Shingling the Fog and Other Plains Lies: Tall Tales of the Great Plains.
by Roger Welsch.
Pp. 160, bibliographic notes, informant appendix, motif index.

Reviewed by Kenneth A. Thigpen

Shingling the Fog and Other Plains Lies is a collection of narratives and narrative fragments which are associated in one way or another with the Great Plains and especially with the state of Nebraska. These are woven together by the author's commentary, often drawn from his own experiences on the Great Plains. Descriptive chapter headings -- "Rough Weather," "Fabulous Land," "Big Men," "Strange Critters," "Hard Times" -- indicate the slots into which the narratives are dropped by the author. This quaint topical categorization produces some interesting results, as when several versions of the well known tall tale, "The Marvelous Hunt," are included in the chapter labelled "Big Men."

The volume is subtitled "Tall Tales of the Great Plains" on the jacket cover (which bears an illustration of the cow that is carried forty feet into the air by the rapidly growing sunflower stalk to which it is haltered), but not on the title page. This is significant because the author promotes the idea of a generic distinction between tall tale and lie which he does not adequately resolve. The reader is only informed that, while both tales and lies are fabricated with at least a soupçon of narrative ingredient, the difference is that lies are usually shorter than tales. To compound this vagueness, the "gallery of American folk heroes" concept is drawn into the Plains setting for the purpose of suggesting a distinction between the tall tale hero and the legendary hero, only to have the question lightly skirted.

The quandary in which the regional folklorist too often must operate -- that of trying to produce a collection which will please the professional folklorist as well as the general reader (the latter probably regarded by the publisher as the most promising customer) has apparently plagued Welsch in producing Shingling the Fog. A motif index and list of informants serve as scholarly trappings to placate the academics while the commentary is geared more to the "Booster" general audience. But the list of informants is merely a list, giving no more than the names and towns of each, some of whom have been contacted by mail and are not actually oral informants at all. The motif index too prompts a negative comment as in what is evidently a printing error a series of motifs has been repeated (pages 159 - 160). One must also question the absence of any obscene tales in the collection. Is it possible that the inhabitants of the Great Plains are really so pure minded? Again one suspects mindfulness of middle class Nebraska readers as a prime impulse for the collection.

A lack of theoretical consciousness is another flaw academic folklorists find in regional folklore collections. Welsch has a thesis, but it is too thin to sustain the work as a whole. He proposes the radical theory that pioneer Plainsmen possessed folklore. Not too surprising to many folklorists, it may nevertheless be thought provoking for a typical Omaha book browser to encounter the argument that folk genres of culture are functional forms of subsistence culture. But an analogy facilely drawn between Eskimo oral traditions and Plains lies is best not pursued any farther than it is.

The collection of narratives in Shingling the Fog is derived from a variety of sources. Items collected directly by the author have been transcribed
from memory -- admittedly not precise tests. Other texts have been taken from letters written to the author by corresponding informants. Many of the narratives in the book are reprinted from a column in the weekly Nebraska Farmer. Stories were submitted to a liar's contest sponsored by the paper which lasted from December 6, 1924 to February 28, 1925. The prolific response to the column demonstrates widespread interest in a regional yarnspinning tradition, yet the extent to which any single narrative is a traditional Plains story is not conjectured. Nor is there any reference to other such lying contests from which folklore has been gleaned, such as the Norwegian Skipper Tales described in Gustav Henningsen's "The Art of Perpendicular Lying" (Journal of the Folklore Institute, 1965). Literary works by Mari Sandoz and Mark Twain provide another source for tall tales of the Great Plains included in Shingling the Fog.

Although the format of the book is not convenient for a comparative use in the study of the tall tale genre, it does provide a full and rich impression of the windy in frontier folklore. Weisch also conveys his appreciation for the Plains country and the people who live there. Furthermore, the book is fairly interesting reading matter, diverting for both the folklorist and the "Booster".


Reviewed by Juerg Solothurnmann

This is the second yearbook published by the Austrian Institut fuer Jazzforschung (Institute for Jazz Research) in Graz and the International Society for Jazz Research. It contains essays, reports, small contributions, and book reviews in German or English, all of varying value.

Josef Kotek (Praha) recalls in "Eine Generation im Banne des Jazz" (A Generation under the Spell of Jazz) the early days when Europe got in touch with this new music called jazz. He especially analyzes relations between "serious" and jazz music in Bohemia from the beginnings till 1935. Apart from being very informative, this historical article shows again how the European intellectuals felt about jazz as the symbol of something fresh and revoltingly new as opposed to the fin-de-siecle atmosphere in the arts and social life. While Americans like Gershwin tried to make jazz more "cultivated," the young Czechoslovakian composers tried to create a new democratic style (Gebrauchsmusik) based on jazz. It seems that only the lack of information about what jazz really was and the arrival of fascism prevented a further development of this trend.

"Black Light and White Shadow: Notes for a History of American Negro Music" by Ernest Borneman is actually excerpts of a larger work, which the author has planned for several years. Borneman always had peculiar ideas but also a provocative way of thinking in regard to Afro-American music. Thus, his contribution contains a lot of interesting viewpoints and information, but also opinions which reveal a considerable amount of ignorance about newer