

CONTEMPORARY OCCUPATIONAL HEROES

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate narratives of several occupational groups in an attempt to establish a connection between the study of heroes and the study of occupational folklore. The material I present was collected in conjunction with my duties at the Transportation Project of the 1976 Smithsonian Institution Festival of American Folklife where I worked with bus drivers, cab drivers, railroad workers, airline workers, and members of the Coast Guard.¹ My duties included both pre-festival field research and on-site presentation with some of the groups.

Before going further, I wish to deal with the problem of ambiguous terminology, i.e., the word hero which I will be using throughout this article. The problem with this word is that it is widely used in two senses: to refer to an individual who is highly regarded for some spectacular personal attribute, ability, or accomplishment, and in a literary sense to refer to the protagonist of a narrative, regardless of the protagonist's qualities or of the audience's feelings for him. In this paper I will consider a hero to be any protagonist of a narrative. We will see almost immediately that there are many of these protagonists that clearly fit the description of the word hero--that is, an individual who is admired for his abilities. One significant fact that has so far emerged from my investigations of the narratives is that there are cycles of tales that surround certain charismatic individuals.² For instance, I have so far collected eight stories about a retired airline captain from five different informants. The following are three typical examples:

We had a captain, his name was Sy Bentner. He's since retired. Back in the days when we originally started flying we were flying mail in the old bi-planes with open cockpits, and the only thing they had in those days for landing gear was a single light under the wing. And Sy used to fly the mail run between New York City and Buffalo, New York. He had the Buffalo-New York express train that he'd fly day in and day out, he'd pass that train and he'd wave to the guys going over. Coming back at night he couldn't wave at them because it was night and they couldn't see him. One night he happened to be going along and he saw them coming along a long straight stretch, and he knew the countryside, so he decided to go down and say hello to them, but he did it in a very unusual way, in that he put his landing light down and then he got down on the railroad tracks approximately ten feet from the tracks, and then when he came up around the bend towards the train he turned the light on. That's the night they flattened all the tires on the train of the New York Express and we almost lost a captain!

There was another story about that guy, when he was flying the DC 3s, they were flying along. They had a new stewardess, she was pretty green, so they thought they'd pull a trick on her. So they opened both windows and they decided they'd crawl back in the coat department and turn the auto pilot on. So they got out of their seat, and they crawled back in the coat department, and then they rang the bell for the stew, and when she came up there, no pilots, the windows open, and she fainted!

He could really think fast, too. Every once in a while crew schedule will call us because they've had storms or flights will be cancelled and they need to grab us really quick for a flight. And they called

Sy Bentner one time in the middle of the night for a trip, and nobody really wants to get up out of bed in the middle of the night and take a trip. He reaches over and he answers the telephone, and the crew scheduler says, "Captain Bentner, we have a trip for you tonight." And he goes, "Ah, ah, honey, I think this call is for your husband" and he hands the telephone to his wife. They never called him in the middle of the night again.

I have so far recorded three stories about a "rugged engineer," Old Sam Barnes. The following is one good example:

Now, we were talking about steering trains, and old Sam Barnes, that fella, I worked a lot with him, and like I tell you, he was rugged, and he could cuss like a drunken sailor when he felt like it, and he had a piercing loud voice.

At that time we had huge gangs of track men, men that repaired the track, put down new track, there'd be maybe two or three section gangs in one group. And old Sam, he'd do it time and time again, he'd pull that steam engine up alongside a group of men, put the brake on, and he'd open those cocks on the cylinders, and leave the steam fly out, and he'd lean a way out the window, he'd say, "All you men stand back! I'm gonna turn this thing around!" And they'd just scatter like chickens. He done it time and time again, and those men worked on that rail, they knew that engineer didn't steer that engine, but if he said he's gonna turn it around, they got out of the way of old Sam.

Sy Bentner has a notoriety among airline pilots and flight attendants that appears to be nationwide. This is not surprising considering the great mobility inherent in airline occupations. Old Sam is the subject of stories among the trainmen in Cumberland, Maryland. Engineers have a fairly restricted area in which they travel (200 miles), and job mobility seems to be a major factor in the distribution of these stories.

While there are occupational tales about particular individuals, it would be a mistake not to also examine the many narratives in which the protagonist is anonymous. The following is a story told by an engineer about an engineer:

I'd like to tell the Christmas story first. It didn't happen on my division. It happened on the St. Louis division, which runs from St. Louis, Missouri, to Evansville, Indiana. It was on Christmas Eve night, and they were getting ready to put the engine on the train. It was snowing heavy snow, of course real cold, on Christmas Eve. It was a limited train, it was a fast train. And a lot of people, they seem to think sometimes that railroaders are a rough bunch, that most of 'em are rough talking. But most of 'em have big hearts.

So while they were trying there, getting ready to leave, the trainmaster was up there, and of course the engineer and fireman. Steam engine days.

This little man came up to the engine and said, "I wonder if there is any chance of this train stopping at Birkness tonight?"--which was a little station out there in the boondocks.

The trainmaster said, "No way. No way can we stop. This is a fast train. You'll have to wait till in the morning and catch the local train."

So the little fella said, "Well, my wife is very sick." He said, "She may be dying, and I'd like to get home." Trainmaster says, "I'm

sorry, this train doesn't stop at Birkness."

So the conductor came up with orders to give the engineer, and he overheard the conversation, and the engineer told the conductor, "Tell that man to get on. Tell him to get on the train."

So as they came into Birkness, the engineer shut off. He told the fireman, "It's night time, light the coal oil torch." He said, "We're going to stop here." He stopped, took a big heavy wrench off, got off and started beating on one of the rods of the engine. Through the gloom back there he saw the little fella get off. He got on the engine and whistled off, left town.

The station was Birkness. The engineer had taken it on himself to stop that train and let that gentleman off.

Compare the above to the following story, told by a trainman (one of the other railroad occupations):

We were on a coal train and our hoghead--we called him Oxhead cause he was kind of dumb--but he's awful hungry. He wants to make every city he can make. So we come up to Somerset and I told him, I said, "Now take it easy going through these switches, we don't have any radio back here and you just take it easy 'cause there's snow on the ground, it's kind of hard walking."

Well, he did take it easy, first half of the train. When the last half of the train started through the switches, that man was making time. I dropped down, made the switch, and then I started making tracks. I wanted to catch that cab, man, 'cause it was cold. And snow just about that deep. I took off running just as hard as I could run, and I was grabbing for the rear end of that caboosie. Just grabbing. Grabbing.

It wasn't about an eighth of a mile, man. Old Jake played out. And there was a highway there, and these people, whenever the train goes by, that traffic just backs up. 'Course they're cussing you, shaking their fists at you, faces long. I made it up as far as that highway, and a young woman came up, and she said, "Mister, that train ran off and left you." I said, "Yes ma'am, it did." She said, "What are you going to do about that?" I said, "I guess I'm going to have to start walking." She said, "How far are you going to walk?" I said, "Well, it's fifty-five miles to Cumberland, I hope to goodness somebody comes along and picks me up by then." She said, "Why don't you get in the car with me," she said, "maybe we can catch it."

So the highway doesn't go through the mountains like the railroad does. We go down by the creek, through the cut in the mountains. The highway goes around. So she said, "Where do you think we can catch the train?" I said, "Oh, well, we're going to have to go down to Rockwood." And, anyhow, the car was faster than the train, and I was standing at the switch waiting for my train to catch me.

Well, Old Oxhead, he wanted to get home in a hurry. But when he saw those switches lined up and he saw me standing there, he brought that train down and he said, "Jake," he said, "I knew you was fast," he said, "but how in the hell did you get down here ahead of us?"

From these narratives, certain character types emerge which, although anonymous, are cast in a positive light and clearly embody positive values associated with the occupation. The engineer in the Christmas story, for instance, is a type, a symbol of positive engineer qualities. He is an abstraction consistent in ways with the Old Sam story in

that he is ultimately in complete control of the situation. It is he who decides that the train will stop, despite the yardmaster or anyone else. He is in charge, he defies the rules while at the same time defining the quality of compassion that is important to the narrator.

When one speaks of folk heroes to the general public, it is often expected that one will talk about Paul Bunyan. When one speaks of occupational heroes to an audience of folklorists, it is often expected that one will speak of John Henry or Casey Jones, or perhaps logging or cowboy heroes. My investigation of occupational narrative indicates that the occupational hero thrives in the stories that workers swap with each other and that occupational heroes are an ongoing and vital narrative symbol, and that study of the contemporary occupational hero is an area largely untapped.

It appears that the majority of occupational heroes are tricksters, although there are stories which prize physical skill and feats of strength as well.³ For instance, one excellent storyteller, Jake Hunter, tells the Old Sam stories--which cast engineers in a positive light--because he worked with and admired Sam personally. Jake is not an engineer; he is a trainman, and most of his stories follow a trainman-as-trickster versus engineer-as-foil (or fool) pattern. He often tells stories about himself which follow this classic pattern. He also tells a story about a brakeman who performed remarkable feats of strength.

There is obvious complexity in the uses and meanings of the various heroes. Variables such as narrator, industry (e.g., railroading), job (e.g., trainman), company (e.g., Chessie System) affect who tells what story to whom about whom. The dynamics of the storytelling situation, and the symbolic, social, and personal functions of the various hero figures for the participants in the event, are areas of great concern into which I am conducting field study. On the basis of the texts alone, however, we can reach some tentative generalizations regarding the attributes of the heroes that may serve as hypotheses for future research.

In the stories I have heard, most of the heroes are tricksters, although, as I have said, there were occasional stories of physical skill and/or courage. Interestingly, it seems that the stories told by those occupying subordinate positions within an industry are more likely to be job-specific. These narratives provide an index of the workers' concerns: foolish bosses, difficult passengers, getting left off the train, and so on. The heroes of the stories are able to deal with these situations successfully, even triumphantly. Witness Jake, who, although left off the train by an uncaring engineer, manages to greet him at the bottom of the hill, doing his job, "ahead" of him in more ways than one. These heroes manifest a control over problems that are very specific to the job.

The term "subordinate occupations" refers to those jobs which are important to the overall industry, but in which the worker does in fact have to take orders from an authority figure who ultimately is responsible for the proper execution of the duties of all involved. The authority figure has the more glamorous occupation and is generally recognized as running the show. Trainmen and brakemen are in subordinate positions vis-à-vis engineers; likewise, flight crews are answerable to the captain. A dual response to this situation is evident in the narratives told by those in subordinate positions. Some stories recognize the authority figure who is particularly admirable and skilled in his work, such as Old Sam, while most of them are of the trickster-versus-authority figure type and seek to compensate vicariously for the subordination that the worker experiences in his job.

The pilots and engineers seem to display a more generalized control. The stories about

Sy and Old Sam seem to suggest that they can do almost anything. This is due, at least in part, to the personalities of these men themselves. Sy Bentner is in fact a practical joker who would gain notoriety by the nature of his exploits (not all of which involve airplanes or the airline industry) in any setting. Nevertheless, these stories are told by pilots to pilots and are relevant to that occupation.

Pilots and engineers seem unrestricted in their stories, socially free to define their own rules. These include job-related rules: the engineer decides when and where the train will stop, Sy lands the plane where he wants to for the hell of it. Although this indicates great flying skill, it goes beyond flying skill to a disregard for, a transcendence of, the rules of society at large. The responsibility of final decision making that is part of being a pilot or engineer seems exaggerated in these tales, and there seem to be hints of greater abilities (turning the train, flying the plane empty). There is an indication that these men are somehow so individualistic and free of social constraints that the manifestation of individuality in the job situation is only one aspect of it, and does not fully express it. Their individuality is transcendent; they define their own reality. Sy decides when he will go to work. They are responsible for their reality just as they are, in real life, held finally responsible (accountable) in their occupation. This transcendent quality is not apparent in the narratives of the subordinate occupations in which the heroes are concerned with job-specific skills and concerns.

Further study, extensive collecting, and intensive follow-up interviewing are necessary. Probably all occupations have some stories in which a trickster takes care of a typical job concern, others in which someone demonstrates great physical skill or courage, and still others about members of the occupation that are not stories specifically about the occupation. Questions of emphasis, ratio, storyteller, audience, purpose, meaning, and function have to be studied, but early indications concerning characterization are that most contemporary occupational heroes are tricksters.

Trickster stories about workers in subordinate positions describe heroes who manage to overcome or reverse certain limited, job-specific situations. The stories describe very specific job situations and principles and are relevant to those situations in much the same way as proverbs are dependent on the proper social circumstances before they can be used meaningfully. The stories about charismatic individuals such as Sy are different in quality. The men themselves do act in consistently remarkable ways over time--not just occasionally--thus giving rise to a number of stories. They are in superordinate positions and their stories document this. They too are usually tricksters, but, unlike their subordinates, they are not limited to certain specific situations; they engage instead in open-ended practical jokes. The subordinate heroes are tricksters who react to situations; the superordinate heroes are tricksters who create situations.

Notes

1. A version of this paper was read at the 1976 meetings of the American Folklore Society in Philadelphia, Pa. I would like to thank Dr. Robert H. Byington for reading earlier drafts of it and for his many helpful suggestions and comments, from which I have benefitted greatly.
2. Wallace, Anthony F. C., "Revitalization Movements," American Anthropologist 58 (1956), 264-281.
3. Dorson, Richard M., America in Legend, New York, 1974. Dorson indicates that the occupational hero is usually a trickster throughout chapter two, "The Later National Period: The Economic Impulse," particularly p. 170.