

WHAT IS FOLKLORE?

Every juvenile, middle-aged, and senile folklorist is condemned to grapple with the question "What is Folklore?" In my relatively juvenile years I framed the statement that Larry Danielson quoted from my Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers (1952) in his pithy summation of our perpetual puzzle (Folklore Forum, I, No.3). No longer juvenile -- I leave to others to determine my present status -- I offer an altered concept, departing from the conventional genres and aiming at what might be called the unofficial culture.

This re-definition was written for the brochure 1968 Festival of American Folklife issued by the Smithsonian Institution.

Folklore is the culture of the people. It is the hidden submerged culture lying in the shadow of the official civilization about which historians write. Schools and churches, legislatures and courts, books and concerts represent the institutions of civilization. But surrounding them are other cultural systems that directly govern the ideas, beliefs, and behavior of most of the world's peoples. Official religion is found in ecclesiastical creeds and doctrines, but the religion of the folk lives in legends of saints, miracles wrought by the prophets, blessings and charms and rituals learned in the family as safeguards against demons. Political electioneering is the official process, but inherited political prejudices, biases, rumors, and suspicions that find daily utterance belong to the politics of the folk. Formal learning is thrust at the schoolboy in classroom and textbook, but his notions about sex and power and life's goals are molded by the age-old lore he drinks in from his peers. The written literature of classic authors stands in contrast to the subterranean oral expression and the lowly channels of print that permeate civilized as well as less literate societies. Medical doctors, drugstore prescriptions, and hospitals share the solution of health problems with faith healers and home remedies. Judges may regulate divorce actions and property rights, but the practitioners of magic reveal and deal with illicit lovers, thieves, witches, and fortune hunters.

Early in the nineteenth century, intellectuals in Germany and England stumbled on and began to study this hidden culture that lay all around them. Anthropologists would discover faraway cultures. Folklorists were discovering their own, and finding unsuspected revelations and rewards.

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