

TOGETHER WITH A RIDDLE  
A LIE  
A JOB DESCRIPTION  
THE DEFINITION  
OF A  
LOCAL NAME  
AND SUCH MISCELLANY  
AS ILLUMINATES  
OHIO'S REGIONAL CHARACTER

MACK McCORMICK

# GLIMPSES OF OHIO FOLKLIFE

The Festival of American Folklife has no strict operative definition. The best statement of its character is the festival itself. A sign at one of the first festivals suggests what I mean. It read: "Folklife is what the people do."

Each year, the gathering of the Festival—the practical organization behind it and the search for participants—begins early. It is based on the deeply held conviction that folklife, with all its concomitant lore and art and skills and other riches passed from one person to another, is found inevitably and invariably in every community of people. One need not sail to an exotic island nor venture into far hills to find this ritual sense of life. It exists at the corner grocery store.

Consider, as examples, some random glimpses of the state of Ohio, glimpses in which any casual passer-by sees not only the fabric of tradition but also the tension and interchange that occurs as one tradition, one kind of ritual, one way of life, touches another:

- Steubenville, Ohio: in a window above Kuntz's Kosher Food Mart hangs a Christmas wreath
- Superior Avenue, in Cleveland: a neon restaurant sign advertises Hungarian & Soul Food
- A factory suburb in Cincinnati: one of the finest bluegrass bands thrives in an easy-going neighborhood tavern called the Minute Man Inn
- Blocks from the state capitol in Columbus: a unique black jazz band plays every Friday and Saturday evening at the Elks Franklin Lodge No. 203, not jazz for tourists but music for the people of the community
- Holmes County, Ohio: a horse drawn buggy carrying an Amish family shudders sideways as an eastbound truck roars past

Take the case of the buggy and the truck. Theirs is not just a matter of new ways shoving aside old ways, but, rather, of coexistence. The Amish family have their traditions: plain, buttonless, dark clothes; thick beards on married men; a fierce striving to go about life without mechanization.

And in his fashion, too, the truck driver in his eastbound rig has traditions. At coffee stops, he'll trade stories with other drivers, stories that grow out of the work. The drivers talk about accidents, near-accidents, and bad equipment. They add to the legend of the driver who

jackknifed his rig to avoid hitting a small dog in the road. They tell about the driver who lost his brakes and died on a steep grade in the Ohio hills but managed to slow his truck enough so that his helper could leap to safety. The drivers' lives, too, are bound in ritual.

"First thing you do, you got to blow up the salamander. Now you probably don't know what the salamander is, but that's the residue in a blast furnace, the steel at the bottom that cools and hardens when the furnace is shut down. That salamander might be ten feet thick and it's got to be dynamited out before you can go in there and rebuild that furnace."

So it is in all people's lives. Food, speech, memories, day-to-day activities—all give a group its character, its points of identity. Folklife is a suburban baby shower as well as an Amish barn raising. The festival sign said it best: "Folklife is what the people do."

There are 150 participants at the festival from the state of Ohio. Who are these people? And why were they and not others included? Examples are better than any general answer to that question.

The two men pictured playing dulcimers, a father and son, were invited. The older man makes and plays his own dulcimers. He plays banjo in a fine frailing style and sings a treasury of songs that are in the heart of the American country music tradition. He was invited because the newspaper editor at Quaker City, Ohio, mentioned him to us and because, in turn, a string of friendly neighbors directed us to his isolated house on RD #4 outside Carrollton, Ohio.

**PONY KEG:** a term peculiar to Ohio and some neighboring states; used as a generic name for a type of store selling cigarettes, beer, grocery items, and so forth.

Another man was invited because someone began leafing through the Yellow Pages one night in Cleveland and started to wonder about the artists who do gold leaf lettering. This wondering led us to the man whose gold leaf work is seen on banks, cigar stores, and lawyers' offices all over Cleveland's business district. You might have seen this artist at work there, surrounded by a crowd of watchers, his



brush flicking up to his hair to pick up a charge of static electricity which, in turn, picks up the delicate sheet of hammered gold and carries it to the surface of a plate glass window.

The dulcimer player is from a rural area; the other, from the center of a big city. We do not maintain that either is typical, but, rather, that each is important. The same applies to the baker whose specialty is bagels and to the family who comes to make cheese. To the Moravians with their sacred "love feast" ceremony and to the venerable craftsmen who design and construct stained glass windows. To the lady who makes buckeye-head dolls and to the gunsmith. Each is important and together they make a statement about the variety of life in one of the fifty states.

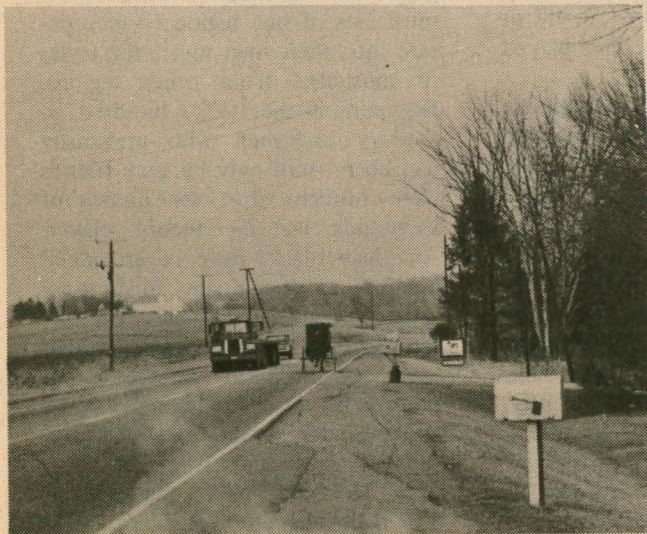
Even though our field work in Ohio spanned seven months time, we do not imagine our results to be definitive. Our choices were necessarily influenced by a field worker's intuition causing him to drive down a certain street to ask the right question at the right time, which led him to a particular person's door. Yet, while admitting this element of chance, we have to note that one Friday night in Norwood, Ohio, one of our people, feeling a bit self-satisfied for having discovered a neighborhood tavern full of rich, living music, looked up from his table to see another field worker walk in the door. Both had arrived at the tavern for the same reason, but by wholly different routes.

**Question:** What is high in the middle and round on the ends?

**Answer:** O-hi-o.

In a sense, it is the function of the Festival of American Folklife to show the American people to themselves. In this, it both succeeds and fails. Over the months of traveling in Ohio, through all the looking and selecting of people to invite to Washington for five hot days in July, we are constantly aware of that which is omitted.

Many things cannot be brought to the Mall in Washington. Some elements of life cannot make the journey without suffering damage or significant change. There are,



for example, several important kinds of traditional music and song that are not meant to be taken as a performance. The commonplace lullaby that you might hear from a front



porch rocking chair is one; a child's skiprope rhyme is another. Only rarely do such things come in a form that can be carried to Washington and put before an audience.

Each year the festival takes on a bit more. Each year it becomes a broader representation of what people do and involves more of the special folklife of large communities of people. At this year's event, for example, there are several important industrial craftsmen from glass factories in the Ohio River valley. There is a man who cuts glass in traditional patterns with such names as the Fan, Hobb's Star, and Strawberry Diamond. There's also a mold maker—a man who chisels these or similar patterns into the heavy steel molds from which pressed glass is made.

The gathering of each year's festival is an incremental process: one event or development suggests in turn something further to incorporate, the results of one field trip amplify or expand upon the possibilities suggested by the earlier visits to Ohio.

Yet we concede the possibility that we could do it all over again and come up with 150 different people from the state of Ohio, equally as appropriate as the 150 Ohioans who are taking part in the festival. Not only do we concede the possibility, we delight in it. America is too vast a place to let any one flow become the mainstream. The human community is infinitely varied in its possibilities and prospects. The 150 at the festival comprise those whom, we thought, as a group, could suggest and represent the 10.5 million people who could not be present but whose ways and traditions make up Ohio folklife.



MAC MCCORMICK, a folklorist and writer, has taped and edited numerous record albums. He is currently director of A Festival of American Folklife, the extension of the Smithsonian's presentation, a summer-long festival being held in the American Pavilion on the Expo '67 site in Montreal, Canada.