

# Notes and Documents

## HUNTING FOR MINNESOTA PROVERBS

*Harold B. Allen*

WITH THE PURPOSE of mining the unexplored wealth of proverbial lore in the state, the Minnesota proverb survey, just getting under way as part of a national project undertaken by the American Dialect Society, is calling for the volunteer co-operation of hundreds of proverb collectors.

Questions which it is hoped the survey will answer are: What old proverbs long known in literature are still alive in the speech of Minnesotans? To what extent does the use of proverbs in the state reflect the use of proverbs elsewhere in the United States? Have any population or occupational groups developed sayings which contribute to a body of proverbial lore that is peculiar to Minnesota? What foreign-language proverbs have been kept alive in foreign-language communities? Which of these proverbs have been felt so necessary that they have been translated into English by second- and third-generation Americans?

Proverbs have their origin in the dimness of unrecorded prehistory. All nations have their own proverbs; all nations share also in proverbs that long since escaped national boundaries and became the common property of humankind. Anthropologists find rich stores of proverbial matter in the speech of primitive tribes throughout the world; students find them in the works of the great writers of the most highly civilized peoples.

As the epitomized wisdom of a people, which students of human culture call them, proverbs constitute a better clue than does literature to the mind and heart and soul of a people. For it is in them that people have embedded deeply and permanently the truths which they have found good. This is not to say that contradictory proverbs cannot be discovered. But these very contradictions are

part of the life of a people, for what is good for one is not always good for another; and the significantly true for any one person at any one time may be so aptly phrased that, repeated and taken up by others, it soon becomes a proverbial saying.

For more than two milleniums recognition of the abiding value of proverbs has led scholars to collect and study them. Aristotle listed and described many in his *Rhetoric*. Erasmus made a prodigious collection, which was published in 1500. John Heywood in 1546 made the first collection of entirely English proverbs. Other collectors followed and led to the great work of James Howell in 1659 and of John Ray in 1670. No other important collection appeared until H. G. Bohn's in 1855. The two large recent collections are Apperson's *English Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* of 1929 and the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* of 1935. And now in preparation at the University of Michigan, under the editorship of Professor Morris Tilley, is a historical dictionary of English proverbs.

But no collection yet made has been based upon a widespread survey of the living use of proverbs by people in general; no collection yet made has sought to reveal the proverbial lore of this country. To supply this double need, for a proverb dictionary which will be both comprehensive and also American, is the aim of the American Dialect Society in initiating the present nation-wide survey.

As national chairman, Professor Margaret M. Bryant of Brooklyn College has received co-operation of state committees in a number of states where large collections of proverbs already are in progress, notably in New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Utah, and Washington. The recent appointment of the writer as chairman of a Minnesota state committee has led to the formation of a nucleus of such a committee and to a call for volunteer collectors in this state. At present the other members of the committee are: Miss Ruth E. Brune of Bemidji State Teachers College, Miss Bertha L. Heilbron of the Minnesota Historical Society, Miss Nora Solum of St. Olaf College, Northfield, and Professor Allen E. Woodall of Moorhead State Teachers College.

The Minnesota survey is supported by a grant from the faculty

research fund of the University of Minnesota. It is also sponsored by the Minnesota Folk Arts Foundation as a specific project of its committee on linguistic studies, of which the writer is chairman.

Although prospective collectors will want to collect any and all proverbial sayings, judging largely by the "feel," many will find it helpful to recognize certain forms in which such sayings commonly appear. Perhaps most proverbs appear as complete sentences, as: "Barking dogs never bite"; "Every rose has its thorn"; "You never miss a slice from a cut loaf"; and "Make hay while the sun shines." Some occur in rhymed form, as: "Well begun is half done"; "Rain before seven, clear by eleven." Some modern sayings that are already proverbs or may become proverbs are: "A ring on the finger is worth two on the phone"; and "Candy's dandy, but liquor's quicker." Many phrases of various kinds are proverbial in nature, as: "to raise the roof," "a song and dance," and "to smoke the pipe of peace." Some such phrases can be recognized because they make comparisons, as: "to fight like a den of wild cats," "blacker than soot," "as greedy as a pig," and "like a shot out of hell." Especially interesting are proverbs of the type nicknamed "Wellerisms." They are best identified from examples, as: "'Home sweet home,' as the vagrant said when he was sent to prison for the third time"; "'All's well that ends well,' said the peacock when he looked at his tail"; and "'I punish her with good words,' as the man said when he threw the Bible at his wife."

Sources of such proverbial sayings may be both oral and written. Books in which writers have deliberately used Minnesota speech, local newspapers, journals, diaries, and the like all are stores of proverb lore. But most collectors will find their richest source in the speech of the people they hear. Especially to be gathered in Minnesota are sayings found in foreign-language communities, whether in a foreign language or in English, and proverbs current among such groups as miners on the range, steelworkers, and timberworkers.

When recording proverbs, it is desirable to write them in ink or with a typewriter upon slips or cards three by five inches in size.

Helpful is any additional information which would translate a foreign proverb or otherwise explain the meaning of one that is obscure, or which tells the circumstances when the proverb was used, or which, if the proverb was found in a printed source, gives the name of the author and the name, date, and page number of the publication. It is desirable, too, that a collector write his own name and address upon the back of a slip, so that full credit may be given.

Further information about collecting proverbs and specimen slips may be secured from the chairman of the state committee. All collected sayings should be sent to him at 317 Folwell Hall, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 14, Minnesota.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).