In Memoriam

An Interview with J. Russell Reaver (1915-2002)

Interviewed by Gregory Hansen

On February 8, 2002, I had the honor to interview one of Folklore’s senior scholars. Joseph Russell Reaver had recently won a prestigious Florida Folk Heritage Award for his work as an advocate for the state’s folk culture. Following recommendations from the Florida Folklife Council, the Florida Department of State presents this annual award to folk artists, musicians, and folk culture advocates who have made significant contributions to the state’s folk life. The program is modeled after the National Heritage Fellowships, and the awards recognize individual contributions to the state’s folk heritage. A retired professor, J. Russell Reaver had a long career with Florida State University’s English Department. The State of Florida provided him with a well-deserved honor for his scholarship in Folklore and for his contributions in establishing the Florida Folklore Society and the Florida Folk Festival.

After completing his Ph.D. in English at Ohio State University, Reaver briefly taught at the Citadel in South Carolina and at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. From the early 1950s, he spent his career at Florida State University in Tallahassee, where he established this university’s first Folklore courses. In addition to his books and journal articles on subjects ranging from folktale, belief, and music, Reaver was also highly regarded as a scholar of American literature. In particular, his work on Emerson is an important contribution to scholarship on American transcendentalists.

We met at his home in Tallahassee, Florida. During the afternoon session, I discovered that he was a talented painter and musician with rich and intriguing ideas about Folklore. He spoke of issues and concerns in the field of Folklore in a way that blended older perspectives
with his innovative insights and creative ideas. The interview revealed that from the start of his fifty-year career as a folklorist, he merged Folklore scholarship with presentations of public Folklore. Reaver explained how he established Folklore classes in folktales, myth, and legend at Florida State University, worked to create the Florida Folklore Society, and helped initiate the annual Florida Folk Festival. Along with our mutual interest in merging academic research with public sector outreach programs, I also discovered that we had in common numerous perspectives and approaches to Folklore. We shared an interest in documenting, interpreting, and presenting Florida folklife in a way that calls attention to the beauty of quotidian experience.

Reaver was born on August 4, 1915, in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. He explained that he came from a long line of Philadelphia Dutch and Quakers. This background influenced his early interest in Folklore during the late 1930s.

"I think that some of my first interests in folklore came from the stories and dialects that my parents used to use around the house all the time. That Pennsylvania Dutch atmosphere was something of my childhood. I didn't have to go out and find out what folklore was. I was living it all the time.

"When people ask sometimes, 'Well, what is folklore?' I just say it's what folk do every day. It's just life. I don't really see it as separated from the rest of our experience. We're all folks in it together: like it or not."

Reaver smiled and laughed, and he explained that he looked at folklore as the traditional aspects of everyday life. He described how he taught that folklore should be studied as something that belongs to all people. He then elaborated on another common question about the work of folklorists.

"The question often is 'What is good folklore and what is bad folklore?' I don't have any strict guidelines for making such choices either. Folklore is what people do, what people say, what people sing, what people believe. Unless you look at the bad with the good, you don't know the human race."
I responded that folklore can be a very honest reflection of the way that people live their lives. My comment evoked a related topic of discussion.

"I remember years ago when I was going to some of the early meetings of the American Folklore Society, some scholars used to forget they were dealing with people. They'd come to the meeting with their tomes to cite this chapter and verse to say so-and-so said this about what a myth is, and they'd spend an hour or so arguing the difference between myth and legend, for example, and it got so tiresome and boring that we had to call a halt to it."

He laughed and I smiled at the familiarity of the argument as I commented that for the last twenty years, the Journal of American Folklore has refused to take any more articles on defining the term "folklore." Interested in his early exposure to folklore, I asked him how he was able to study the subject prior to the establishment of folklore departments and programs.

"Having that attachment to the common life, I just noticed what was going on around me in the days that I was going to high school and college. It was along in these years that B. A. Botkin published his popular anthologies, and he really caught my attention more than anyone else. Here was this big book with all kinds of interesting things in it, and I would use his stories to illustrate points in my undergraduate classes.

"The big leap for me was the move from Illinois to Florida. The move came when the state college for women in Tallahassee was recruiting new people to come and expand the faculty to make it into a full-scale university. I was invited by the dean to come, and I realized the fresh field of action when I came down here. So I took advantage of the situation, and I gathered all the local bibliography that I could. I found out what was at the university in Gainesville, and I put together a proposal for a folklore course. I asked for a research grant from Florida State University's Graduate School, and they gave me a traveling grant. So I did a tour of Key West, and some of my best tales came from people I found in Key West. I also went to St.
Augustine and found some of the old settlers there, especially those in the Minocan community. I published some of these stories first in the Florida folklore journal and later in Journal of American Folklore. I had to do most of it on my own, and I did a lot of tape recording and note-taking. Then I found out, as my folklore course became more popular, it in itself was a good place to exchange ideas. I admit that I got a lot of good leads from my students.”

I asked him if he was the first professor to teach Folklore at Florida State University and whether or not the university was receptive to Folklore research.

Reaver explained, “It took a while to convince everybody that I was doing something worthwhile. But I kept it always on a respectable scholarly plane. I didn’t want to do something that was just amusing and popular, but I wanted something that was a careful collection and study in the language arts.”

Curious about his early work, I asked, “You also became involved in establishing the Florida Folklore Society in the early 1950s. Could you tell me how that came about?”

“People at the University of Florida in Gainesville and at the University of South Florida had been teaching Folklore. They felt that there was a lot of folklore in Florida that was being missed, so I was immediately sympathetic with the drive to have a Florida Folklore Society. They had a big room on the campus at the University of South Florida, and there were at least three or four hundred students who attended the first meeting. They had an enormous crowd.

“We finally decided to formalize this thing. A lawyer did the legal apparatus of applying to the state to have a learned society added to the State of Florida, so I just fell into the position of president to get things started. We had to start from scratch. There were about seven of us who taught, and we realized we were the Board of Directors.”

Our conversation moved forward thirty years when I asked about the history of the state’s Folklore association. “The Florida Folklore
Society waned in the 1980s,” I commented. “You’re credited with revitalizing it.”

“Well, I just didn’t want to give it up. I thought, ‘if we let this thing die, then it’s going to be awfully hard to get it started again.’ We had some competition from other groups doing similar things.”

Recognizing one of these groups, I noted, “I know that a group like the Friends of Florida Folk is more of a group of people getting together to play whereas the Florida Folklore Society is more geared toward having an annual meeting, encouraging collection projects, and sponsoring different activities like the development of educational materials and grant projects.”

He elaborated, “That’s the sort of group that I always wanted it to be, but it took a while to get to that level.”

Remembering that the state’s folklore society was also linked to the first Florida Folk Festival held in 1952, I asked him about the first festival.

“Alton Morris was the leading folklorist in the state when I came, and he was mainly interested in Florida folk music. So I got to meet him through the Women’s Music Clubs of Florida. They thought that the Stephen Foster Memorial Park should go beyond just emphasizing his music at White Springs. They wanted to broaden out and have more people gather and enjoy more of Florida’s music of other kinds. So it really was the women in the music club who started it.

“Some of them lived in White Springs, and they wanted to add something fresh and interesting to their hometown as well as being of benefit to the state. They got people connected with the National Folk Festival like Sarah Gertrude Knott. She was one of the main leaders, and she had all the energy and enthusiasm to do it. She used to come down here and talk to us about what could be accomplished and so we became good friends. Sarah, some of the women of the music club, and some of the faculty all had a meeting, and finally we organized and met in the women’s club in White Springs. That’s where we had the first official meeting of the board. For Sarah, it was almost agony because there she was with a reputation as a fine leader for the National Folk
Festival and she had taken on the responsibility of making the Florida Folk Festival successful. She didn’t want it to fail, so she knocked herself out with our help.

“What we insisted on from the beginning was authentic Florida material. We didn’t want to have just a little dab of this, that, and the other and call it ‘Florida Folklore’ mainly because the festival was held in the state of Florida. We wanted it to be essentially Florida material. We held onto that line from the beginning.”

I was interested in how the original festival organizers conceptualized Florida folklife in relation to cultural diversity. Earlier, I had reviewed printed brochures from the first folk festival, and I commented, “One thing that I looked at was that the early festival included a great range of a lot of different groups from Florida. There were Greeks, Minorcans, Seminole Indians, African-Americans, and a whole range of people.”

“Oh yes,” Russell affirmed. “There were many cultures living in Florida. We did our best to have them represented. We had lovely dancers from the Czech community, for example. All the women made their own costumes and brought along their own musicians. It was really genuine Florida material.

“Eventually, as Ormond Loomis can tell you, we worked around all the menagerie of people in state government and got this festival and the Stephen Foster Memorial under the State of Florida.”

As I flipped over the first side of the tape, we talked about early plans for combining the Florida Folklore Society’s activities with the first Florida Folk Festival. As the tape began recording, I opened side two, “We were talking about having the folklore society combine with the programs of the Florida Folk Festival to have the event include a study center.”

He replied, “It’s a tricky thing to do, and I can see the purpose in it. But I don’t believe most people come to the festival to sit around and listen to college professors talk about folklore. On the other hand, I’ve seen discussion sessions after a presentation. I think that you can do that after people see something and they become energized and
fascinated by something. They can then share ideas with the audience and maybe one or two of the scholars there.”

“That’s what I usually find,” I commented. “People get interested in folklore for reasons of their own. They’ll maybe do some reading and then they get excited about seeing folklore at a festival. Sometimes that type of separation is a good thing because the festival does really well with music performances, dances, and tasting the foods. If you want to study it, there are other places to take a more scholarly approach.”

“It seems to me, yes,” Reaver agreed.

I was curious about his perspectives on other ways to use the state’s folklore society to integrate academic presentations with public programming and commented, “Well, it works pretty well to take the Florida Folklore Society’s meeting to interesting locations across the state and provide a folkloric tour of Florida.”

He added, “I think that works better that way. We can pick a place where we want to study some of the local lore. Or we can get the local community involved.”

Shifting the focus back to his teaching and research, I asked, “In your classes, you focused on mythology and folk narratives, right?”

“That’s right. Then in about the middle of my career, I had a chance to travel to India and Nepal. I spent five weeks going to all the shrines and seeing the background localities of the Hinduists and Buddhists. That was a marvelous experience. It was really fascinating for me because we went to the Deer Park where the Buddha gave his great sermon that founded Buddhism. I, myself, have become a Buddhist, in case you’re interested. I go every week to a Buddhist meeting, and I find the meditation and principles very satisfying.”

“What branch of Buddhism is that?”

“It’s the Zen branch in the Kwan Um school. It’s like making a full circle for me, personally. Reaching out to people in Florida, in the world, and then finally coming back to my self and saying, ‘Now, who are you, Russell Reaver? Let’s pause. Let’s not be thinking entirely about the world around you, but give yourself a chance to know yourself once more.’”
He continued, “It’s an inward look, discovering what you feel, what you believe, how your mind works. You see, Zen is a deeply meditative kind of thing.”

I offered my reflections, “The connections between folklore and the spiritual traditions like Buddhism are really interesting to me because I see a lot of things in the Buddhist practice that relate to the sense of inwardness in folklore. But also I see it as a way of making connections to others. You’re recognizing it in yourself, but you see it in others.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“I was wondering if this is something you’ve experienced in Folklore research?”

Reaver smiled and answered, “Yes, Folklore is one way of finding others through their lore. The Buddhism is another avenue. Since you find yourself first, you realize that you’re just like everybody else. One of the meditating devices that I use if I find my mind wandering and want to sharpen my attention is to start at the bottom of a pool. And I concentrate on a bubble, and it gradually bubbles and bubbles up. And I fix on nothing but that and watch it and watch, and it goes very, very slowly until it finally bursts at the surface. And then I’m ordered again. And then I come down, down, down, down, down, and there I’m on the lotus.

“You see,” he continued, “if you think in terms of something that holds your interest and your attention consistently, you’re not distracted from it.

“And so, you discover that you need to give your mind a chance to rest. Our minds are so full of busyness—of buzziness, of affairs, of problems, of decisions—that we have no chance to discover who we are and how we are supposed to live our lives. The point of Buddhism is not to run away from people. It’s just the opposite. You discover who you are and then you discover that other people are just like you.”

He concluded, “And so the high ideals of compassion and love come out of that sense of oneness. You see?”

I offered, “That seems so similar to what we do when we study folklore. When we sit down and do an interview with someone, it seems to me that it’s an invitation for that kind of interchange.”
Reaver understood. “You’re trying to be friendly and expecting the other person to open up more and more to you—to be willing to have that sort of interchange. Yes. Exactly.”

I commented on the process of interviewing, itself, “It seems very meditative.”

“If you try to interpose yourself into the situation from another angle, it all falls apart. You’ve lost your attention. You’ve lost your focus. If you look at folklore right, it is a meditation to reach the otherness of life. You’re part of that otherness. That, to me, is the beauty of folklore on the one hand and Buddhism on the other.”

Our time was winding down, and I had to return to my office. But I asked another question, “What continually keeps you interested in folklore?” His answer further developed the inspiring connections between folklore and his own life’s journey.

“Hardly a day goes by that I don’t get down a book that I haven’t looked at in years. I’m broadening and deepening my perspective. I started with the idea of ‘Who are Florida folk?’ They led me to American folk. They led me to European folk. And they led me to Asian folk.”

Reaver smiled and asked me a question, “Now, you know what country in the world is my favorite country.”

“No.”

“Bali.”

“Bali? Hmm. What draws you to that country?”

“It’s not merely symbolic, but it is real. Bali is a little island, near Java, down in the South Pacific, off the shore of Australia. It was founded by Hindus many years ago, and everyone there is an artist in some way. You grow up being a gardener, a stone carver, a painter, a dancer, or whatever. Every family is made up of a collection of artists. They all are living to create something that is beautiful and wonderful, and they all experience it.

“And the island itself is called ‘The Rose of the Wind.’ Symbolically, the island is round, a perfect mandala, and the focal point is a mountain. Like the point of meditation, that point is the pivot around which
everything revolves. And they're surrounded by the water. The water of the world encloses them, holds them, embraces them."

Reaver continued by asking rhetorically, "What is the most joyful event of the island?"

"The cremation ceremony. They wait until they have three or four people who have died recently and then they all come out. They dress in their finest clothes. They collect all the most beautiful flowers. They play the most gorgeous music. They dance the most elaborate dances because they are celebrating the restrictions of this physical life before they move on to immortality.

"How do they handle the bodies? They build these elaborate carts, and they will take days and days and days building them with all kinds of beautiful native woods. The bodies are put in there and then cremated in one great funeral pyre.

"And the most joyful part of the whole ceremony is the taking of the remains down to the shore where they are returned to the waters from which they came. They're surrounded by their native dancers and musicians. They have beautiful music. The band is made of people sitting in meditative positions, and the music is made by tapping on wood or metal. It is impossible to sing because it's not a tune; it's dozens of tunes all being played at the same time. It's polyphonic, and being polyphonic, it's turned in toward the inward depth of the music.

"I've studied music myself and used to play the piano for years. I've looked at these transcriptions, and they don't seem to make any sense. The notes looks like a jumble as you look at the composition manuscript. But suddenly you divest yourself of reading the music and you start hearing the music. You read it for the sound that is preserved there, and you realize you really are experiencing a deeply polyphonic calm.

"This is the long calm of depth of sound, all producing one chord. That's like the Buddhist experience of forgetting the surface and going deeply, deeply, deeply, deeply into one harmonious whole. So we're moving chord by chord, column by column, but all sounding simultaneously. We're not thinking about it, we're hearing it.

"You become part of it. It's a continuous cycle. We come from it, but we return to it. Nothing is lost."
I concluded the interview by asking him what he would like to see continued in the study of Florida folklife. He explained that he wants people to take note of what is around them in the state and to seek out the rich experience of discovering authentic expressions of folklife in Florida. He added that he wished visitors would also gain a greater appreciation for the state’s history and folk culture rather than solely congregate at the state’s tourist attractions and theme parks. After we completed the interview, Reaver showed me around his home. We visited for a while, and a few days later, he was presented his award at Florida’s capitol complex. We kept in touch over the spring, and I visited him at his hospital bedside late in the summer. At the end of July, I moved from Tallahassee. Upon arriving in Arkansas, I received word that J. Russell Reaver had died on August 2, 2002, two days short of his 87th birthday.