

IT'S COME A LONG WAY

by Gerald L. Davis

FIELDWORK— A SYMPOSIUM

"Folklore is a bastard which English literature begot upon anthropology," wrote Tristram Coffin, expressing the futility of the strife between different factions of scholars while hinting at the history of folklore as a discipline. What is important to understand today is that the rules of "collecting" folklore, like those for the writing of counterpoint, were set down after the fact. The creative work was done by imaginative thinkers: Palestrina, Orlando de Lassus, Josquin des Pres, in the case of musical composition: Bishop Percy, the Brothers Grimm, Cecil Sharp, Lydia Parrish, John Lomax, in the case of folklore. Once the concept was established and the material scrutinized, the rules were written and the battle was begun. Methodology became the byword, and the fact that the pioneers were "amateurs" for the most part (they had no rules to go by) was forgotten.

We know of no rules for presenting an authentic festival of folklife save one: fieldwork must be done. Gerald Davis opens the fieldwork discussion with a sharp, penetrating focus on two questions: contemporary academic concern with context rather than text; and the related problem of folklore concerned with antiquities in their earliest form versus folklore as the study of the adaptation of traditional material to changing times.

A parallactic view of fieldwork as an operation and a problem is presented by Gerald Parsons and Tom Kavanagh, both of whom have contributed significantly to this year's program. Mr. Parsons dispels the myth that fieldwork is only for the scholar, and Tom Kavanagh provides insight into the philosophical base from which all of this Festival's fieldwork was done.

Ralph Rinzler

"We've come a long way, Baby . . ." may very well be a rallying cry for women concerned with their liberation from the banalities imposed upon them by an oppressive, male-oriented society, but it just as aptly captures the sense of vitality in the development of fieldwork techniques for folkloric research and folklife study during the last fifteen years.

About forty years ago, when folklore research in America was still in its infancy, Elsie Clews Parsons was a prominent figure in field research in oral traditions. Among her legendary methods of "collecting" was her fondness for anchoring her yacht in the waters of the Bahamas and summoning Bahamians to her side to tell her stories, jokes, and other oral material.

This kind of "collecting" was possible at a time when folklore research was perhaps more amateur than academic, more arrogant and presumptuous than sensitive and self-conscious. The concentration in those early days was on the "collecting" of texts—the stories, the songs, the jokes—to feed massive compilations of folktale and folksong collections and tale-type and motif indices.

While some interest remains among a handful of scholars in representing folklore texts as the substance of the field of folklore, overwhelmingly the concern now lies in other areas such as the cultural, physical, social, and political environment in which a folkloric event takes place, or the context and the philosophic and esthetic principles underlying the creation and uses of folklore materials in a culture, in a society, among groups of people whenever and wherever they meet and creatively share experiences, either orally in verbal art or through traditional crafts or material culture.

In direct contrast to earlier interest in oral materials, contemporary students and scholars of folklore are primarily concerned with the living styles of the people called "the folk." The "folk" in contemporary parlance may be university professors and pre-schoolers, urban raconteurs as well as

rural craftsmen, young people as well as old people, African-Americans as well as Irish-Americans and Jewish-Americans—in short, any group of people who share common occupational and ethnic traditions, common expressive ways of handling parts of their lives. Important and central to the work now going on is the belief that the way the "folk" look at their own creative systems, verbal or material, is as valid as the elaborate systems scholars manufacture to explore and analyze artistic communication and traditional crafting in cultural environments.

The now dated notion of "collecting," so strongly suggesting the preservation of fragile antiques, is as poorly descriptive of folkloric and folklife fieldwork and research as is the description of American democracy as egalitarian. The problem of modernity within tradition or, as often presumed, vestigial tradition giving way to cybernetic modernity, is continually one of the frameworks within which many folklorists work.

Is the proverb "It takes a thief to catch a thief" any less folkloric because a portion is used as the title of a successful TV series? Is "St. James Infirmary" still a folksong now that it continues in a funky blues form or as a honky-tonk jazz piece? Does a bonafide, dyed-in-the-wool Appalachian craftsman cease being a traditional craftsman because the rocking chairs he makes now have metal rockers with wide feet for use on carpeted floors? These certainly are not earthshattering questions, yet for all of their seeming simplicity, they contain tightly impacted theoretical questions that have occupied the attention of scholars for the last one hundred years.

Each of these examples, together with its new form, is part of the process of change that is so characteristic of so much that we know as American folk culture. Far from destroying the earlier form, far from being "contaminated" by exposure or declining in quality, a reshaped example of verbal art or a "modernized" item of material culture

FOLKLIFE FIELDWORK FOR FUN AND PROFIT

by Gerald E. Parsons, Jr.
University of Pennsylvania

often experiences as hardy a life cycle as its model. It is true that many of the old ways are disappearing from use, but the processes of change and adaptation encourage exciting new forms from the equally exciting older forms. Expressive culture is pregnantly alive and responds, as we do, to the pressures, the fears, the joys, the habits, the needs of time and place and personhood.

Field research in American folklife is fun when it takes you outdoors on a fine day for a talk with the local herb doctor, barn builder, storyteller, or moonshiner.

Field research in American folklife is profitable when the results of your happy experiences can be used to answer theoretical questions about cultural change, encourage a higher valuation, monetary or otherwise, of our still flourishing traditions, foster an awareness of social conditions that will smooth the way for necessary political and economic change, and reinforce the enduring values of our culture in the face of the clamor to change for change's sake.

Yes, folklife fieldwork can be both fun and profitable, but to hear some professionals talk—the anthropologists, folklorists, cultural geographers—you'd never get the idea that good work and good times could go hand in hand.

Scholarly writing fosters the impression that to accomplish anything in the

field one must be numbered among a select few described variously as blessed with the God-given talent to "talk to the folk," or as "thoroughly grounded in cognitive anthropology." On top of election to the elite, scholarly publications often imply that fieldworkers are purified through hardships in their research. The exact shape of the ordeal may vary; anything from being lowered into the folk community in a basket to difficulties in finding a foundation to fund the work will be sufficient to introduce the proper note of rigor and—not incidentally—to discourage amateurs from, as is sometimes said, "contaminating the field."

Given the enormous debt folk-culture studies owe to the nonprofessional scholar, this cold-shoulder treatment is difficult to understand. It is even less comprehensible when one stops to consider how much work must be done, immediately, if we are to document enough about everyday life in preindustrial American so that future generations may retain an accurate perspective. Therefore, I want to direct a few words to anyone who has ever been attracted to the idea of collecting American folk traditions, but who has been frightened away by the stern declarations of the professional scholars.

In the first place, what academics say to each other regarding the harsh and demanding nature of folklife fieldwork may be largely disregarded by anyone whose place in the sun doesn't depend on regular publication in the scholarly press. Scholars write not only to tell one another what they have learned in a given research project, but also, in some cases, to suggest that no other scholar could have done the job as well.

Underlying this are not only the obvious vocational interests of the particular academic, but also a schism within the field of folk-culture study that divides the new breed of social-scientific scholars from the old guard, trained in literature, history, esthetics, and other areas of the humanities. This internal dissension is felt nowhere more keenly than in the matter of field procedures.

Student Don McNeil watches Aunt Arie string leather breeches beans.

