

An Unreconstructed Do-Gooder

Archie Green
San Francisco, CA

In envisioning public folklore's future, I inevitably hark back to the past by asking: What made our endeavor appealing in the New Deal era? Can we refurbish the original lure, or must we fashion a new rationale for our work—one grounded in the politics of compassionate conservatism, the Internet explosion, dot.com commerce, and corporate philanthropy?

The handful of 1930s public servants and WPA relief recipients who collected songs, noted life stories, photographed everyday scenes, and documented vernacular landscapes shared a belief that they were doing good. Somehow, personal good coincided with civic virtue. This feeling of moral achievement connected data-gathering and cultural presentations to egalitarian goals enunciated in political terms.

Within an expansive program of economic recovery from the Great Depression, New Dealers voiced concern for justice for all citizens—haves and have-nots, the established and the dispossessed, mainstream and marginal. A particular cultural project might not have been fully spelled out in the rhetoric of reform liberalism or social democracy; nevertheless, a near-utopian vision animated folkloric tasks.

I do not imply that governmental cultural programs began in the Roosevelt years. Various movements—abolitionism, Bull Moose progressivism, natural conservation, historic preservation—stood behind New Deal energies. Throughout, the belief in good work sustained seasoned activists, as well as song collectors among migrants in California FSA camps and slave-narrative seekers in Carolina hamlets.

As a young man in the 1930s, among many plays and musicals I attended in the WPA Federal Theater was "Hot Mikado," Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta served with a jazz/blues/gospel flavoring. In these same years, with eyes, ears, and pores wide open, I reveled in a cornucopia's offerings: Billie Holiday, Leadbelly, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Wreck on the Highway*, Bob Wills, John L. Lewis.

Workers whom I idealized appeared to perform in a grand ballet as they toiled on Pacific Coast waterfronts. They combined Paul Bunyan's optimism with Joe Hill's heroism. I felt their presence everywhere: in Eugene O'Neill's *Hairy Ape*, in Tom Benton's murals, in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*

I did not know then that I would spend my mature years as a teacher of folklore and also as an advocate for the presentation/preservation of vernacular culture. With working years behind me, I have the luxury, like Janus, of looking both backward and forward. From the latter perspective, I return to the opening questions: What vision is useful for public folklorists? What shall we recall in preparation for the future?

Folklorists enjoy placing items and events "in context": a location within a tale, the artifact within the community, a blueberry within a muffin. By analogy, we see our public tasks circumscribed by the politics of this period. What is our legislative/administrative charter? What budgetary restraints do we face?

Obviously, in comparing today's polity with that of the New Deal decade, the belief in governmental action has declined. Powerful congressional leaders brand the national census intrusive, property owners in western states oppose the setting aside of old-growth forests, organized tax protesters scorn "meddlers" who encourage Indian basket-weaving co-ops (those on the firing line can multiply this litany).

Public folklorists must reconcile the contradiction in daily work between their faith in civic programs and scepticism about whether they can do good in people's lives. Some folklorists drop out, seeking fresh outlets; others try to push ahead by adjusting to the new environment; still others despair of circumstance and lend voice to the naysayers.

Fortunately, in a society that values cultural pluralism, no single vision for public folklore prevails. We choose among diverse paths. Yet we seek a thread that runs through all our discourse, that binds our discipline but does not chain us to leader, dogma, or cause.

The use of public funds for the common good is as old as our republic; it continues to serve. We know the old English term "weal" to mean a just, healthy, and prosperous state. We translate "doing good" into participation in the commonweal. The songs, stories, dramas, rituals, amulets, artifacts, beliefs, and practices that intrigue us are also instruments in the construction of common wealth.

Growing up in a secular Jewish immigrant family, as a child I puzzled over the relationship of language and custom to identity. Hearing neighbors play phonograph records of Mexican corridos and seeing kimono-clad playmates in Japanese festival dances helped me frame early esthetic and ethical questions. As a young man entering the shipwright's trade, I took in union (pragmatic) and Wobbly (anarcho-syndicalist) creeds. Childhood sights and sounds, craft secrets, and rough-and-tumble labor prepared me for folkloric work.

Having aged, my views as a citizen and folklorist have not changed substantially over the years. Is it hopelessly old fashioned to confess to being an unreconstructed do-gooder? I remain content with time-tested visions.