

OF OXEN AND EDITORS

"Is this supposed to be good? The ox is smarter than he is." Referring to the Paul Bunyan cycle, this comment from a student in my "minus" section of eleventh-grade literature represented both a culmination of and a new beginning to my backdoor entrance into the study of folklore.

Very early in my teaching I developed a decided preference for American literature rather than English for two reasons: first, some of the things in the English literature text, I couldn't stand to read myself; second, there seemed to be more possibility of getting high-school boys to listen to "and I have seen your painted women under the street lamps luring the farm boys" than of expecting them to pay attention to "Flower in the crannied wall, I pluck thee out of the crannies..." The poem, "Chicago," may be dated and obviously overstated beyond mere hyperbole, but it makes more sense to a sixteen-year old young man than some guy pulling up flowers by the roots and talking to them. No, I didn't teach in a boy's school, but another one of my perversities has been--is--that it is important to find good literature the boys will read. The girl who is determined to sigh over Elizabeth Barrett Browning will do it without any help from me.

This same perversity, not any knowledge of folklore, led me to the decision that ballads should be sung, not read in class. I had guitar-playing students sing them, but too often their instruments were the electrified variety. So I bought a guitar and learned a few chords. I used records--at first, Joan Baez and Josh White; later Woody Guthrie, and one of my "I-hate-English" students discovered Leadbelly and Brownie McGhee, and the Library of Congress collection (at the time, I was teaching in Arlington, Virginia). The songs evoked comments from, "Boy, is that weird!" to, "I wonder how many beers they gave that guy before he finally agreed to sing?" But they were listening, even noting differences in style and texts. At the end of the unit when I made the inevitable assignment, the inevitable groans followed. They all tried, though, even those whose handwriting was still unfamiliar at the middle of the year, and all demonstrated some understanding of the ballad structure.

The same phenomenon happened every time-- in different classes, different schools, different states. I would like to think it was my superior teaching ability, but the "sleepers" still slept through other units. Was it, then, merely the entertainment value? I never did get beyond being a third-fret guitarist. Perhaps it was solely the current folk-song revival. Whatever it was, I was all for it. Anything which generated that much interest deserved more attention, so I read whatever I could find. The local bookstores carried the Lomax books.

After several years of skimming over or skipping the Paul Bunyan material, I finally decided to include it with an especially hard-to-interest class. If I had tried out that material with one of my advanced classes, the students might have responded in the best tradition of all the training we had given them, i.e. what is the symbolism? Why is the ox blue? What is the significance of the name Babe? But my "OK so I have to take this course, but I don't have to like it" class came up with the observation that the ox was smarter than Paul.

Every time he had a big problem, he knew just what to do; he called for Babe, his big blue ox. I answered with, "Let's see what else we can find."

Here I must acknowledge the invaluable assistance of an excellent librarian. We went through every source she had and ordered every book the budget would allow. Many weren't any better than Paul Bunyan and my eleventh-grade critics said so, but of some, such as the Mike Fink collection, they said, "Why don't they put stuff like this in the textbooks?"

I knew nothing of the "fakelore" controversy, and could give students no guidelines, but they sorted it out on their own. Some stories they shared with their friends (Hey, Mickey, who was that guy you read? Don said he was good). Others received the Paul Bunyan treatment. There was no in-between. The fancied-up versions were simply rejected.

My classes complained repeatedly that textbook editors always included stories which they, as adults, thought the students ought to like. I thought the complaints were justified, and was challenged to discover what folklore was really about. I intend to return to my "slow" high school classes, after studying at the Folklore Institute. Maybe next time around I can teach them as much as they taught me, and learn why blue oxen and slow learners are smarter than textbook editors.

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To: All Folklorists
From: Dick Reuss, Wayne State U.

Subject: Hair (mine, not the play)

It has been suggested to me by an eminent fashion designer and scratch-board artist of my acquaintance that I would do well to reshape my image in the guise of one or more distinguished hairy and/or bearded avant-garde leaders of 20th century American culture. This coincidentally harmonizes with my own internal predispositions of the moment, and so I am inviting my associates to tender me their advice as to what design, so to speak, my external facial appearance should follow in the future. (Plastic surgery being expensive and decapitation too final, I am limiting the discussion to considerations of sideburns, beard, hair, mustache, and other hairy vestiges which at present or in the future might possibly encountered on my head.) To wit: should I let my hair grow as long as Tiny Tim's (or Ellen Stekert's)? Should I grow a beard like Kirk Douglas (or Barre Toelken)? Should I crop my hair closely the way Yul Brynner (or Dan Crowley) does? Should I cultivate a walrus mustache like Henry Glassie? Friends and fellow inmates: here is your chance to play God and exercise those graffitti instincts. What is your pleasure? On this or another sheet of paper, sketch or paste in your conception of what a rising young folklorist, Dick Reuss, age 29, should look like from the neck up. Label your drawing and attach an explanation in 25 words or less. (Libel suits are hereby waived but shotgun blasts in the night are not.) Return to me at the Folklore Archive. Drawings and other suggestions will be graded on neatness, spelling, originality, and potential practical application. A qualified and impartial judge (the eminent fashion designer alluded to above) will make all final decisions. Laugh all you want, but send those cards and letters in, folks. Winner receives two dandruff seeds and a forged signature of Allen Ginsberg.