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Early Virginia analogues of some modern legends

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It is increasingly common knowledge that the federal government of the United States became involved in field collecting folklore during the Depression of the 1930s. In the state of Virginia the work was done by employees of the Virginia Writers' Project (VWP), a subsidiary of the state's Work Projects Administration (WPA). Altogether the VWP workers amassed over 3850 items of oral, customary, and material folklore from sixty-two counties between mid-1937 and mid-1942. Over seventy workers submitted items to the VWP's Richmond office during that period. The Washington, DC office of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), under the direction of Henry G. Alsberg, and its folklore unit, headed first by John A. Lomax and then by Benjamin A. Botkin, instructed the state Writers' Project offices to have their workers collect a wide variety of local customs and lore. To Alsberg, the primary purposes of the collecting was to generate colorful and interesting copy for the state guidebooks, the publication series which he saw as the most important work of the state Writers' Projects. But he also recognized that the lore they collected would be valuable in its own right. In 1937 he and Lomax wrote a letter to the state directors instructing them on fieldwork methods. While they stressed the value of the work to the guidebooks, they also stated that the fieldwork was inherently worthwhile, saying "Such an opportunity to collect this material may never recur" (Mangione 1972:265).

When the WPA shut down in 1942, the VWP files were deposited at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library in

Charlottesville. For the past few years, I have been working with the materials in this collection, focusing on the approximately four hundred items which may be designated folk legends. In the process of editing a volume of these folk legend texts for publication (Barden 1991), I noticed several that were clearly predecessors of some common modern/contemporary urban legends. But before discussing these narratives, I want to remind readers of the fact that the workers who did this collecting thought of folklore as items to be extracted from their interviews. Before any folklore was sent in to Richmond, it was removed from its context and typed onto sheets which were named according to the folklore item contained in them. It is fruitless to look for the kind of sensitivity to contextuality and situation in the performance of the narratives that a folklorist on this side of the 1960s would be held to. To them, folklore was not a dynamic social phenomenon—they gathered *stuff*. In fact, a proposed title for a national collection of folklore was *American Folk Stuff*. When they paid any attention to the situational circumstances of the lore in its small group setting—when, where, why and how it naturally occurred—it was inadvertent and haphazard. When they noted the background circumstances, it was of the informants, not the communicative processes of the folklore itself. Without these data, study of the particular social meanings and functions of these narratives, or any analysis of their performance-in-context, what Dell Hymes terms the "ethnography of speaking" folklore, is impossible (Hymes 1971, 1981).

This is one likely reason that this vast storehouse of field-collected material has received so little attention. In bringing to attention WPA-collected folklore texts I realize I am weighing in on one side of the rather formidable theoretical issue of performance versus textual interpretation. My contention is that the latter is a viable alternative to ignoring such older folklore holdings as the WPA collections. A basic assumption of my argument is that valid readings of folk narratives may be made from written texts; they may be less verifiable than those constructed from observing specific performances and situations in the field, but they are not inherently untrue. Another is that themes, patterns, and structures of which both informants and collectors were/are unaware may exist in folklore texts. As I

read the erudite work of Alan Dundes, the continuing output of Jan Harold Brunvand in his "modern urban legend" collections, and the work of many of the scholars represented in this volume, I find I am in good company in these assumptions. As early as 1963, Roger Abrahams, who has become strongly associated with the performance orientation, was calling for eclecticism in the study of oral narrative (Abrahams 1963). That is what we have now in the discipline of folklore, and I hope this diversity of approach will continue. So, with that said, I would like to pronounce the WPA legends viable, at least for textual interpretation, and move on. In fact, I would assert that it is from this "literary folkloristic" perspective that the correlation between older folk legends and their contemporary counterparts is best discerned. As usually practiced, performance-oriented analysis procedurally ignores exoteric matters.

In examining the VWP folklore collection I immediately recognized two texts as direct correlatives of well-known modern urban legends; two others had more abstract similarities which were not revealed by their titles and/or surface details. Cornelia Berry's text *A Roast Cat for Breakfast* was the item which first brought the connection between the old WPA legends and modern ones to my attention. This is a long rambling narrative, unquestionably believed, opening with a friend-of-a-friend framework, full of details about how the cat in question was a beloved and spoiled family member, and concluding thus:

> The next morning she made her fire and made her bread dough and in a hurry jerked open the oven and shoved in the dough in the pan. The fire got hotter and she called her grandson to his breakfast. And as he walked into the kitchen putting on his shirt, she reached down and opened the door to take out the hot biscuits as usual. When the door was opened an awful smelling cloud of smoke floated up into her eyes and she almost fainted on the spot. Her grandson saw that something was amiss and went to the door of the oven, and inside he found the biscuits brown in front and just below them back in the far corner, a fine roasted tom cat. She has the stove to this day, cooking on it as usual and says it cooks as good as ever (Barden 1991:304).

A clear predecessor of "The Cat in the Microwave," this story casts doubt on, or at least calls for a reassessment of, the most common interpretation of the modern story, that it is a response

to contemporary fear of technology and "those mysterious invisible waves the device employs" (Brunvand 1981:63). The very existence of the WPA version in 1942 argues against, if not this meaning of the story, at least its primacy. It throws the interpreter back upon another part of the story as the locus of meaning. The narrative is not necessarily about the microwave oven, after all; it is essentially about the cat, about the accidental cooking of the cat. Notice, in fact, how extremely unlikely the story is from an empirical standpoint—what conceivable feline would like quietly in the back of a slowly heating oven and roast without launching into a tremendous and vocal fit. The microwave, which cooks so quickly and thoroughly, actually makes this story more believable. But the WPA legend presents evidence that it is an add-on, a new element to a narrative that was there long before the microwave oven was invented.

Further evidence that the pet is the dramatic core of this story is the fact that the story fits a type-category—"The Suffering Pet." This type, which Brunvand and others have noted, includes tales of a pet canary which is bashed to flatten out the "Bump in the Rug" and the little dog that chases a ball out the window of a high-rise apartment. So, in narrative importance, the high-tech appliance is reduced simply to the latest device with which man abuses and tortures those small and defenseless creatures that choose to befriend him. The historical perspective provided by the Virginia legend allows us to see this narrative core and this connection. If a new motif number is called for it should be N339.18*—"Animal cooked in oven," not the over-specific motif Russell Reaver devised in his collection *Florida Folktales* (Reaver 1987:108)—"Animal killed by drying its fur in microwave oven."

A final thought on this narrative. While a number of legend scholars have mentioned the similarity between microwaved cat tales and cooked baby legends, no one I have read has commented on the fairly common psychological phenomenon of transferring parental love and affection to pets. The cover of Brunvand's *The Mexican Pet* (Brunvand 1986) implies it, as it shows a female cuddling what could either be a chihuahua dog or a large rat; the woman has a rather blissful expression that I would definitely characterize as maternal. This connection allows a reading of the cats in these legends as substitutes for infants,

which activates the considerable body of critical commentary, from Freud to Bruno Bettelheim, regarding the oven as a womb symbol and the "Hansel and Gretel" oven as a symbol of parental (especially maternal) aggression and abuse of children.

A Man Dies of Earwigs (collected in 1940, also in Botetourt County) is another Virginia Writers' Project text that correlates to a modern legend, namely the cranial contamination story called "The Beehive Hairdo." Unlike the cooked cat legend, older versions and variants of the beehive hairdo narrative are numerous and widely published. The historical depth of at least the core idea of this tale has been demonstrated by Brunvand in his newest urban legend compilation *Curses! Broiled Again!* (Brunvand 1989). Turning to the *Oxford English Dictionary* for first use and etymology of the word "earwig," Brunvand found that the name itself is a reference to this body contamination legend. The name is Old English and Middle English for "ear bug," and the *OED* places the notion that the bug penetrates into the head through the ear to as early as the year 1000 AD. This etymological background should discourage the interpretation that the legend is "about" vanity and dependent on the elaborate hairdo in fashion in the 1950s. Yet Kenneth Clarke's "The Fatal Hairdo and the Emperor's New Clothes Revisited," (Clarke 1968) makes a case for precisely this reading of the tale.

So, like the cooked cat narrative, these contaminations of the cranium tales are old bottles that can hold new wine. In that it is free of calls against pride or for cleanliness, I would suggest that the Virginia text is a version of the old bottle itself, the early core meaning alone.

> You know these little old earwigs that you see crawling around, mostly under bark of dead trees, look sorta like a thousand-leg, them old hardshell kind. Well sir, them things will sure git in a body's ear. That's what I've allus been told. I heard my pap tell about one time there was a man in the neighborhood that got to complaining with the headache. He done everything he could for it but it jus got worse and worse. They got the doctor and he couldn't do nothing for him. He jus got worse and worse. Got so he would jus go into fits nearly. Said it felt plimblank (exactly) like there was somethin crawling in his head all the time. He couldn't sleep, and it got so bad and he was in such misery that he couldn't eat or sleep. And finally he just died. The doctor wanted to know what was the matter with him. He begged and

> begged his folks to let him cut his head open to see what was the matter with him. They didn't want to, but he kept on 'em till at last they said all right.Well sir, when he cut that man's head open they was a measured pint of earwigs in his head. They allus allowed that one had crawled in his ear when he was asleep and had young'ns in there and they kept breedin' and increasin' until they was that many. My lord, that man must a-suffered a sight in this world (Barden 1991:308–309).

Note the closing comment to this narrative. I believe this is the emotional and dramatic thrust of the story. It is "about" suffering. Like a motorist who slows down to stare at a highway accident, the informant was drawn to his narrative by its horror. Moral or social points and meanings may become attached to it, but as this version shows, they need not—they are not necessary, they are not the legend's essence. Just as the motorist may suddenly decide to buckle his seat belt a few miles down the road after passing a wreck, the horrible image may invoke some moral or point, which can then be attached. But the image precedes the idea; the emotion precedes the moral. It is about the bug, not the fancy hair style.

The Naked Bull Ride (Barden 1991:305–307), which was collected in 1942 in Page County, Virginia, is analogous to modern stories of naked individuals who step (or fall) into a crowded intersection from the back of a camper or RV. Its correlation is less apparent because the element of an enclosed vehicle would seem to be an essential motif of this story. But the old Virginia version, which begins with a rendition of motif N385, "Unintentional injuries bring unfortunate consequences," replaces the private van interior with the isolated countryside far from town. The parallel here is the sudden change of venue, from private to public space. A raging bull on which the naked protagonist has landed (after a series of injuries as he tries to skinny-dip on Sunday instead of going to church) replaces the vehicle that conveys the man from private to public space. The essential thing is that he is not driving, either the bull in this legend, or the camper in "The Naked Man in the RV." In other words, he is not in charge. Naked and at the mercy of circumstances, the character in both these stories is placed before a crowd of people. Since the bull heads straight to the church he has skipped and dumps him at the feet of the people coming out

of the service, we also get a sense of poetic justice in the story. This irony gives the tale its moral theme of not violating taboos about keeping the sabbath. But in this instance the existence of the contemporary stories strengthens the case that the moral point is not the core of the old narrative. The tale need not concern either breaking a sabbath taboo, or contemporary American automobile culture—it is more primally and simply about the basic human anxiety regarding public nakedness and the humiliation it entails.

The fourth WPA Virginia legend narrative with parallels to contemporary urban legends is *The Ten Indians*, which was collected in 1940 in Wise County. While its subject, a frightening night visit by a group of Indians who end up saving a pioneer woman's life, seems far removed from contemporary life, it is structurally equivalent to the contemporary urban legend commonly termed "The Killer in the Back Seat." In this case, the pattern of the dramatic action alone, and no specific motif or element of content, provides the parallel. This pattern, which may be described as "suspected harmer revealed as savior, "is the basis of both stories, even though, on the surface, they have vastly different subject matter, setting, and atmosphere.

I should point out that the informant said his narrative could be traced back four generations, which places it substantially into the nineteenth century, when there still existed active hostilities between the Indians and settlers, especially in the remote Appalachian areas of western Virginia. I give it here in full:

> One time they's a widow woman and she lived by herself. One night there was ten Indians come by her house and wanted to stay all night. She told them she's afraid of them, that she's by herself and she's afraid they'd kill her. The old chief told her to let them stay all night and they wouldn't be a hair on her head harmed, and they'd all sleep on the floor in front of the fire. So she let them stay. That night the Indians laid down in front of the fire and she went to bed. 'Long in the night something commenced to stick her in the back. She said, "I knowed you'd kill me, I knowed you'd kill me." The old chief jumped up and counted his braves and they's all there, so he told her it wasn't any of them. He laid back down.

> 'Long after while something begin to stick her again, and she begin to holler, "I knowed you'd kill me, I knowed you'd kill me." So the chief got back up and counted his braves again. They's all there, and so he knew it was someone else. So he looked under the bed and there wuz a big old nigger under the bed with a big, long knife. They got the nigger out from under the bed and took him out and scalped him. Then they burnt him. And the chief and his braves and the old woman all laid back down and slept peaceful the rest of the night (Barden 1991:145–146).

The parallels to modern "back-seat murderer" legends are clear: (1) the protagonist is female, her assailant(s) male, (2) the woman thinks harm is coming from one quarter, when in fact it is coming from another, (3) the aggression against her comes repeatedly and is averted each time by the agent who appears to be further assaulting her, (4) the aggressor is unbelievably persistent, (5) the aggressor is inside the woman's supposedly safe interior, and has been there all along, (6) he comes from the dark underside of her physical situation (back seat = under the bed), and (7) there is a racial aspect to the story. I have enumerated these details to clarify the similarity between the old and new legends, because they may not be as obvious as those in the texts discussed previously.

The last element needs some clarification. A racial element is one of the most often mentioned aspects of the "Killer in the Back Seat" story. In noting the racial angle to most versions of the "Choking Doberman" legends, Brunvand comments that "the Killer in the Back Seat" has this element as well, but in the form of a reversal, since the driver of the pursuing car, who turns out be the woman's benefactor, is a black man (Brunvand 1984:16). This is a common element, in fact, in many contemporary American legends—a black male, mistaken for an attacker, turns out to be a valiant savior, an educated gentleman, and/or someone famous (for some reason Reggie Jackson seems to be a favorite).

It is striking that this nineteenth-century Virginia "Killer under the Bed" legend contains a racial element at all, since it is so far removed from urban racial tensions of the modern sort. Note the transpositions of race involved, however. The suspected villain, the object of the woman's initial dread, is not a black man, but Indians. This is the bias the narrative works against. Just as inter-racial fears, strife, and bad feelings between blacks

and whites are a very real aspect of modern urban life, so fear and loathing of Indians were aspects of pioneer life in Wise County, Virginia. The core of the narrative is that the woman's dread is misplaced. The Indians are honest, they respect the woman, they are as good as their word, and, finally, they save her life.

There is no positive role for the black man in this tale, however. He plays the part given to a homicidal maniac in the contemporary stories. Furthermore, there is a decidedly sexual cast to his actions—he is under the woman's bed at night relentlessly sticking his "big, long"knife up through the mattress at her. Here is the full racist image of the black man in the South—a sexually potent and physically threatening menace. If this seems to confuse the positive racial message that would make the old and new tales parallel, one need only recall that, while black men were not common in pioneer Wise County, Indians were. And just a generation before this tale arose the prevailing mind set was "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." This is the racial bias the story counts on and works to counter.

It is interesting that all four of these legends have in common the theme that a safe and supposedly private place turns out to be neither safe nor private. The four spaces—a cold oven, the inside of the head, the isolated woods, the mountain cabin—turn out to be treacherous, even deadly, places. The stories suggest that in reality there is no safe warm haven of the kind all human beings long for. This supports Linda Dégh's comment that "the tale gives relief from anxiety; the legend arouses it and leaves man alone with his anguish" (Dégh 1979:99). While the telling of the narratives may assuage this *angst* to an extent, or, as Bill Ellis puts it, "When anxiety is shared, one is no longer alone" (Ellis 1989:40), the fact is that invoking it comes first. Even when the narrative has a happy conclusion, when the Indians and pioneer woman "all lie back down and sleep peaceful the rest of the night," it is, and will always remain, dark under the bed.

Since contemporary legends are often said to reflect the concerns of modern urbanites, such as the stress of coping with technological devices and corporate food distribution, the dictates of fashion, racial and cultural clashes, overcrowding, etc., it is important to keep in mind that the dramatic and

emotional cores of these stories are neither modern nor urban. These modern things certainly attach themselves to the stories, but the thing that keeps them alive in tradition and keeps them recurring in performance is that they tell of deep-seated anxieties and fears, such as those surrounding sex, violence, suffering, and death.

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