

HOW I TEACH FOLKLORE

by Gladys F. Crawford

Teaching Folklore on the high school level can be both challenging and rewarding. It can also be a great deal of work.

When Russell High School decided to change the program for the two upper grades from the regular English 11 and English 12 to nine week mini-courses, Folklore was one of the courses decided upon.

Folklore is such a broad field that the first thing that confronted me, as the teacher, was limiting the subject to what could be taught in a nine weeks period. Before I could do this, I had to decide the aims or goals of the course from the students' standpoint. Should it be just another factual course with dates and events to remember or should it have some bearing on the background of the student himself? I decided that in order to make the course relevant to the student I would have to have a maximum of student involvement in the course. I wanted to give each student a sense of the past by teaching what people did, what made them happy, what songs they sang, how they played, what they ate, and what they believed in. Because of the varied backgrounds of the students, I decided to begin with the American Indians, proceed chronologically through the historical periods of America, and finally concentrate on Kansas Folklore.



The next step was collecting the material. My first thought was to get a suitable textbook. For every high school student a textbook seems to be a security blanket. After reviewing many textbooks and finding none suitable, I discarded this idea. For a course without a textbook, I needed a great deal of reference material. Because of the limited time for ordering teaching materials for the following year, I had to order audio-visual supplies almost immediately. I checked the catalogs and decided on a number of filmstrips with sound. These included: Indian folk tales, New England Witches, Sea Chanties, Songs of the Old South, Songs of the Mountains, Songs of the Plains, Songs of the Great Southwest, Songs of the Prairie, Tall Tales, The

Great Depression, and Kansas Folk Ways. All of the film strips that I ordered arrived almost immediately with the exception of the one on Kansas Folk Ways. I am still waiting for this one. I checked the existing records at the school and found some songs of Woody Guthrie, a few other records of folk songs, and some short stories that dealt with tall tales and folk ways. I placed these on reserve. Then I checked all the Folklore books in the library and had the suitable ones reserved to be moved to my room at the beginning of the course. All this was done before the close of the school year.

The next fall I took Dr. Sackett's course in Folklore. Since my first mini-course in Folklore did not begin until the second semester, I could revise my planned procedure using ideas I got from this course.

Having planned the course, my next step was to teach it. The first day I told the class they would have no textbook but would make their own textbooks by taking notes in class. These notebooks would be graded at the end of the course and returned to them to keep. Taking notes in class is not a popular activity at our school; some of the students had never done it. However, I gave them a definition of Folklore and a mimeographed sheet outlining the course as the first two pages of the notebook. To introduce Indian lore I borrowed a map from the history department showing the distribution of Indian tribes in America. I used this and played a tape I had made telling differences in the religious and social customs of the Indians. Using the books I had allocated to my room, I asked each one to find some sort of Indian tale. This would be written up for the notebook and also presented to the rest of the class, not as a formal report, but as a sharing of information.

Whenever possible I tried to bring material of local interest. Since one of our senior boys is a Comanche, I asked him to talk to the class. He has many works of Indian art which his family makes. He also has the Indian dance costume which he uses each summer when he dances at the national pow-wow at Anadarko, Oklahoma. He brought these to the class and talked to the students about Indian costumes, religion, art, and history. He was able to answer their many questions. They enjoyed his talk, and seemed to appreciate him more as a person after it.

The Puritans were next chronologically. Everyone had heard of the Salem witchcraft, but few knew much about it. Their next research project was to find stories of the supernatural or magic from the Folklore books. With each research project there followed a day of sharing

with the class. Then, as a guest speaker, I asked one of the teachers who has made a study of magic, witchcraft, and the occult arts to talk to the class. Witchcraft proved to be very popular. Many wanted to pursue this topic indefinitely.

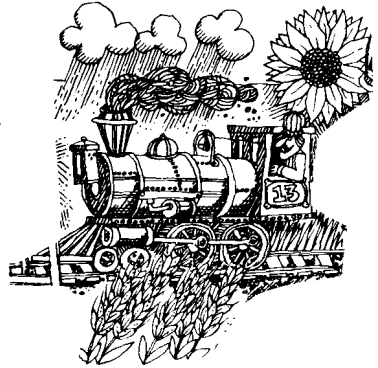
After that I spent a short time on the customs of the Pennsylvania Dutch. Since many of the people of Russell are of Russian-German origin, the students were able to note the similarities in speech to those in our area.

Revolutionary War songs came next, followed by tall tales, pioneer America, railroad songs, and work songs of the pioneers. The class took notes and did research on each of these topics.

The Old South proved a subject of surprise and delight. Someone reviewed *Gone With the Wind*. The Azalea Trail, which is open to the public each spring, was discussed. The meaning of Mardi Gras was brought out. These subjects naturally led to the treatment of the negroes by the Southern planters. So the next subject was negro folklore. We spent some time on this with class discussions of racial prejudice. I also used a tape made by one of the students of Dr. Sackett's class, an interview with a retired black minister who lives in Russell. He told of many folk remedies, customs, superstitions, and religious practices of the negroes.

When the class had become accustomed to what folklore really was, I thought it was time to tell them of the major project each one must complete for credit in the course. This was an individual collecting project. Each student was to interview someone, preferably from his own family, and collect recipes, superstitions, beliefs, recreation practices, songs, and dances, handed down in the family from generation to generation. I gave each student forms to fill out for these projects. This would be due the seventh week of the course and presented to the class in a ten minute or longer report.

The great Westward movement was the next subject taught. By this time the students were more willing to find outside information without having it expressly assigned. They brought pictures of wagon



trains, asked questions about the TV programs, reported on movies of the West that they had seen. Some of them enjoyed the cowboy songs. Some were more interested in the heroes and outlaws. I used heroes, outlaws, or women of the old west as a topic for research.

Homesteading brought the subject right into our area, as many students had ancestors who had homesteaded. Tales of Indian raids, grasshopper invasions, droughts, homes with dirt floors, sod houses, cabins, the importance of the railroad, kinds of tools used in farming, cattle ranchers, and cattle rustling, all became topics of class discussion. We were in the middle of Kansas folklore. I mentioned the ethnic groups who had settled in Kansas and their geographical locations. The story of Victoria was assigned as a special report. Others found material about Nicodemus. I used a taped report about the Mennonites of Hillsboro, another of the Czechs of Wilson. Students reported about the German-Russians of the Russell area. Because of a paper given by Dr. Sackett, I had become interested in the steel crosses in the cemeteries of Gorham, Walker, and Victoria. I took some colored slides of the crosses and showed these to the class explaining what the crosses were made of and that they were true folk art. One of my students recalled that he had seen a number of wooden crosses in a cemetery where his grandparents were buried and wondered whether these would be considered folk art, too.

Continuing the study of Kansas folklore, I asked the students to bring to class superstitions, counting out games, and jump rope rhymes. Then we counted the incidence of the same ones. We spent one day in the physical education department where the instructor taught the class several play-party games and some simple folk dances. We visited the local historical museum. Some were fascinated with an old Edison phonograph in perfect working order. Some were delighted with an old small-town telephone system. All thought that visiting the museum was a good idea, and some wondered why they had never visited it before.

When the time came for collecting reports, I was really looking forward to the class session. As I have noted before, many of the students are of German-Russian origin. They brought recipes of *bierocks*, butter-ball soup, watermelon bread, watermelon honey, *pfefferniesse*, and *krebble*. From those of Czech origin there were recipes of *kolaches*, *rollickes*, and sauerkraut. Some brought autograph albums, butter molds, old guns, etc., to show how their ancestors lived, and to show the things their families cherished. Some even brought samples of the foods to be eaten in class.

Following the presentation of the projects, I gave the class some time to get their notebooks into presentable order. When the notebooks were handed in, the graded part of the class was over. There was still some time so I presented the film strips of the Great Depression and played some Woodie Guthrie records.

Grading a class of this sort is very difficult. I placed most emphasis on the completed notebooks, grading not so much on grammatical excellence as on content, extra work, unassigned related material, and arrangement. The collecting project received next highest priority, then the class reports. I gave only two tests during the nine weeks as spot checks to see whether work missed had been made up and to see whether the students were actually taking notes. The completed notebooks were a disappointment as many students did the bare minimum in note taking and did not transcribe their notes in ink or by typing.

Evaluating the success of the class from a teaching standpoint is not easy. If I were to judge it from the standpoint of popularity and enthusiasm, it would be an outstanding success. Whether or not I achieved what I set out to do has not been determined. But if I have made each student a little more aware of his heritage, if I have made him proud of his ancestors, and more tolerant of his peers, I feel that the course was worthwhile.



*Western Kansas Dust Storm of the 1930's.
(Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society.)*