FOLK HUMOR ALIVE AND WELL IN MARYLAND

by George Carey
Department of English, University of Massachusetts

When anyone argues that the art of oral storytelling is dead in Maryland, I hasten to direct him to any of a number of places in the State where people of different folk groups gather to pass their time. One place I am particularly familiar with is Crisfield, a small town on the lower Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake where some 5000 souls live perched together at the edge of the Bay. Most of them sustain themselves on the seafood the Bay provides, crabs in the summer, oysters in the winter. And their spiritual sustenance stems from an ironbound Methodism.

On a given day in the summer, the patterned beat of Crisfield life holds pretty much the same. By dawn the crabmen are out on the Bay and the crab houses that line the inner harbor have been humming with activity since 4 a.m. As the heavy, humid day advances, the town landing becomes the center of action. Retired watermen amble down to the wharf, plant themselves on a series of shaded benches collectively known as "the liar's bench," and watch as the day's commerce unfolds.

With that, another member of the brotherhood pipes up:

> That's one hell of an echo, but it ain't nothing really. We were up at Alberta, Canada, north of Montana, and me and my partner parked our truck beside the edge of the canyon to go to sleep. And we wanted to be sure to wake up in the morning, so we went over there and yelled in the canyon as loud as we could and then went back in the truck and went to sleep. Damn if seven and one half hours later that echo didn't come and wake us up.

Suddenly, the yarning takes a turn toward a favorite pastime on the Eastern Shore—the hunt.

> Oz Mears had a bird dog that was said to be about the best around. He carried it down to the beach one day where some men were fishing. That dog just stood there looking out into the surf, until one of the fishermen said, "What's wrong with that dog?"
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> Oz said, "I don't know, but when he goes on point like that, there's usually a bird around." Just about that time one of those fellas hooked a big red drum. When they got it ashore, Oz said, "Cut him open." When they did they looked and there was this quail inside of that fish.

The response is immediate:

> That's interesting, but I knowed of a fella down here one time and he had a wonderful rabbit dog. Well, this dog died and he decided that he had to do something to remember him by so he had him skinned and made himself a pair of gloves out of that dog's hide. One time he was out in the forest working, and he pulled his gloves off and laid them on this stump and set down to eat his lunch. All of a sudden this rabbit run out of the underbush and those gloves jumped off of that stump and grabbed the rabbit and choked him to death.

And so it goes on into the sultry morning until the watermen scatter for lunch or other incidental business. Obviously, the Eastern Shore of Maryland holds no corner on this kind of gathering nor the folk repartee which issues from it. The same sort of thing occurs with any group drawn together by some common bond. Lawyers have their offices, teenagers their slumber party, college students their bull session, miners their tavern, Polish immigrants in Baltimore their church supper. And out of this variety of congregating places springs a body of oral folk humor fitted to the needs and associations of that particular group. Surely Jewish businessmen in Silver Spring would find little amusement in the stories of Chesapeake Bay watermen, but this widely known joke would unquestionably raise more than a passing smile among them:

> And oh, yes, then there's the one that Gloria thinks is very cute. This comes out of the six-day Israeli War. There's a whole company of Arabs marching along in the desert. And there in the distance they spot one lonely Jew. And they send six men out to get him. An hour passes. Nothing. So they send fifteen men out to see what happened to the six. An hour passes. Nothing. They now send out fifty men to see what happened to the fifteen. Couple of hours pass. Here comes one guy staggering back, bloody, beat up, uniform torn in half off of him. And he comes staggering back to the commander and says, "Go back, go back; it's a trap. There's two of them."

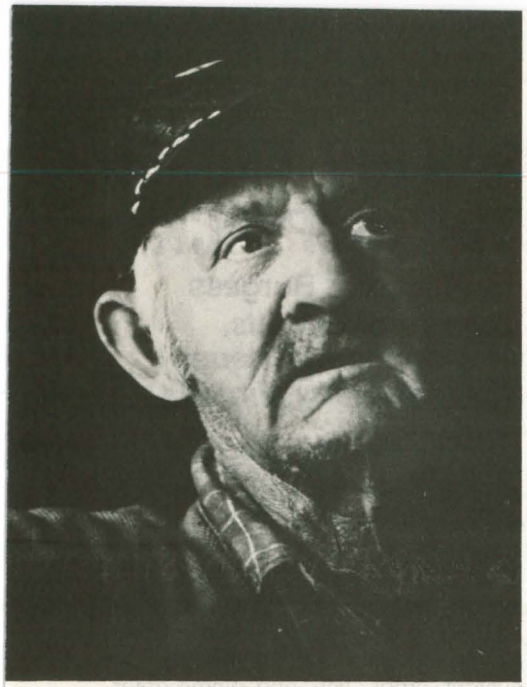
Among rural storytellers it is the local character who furnishes much of the mirth, and tales about well-known personalities often linger on long after their death. One such character was Ike Morgan who live in Klondyke, a small town near Frostburg, Maryland. Ike ran a saloon called, appropriately, The House of Morgan, but his star rose in local legendry largely because of his well-turned wit. Asked one day why he never went to Hollywood to try his luck, Ike immediately quipped: "Why the hell should I go to Hollywood? There I'd be a fool among kings; here I'm a king among fools."

Another time in Frostburg, a friend accosted Ike and asked him how business was over in Klondyke. "Business?" Ike shot back, "Why things are so slow over there the creek only runs three times a week."

From a folklorist's point of view, a day spent on that bench can be highly instructive. If his antennae are at all sensitive he will pick up the distinct lift and fall of Eastern Shore speech dialect, or the highly flavored proverbial comparison: "I'll say this, old man Charlie is so worthless, he lacks a dollar and a half of being worth a damn, and his wife, why she's so ugly, she has to sneak up on a glass of water to get a drink."

Coupled with these traditional expressions are the sudden flights of exaggeration so ripe in folk speech. "Did it blow over your way last night, Willie?" "Blow? Why my good Lord, I guess it did blow. Blew so hard it white-capped the pisspot."

If one stays to listen, liar's bench talk takes a variety of turns. It may drift back to the old times on the Bay, the



Dewey Landon is a blacksmith's helper and a former tugboat captain. A true waterman, he has lived on or near the water for all of his 70-odd years. Photo by Warren Jorgensen

days of sail, for instance, when a man had to lean more on his God than his gasoline to see him through. Or it may dwell on the days of the big oyster catches when a man's life meant little and a ship captain might simply dump his crew into the March waters of the Bay rather than pay them their wages. Or the conversation could just as easily shift to anecdotes:

Now old man Haynie Bradshaw over on Smith Island, he used to have a pretty good garden. Everyone had gardens then, but Haynie had one of the biggest. He used to raise corn and beans and things like that. Well, they had a bad drought one time and everything dried right up. So Haynie called a meeting to pray for rain. And the first thing you know, along overhead came this big black cloud, and Haynie's wife said, "I think our prayers are going to be answered. Here it comes."

Well, it did come, but it didn't come only rain; it come wind and it come down in torrents and it blowed a tornader. And after it was all over, the old man went out and he looked around, and he come back in with his head down. His wife said, "Well, Haynie, you got your rain."

He said, "Well, I'll tell you, I believe the Lord sent the rain, but he sent the wind too; take the Lord on the average, he does about as much harm as he does good."

Another storyteller, his memory prodded by talk of the Almighty, recalls one about a local preacher:

Now this really happened down here in Lawsonia. There had been a change of preachers there and this new man come into that institution of learning, the country store. (What you couldn't learn there wasn't worth learning.) Well, there was this old fellow laying 'round there after a day's work and this preacher was trying to get acquainted with the future flock and he walked into the store and he greeted the old man, who was laying on the bench chewing tobacco.

"Good evening." The old fellow spoke to him and spit. "I'm your new preacher around here and I'm trying to get acquainted with the members of the church." The old fellow never noticed him. "I notice the soil seems to be fertile around here. Looks like you could raise most anything on it. What crop do you raise the most of?" The old fellow looked at him and spit again. "Well, all I ever knowed them to raise around here was a lot of hell, and they get about five hundred good crops of that every year!"

Other elements of folk humor frequently surface at these daily gabfests and one is surprised if one fails to hear some outlandish examples of tall-tale lying, often set within the framework of a contest. One man might begin: "Now you're not going to believe this, but around Easton, Pennsylvania, where I was one time, there was a place where you could holler and then take out a cigarette and light it before the echo got back."

As might be expected, Ike explored the pleasures of John Barleycorn from time to time, much to his wife Mag's chagrin. Finally Mag got tired of Ike coming home drunk all the time so she commandeered her brother to dress up like the devil and give her husband a good scare. When the time came, her brother hid in the bushes. As Ike lurched past he jumped out and yelled, "OOH! OOH! I'm the devil, I'm the devil!"

Ike took one look, laughed, and said, "Well, I'll be damned. I'm glad to meet you. Come on up to the house; I married your sister."

But Ike always complained that the real reason that he never got on well with his wife was because other women were constantly after him.

Ike told this one on himself. Said he was leading this hog home one time and he had this rope tied around one of its front feet. So pretty soon this woman came along and jabbered something to Ike and then she said, "Now don't you molest me."

He said, "How the hell can I molest you and hold this hog at the same time?"

She said, "Well here—I'll hold the hog."

On a par with Ike Morgan was Fred Merrbaugh of nearby Lanacoming. Fred's reputed remarks revealed him more as a traditional simpleton than as a coiner of clever retorts. One morning a friend gave Fred a rather wild ride in his car from Lanaconing to Peking. When Fred stepped out at his destination, he looked his chauffeur in the eye and said, "I'll tell you one thing, the next time I ride down here I'll walk."

Another time, when he spied some overlarge grapefruit in the grocery store, he candidly observed, "My God, it sure wouldn't take many of them things to make a dozen."

And one evening he arrived home from the mines to find very slim pickings for dinner. "My God, woman," he complained to his wife, "there ain't enough ham in that skillet to make a cheese sandwich."

No doubt a thorough canvassing of Maryland's folk humor would reveal much more variety than that suggested here. But perhaps what is more important to realize is that any sampling of oral folk humor, from Maryland or anywhere else, loses much of its vitality when confined to the printed page. It lacks the storyteller's dramaturgy, his inflections, his gestures, his intonations; the roll and pitch of the spoken word. And as long as men can cock an ear to "Did you hear the one about . . ." I doubt that folk humor will ever die out. Laughter is just too endemic in the American character.