

# FOLKLIFE FIELDWORK FOR FUN AND PROFIT

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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.*







The "scientist," for example, will maintain that nothing worthwhile would have been learned from his field project save for his skills in, say, nondirective interviewing; the "humanists," on the other hand, will contend that it was his sensitivity to the lifeways and indeed the souls of his informants that made the whole thing possible.

Thus does each side disqualify the methods of the other. The point that a knowledge of interviewing techniques and a poetic sensibility to people and places might BOTH be useful attributes to the fieldworker tends to be overlooked—as does the point that a little common sense might be more useful than either of the more rarefied virtues.

The simple truth is that whatever the limitations on the fieldwork of the non-specialist, there are some things he can do as well or better than the professionals.

This has been proven in Arkansas, where Vance Randolph is the dean of American folktale collectors. It has been proven in North Georgia where the students of Rabun Gap High School, under the guidance of their teacher Elliot Wigginton, have been publishing reports and photographs of their community traditions in a remarkable periodical called *Foxfire*. And it has been proven here in Maryland, where the field experience of Alta Schrock and members of the Council of the Alleghenies has been directed to helping the mountain people and culture survive in the face of overwhelming pressure to give up their traditions. Vance Randolph, Alta Schrock, and the students and teachers of Rabun Gap High School are all "amateurs," but amateurs in the older and nobler sense of that word—people who do something for the love of it. In the presence of these inspiring examples,

Chairmaker Lon Reid is interviewed by Elliot Wigginton, teacher at Rabun Gap High School in Georgia and advisor to the student periodical *Foxfire*, and student Mary Jane Shepard.

no other "amateurs" need have reservations about going into the field.

Here are a few suggestions for anyone who might like to find out about his community's living past.

First, write to the American Folklore Society, University of Texas Press, Box 7819, Austin, Texas, and request the names of local and regional associations which might be joined.

Second, buy a copy of the handbook that is the standard reference work for all collectors of oral tradition: Kenneth Goldstein's *Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore* (1964).

Third, gain a basic knowledge of what might reasonably be expected to turn up in traditional culture by reading Jan Brunvand's *Study of American Folklore* (1968) and Henry Glassie's *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (1969).

Next, the would-be folklore fieldworker should select some specific topic to pursue with informants. Weather lore, church music, foodways, hunting and fishing, horse training, rug weaving, almost anything that will engage the interest of the people one hopes to talk to will provide a good beginning.

The purpose of focusing on a particular topic is to avoid that embarrassing silence that falls over the crossroads store when one walks up to the counter and says, "Say, can you tell me if there's any folklife around here?" One can go about fieldwork the wrong way, make no mistake, but the right road is easy enough to find and easy enough to follow.

## SEEKING OUT INDIAN PARTICIPATION

by Tom Kavanagh

The end of July is a beginning and an ending. It marks the final mop-up of one year's Festival of American Folklife and the start of extensive planning for the next. For us, in the Indian Awareness Program, it marks the time when we can get out into the field once again and renew old friendships, make new ones, and learn more about the tremendous amount of traditional Indian culture still existing within the Indian community.

Indian participation in the Festival of American Folklife is more than a presentation of a colorful but irrelevant past. It is the presentation of modern adaptations of traditional Indian cultures within the context of 1972. The Festival is not a performance out of the past; it is a celebration of the present.

The fieldwork that goes into the Indian participation at the Festival must therefore search out the people who will best represent the living aspects of Indian culture. A potter comes to the Festival because there is still a demand for Pueblo-made pottery, not because pottery is something the Indians used to do. There are dancers on the Mall, not because they are the visible and best-known image of Indians, but because the dancers and songs play a vital part in Indian life today.

The job of adequately representing the Indian cultures during the five days of the Festival is impossible. Not only are those cultures complex and inter-related, but the gap between the Indian cultures and the general white population is wide enough to discourage most attempts at presenting them. The cultural differences between other ethnic minorities—Basque dancers, say—and the average visitor to the Festival are minimal compared to the differences between the same visitor and any Indian.

The job of representing the Indian culture truthfully, in such a way that the average visitor can understand, or at least accept the differences, is largely up to the fieldworker in his choice and recommendation of participants.

There was a time when Indian people were not fully aware of what was hap-