

THE AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER  
A PERSONAL EXAMINATION AND APPRAISAL OF THE IDEA

I recently received the following letter from Archie Green, who was writing on behalf of the Citizens Committee for an American Folklife Center:

Permit me in this letter to report that the Citizens Committee for an American Folklife Center is active again, and that folklife legislation is now under consideration in Congress. Some weeks ago Senator James Abourzek introduced SB 1844, a copy of which is enclosed. Several House companion bills have also been introduced. Full lists of Senate and House co-sponsors are enclosed. The breadth of Congressional support to the American Folklife Preservation Act is impressive.

We wish to secure additional co-sponsors in the Senate and the House. We need personal letters of thanks to those Congressional members who have already signed the bills, as well as letters to other members explaining our aims. Please send copies of your letters to the CCAFC office (209 National Press Building, Washington, D.C., 20004). I shall appreciate a note from you. Only by exchanging views with each other as well as with members of Congress can we reach beyond our present limited circle. I close with warm thanks for your past assistance to the CCAFC, and in the belief that we shall all contribute to the understanding of folk culture.

The bill and clippings from the Congressional Record are worthy of deep scrutiny; most especially so is the bill itself, which appeared in the Congressional Record on Thursday, May 17, 1973. It seems crucial to me that all persons interested in folklore studies become aware of and familiar with this bill and its provisions, for it seems likely that--if support by the CCAFC and folklorists at large is continued--the bill will become a reality. For better or worse, then, we should know what the government may soon be concretizing and permanently establishing with respect to folklore. The bill does contain all of the usual legalistic necessities (such as provisions enabling the proposed Center to pay its personnel, enter into contracts, and so on), but there are special parts of SB 1844 that deserve to be brought to the attention of all who deal with folklore or folklife. Paramount among these is the following:

As used in this Act--the term "American Folklife" means the traditional customs, beliefs, dances, songs, tales, sayings, arts, crafts, and other expressions of the spirit common to a group of people within any area of the United States, and includes music (vocal and instrumental), dance, drama, lore, beliefs, language, humor, handicraft, painting, sculpture, architecture, other forms of creative and artistic expression, and skills related to the preservation, presentation, performance, and exhibition of the cultural heritage of any family, ethnic, religious, occupational, racial, regional, or other grouping of American people.

Clearly, this is important. The definition of folklife as proposed in this bill seems to me to be a reasonable one, but only because it will permit the proposed Center a great amount of latitude in its operations. Not that I cannot find fault with that definition--I would academically take exception to several parts of it, and so could most of the freshman students enrolled in "Introduction to Folklore"--but the criteria by which we judge this definition must differ from our usual ones. We are not so much concerned with limiting denotation here as we are with expanding connotation to make possible a folklife center that can serve all our needs. In this respect, I think the definition does a fine job; it is at any rate deserving of careful thought, particularly by those who may not be happy with it for any reason. If you have objections, or if your opinions on this bill differ generally from mine, by all means communicate with the CCAFC; your chance to be heard is now.

A number of other sections of SB 1844 should also be pointed out, at least in terms of their ramifications for students and scholars. First of all, the proposed American Folklife Center will be directed by a Board of Trustees of seventeen members, comprised by the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, the Librarian of Congress, the Director of the Center itself, four members "appointed by the President from among individuals who are officials of Federal departments and agencies concerned with some aspect of American folklife traditions and arts," and "eight members appointed by the Librarian of Congress from among individuals from private life who are widely recognized by virtue of their scholarship, experience, creativity, or interest in American folklife traditions and arts." (Quotations from SB 1844). Thus of the seventeen positions on the Board, nine could be filled, conceivably by any of us in the field. I need not overemphasize the importance of having active folklorists in a position of influence in a national center having the powers that have been written into SB 1844.

The second general aspect of the bill which should be brought to the attention of all Folklore Forum readers is that in which the specific purposes and powers of the American Folklife Center are enumerated. Reduced to their quintessential form and translated from "governmentalese" into English, the functions of the Center are these:

1. To issue grants, loans, and scholarships to individuals and groups in order to specifically support:
  - a. Research, scholarship, and training in folklife;
  - b. Promotion and production of festivals, exhibits, and workshops;
  - c. Production and support for audio-visual presentations of folklife;
  - d. Production of materials for classroom use illustrating American folklife.
2. To establish a national archive for American folklife.
3. To collect and preserve artifacts, exhibitions, and audio-visual records which represent American folklife.
4. To loan (through Library of Congress procedures) any archive materials to any individual or group.
5. To present folklife materials to the public.
6. To loan or lease materials developed for classroom use as according to section 1.d, above.

7. To develop other appropriate programs to preserve, support, revitalize, and disseminate American folklife.

In addition to these specific possible functions, there will be accorded the Center the authorizations to:

8. Obtain the services of experts and consultants, who are to be paid by the Center.
9. Accept and use the services of volunteers, who may be reimbursed for travel expenses.

At this point a mild warning is in order; the nine points listed above are restatements or paraphrases of those aspects of SB 1844 that seem most generally significant to me. Lest any readers become prematurely joyful or upset, I would advise all to obtain a full copy of the bill and give it a careful reading. The answers to any questions or controversies I may have unwittingly spawned lie within it. A more productive resolution to any questions or concerns about the bill may be sought by the readers corresponding with the Citizens Committee for an American Folklife Center in Washington, D.C.

It should by now be quite clear that this article has a purpose beyond merely bringing the proposed American Folklife Center to Folklore Forum readers' attention. As Archie Green indicated, we must write personal letters of thanks to Congressmen who are now sponsoring the bills, as well as explanatory letters to those legislators who are not yet aware of our aims. Those who support the bill in principle must tender it support in fact--by writing a letter--if the bill is to pass. The usual senatorial estimate (so rumor has it) is that each letter received represents the view of about 10,000 people. Many eloquent and effective letters have already been sent to our various Senators and Representatives--Dell Hymes' lengthy missive was entered in its entirety in the Congressional Record of July 19, 1973--but more are needed, and needed now. Even a simple letter will have a meaningful impact on its recipient in the U.S. legislature, if the following few caveats are observed:

1. Address it correctly: "Hon. ----, House Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510," or "Senator ----, Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510."
2. Identify the bill by number (SB 1844, or Hr 9849, 9640, 9579, 8781, 8778) and by its popular title, "American Folklife."
3. Concentrate on your own delegation: write to Congressmen who represent your residence. This is especially true for students at the major schools of folklore/folklife studies. If you're studying at Indiana, but have a residence in Maryland, write to the Congressmen from Maryland. It would also be an excellent idea to mention any folklore or folklife projects, large-scale or small, which are being conducted in the state of your residence.
4. Write your own views and give your reasons for taking your stand.
5. By all means thank the sponsoring Congressmen for their support.
6. Send a carbon copy or xerox of your letter(s) to the Citizens Committee for an American Folklife Center, 209 National Press Building, Washington, D.C., 20004.

The proposed American Folklife Center will have a tremendous impact upon the course of folklore and folklife studies in this country. National support for folklife is an old story in many countries throughout the world. For too long we have merely looked enviously at the government-financed backing of studies in Ireland, Sweden, and a host of other nations. With the passing of the bills now in the legislature, we may finally bring about the sort of federal support that will felicitously affect us all. The responsibility for realizing that support and for determining its exact shape rests with all of us.

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"MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME THE STORY ABOUT..."  
FOLKLORE IN A SECONDARY SHORT STORY UNIT

The short story has in recent years been given a major role in secondary school literature. No longer is it supplementary to the novel; "the twentieth century has seen the maturing of the short story as a literary genre of the first order."<sup>1</sup> In light of this, the current challenge to secondary English teachers is in large measure to find stimulating sources of new materials for use in short story units that will further deepen and broaden student perspectives.

Because the class has been traditionally bound to the book as the primary source of American stories, the typical unit has involved successive reading of the text with emphasis on plot, character, setting, etc. Although any creative teacher has been able to draw from outside references to enhance study, there has remained the chronic problem of limited supplementary sources and the resultant lack of active student response in outside classwork, particularly their own writing.

In the search for greater excellence in the American short story unit there is no ready solution to the need for easily accessible/ appropriate materials and increased student involvement/participation. Recently, however, there has arisen in a few scattered classrooms across the country a new field of study which has proven exciting and workable. The field is folklore. The purpose of this paper is to discuss in some depth the use of folklore in secondary school English classes with particular emphasis on a unit which has proven effective with seventh, eighth, and tenth graders.

Generally and erroneously, folklore in public school has consisted of an elementary grade treatment of Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill and the other so-called tall-tale heroes. The truth is, however, that:

American folklore does not consist mainly of stories about Paul Bunyan, southern mountain ballads, protest songs, and