paper.

One could construct a similar cultural geography unit for the local community, incorporating standard geography studies with student collections of information about community daily life, past and present. The same range of topics would be available—traditional technology, architecture, arts and crafts, cookery, agricultural and hunting techniques, nature lore, medical beliefs and practises, and so on—but would be particularized to the local environment. Oral history projects, drawing on the reminiscences of older residents, retrieve valuable information about the community past.



In the secondary school history classroom, attention to folkloric materials is certainly worth the effort, whether used to introduce a certain historical period in an unusual fashion, to provide necessary insights into “what it was like and how it felt,” or to expand the student’s concept of history beyond that of the standard classroom textbook.

Witchcraft documents often interest students, especially in recent years because of the current American fascination with the occult. New England Puritanism, its theology, politics, and institutions, however, have seldom attracted many eager students in the high school or college classroom. The Salem witchcraft trials of the early 1690’s can become an interesting introduction to seventeenth-century New England Puritanism. The primary documents are numerous—letters, examination and trial records, sermons, and essays—and the secondary accounts are varied, for example, Marion Starkey’s novelistic description, *The Devil in Massachusetts*; Arthur Miller’s drama, *The Crucible*; historical analyses like *Witchcraft in Salem* by Chadwick Hansen; and the social-psychological interpretation by Kai Erikson in *Wayward Puritans*.¹¹ These secondary descriptions and studies are not of equal merit, by any means, but they provide a reading list in order to discuss diverse interpretations of the Salem phenomenon. Even poor, misleading accounts, for instance, the “documentary” film, “Witches of Salem: The Horror and the Hope,”¹² are helpful in facilitating class discussion, if it is carefully directed by the teacher. As the

11. *The Devil in Massachusetts* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1969), *The Crucible* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), *Witchcraft in Salem* (New York: New American Library, 1969), and *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), all in paper. See also “Remarkable Providences” and “Witchcrafts,” in *America Begins: Early American Writing*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971), also in paper.

12. Azzarella Unlimited, Learning Corporation of America, 1972; color, 34 minutes.

studies progress, information about Puritan theology—concepts of God, the Devil, justification, salvation, and the covenant—will enter the readings and discussions, together with historical descriptions of civil courts and their procedures, church organization, and ecclesiastical powers. The unit will also disclose the Puritan stereotype as a misconception, if the full range of sources is drawn on. In this type of introduction the secondary purpose of the witchcraft studies will be a clearer understanding of seemingly strange beliefs and activities. Primarily, the examination will function as an interesting introduction to a remote period of American history and a lens through which Puritan ideology and institution can be viewed.

Historians have at last become aware of the richness of oral sources and their value in gaining insights into ethnic and racial minority life in the United States. Earlier studies of the Black-American and the Native American were often based on white, elitist sources. We get a decidedly different point of view when we consult the minority group that directly experienced crucial events. Although oral history is not the same as folklore, it is an oral source that must be collected in the field, using an interview methodology similar to that used by the folklorist-collector. The collection and analysis of folk history, or the collective perception of past experiences, is one of the most interesting developments in folklore studies today.

The remarkable collection of reminiscences from ex-slave, made during the 1930s under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project, covers the nineteenth-century Black-American experience.¹³ These personal histories are vivid narratives that interweave folklore, factual description, attitude, and perception, and can tell a student more about the life of the slave and exslave than any history text. The reminiscences of what it was like to be a slave reflect a wide range of attitudes toward slavery, the white man, Lincoln, and the war, and dramatically illustrate the physical, psychological, and sociological realities of the slave experience. Among the many themes that run through the accounts are the remarkable durability of the slave family and sense of family identity, and the various means of overt and covert retaliation against the system—themes that have often been ignored in scholarly treatments of slavery.

Numerous Native American life histories, like the ex-slave reminiscences, provide insights into "what it was like and how it felt" to be

13. Selections from this slave narrative collection are published in *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, ed. B.A. Botkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) and *Life under the "Peculiar Institution"*, ed. Norman R. Yetman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), both in paper.

a member of a particular population. *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* and *To Be an Indian: An Oral History*¹⁴ are but two of an expanding and varied list of Native American publications. Again, the Red Man's life is described in these works by the Native Americans themselves, supplying a necessary corrective to the past historical treatment of that experience.

The imaginative teacher can also use oral history in the secondary school classroom to explore concepts of history. In some college classes I have found that a life history project, based on interviews with a family member or friend, serves to help the student realize that history is more than a chronology of national figures, economic crises, and military conflicts. The life history project emphasizes the significance of social and cultural history, its relation to political, economic, and military history, and leads us to understand that all of us as individuals have a history and experience it directly. The best of these projects include a detailed chronological narrative, transcribed excerpts from the interviews, information about the subject's attitudes toward selected national, regional, local, and personal events, and a discussion of the relationship between the individual's life and a larger historical context. This kind of oral history project brings up questions of research methodology, the value and limitations of oral history sources, and the expansion of history studies to include serious attention to social, cultural, and personal materials.¹⁵

On a more philosophical level, the investigation of folk history, oral sources, and diverse perceptions of the past can direct the student toward questions that have fascinated philosophical historians for centuries: What are the functions and meanings of history for man and his society? Is history always ethnocentric? Is there a difference between history and myth? What is the difference between sacred and secular history? How does a cultural perception of time and reality shape the way a people perceives its past? These are difficult and perplexing questions. The Native American traditional narrative and oral history collections can introduce these topics quite naturally, and the abstractions that the queries lead to become less awesome when grounded in specific examples from those readings.

14. *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior*, ed. Peter Sabokov (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967) and *To Be an Indian: an Oral History*, ed. Joseph H. Cash and Herbert T. Hoover (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), both in paper.

15. William Lynwood Montell's *The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) is an excellent example of the history of an entire community, carefully reconstructed from oral sources and corroborative public and private documents.

The possibilities for incorporating folklore studies into the standard public school curriculum are rich. My own proposals are meant to be suggestions rather than authoritative directives that guarantee lively and profitable experiences with literature and the social sciences. If a classroom teacher picks up an idea in these pages, revises it, and adapts it to a particular situation with success, my enthusiasm for serious attention to folklore in the public schools will be justified.



*Typical Scene of the Flint Hills Area.
(Courtesy of Kansas Industrial Development Commission.)*