

## IS THE A.F.S. ON ITS A.S.S.?

Most of us would be inclined to answer such an upstart question with an indignant "No." We have a pleasant little society which is generally close-knit, strong and growing in vitality. Despite vigorous controversies we are not dangerously split into ideological factions. Nor has anyone felt the need to propell the Society into the political arena beyond the scope of social concern appropriate to the uniqueness of the discipline itself. In many respects we are in an enviable position. Yet we should not refrain from asking whether the A.F.S. has perhaps not held back on extending itself into certain areas into which it might profitably proceed. We are not referring to any sort of wholesale involvement in social action programs, although we hope that individual folklorists will give increasing attention to the relationship between our particular interests and current social problems. Rather we might begin moving away from the concerns of internal scholarly dialogue and publishing toward a broader perspective simply by promoting our subject to the general public and by solidifying, strengthening and clarifying the position of our discipline within a troubled academic establishment.

To begin with, what, if anything, does the "general public" think about folklore? Now, the whole issue of "popularization" seems at the moment to be a dormant one with academic and other scholarly folklorists. We don't need to feel threatened just now by public misunderstanding of our subject. But this is no reason not to take the initiative in bringing sound information to the public. The interest is there (if perhaps a bit below the surface at present); the folksong revival and the success of B. A. Botkin's interesting (and once controversial) anthologies prove that. A carefully organized public education program, planned by the A.F.S. and produced cooperatively by its members, ought certainly to be seriously considered. Such a project might, for example, include a series of newspaper features, say thirty short, illustrated articles to be spread over as many weeks. These might survey the whole range of American folklore. Each could be written by a specialist in a certain area under a general series editor. Thus sound scholarship would be assured and the public would receive the best information on folklore available. These features might be circulated free of charge; better, they could be sold through a news features service with the proceeds going to the Society. Similar articles might be made available to elementary and high school publications, which often reach a vast audience (Senior Scholastic alone enjoys a circulation of 2,600,000). We are clearly in no position to attack the "evils" perpetrated by the "popularizers," the purveyors of the folksy and of fakelore to the young unless we can offer a strong alternative.

The Society might also assume a more vigorous role in promoting folklore within the academic milieu. Individual folklore professors promote folklore offerings at a given institution; sometimes, when they move elsewhere, the interest lingers and a folklorist replacement is brought in. Or sometimes several folklorists find themselves at a single university and a program is born. Yet this is a rather haphazard procedure. Instead, the A.F.S. could begin to systematically cultivate interest in folklore courses, and even departments, among deans and department chairmen at institutions where no such interest exists now. Quite probably some

(continued on page 64)

White, George Cary. Immigration and assimilation: a survey of social thought and public opinion, 1882-1914. (Ph.D.). 1952.

---Compiled by Robert D. Bethke

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administrators will pay attention to an inquiry from a long-established national learned society. At some point in the future it would be splendid to have a Society president, secretary-treasurer or other officer who would be willing to devote time (say while on sabbatical for a term) to such a project, perhaps even travelling around the United States and Canada on a round of personal promotional visits and lecture stops. What such a coordinated campaign might come to is open to question, but universities these days are often seeking unique programs. Folklore which puts emphasis on ethnic groups and black studies will perhaps find a ready welcome.

Likewise the Society might begin to actively seek out monies for the establishment of a central fund for dissertation year fellowships and for the support of research projects to be undertaken by teams of scholars under the auspices of the Society. We are perhaps naive about the ways of foundation grants, but it seems likely that an established learned society with a long and distinguished history would be able to procure relatively substantial funds for dissertation research and for projects to be undertaken by scholars, jointly, under its auspices. The availability of dissertation year funds might stimulate the interest in folkloric subjects in non-folklore departments; the availability of research funds would hopefully put the cooperative spirit which certainly exists on a national level among folklorists into practice.

All the foregoing suggestions have been offered more or less at random and it may perhaps be felt that none of them are really viable. Be that as it may, the point to be made is that we ought to make the Society move in new directions, even if the only tangible result is to make the A.F.S. cohere as a group oriented toward cooperative action as well as intellectual intra-action. The Society has done relatively little in the way of promoting folklore outside the ranks of its membership, and it has done little to promote really close cooperation among its members in joint ventures. For example, we have, as a national society, taken no strong measures to support the proposed American Folklife Foundation; and our committees have generally limited their activities to annual reports and uncoordinated individual activity. We are certainly in need of a much stronger collective self-identity.