

BOOK REVIEWS

Land of the Millrats. By Richard M. Dorson. Pp. xii + 251, bibliography, index, photographs. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. Cloth.

Reviewed by Ricardas Vidutis

For six months during 1975 and 1976 the National Endowment for the Humanities was the fund source that sent nine folklorists (the team, consisting of Dr. Dorson and eight graduate students came to be known as the "Gary Gang") from the Folklore Institute at Indiana University into the industrial urban conurbation of Northwest Indiana. Their concerted effort aimed to discover what forms of folklore were generated by groupings of people in a present day urban context. For Dr. Dorson the urban fieldwork experience proved to be a challenge to his views of what folklore is: what types of people produce it, and where. Dr. Dorson's theoretical notions of the folk and their cultural products had a practical reflection in his fieldwork and writings of thirty years, that sent him, and other collectors such as Cecil Sharp, John Lomax, Vance Randolph and Harry Hyatt, into the American hinterland to capture remnants of the folk past. The NEH sponsored project represented a focal shift for Dorson from the rural environment to an urban one, and contributed to at least one new current in folkloristics--the redirection of field inquiries from the country to the city, from the marginal to the mainstream, and from the past to the present. In recent years Dorson found it difficult to ignore the impact of Young Turk folklorists Goffmanesquely micro-analyzing performance, computerizing folklore data, selling their services in the public sector, and socio-analyzing mainstream (even popular) culture. An inveterate realist, Dorson neither ignored the new trends nor blindly hitched his wagon to them. He took the challenge of the new scholarship and plunged into a field situation he knew would raise questions concerning the way folklorists have traditionally exercised their craft. And he knew that

by moving the intellectual concern from the past to the present, we folklorists would see "...that we have done very little to collect our own folklore, or even to recognize its forms" (p. 2). **Land of the Millrats** is a record, mainly in the form of narratives, of Dorson's trekking through an industrial metropolis in pursuit of contemporary forms of folklore which eventually answers his question, "Is there a folk in the city?"

In order to unlock the historical and spiritual constructs of folk culture in the Calumet Region of Indiana, Dorson used concepts taken from regional theory. The notion of a folk region for Dorson had been restricted in the past to a provincial locality with its common points of reference that set boundaries for social and cultural expression. In the urban environment (seemingly more complex than the urban one) Dorson searched again for distinguishing characteristics that this time would delimit an urban folk region, that is, its imagery, physical dimensions, component parts, and the residents' perspectives and daily orbits of interaction. The sum total of these characteristics would unfold a cognitive map of commonly shared perceptions (of industry, race, crime, corruption, history, geographic boundaries, etc.) guiding the dweller through the urban jungle of Northwest Indiana. The mental and physical boundaries shift as the social networks (which maintain folkways and symbols) reshape themselves in an effort to prolong group cohesiveness according to the realities of the day. The cognitive boundaries appear as human concerns, anxieties, and aspirations in the narratives that Dorson presents in **Land of the Millrats**.

Dorson marked out five targets for his fieldwork and analysis of folk expression in the urban Calumet Region, and named the chapters respectively: *Mystique of the Region*, *the Folklore of Steel*, *a Spectrum of Ethnics*, *Black Outlooks*, and *Crimelore*. In each area he presents narratives which reflect contemporary social conditions. For example, in the chapter, "*Mystique of the Region*," we listen to four informants who give us their views of the Region's history and current situation. Their narratives point to some of the forces that have shaped the Region in the past and the present: the steel economy and ethnic makeup. These forces, or common points of reference, influence blue collar and

and racial attitudes which emerge as concerns in the narrative folklore. In the chapter, "Black Outlooks;" Dorson uncovers a current form of folklore and a new genre for Blacks--the personal success story--an autobiographical narrative shaped by the American cultural myth of the upward climb. This genre, though new to urban Black folklore, is not new to other ethnic groups who no longer see the urban world as having a viable future. Just as white ethnics (now involved in a flight to the suburbs) in the past saw the Region as the promised land, the Blacks (especially in Gary) do so now by projecting their concerns for a governable future. White anxieties and Black aspirations are mirrored in the narratives as shared perceptions of two groups of urban dwellers.

Through narratives, Dorson shows how, for example, blue collar work culture in the Region is held together by reference to steel mills and refineries, and how this gives the area a common language and special character. But the character is shared by other cities in the United States also trying to cope with problems of inner city decay, crime, race, corruption in politics, unemployment, and tedium in the work place. In the narrative, dramatic personae appear in traditional poses as tricksters, or villains, or heroes symbolizing social attitudes as local versions of national problems. As great as the problems are, they do not seem great enough to engender bodies of folklore as rich as those found among lumberjacks or cowboys. Folk heroes, such as Gib Morgan or Casey Jones, are not produced among the steelworkers of the Region, or at least Dorson was not able to find any. To explain this lack, Dorson surmises that mobility and turnover of the labor force, along with work conditions in the mills, discourage the development of close relationships, and, thus, the kind of folklore found in closeknit communities. Dorson's conclusions regarding communities and relationships, as well as his fieldwork approaches, are open to question, but his underscoring of the functional basis of folklore throughout *Land of the Millrats* is an important addition to the scholarship of social based urban folklore.

As interesting as *Land of the Millrats* is, this work is not without problems. Dorson's handling of the ethnic spectrum produced some unexpected comments regarding ethnic demeanor--all the more surprising when coming from

a student of culture. Dorson says he wants to view ethnic folkstyles the way they are, unfolding in new settings and even departing from Old World practices. Yet preconceptions of the "foreigner" emerge which expose Dorson's unease at being in their presence. The result can be taken as an implied contrast to some kind of imagined world of normalcy, that sees ethnics as strange intrusions. "They act on their traditional sentiments in ways surprising to the dominant culture," (p.129) and somehow undeveloped. He finds it difficult to comprehend the "ethnocentric matters" (p.112) of these "militant and contentious men" (p.110) who "do battle with the forces of darkness" (p.238), "whose Old Country loyalties and hostilities still dominate their emotions" (p.110) through "inward looking observances" (p.112) and "inward looking communal rituals" (p.116) produced basically as crowd pleasing spectacles. As an ethnic from Gary, I am offended by the above descriptions which can be applied just as easily to the so-called "dominant culture"; and as a scholar I am dismayed by such an open display of subjectivity in an ethnographic work. This ethnocentric spectacle is the book's darkest moment.

During the academic year 1978-79, a fellowship from the National Humanities Center allowed Dorson to write up the Region material at the Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Dorson eventually produced a manuscript of about 500 pages which included, along with the narratives, descriptions of his fieldwork experiences and those of the graduate students involved in the project. Dorson was conscientious in keeping a diary during the urban foray. He spent his evenings going over the events of the day and recorded his observations and thoughts in notebooks. But at Harvard Press a decision was made to delete these portions which dealt with fieldwork experience, and as a result the book was shortened to 250 pages. Apparently the decision was based on the fact that previous publications¹ had already carried his reflections on the subject of doing fieldwork in the Region. The unfortunate result is that Dorson's summation statement of the project, though given the time for reflection and the perspective of hindsight, will remain scattered and incomplete.

From the nostalgic perspective of this reviewer as participant-observer to the project, what is lacking in *Land of the Millrats* is any sense of the life of the

project--an exciting admixture of place, fieldworkers, and events. **Land of the Millrats** was the time and place to put it all together, to make the work into something more than just another esoteric collection of stories from yet another esoteric place, so often the problem with book publications in folklore studies. Instead, it could have been a document and chronicle of theory applied to practice. Team fieldwork is a rarity among folklore departments in American universities, although commonplace, for example, in Europe. An in-depth discussion of the project's fieldwork approaches and accomplishments, which included the examination of all forms of folklife and not just oral tradition, would have made **Land of the Millrats** closer to an ethnography of the Region which would have been a strong statement in support of further research in folklore using a university based team of fieldworkers.

The foray into "De Region" was also Dorson's last foray into any region. On September 11, 1981 Dorson died in Bloomington, Indiana at the age of sixty-five. **Land of the Millrats** was his last publication (out of a total of twenty-four books and over two hundred articles) and will stand as a culmination of scholarly perspectives that took Dorson from the study of antiquities to the analysis of contemporary patterns of American folklore.

NOTES

1. **Indiana Folklore** 10 (1977), entitled **Land of the Millrats: Folklore in the Calumet Region** (reprinted in hardcover by Arno Press, New York, 1980); **Folklore Forum** 11 (1978), special issue entitled **Folklorists in the City: The Urban Field Experience**; and Dorson's article, "Team Fieldwork," **Fabula** 20 (1979): 69-78, and again as "Team Fieldwork in Northwest Indiana" in a Festschrift for Max Lüthi.