

HOW I BECAME "THE TV MAN":
VIDEO FIELDWORK IN THE CALUMET REGION

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On a muggy Indian Summer day in early October 1976, yellow-tinged sulphurous smog hung in the East Chicago air as I ducked into the drug store on the corner of Broadway and Main. While I waited in line at the cash register, a skinny, blond-headed nine-year-old boy in shorts and a striped tee-shirt pointed at me and began to chant, "The TV man, the TV man" I stared at him, amazed, then smiled in embarrassment and understanding. I'd been recognized, even though several months had passed since I ended my total of six weeks of field research. For the first time, I realized that to him and to other residents of the Calumet Region I was indeed "the TV Man," who had videotaped their folkloric events. I would rather have been identified and remembered as "the folklorist," but for most people such a label is meaningless, while an interviewer with a camera in hand is easily pegged.

My work in the Region had involved extensive use of a videotape recorder, which intimately affected the nature of my folklore field research and my role among the informants. By October 1976, I had been making regular visits to the Calumet Region for over a year as a fieldworker in the Folklore Institute's Urban Folklore Team Project. Richard M. Dorson, the project director, had given the seven fieldworkers involved some general research guidelines, but essentially we were allowed a free rein to develop out own approaches and techniques. Even what we were to look for was not rigidly spelled out. Thus I went into the Region only with the understanding that I was to deal primarily with the South Slavic community, do some general ethnographic observation and collect their folklore--both the rural imports into the city and the lore of urban origin.

I had been allotted six weeks of field time, forty-two days, which I elected to break up into many short

visits, because I was curious and anxious to get started even though I was then taking a full course load and teaching a discussion section of an American folklore course at Indiana University. From September 1975 until May 1976, at least once a month (usually more often) I would drive up to Gary on a Thursday or Friday to spend a long weekend. I spent these early field forays getting acquainted with people and orienting myself. The very first day, a Friday, I drove many miles around the Region, trying to determine the boundaries and ethnic composition of neighborhoods, the names of major streets, the location of landmarks. This drive proved immediately valuable in my early contacts with people, since names of streets, neighborhoods, towns, and steel mills seemed to be sprinkled liberally in all conversations.

During this initial stage, I always took along both my tape recorder and still camera, only to find that I did not use them very much. I was still a stranger, just starting to become acquainted with people, and I found myself--less on the basis of a conscious decision than because of a personal impulse about the moment of encounter--reluctant to use equipment. In the midst of an informal conversation, I felt awkward and embarrassed to ask if I might turn on a tape recorder. I sensed that using the machine would change the nature of the ongoing conversation, would establish a certain officiality that would bring with it an impersonality I mistrusted. I simultaneously feared the tape recorder would fix my identity too rigidly as "that researcher--that something like a sociologist or social worker." The identity of the people I talked to could alter also: our conversation would become an interview with each of the individuals responding according to a narrowly defined role. I feared that I would not be able to evaluate the comments on the tape. Was the person sincere or was he or she giving me an "official line," the kind of guarded posture one assumes when faced by reporters,

researchers, or other inquisitive strangers? How important was a given topic to the people I talked to or was it only important to me? How was I perceived by these new acquaintances and how did their perception influence their answers? I sensed that if my own fieldwork was to be successful I had to first establish an open and friendly relationship before a person could become my informant.

Therefore I spent a lot of time getting to know new acquaintances and building rapport with many who proved to be important in my later work. For example, on my first visit to the home of tamburitza maker, Milan Opačić, we talked for eight hours, playing music and listening to records without ever noticing that the hours had slipped by. On one of my first evenings with Nick Tarailo, we met up with a couple of his friends and spent a long night of barhopping in South Chicago's Serbian clubs.

I filled pages with field notes after each of these encounters. Tapes of these visits might have been both more convenient and more exact, for obviously the knowledge I had gained remained largely in my head and could at best be only partially recorded in my field notes. Later, in writing up my research for publication I often could have used an informant's verbatim taped statement or specific supporting evidence, but I rarely asked a friend to repeat into my tape recorder what he had told me some time earlier. In the final analysis, what I lost in tape recorded words, I gained in rapport with and understanding of the people I encountered.

But there was a problem: I was in the field to do research, not to make friends, and I began to feel somehow deficient about my lack of tangible results. Other fieldworkers filled tape after tape with interviews, while I, seemingly unable to push the record button, continued to visit people, socialize with them, explore the Region with them. By late fall of 1975 I had made many contacts among the Region's South Slavs, had attended many cultural events, but my profile in the community was still pretty low. A few people might have recognized me as a face they had seen at a concert or a dinner or as the friend of someone they knew, but to

most of them it just was not clear what I was doing--perhaps largely because my fieldwork was still gropingly general, not goal-directed. I was vague in defining my goals and their perceptions of me were correspondingly unfocused. "The TV Man" had yet to emerge.

During our winter Gary Gang meetings in Bloomington we emphasized the making of audio-visual teaching aids as a major goal of our project. We had videotape machines on order which finally were to arrive later in the spring. I began to reorient my thinking about fieldwork, and to direct my efforts toward the production of educational videotapes. As I started to look for field situations to present visually, I re-examined folkloric aspects of certain ethnic events that had already caught my interest and tried to imagine how these might be presented on a television screen. I consulted my informants about events they felt would be especially effective. I thought about my students in Bloomington, and tried to remember which of the visual aids we had used had been successful teaching tools. When I returned to the field with a specific goal in mind--producing educational videotapes--I began to feel I was finally making progress.

I gained some training in the use of video equipment from the Monroe County Public Library in Bloomington, because, strangely enough, such training was not available to me anywhere at the University (unless I enrolled in a formal course). Soon I began to work up a schedule of events to videotape in the Region, but because of our seemingly unending hassles with the university equipment committee and the delay in obtaining our video port-a-packs, I had to keep pushing back my starting date. When the hardware finally arrived at the beginning of May, I rushed up to the Region without getting adequate field experience in using the video recorder.

Predictably my rookie attempt at videotaping was far from a total success. I chose to record a slava, a Serbian saint's day feast at the Tarailo

family home in Gary. Fellow folklorist Richard Vidutis was on hand to assist me. We set up the tape deck in an unobtrusive corner behind a living room couch and put a long extension cable on the camera, so we could move about freely without having to drag the tape deck along. We set up the camera and tripod in the dining room where the liturgy was to be performed. The priest, Father Lazic, arrived early to carry out the slava ceremony with the family, and the first shots we took were of this ritual. Only at the end of the ceremony did we think to check the deck, or our taped footage, in spite of having been warned during our early training session to shoot five seconds of tape, and then always take time to play it back. When we did check the deck, we found the tape strewn about like strands of spaghetti, spilling out over the machine and onto the living room floor. We gasped, slapped our foreheads, and felt like complete fools: we had incorrectly threaded the tape. Since many families hold their slava on this particular date, St. George's Day, and since Father Lazic had to make his rounds to many homes, he had neither the time nor the desire to attempt a re-take. Such sorry results occurred repeatedly during our fieldwork. We were, after all, novices and often neither the admonishments nor the recommendations of our brief training sessions made hard sense until we plunged into the field--until we actually saw the tangled tape.

Operating the equipment was not my only problem, now that I had set out to document my field research. In some ways the added responsibility of videotaping confused the boundaries of my personal communicative role at some of the events I attended. At the slava celebration, for example, I was well acquainted with the people and comfortable about participating in what they were doing. When the Tarailos good-naturedly twisted my arm to join in the eating and drinking of the slava, I naturally complied. But this participation proved especially critical, since I have a pretty low tolerance for alcohol. My drinking, obviously, did nothing to improve the quality of my camera work. I also became so enthusiastic during the singing of many Serbian songs that I joined in, all the while holding the microphone in my hand. The results were disastrous, yielding a soundtrack on which my voice drowns out all others. These mishaps occurred primarily because I was

trying to videotape the event without assistance. My partner, Vidutis, left for a while to visit his parents who lived nearby. Fortunately, he returned before the evening was over and took the camera from my reckless hands, much to the benefit of the remaining footage.

Through experiences such as these, we once again witnessed the reality behind the training session rules: a two-person crew is essential to properly and professionally document a complex event. One fieldworker should remain somewhat detached, free to operate the camera, while the other either interacts or perhaps holds the microphone to talk with informants. Usually a larger crew is neither necessary nor desirable; the two-person team is fairly unobtrusive in an intimate field situation.

Obviously, then, the videotape machine had an effect on the events we recorded, but the extent of its influence varied with the nature of the situation. When John Hasse and I videotaped Vojislav Rajkovic, a retired steel worker, who performed epic songs to the accompaniment of the one-stringed gusle at his home in downtown Gary, the event was understood by all of us as a taping session, not a spontaneous celebration. His house became our studio. When necessary, we stopped the camera to change the position of lights, to ask for retakes. The gusle performance became a media event, created for the videotape machine and the researcher. Anticipating the camera's eye, Mr. Rajkovic donned his suit and tie, and his wife stood beside him during the entire taping of a long epic song. The recorded material is valuable for its subject matter, but it does not capture the event as it would have occurred normally in the family's routine; the machine's presence caused both Mr. and Mrs. Rajkovic to behave more formally.

A few weeks later we videotaped Mr. Rajkovic again--this time on stage in a large church hall in South Chicago. To Mr. Rajkovic the camera's

eye was now only one small part of a large audience, and thus the videotape machine exerted minimal influence on this event. Furthermore, in contrast to the slava and the earlier recording of the gusle performance, my own participation and the presence of the camera seemed to have very little impact. The photographer's role is already well accepted at ceremonial events such as weddings, christenings, and graduations. I easily slipped into that role. Either people genuinely ignored me or they pretended to do so, just as they do before the more familiar still camera. As I had done a good deal of previous fieldwork in these communities without any equipment at all, I was able to judge with greater confidence the extent of the videotape machine's interference. Once again, as in the case of the slava, what I recorded was part of a naturally occurring event.

The fact that I began to show up at ethnic events lugging a tape deck and camera changed my image in the community--something I did not realize until much later. The bulky equipment made me much more conspicuous and my ability to operate it seemed to indicate that I was in possession of great technical skill. Most importantly, to my informants, it finally became clear just what my incomprehensible research was all about: I wanted to make movies about them! They pegged me as the "TV Man" or the "film-maker," an understandable and positively-regarded role. Whereas my earlier participatory observation had consistently been well received, I realize, in retrospect, that my informants' understanding of my research goals was vague. They were not always sure just where and how I intermittently fit into their lives.

As I pursued my videotape fieldwork, I was continually astounded at people's willingness, even eagerness, to allow us to record them. Even in delicate and sacred situations such as church services, our crew was not barred, for unlike film, the videotape camera does not require such bright lights. When we asked permission of Father Lazic to videotape an Orthodox marriage ceremony, he agreed, once told we would not have to brightly illuminate the church.

My informants perceived distinctions in my identity as "TV Man." For example, if I was already acquainted with the people, I became "Richard March who is a TV man." I had a name. In contrast, any of the fieldworkers who assisted me remained nameless, merely adjuncts of the machine. I myself played this nameless role one Sunday morning in May when several of us showed up to videotape the service at the Prayer House of Faith, a black church in Gary. Prophet Williams, the minister, was quite interested when I played back portions of the videotape on the television set in his office, asking about the operation of the equipment, its capabilities, and cost. I don't recall that he asked my name and he certainly never asked where I was from. I was just a nameless TV man.

The camera had made it easier for me to gain entrance into the church, but it circumscribed my role. I was part of a TV crew and therefore an eye of the public. I was welcomed but met with a certain reserve. A church deacon, sitting beside me in my car as we followed Prophet Williams' car to a local steakhouse for dinner, carefully explained to me that the Prayer House of Faith had many expenses. He must have felt that since I was a media person whose opinion would be conveyed to the outside world, it was important that I not get a mistaken impression that Prophet Williams was profiteering. I never encountered such defensiveness with informants I already knew fairly well and who understood my intentions.

If my relationship to the machine completely defined my role to the people with whom I was unacquainted, the videotape even influenced my interaction with close friends whenever we were recording. As mentioned earlier, the influence was not so noticeable at big, ongoing events, but at specifically arranged taping sessions in a private home people definitely behaved differently while on camera.

Recently I played back a tape of Milan Opacich and myself examining his photograph collection. "You certainly have a lot of pictures of tamburitza ensembles, Milan. How long have you been collecting them?" I hear myself asking in the stilted tones of a TV announcer. "Well, this collection is the result of over twenty years' work . . .," Milan replies also much more formally than usual. We had slipped into the roles of the TV interviewer and his guest; we were trying to be natural, but produced a parody of our usual behavior. Though we were alone, we were aware that other eyes might view us later on television. Thus the machine's presence caused us to restrict our behavior to actions we felt were appropriate to present to a large public audience.

Though the machinery is sometimes restrictive, it can also expand fieldwork possibilities. In non-public places at least one of the video crew had to know the informants in order to gain entry in the first place. We accidentally discovered, however, that on the streets of the Region we could easily tape the comments of total strangers. Tom Adler and I happened to be in downtown Gary to take some exterior shots of Vojislav Rajkovic's home. The neighborhood kids began to show off for the camera and before we knew it, we had strolled over to Fifth and Broadway, the main shopping district, soliciting the comments of any and all passers-by. "Are you from channel two or five?" we were asked again and again. Obvious disappointment registered on faces when we explained that we were from Indiana University and that the tape might be on educational television but not on the six o'clock news. Children clowned for the camera and adults viewed it as an opportunity to make a public statement of political opinion. The comments we collected in Gary fell into two categories: either local boosterism coupled with a plug for Mayor Hatcher and his good works, or the opposite, pessimism about the city's future and an attack on the mayor,

A particular political issue seemed to be automatically linked to a specific locale in the Region. In Gary it was the mayor, but when Vidutis and I showed up at Wolf Lake Beach in Whiting, the bathers

assumed that we had come to get their opinion on pollution. "The lake stinks! They should clean it up," shouted a teenage girl even before we had a chance to say a word. We recorded only one completely apolitical event that day at Wolf Lake. Some motorcycle enthusiasts were downing a case of Stroh's beer nearby. A blond-bearded six-footer challenged me to a chug-a-lug contest, and Vidutis, who seemed to have a knack for videotaping me in embarrassing situations, duly recorded my utter defeat.

In these public encounters the videotape equipment made it possible for us to establish some kind of contact with strangers. The material collected in this way is useful in capturing some of the flavor of the Region, but I doubt that serious folklore fieldwork could be conducted exclusively in this way. We know too little about the informants--many even refused to give their names. The exact influence of the intrusive camera is difficult to gauge and the range of topics which the random passer-by feels appropriate to discuss is very limited--usually a single current community issue.

Technical equipment such as still cameras, tape recorders, and videotape machines will play an increasingly important role in folklore field research. Each of these devices can obviously be an aid to the human memory by recording aspects of field encounters, but each also influences the situation somewhat. As folklorists we need to technical equipment to preserve our field data and to more vividly portray our field experiences to students. But we should not over-rely on the equipment. I feel fortunate that I did fieldwork in the Region first without the aid of technical equipment, because insights gained before I became the "TV Man" helped me to decide what I should videotape and to understand the meaning of the events I recorded. A fieldworker cannot get real depth from the mere act of videotaping, but videotaping and final editing, buttressed by

commentary that is based upon participant-observation, can present vivid and informative research results that may be used as valuable educational tools.