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Folklore and Minnesota History

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THE FOLK ARTS CONFERENCE held in September, 1944, at the University of Minnesota was an event of significance not only for the study of folk arts and other aspects of folklore, but also for an increased appreciation of the historic resources of Minnesota and the whole of the Old Northwest.¹ The plans there discussed with so much enthusiasm may never be completely realized, but it was good to have the plans. Before the conference many people were aware of one aspect or another of the problems to be discussed, but it was only in the conference itself that the ideas were developed. From the impact of varying points of view there emerged a much clearer concept of the term "folklore" and a much more definite idea as to what should be done about it.

Even though folklore as a recognized study is this year celebrating its hundredth anniversary, it is still necessary for the practitioners of this mystery to keep explaining themselves. At times, folklore has become a fad and has attracted to itself a large dilettante following, usually because of the "quaintness" of old customs and the simplicity or lack of sophistication of the tales or songs of the forefathers or of belated communities today. The study has also drawn to it somewhat more than its share of eccentrics and "nuts." But in spite of the evil name that these well-meaning but ineffective folk have acquired in serious academic circles, there has been throughout the whole century of its history a considerable group of scholars whose handling of folklore has been as intelligent, as well-disciplined, and

¹ For a brief report on the conference, see *ante*, 25:397. The author of the present article participated in the program. *Ed.*

as definitely directed as the investigations of the best of their fellows in adjacent scholarly fields.

As conceived by the leading folklorists of Europe and America, the subject is by no means simple. It occupies an intermediate place between other well-established subjects, and for that very reason has opened up many new problems for the scholars of today and for the future. Its affiliations are threefold — with literature, with ethnology, and with history. The student of the Homeric question is at once a literary historian and a folklorist. He deals with the songs of the people, with the compositions of a great artist, and with manuscripts and literary redactions. Or he may seek to follow Cinderella or Snow White or Paul Bunyan from an original source, through a complicated oral history subjected to disturbing literary influences. Some folklorists, on the other hand, are essentially ethnologists. In folklore they see survivals of primitive customs, or they are interested in traditional social organizations, games, amusements, cookery, and dances. And they make large accumulations for museums of folk culture.

Not only these two points of view, but also that of the historian, must continually be kept in mind if one's approach to folklore is not to be too narrow. Furthermore, the student must always remember that many worthy people whose interest he rightly covets have an approach to folklore quite other than his own. Such people are content to let the scholar investigate the actual traditions of the folk, but for them the chief end is the enjoyment of the activity itself—singing songs, taking part in folk games and dances, and listening to old tales. It is from such persons that some of the most valuable collecting in the past has come. Still another group, interested in its own way in folklore, is viewed much less sympathetically by the serious scholar. For members of this group muddle the waters in which the scholar is fishing. These persons continually inject foreign traditions into places where they do not belong. Thus we have all kinds of European folk dances taught in our colleges, and mountain songs adapted to a radio audience. Less disturbing, because more authentic, is the revival of obsolete traditions. Frequently where the

folksongs or dances of a European group have been forgotten or dropped, they are deliberately revived by an enthusiast.

All these points of view were evident at the Folk Arts Conference. Proponents of all of them must learn to live with one another and to see what is valuable in each approach. The conference, attended as it was by ethnologists and historians, as well as folklorists, approached the subject of folklore in a broad and tolerant spirit. For one thing, no attempt was made to limit the actual scope of the subject. While there may have been reservations in the minds of some listeners as to the pertinence of particular contributions, no objection was raised to their presentation and consideration. Some limits, of course, must be drawn. But when one realizes the host of manifestations assumed by the traditions of a people, he must be willing to consider all of them. There will be few not deserving of his study. Even the well-known forms of folklore have a considerable variety. There are, first of all, the folk arts, consisting of textiles and designs, of building types, of decorative woodwork, of implements, and other objects. It is of such materials that folk museums are largely composed. Next there are the customs and beliefs, as applied to agriculture, domestic life, medicine, cookery, etc. Again, to many persons folklore means nothing more than folk dances and games. Finally, there is the oral tradition of a people, its songs, its proverbs, riddles, tales, and traditions.

The student of literature has a tendency to confine his use of the term "folklore" to the latter concept of oral tradition. But the broader use suggested above is of much more value to the historian, who is becoming increasingly aware of the fact that a true history of a people concerns much more than political or military events. When the historian approaches his task in the spirit of Herodotus, or of Gibbon in his analytical moods, he cannot clearly draw a line between history and such neighboring areas as economics, sociology, or ethnology. Of all excursions into neighboring precincts, those which the historian makes into folklore are among the most rewarding. The traditions of a people inevitably preserve long vanished elements in their culture. In fact, the primary interest in the early stages

of folklore research was the study of just such "survivals in culture." The early folklorists had especially in mind fossilized elements coming down from our primitive ancestors.

But even if our attention is confined to a much more recent stage in history, we are continually finding in folklore interesting clues to the changes in culture during recent centuries. The study of folk design may demonstrate a hybridization of foreign culture groups on our own soil, or may show the direct adaptation of a foreign culture to our own environment. The recording of an old English ballad in Minnesota and a comparative study of its versions over the whole continent may give original or corroborating evidence of a chain of traditions extending, it may be, from seventeenth-century England by way of Virginia and Kentucky, or by way of New England. A folk tale recorded in our Old Northwest from a Scandinavian family may take us immediately back to Norway or Sweden of 1870.

No state can more profitably use all these folklore resources for an understanding of its present and past than Minnesota. Within its borders it has a true epitome of the European continent. Above thirty organized groups keep green the memory of the lands from which they came. With more or less conscious effort, they preserve traditions and practice the arts brought by themselves or their fathers into the New World. The historian who would understand the roots of the culture of his state must know the people themselves and their ancient modes of thought and activity. All have deep roots and continue to bind our people to a land and age far away and long ago.

And there are also two groups with more definitely American connections. In a state like Minnesota recollections of the days when Indians roamed the plains are not yet extinct, and even today the aborigines are seen in many parts of the state. The historian has largely assigned the study of this native culture to the ethnologist and the folklorist, but he has an obligation to understand the modes of thought and the traditional patterns of this basic population. We must also remember that folklorists and ethnologists are few, and if the historian waits for them to act, much that is valuable will perish with the dying generation. Close and friendly co-operation between

historian and folklorist is especially desirable if this American Indian culture is to be understood and is to take its place in the larger life of the state and the nation.

In his interest in recent immigrant groups and in the old-age natives, neither folklorist nor historian can afford to forget the hardy race of older American pioneers who helped to open up the Minnesota country. They, too, brought memories with them. Specific recollections of New England or Pennsylvania faded out in the next generation, and the great epic movement of the settlement of the continent became generalized and blurred in the minds of the historian and of the people themselves. But the folklorist, if he works carefully and if he interprets his results intelligently, finds songs and tales, legends and anecdotes, old games and dances, cures and weather signs, and many an old-fashioned saying or turn of phrase which carries him far into the backward and abysm of time.

This great variety of tradition in a state like Minnesota is not something to give us alarm. It is not a sign of disunity. American life, national or local, pulls all groups together, so that there is no danger of undue weight being given to the past or to old loyalties. Rather does the variety of racial or group memories bring immeasurable relief to the uniformity of American culture as affected by the chain store, the cinema, and the radio.

One of the most interesting reports made at the Folk Arts Conference was that concerning local historical museums scattered throughout Minnesota. It was clear that those who have developed these museums have had a very broad concept of the field of history, certainly not far removed from the point of view we have been trying to suggest. Many parts of these museums effectively display the traditional culture of their regions. The chief emphasis in such museums is, as might be expected, the purely historical. Old implements or pieces of furniture are favored because they project us into the past. But this natural bias has not prevented many of the museums from gathering and displaying contemporary material.

The local historical museums are a good beginning to the collecting and utilization of the folklore resources of the state. But it was clear to anyone who attended the Folk Arts Conference that they

furnish only a beginning. Independently, or in friendly co-operation with organizations more definitely committed to folklore, the historian may well expand his interest and investigations concerning the traditional life of those he studies. He will find it of great value to consider not only material objects made and used by our ancestors, but all aspects of their intellectual and aesthetic lives. He will recognize that not only in primitive and pioneer groups, but even among more recent immigrants, life has not all been given to the making of a livelihood. Even under the hardest pioneer conditions there were outlets for emotions, for a sense of beauty, and for a joy in living. Aesthetic life may have been largely confined to emotional religion on Sundays. But even in the crudest of religious experiences, there was frequent opportunity for the singing of really noble hymns or listening to the incomparable cadences of psalm or gospel story.

In the workday week there were periods of refreshment—long winter days of enforced idleness, evenings about the fire, even occasional holidays and festivals. And though dependent largely on his own resources, the pioneer did not do badly. He had a wealth of old songs, and an increment of new ones, expressive of the wild life he lived; he told ancient tales which had come across the sea and newer traditions accumulated as his ancestors moved to their new homes. He may have danced old dances or, if religion forbade, may have disguised them as play-party songs. He exchanged wise sayings or ancient counsels about plowing or the sowing of seed. And in county fairs were seen the results of many a traditional pattern of embroidery or quilting and of many a recipe for food and drink handed down from old times.

Much of this teeming activity, traditional in pioneer and immigrant groups, has vanished. The historian can reconstruct some of it from books and newspapers, and from diaries and letters. Much more can still be found in the memories of men and women yet among us. It is the collecting of this still living tradition that is the primary task of the folklorist. Only when he has done his best to bring together what still remains can there be a really adequate record of the life of the community.

For a long time to come, as in the past, considerable dependence

must be placed upon the amateur collector of folklore. The historian has long had experience with the enthusiast for local history, and he will realize some of the limitations in the results produced by the untrained worker. As rapidly as possible our local folklorists must be given the training that is necessary if their records are to approach completeness and accuracy. Too often the amateur is interested in only one kind of item — tales, it may be, or songs, or superstitions. He will profit greatly by careful training which will make him aware of the wide scope of folklore and especially of what kinds of material he may well expect to recover in the area where he works. He should be able to place a reasonably accurate value on his materials and above all to know the relation of what he has gathered to the whole body of folklore, both in America and elsewhere. All this calls for academic preparation. Increasingly, American universities are realizing the need for such training, both on the undergraduate and the graduate levels. In almost a score of institutions introductory courses are given to stir up interest in folklore collecting and to give undergraduates some practice. As for the more specialized graduate training, there are at present not more than three or four possibilities for the student. It is in the latter direction especially that the large universities may be expected to be of greater service in the coming years.

One promising device for giving training on both levels, as well as for engendering enthusiasm for folklore collecting and study, is the folklore institute. Sometimes this has been a meeting for only a few days and sometimes it has consisted of an entire term of study. The former is illustrated by the annual Western Folklore Conference at Denver and the latter by the Folklore Institute of America, which has had one session and which expects to revive during the summer term of 1946. As time goes on and more people are interested in collecting, it will be possible to handle this training as a regular part of the university program, rather than by what are at best makeshift methods.

One special problem which the folklore collector encounters is shared by the field worker in ethnology. He must learn how to make such tactful approaches to his informants that they will speak to him

freely. No one can teach the folklorist this art better than a successful collector himself. Hence, whether in established university courses or in folklore institutes, one of the important services must be to bring collectors together so that they can exchange experiences and mutually widen their horizons. The beginner will learn many things that he must not do, and will be saved many false starts and some failures. He will learn how to record traditions without interrupting the natural flow of speech, and he will especially learn how valuable it is to make recordings with absolute faithfulness.

Even if the state affords adequate training and stimulus to its folklore collectors, it cannot merely turn them loose and expect to achieve the best results. The systematic gathering of the folklore resources of any state is a major undertaking. It has not even been attempted in America. But that is no reason why it should never be. Twenty years ago the vast folklore riches of Ireland remained almost untouched. But within the last two decades the efforts of a single man, aided by an intelligent interest and modest state support, have resulted in such a gathering of the vanishing traditions of Ireland as will take many a decade for folklorists, literary scholars, and historians to utilize. Any state which contemplates such a program must study the activities of the Irish Folklore Commission. From the central archive at Dublin the efforts of eight full-time collectors are supervised by means of letters of instruction and frequent visits by the director of the commission. By the use of phonographic recording and careful transcripts, the archive of the commission has now brought together well over a million pages of authentic folk tradition.

The United States is too large a unit to handle its folklore collecting on a national basis, as Ireland does. The ideal unit is a state. Here it may be assumed that a state university will give adequate training to folklorists, and that a state organization, either public or private, will house and administer an archive and supervise collecting. This is actually done, in peace times, in Finland, Estonia, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, as well as in Ireland. With a state possessing the diverse traditions found in Minnesota, it is not too much to expect that it will assume leadership in bringing the best

of the European methods to bear on the collecting and proper utilization of its folklore.

Whether such an activity comes as the development of the present vigorous interest in Minnesota history or whether it comes independently, it will be very significant for the state in several respects. Aside from the information and understanding which such material brings to the historian, the collecting of the folklore of the state is of great social importance. It gives a welcome recognition to all the ethnic strains in the population. It brings to each of them a justifiable pride in the people from whom they have come, and it helps each group to understand and value the other.

The essential of all folklore study is collecting and attempting to understand that which has been collected. This means university courses, subsidized collection, archives, publications, and perhaps museums. If one could combine the best features of the collecting program of Ireland, of the university courses of Sweden, of the great indoor and outdoor museums of Stockholm, of the activities of the Archive of American Folksong at Washington, of the gathering of folklore from recent immigrant groups in Detroit, and something of the group pride manifested in the Nationality Rooms of the University of Pittsburgh—if one could combine all these, there could never be a question as to the significance of folklore, not only for every member of a state, but also in a special measure for all serious students of its history.



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