

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

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## Toward a New Folklore<sup>1</sup>

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ONLY A FEW days ago there came to me a small leather case. Frayed and stained, it is about as ugly an artifact as one could find anywhere. For decades—the years of Minnesota's boisterous growth—it had been carried in a broadcloth pocket or stuffed hurriedly under the ample flaps of a saddlebag. Originally this miniature kit of primitive surgical instruments had been manufactured in the East; it had traveled from Baltimore to Wheeling, where it became part of that ceaseless caravan of movers bound for the western lands of promise; and it had witnessed the gigs, carryalls, and handsomely appointed stagecoaches that thronged the Cumberland Road from Columbus to Indianapolis. Then it had struck overland to rough Galena and, like thousands of emigrants, had gone up the Mississippi to the Falls of St. Anthony. In a new territory, the case labored as arduously as any frontiersman. It articulated the first joint of a lumberjack's thumb; it bled when phlebotomy was indicated; and it contributed its cutting edges to ease the labor of childbirth. The case was a part of the folkways of a past people. Today it symbolizes a folk pattern in exactly the same way that legends and proverbs expose the mind workings of a cultural group.

Many of us conceive of folklore from an antiquated viewpoint. Almost automatically, folklore is associated with songs and ballads, Munchausen tales and tall yarns, Yankee oddities or deep-South mumbo-jumbo, local legends, supernatural thrillers and chillers,

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superstitions, cures and charms, and proverbs—"A man does not look behind the door unless he has stood there himself," or, "Don't write—and fear no man." For years such material has been collected and published. Collect and publish! Publish and collect! And then begin the entire sequence over again. It is little wonder that today folklore rapidly is losing ground and respect in exactly those places where it should flourish the best. The literary market, during the dark war years, was flooded with folk collections of all types. It was considered quite the thing to soak yourself in a quaint American past and to indulge in smugness while tittering at the weird tales and ignorant customs of a bygone age. How superior a reader felt when he learned that in the Philadelphia epidemic of 1793, "Many persons, even women and small boys, had segars almost constantly in their mouths. Others placing full confidence in garlic, chewed it almost the whole day; some kept it in their pockets and shoes."

The reason for the failure of much folklore research lies in the fact that a nineteenth-century concept of folk culture has continued into the twentieth century without recognition that methods must change to meet new conditions and new types of materials. You know the older themes: fairy stories, tales of heroes and supermen, the dance theme, the love legend, the ballads and popular tunes, and the special days that honor folk events or personages, such as Christmas, Easter, or All Saints' Day. You recognize the earlier preoccupation with His Satanic Majesty the Devil, and his wizards, witches, goblins, and incubi. You can pick up almost any folk journal today and find long lists of weather superstitions being printed just as they were put into type fifty years ago. How many times have you noticed catalogues of death signs: sneezing at the breakfast table; dreaming of a wedding; observing a light on a post in the dooryard; seeing a bird fly through a window into your home. Or, on how many occasions have you heard that a cat has nine lives, that a cat always lights on its feet, that cats suck a baby's breath, that cats are color blind? Yet, day after day, this type of material is brought to print somewhere, and another folklorist is born!

Folklore, of course, does investigate the shifting, elusive content

of popular tradition, chiefly in its oral appearances, and does attempt to trace migratory tendencies and to discover universal similarities. This traditional approach to a fascinating subject has brought additional color and meaning to the cultural history of both region and nation. But folklore, in its broader definition, includes larger areas of human experience when it surveys traditional modes of political, economic, and social activity. Serious scholars recognize this enlargement of vision that a competent study of the folk reveals. It is sad indeed that the present dearth of research in such aspects of intellectual history hinders both scholar and novelist from revealing more completely the outlook, mind, and manners of the people.

Let us make truce with death and cats and leave them to their devil-driven mischief in peace while we devote ourselves to fresh fields of folk investigation. There are two approaches to the new folklore: the first is intensive study of what has been collected in an attempt to synthesize thousands of proverbs, superstitions, and legends into some fundamental cultural pattern; the second is to begin collection and analysis in fields that not so long ago were considered outside the province of folklore.

Most folk anthologies in type belong to the first category. They are printed catalogues with little interpretation. John Bennett's *The Doctor to the Dead*, Harold W. Thompson's *Body, Boots, and Britches*, Thomas D. Clark's *The Rampaging Frontier*, and Botkin's grab-bag treasury of American folklore all belong in this class. Even songs and ballads, when they appear in collections, carry little penetration into the cultural forces that brought them into existence. The first approach to the new folklore is to analyze collections already in existence, to collate them, if you will, and to discern eventually the skeleton of the environment that brought them into being. That is the ultimate business of the folklorist: to use his proverbs, legends, dances, and other activities to expose, as Constance Rourke once pointed out, the roots of a culture.

The second—and newer—approach is research in areas quite unique to folklore, but nevertheless most significant. Minnesota was a part of the great western movement that always has been drama-

tized by the covered wagon pushing toward the fringe of settlement. Frequently, this pioneer theme has been characterized for want of a better term as "manifest destiny." Now manifest destiny is as much a folk motto as any directional proverb. It has appeared in hundreds of texts, in innumerable articles, and in the loud mouths of two-dollar-a-day politicians in Congress. What does it mean? No slogan influenced the growth of this nation and state more. Indeed, are not both "the West" and "Jacksonian democracy" folk fetishes that need meticulous scrutiny at the hands of the scholar? It is doubtful if the essential narrative of this nation can be written until such folk ideologies are studied thoroughly. In this same connection, do we not need to re-examine the entire philosophy of Calvinistic thrift, of the dignity of hard work, and of the alleged superiority of private capital? Mind you, I am implying nothing at this time concerning *laissez faire* and capitalism. I mean only that as a folk belief the system of profits is worthy of study. Unfortunately, the rather recently published Horatio Alger anthology side-stepped an examination of the get-rich-quick thesis. The job still remains to be done. In this connection, there is needed a complete study of the American businessman, for he too has transcended this earth to be enshrined on high among folk heroes. It would also be of interest and benefit to explore the fascinating history of labor and the working man. From the days of the guilds to the time of the mighty unions, labor has woven innumerable folkways into its economic structure. And, of course, the place of women in industry has given new color, new superstitions, and new prejudices to the movement.

It is astonishing, too, to realize how great an untilled field is immigration. The coming of new peoples and races to the United States is nothing more than the narrative of the migration of folk patterns. Some—but not all—discussions of this coming-over from the Old World ignore in too large a degree the peculiar folk characteristics. That is, the subtle, deep-rooted psychological facets are dismissed, and emphasis is placed upon the strangeness of costume, the taste of foreign foods, or the peculiar celebration of feast days. Foreigners are persons to be amused at, but not to be understood. In far too

many instances, little attempt has been made to comprehend the folk mind. The scholar has been content to measure immigration in terms of statistics, to show where this or that group began its economic rooting, and to describe racial or nationality districts in our great urban centers. Neither the historian nor the sociologist, neither the psychologist nor the philosopher, has succeeded in exposing the essential folk nature of most of our peoples from across the seas. Where is the volume that makes clear the Irish (or can the Irish ever be made clear?), that delineates the Finns or the Germans or the Swedes or the Dutch? Can the story of Minnesota ever be fully told until most careful research is conducted into the folk mind and practices of the people who made this North Star State? Fortunately Theodore C. Blegen has provided, on a somewhat wider scale, an admirable and delightful model in his *Norwegian Migration to America*.

There are other fascinating and significant folk topics to be investigated—large problems, such as the folklore of the city and of the country. Elmer T. Peterson's *Cities Are Abnormal* would have been a stronger volume had it contained an account of the folkways of the megalopolitan community. The rise of organized sport offers tantalizing bait for those who wish to learn the meaning of a recent folk passion. For some reason contemporary folklore has not been comprehended as offering an adequate field of study. It is taboo to deal with current folk manifestations. The proper thing has been to track down an old story or social practice and to turn away from episodes and events that are occurring in the fertile now. I think one of the richest fields for folk research lies in the daily activities of man in our own society. Let me mention only a few topics that need examination: apartment houses, taverns, penny arcades, the unwritten songs of sororities and fraternities, the five-and-ten, and, to bring a long list rapidly to a close, the crossword puzzle and the quiz program.

On all these subjects, and many more, the researcher can collect at the source, does not have to depend upon hearsay, can check his findings repeatedly, and may secure consultation from other special-

ists. The great difficulty, of course, is that this type of investigation seems not to appeal. It is much more fun to drive way off in the woods somewhere to locate an old crone with vacant gums who whines out some half-forgotten song of her youth. Then you have an "informant" and "information" and, putting both together, you possess the basis for an article in some reputable folk journal whose editor is conditioned to this type of manuscript. Perhaps you may even have the nasal tune recorded. If you find enough of them, you may issue an album of folk songs.

Folk study has rutted itself in traditionalism until the orthodox pattern has stifled, to too great a degree, the freshness of independent research. The result of all this has been to limit folk investigation at the very time when it should be broadened. Instead of a fresh and invigorating activity, imbued with the bouyant spirit of a living culture, we have been given a desiccated body of material that meets all the ancient rules but somehow succeeds in squeezing out the people and their mind. The older approach has led us to take too many folk yarns for truth, when, indeed, grave doubt may exist as to the validity of the legend. Take, for example, the amusing and typically American Paul Bunyan, Babe, the blue ox, and the industrious Johnny Inkslinger. Was there ever a powerful woodsman from whom gradually developed Paul in somewhat the same manner that there actually was an Uncle Sam from whom indirectly came that national symbol with the long trousers, blue coat, and tall hat sprinkled with the stars of the Union? Or were the Bunyan yarns made from whole cloth and projected in reverse chronology? The question has not as yet been settled, but there may be some reason to believe that both Paul and his ox were deliberately created in exactly the same fashion that some modern craftsmen manufacture antique highboys and corner cupboards. It seems likely that the stories of Paul's prodigious strength were not known in either Wisconsin or Minnesota lumber camps much before the turn of the century. And I have recently examined some "new" Bunyan yarns that are nothing more or less than modern stories tailored to fit the Bunyan pattern. You see, folklore can be made and packaged and

sold to the unsuspecting in exactly the same manner by which a credulous public is duped daily by market-place sharpsters. It may not be unfair to hazard a guess—a guess that will have to suffice until all the evidence is in—that the Bunyan tales, now commercialized in vulgar fashion by some Minnesota resort centers, were deliberately fabricated by a lumber company or companies as part of an early twentieth-century advertising scheme. To solve problems such as this, the folk researcher must become a keen detective, but, grievously enough, he is obliged to follow the trail without the assistance of Erle Stanley Gardner's sexy, but chaste, Della Street!

There are other perfectly fascinating and almost new fields of exploration. Until recently folklore has been associated, as I said earlier, with oral or printed material. The time has now come to include tangible and physical materials as legitimate sources for folk research. The stained surgical case certainly is as much an evidence of the folk mind and folk attitudes as is any yarn that ever appeared in those great folk depositories—*Yankee Notions* or *Yankee Blade*. I can think of a hundred physical sources that need to be investigated. In Minnesota, for example, use could be made of pioneer farm machinery—the tools that helped plant and harvest the state's golden wheat. Another perfectly fascinating activity centers about the primitive apparatus used on the iron ranges. Then comes the question of homes and stores. The art and architecture of the people, as Professor Laurence Schmeckebier has pointed out again and again, can expose a culture with splendid fidelity. It is as true to say that the homes of a people give insight into what those individuals believe as it is to say that the stories and legends of a group indicate their folk beliefs. Architecture is as much a folk belief as are proverbs. Even store fronts and cemetery angels are folk sources.

It is strange, indeed, that such records have not been more widely used by the folklorist. Yet the average folk journal ignores completely this type of material. The truth of the matter, of course, is that this business of folklore has grown up without its parents realizing the transition into maturity. It is equally true that there are too few trained folklorists. Too many persons are primarily dabblers and

collectors. Too few of them are competent investigators with a solid background of history, sociology, psychology, and languages. Then too, few editors realize the importance of the new approach, for they are largely self-taught amateurs who have achieved a post of editorial importance.

It is gratifying to know how much Minnesota has contributed, in positive fashion, to the maturing of folk culture. Certainly, the International Institute of St. Paul has been in many ways a pioneer. Alice Sickels' book, *Around the World in St. Paul*, was in some ways a unique contribution. The Folk Arts Foundation of America steadily and gradually is making its influence felt. Perhaps some of you heard last summer the series of folk broadcasts sent out over the air by KUOM as a joint enterprise with the foundation. It seemed to me that the dramatizations of racial cookery, Paul Bunyan, and Uncle Sam were extremely well-done. Written by students in the University of Minnesota school of journalism, the scripts could not help but enlarge the vision of the authors as well as of the public. Stimulus has been given this folk movement by the creation of fellowships in regional writing. Then, too, the Minnesota Historical Society has ever been on the alert to promote interest in folk culture. Within the past year, the society has exhibited special collections of early firearms, glass, weaving, and milling. And only a casual examination of the files of *Minnesota History* shows how the editors of that journal have been ever on the alert for reputable folk material. Have you read in the last issue the delightful article concerning the ballad entitled "The Beauty of the West"? It is well worth your time, not only for itself, but also as an example of what may be done in folk research.

Folklore, then, offers much in the way of personal enjoyment and is a definite contribution to the understanding of a culture. There is still plenty of room for the person who is just interested and who wishes to collect. And there is a vast territory wherein the scholar may roam, forage at will, and come up with most significant information. There is plenty of room for everybody, and more fun than you would think possible in this troubled world.





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