

A MODEST RESPONSE

Frank de Caro's excellent suggestions ("A Modest Proposal" in FF I:3) of three possibilities for short contributions to the FOLKLORE FORUM prompt me to respond in kind by amplifying his ideas, especially since his first suggestion involves one of my own publications.

(1) The origin of the shaggy dog story -- both the genre and the term -- is one question I hoped readers of my 1963 JAF classification would try to solve. Not only is Partridge's memory of an example from 1929 (misprinted as 1939 in JAF) antedated by other sources I cite, but even earlier examples of individual stories may be found (although my Sumerian "parallel" is pretty far-fetched). I've already got Freud's ca. 1912 allusion to B561 in my notes, along with several other later discoveries, such as the allusion to B800 "The Golden Screw in the Navel of Moby Dick" (1951), which I missed completely when I read the novel.

[While we are thinking of Freud's Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, however, let me point out another interesting variant of a peice of American folklore there. Freud paraphrases a story about a Hungarian village official who decreed that a convicted blacksmith should not be hanged for a serious crime, but a tailor instead, "as there were two tailors in the village and only one blacksmith" (Modern Library edition, p.781). This clearly parallels the situation in the western ballad "Old Judge Duffy" (see my text and notes in WF, XXIV(1965), 240-241) where a judge decrees:

We have two Chinese laundrymen, everyone knows,
Why not save the poor blacksmith and hang one of those?]

(2) The Great Proverb Collecting Project has been under the direction of Margaret M. Bryant of Brooklyn College for years. Professor Bryant makes annual reports on her committee's progress at the ADS meetings (with the HLA at Christmastime). People who are interested in the project may wish to communicate with her. Her home address is 222 Hicks Street, Brooklyn, New York, 11201.

(3) The air-pollution-yellow-house plague legend has not been reported in the Salt Lake Valley, and probably will not be until enough Eastern (that includes Californian) flatland tourists start to cross the mountains in gas buggies to give us a real smog problem. But I expect you're right about the anxiety factor underlying this tale; think of all the urban belief tales that concern foreign matter in food, infestations by insects, poor personal hygiene, etc.

I'd like to raise a query about another recent story which I have seen only in two newspaper accounts. It takes the form of a supposed letter from some native construction worker to his employers describing a chain reaction accident the worker suffered when trying to lower some bricks or tiles from a roof to the ground using a rope and pulley. The barrel goes down and the worker goes up; the barrel bottom falls out -- the bricks drop -- and the worker comes down hard; then the barrel drops down again on top of the worker's head.

The first clipping I have come from a student who thought it was from the Akron [Ohio?] Beacon Journal "about 1960." The United Press story, datelined London, reports the tale from the Manchester Guardian and attributes it to a "bricklayer in the Barbados." My second clipping is probably from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. It is datelined Saigon, South Viet Nam, June 7, and carries the legend "The Chicago Daily News-Post-Dispatch Special Dispatch, Copyright, 1966." Here we have a Vietnamese worker writing the note. Both are phrased in somewhat broken English and are nearly identical in content and phrasing; for instance, each concludes "I respectfully request (or 'ask for') sick leave." Surely some other folklorists must have clipped this from other papers, but I haven't met any others yet.

Thoughts of a dry brain in that awkward season between trout fishing and skiing.

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QUERY

I am writing to ask your assistance with a problem that has arisen in connection with the annotation of one of the stories I am editing for two volumes of short fiction and miscellaneous essays in the new Iowa-California edition of the writings of Mark Twain.

In Mark Twain's "A True Story", (first published in Atlantic Monthly, November, 1874) there is an expression which may well be a folk saying, but which I have been unable to locate. The narrator of the story is a former slave, whose tale is based on the experiences of one Aunty Cord, a servant at Quarry Farm, where the Clemenses often spent the summer. At one point, explaining that she was by no means a run-of-the-mill person, she exclaims: "I wa'nt born in de mash to be fool' by trash! I's one of de old Blue Hen's Chicken's, I is." That statement then becomes a sort of refrain, which occurs whenever she is called upon to assert her authority over others.

The "Blue Hen's Chickens" allusion provides no problem. But I am wondering if the first exclamation is an actual folk saying. Clemens, of course, may have made it up, or it may have been original with the actual Aunty Cord. What makes me think that it was or is a folk saying is that the author first wrote "I ain't no houn' dog mash to be trod on by common trash!" and then sometime later went through his manuscript and in each instance changed it to "I wa'nt born in de mash...."

Taylor and Whiting, Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases, 1820-80 (Bleknep Press, 1958), p.230, quotes the phrase from Mark Twain's story and suggests that "mash" is "marsh", citing Krapp, Eng. Lang. in Am., 1925, II, 222-24 for the "mash" spelling. But the "houn' dog mash" does not seem related to "marsh". I would appreciate information relating to this problem.

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