THE RANDALL V. MILLS MEMORIAL ARCHIVE
OF NORTHWEST FOLKLORE

J. Barre Toelken

The Special Collections Division of the University of Oregon Library, under its able and indefatigable
curator, Martin Schmitt, has long been engaged in the collection of materials pertinent to the settlement of
the Northwest and to the culture and byes of early in-
habits. Until some ten or twelve years ago, how-
ever, little attempt was made to separate the strictly
historical from the traditional in all the varied and
extensive collections housed here. In the late 1940’s
and early 1950’s Randall V. Mills, Professor of Eng-
lish at the University and first president of the Oregon
Folklore Society, began to augment the holdings of
Special Collections with the fruits of his own collecting
in the Pacific Northwest and California. Though his
untimely death in 1952 caused a serious decline in
many folklore undertakings then in progress, his col-
lections served thereafter as the nucleus for a modest
but continually growing body of traditional Northwest
materials presently being archived at the University
of Oregon.

Now, with the recent revival of the Oregon Folk-
lore Society, there is in Oregon a rather direct schol-
arily interest in the collection and preservation of
Northwest traditions for their own sake. In order to
supply a sense of unity to this effort, the Oregon Folk-
lore Society and the University of Oregon Library have
created a special Archive for Northwest Folklore, to
be named in honor of Professor Mills, and to be di-
rected by Mr. Schmitt. It will preserve new collec-
tions of folklore now being given to the University and
will begin the arduous task of listing separately the
items concerned with folklore contained in the other
collections. Our present lack of a specially trained
folklorist will, regrettably, tend to make the latter a
slow process, but there is some hope that a graduate
assistantship will be made available in the future to a
part-time archivist.

At present, the Randall V. Mills Memorial Archive
of Northwest Folklore can list the following items and
collections:

1) The Robert Winslow Gordon Collection of
Folksong: A gift from his daughter, Mrs. Roberta
Gordon Nye, the Gordon Collection constitutes the bulk
of Gordon’s papers, manuscripts, and personal library
that was concerned with folklore. In particular, there
are more than one thousand folksongs and their vari-
ants, including American variants of the English-
Scottish tradition, which Gordon collected himself or
received in the mail. There is also a complete set of
his contributions to Adventure magazine, containing
the texts of many songs and his comments on them.

2) The Randall V. Mills Collection: Testi-
fying to the diversity of Mills’ interests, this material
includes notebooks, papers, published and unpublished
MSS, card files, scrapbooks, and letters concerning
Northwest folklore. Among the genres represented
are proverbs, superstitions and popular beliefs, bal-
lads and songs (including several voyageur songs taken
from early diaries), Northwest dialects and linguistic

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now a member of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra.
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3) The John “Watermelon” Redington Papers:
These are primarily scrapbooks, loose papers, and
correspondence of Redington, who was once an Indian
scout, later a newspaper editor and natural humorist.
He passed along a large body of frontier lore, mixing
it on occasion with some of his own manufacture.

4) The Audio-Visual Department Collection of
tape-recorded singers and speakers: Much of this ma-
terial is used for analysis of local dialects by the En-
lish and Speech Departments. Under the directorship
of Mr. Donald Hunter, the Audio-Visual Department has
also recorded many professional folk singers, mostly
in concert. The collection has been augmented contin-
ually by the field recordings made by Professor E. A.
Cykler of elderly singers around the state, of Basque
dances and songs, and the like. Recent field recordings
done by J. B. Toelken and students are currently being
processed for addition to this collection.

5) The Library Manuscript Collection: In this
group the library has about one hundred diaries and over
one hundred thousand letters, many of which contain
words and music of ballads and songs, folk remedies,
beliefs, and myriad references to traditional material.
Many of the letters have already been filed chronologi-
cally, so that all the early uses of words, slang expres-
sions, proverbs, profanity, and localisms, as well as
references to music, medicine, entertainment, and
superstitions may be pointed out.

6) The Library Collection of photographs: The
Library has a collection of over 80,000 photographic
negatives, many of which will be of use to folklorists:
old epitaphs, covered bridges, fairs, local customs are
depicted.

Soon to become regular parts of the Mills Archive
are the following:

1) Card files and papers related to the Soci-
ety’s projected Dictionary of Oregon Popular Belief
and Superstition.

2) Contributions of traditional material to

3) Collections of J. B. Toelken, students,
and staff.

4) The Verne Bright Collection of Northwest
Folklore. Recently offered to the University by poet
Verne Bright (Mountain Man), this material is primar-
ily traditional lore of all descriptions collected over a
period of thirty years toward publication of a book which
was to have been titled Webfoots and Bunchgrassers.

Most of the printed material in the Archive can be
duplicated for scholarly purposes at the usual nominal
charge for Xerox copying, although some segments of
larger collections may have legal restrictions which
will prevent use in publication. The intricacies of this
problem are being explored at present with the basic
assumption that all material in the Archive will event-
ually be available to qualified scholars. Further, to
make the clearly traditional matter more generally ac-
cessible, the Oregon Folklore Bulletin plans to under-
take the eventual publication of many items listed above.

1. The author is indebted to Martin Schmitt for
his help in compiling this list. See also his “Folklore
Sources in the University of Oregon Library,” Western
Folklore, X (1951), 325-328.

2. For a more complete survey of the Gordon
Collection, see Arthur G. Brodeur, “The Robert Win-
slow Gordon Collection of American Folksongs,” Ore-