

# DON'T OVERLOOK LABOR'S PLACE IN AMERICAN FOLK CULTURE

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The study of American folklore and folklife during the past seventy years has been limited almost exclusively to rural traditions. The folksongs and tales of backwoods America, crafts of mountain folk, the history, lifestyles, and beliefs of country people have been collected, cataloged, studied, and published, and information concerning them has been taught in colleges and universities across America. More recently, with the destruction of the myth of the "melting pot," the folkways of Afro-Americans, Spanish-speaking Americans, Amerindians, and of immigrant groups across our nation have been spotlighted for study along with the traditions of White, rural Americans of Anglo-Scots-Irish stock. This cultural pluralism is now recognized as one of the great strengths of the American fabric.

But while cultural minorities, in the course of fighting for their share of the American dream, have asserted their rights to an historical past, one of the largest segments of our population has been left out in the cold when it comes to receiving recognition for historical and cultural contributions. This is the American worker.

Within the last five years numerous educational programs in high schools and colleges as well as on television have surveyed Black history, ethnic studies, and immigration movements and contributions to American social and cultural history. There are, for example, courses on Afro-American history, music and folklore, on American Indian and Chicano history and culture, on Slavic, Italian, Spanish, Jewish, and other national and religious groups' history and culture. To be sure, the picture is nowhere near complete. Some of these groups have been given more attention than others, but continued social, economic, and political pressures are being brought to bear to achieve fuller recognition. All of these groups have some platform for presenting their history and culture, while the American worker remains almost totally unknown to his fellow Americans. Where, we may ask, are



there courses on American labor history or on industrial folklore?

To be sure, certain American occupations have received limited attention. Sailors, cowboys, lumbermen, and miners are mentioned in university folklore courses, but usually only their songs are covered in any detail. The treatment their traditions are given is not unlike that given to the folkways of rural Americans. It is essentially past-oriented, romantic, something akin to the "noble savage" philosophy of earlier centuries, and embodying the intense fervor of those employed in the salvage-collecting of essentially dead or fast-dying traditions.

But what of the living traditions of the American factory laborer, the industrial craftsman, and the technical trades worker? As has been pointed out by America's leading industrial folklorist, Archie Green, "it is ironic that in the United States, an industrial giant, our heritage of industrial and urban folklore has been so neglected."

*Milton Summers, union baker, filling cakes at the Smithsonian Institution's 1971 Festival of American Folklife.*

It has been one of the purposes of this Festival to do something about such neglect by presenting some aspects of the lore of manual, mechanized, and organized labor.

American labor groups are represented at the Festival because their members are living tradition bearers. In most people's thinking there is a sharp distinction between the dying crafts of rural America and the viable trades of urban America's workers. The separation is an artificial one, usually based on only a limited knowledge of the occupation of one or the other group. In terms of the training or apprenticeship processes, however, the passing on of a body of technical knowledge, personal skills, and tricks of the trade from master craftsman to green apprentice is very little different whether one is doing dry-wall



# WHY ARE UNIONS IN THE FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL?

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masonry in Vermont or laying bricks in downtown Philadelphia. While the superficial differences are of interest, the similarities are far more important.

In the area of folkloric traditions, including occupational jokes, rituals, beliefs, and customs, there is only a fine line separating rural workers from urban industrial craftsmen. For example, the greenhorn cowboy tricked into mounting a docile-looking, but totally unbroken bronco, or the teenage farmworker sent out on a snipe-catching midnight hunt, is certainly brother to the young trainee ironworker who, on his first day on the job, is sent out to get a sky hook. Certainly, in such cases, labor lore is every bit as meaningful and functional as the lore of ethnic, regional, or religious groups.

One may, of course, argue that American labor does not constitute a cultural subgroup as do the groups mentioned above. But the argument does not hold water because the factors that contribute to its "groupness"—stability, homogeneity, and continuity—are also to be found in varying degrees in those other groups. These, in turn, are reflected in shared values, group pride, a sense of history, and a commitment to the future—sometimes to an even greater degree than one might find among more traditional folk groups.

Most citizens probably picture the average American as a white-collar worker, based on stereotypes presented in movies and on television. Rarely does the blue-collar worker get a chance to present his side of the story. But he, too, needs to be given a platform on which he can express his pride, reveal his identity, and explain his values. If we are to have a true understanding of contemporary American folk culture, the perspectives of working Americans of all types must be presented in broadly based cultural forums. The American Folklife Festival is such a forum. The American worker finds here his opportunity to have a voice in a program designed to reach all America via the stage of an American cultural institution.

"I dig your ditches, I'm labor;  
 I man your switches, I'm labor;  
 I teach your kids and make your shoes,  
 I sew your pants and write your news,  
 With brain and brawn, with nerve and  
 thews,  
 I'm labor.  
 I fight your fires, I'm labor;  
 I cleanse your mires, I'm labor,  
 Your towers that top the mountain crest,  
 Your teeming east, your bounteous  
 west,  
 I wrought them . . .  
 I drill your sewers, I'm labor;  
 I plow your moors, I'm labor,  
 On earth, in mine, on sea, in sky,  
 I swarm and toil and fight and die . . .  
 I'm labor!"

—Samuel H. Friedman

*Rebel Song Book*, Rand School Press,  
 N.Y. 1935

In 1971, for the first time since the Folklife Festival was established, labor unions were invited to take part. A large proportion of the some 750,000 people who came to the Festival saw and wondered at the skills displayed by members of five AFL-CIO unions: the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union of America, the Glass Bottle Blowers Association, the Iron Workers, and the American Federation of Musicians.

In spite of the obvious enjoyment visitors to the Festival experienced watching sheep-shearing and expert meat-cutting, the making of sausages and displays of other skills of meat-cutters, people were puzzled as to

why labor unions were taking part.

Well, as students of labor know, the modern labor movement traces its ancestry back thousands of years to the very first workers who ploughed the fields and, before that, made primitive garments and "invented" tools for hunting, sewing, and the sustaining of human life.

Down through the centuries, men and women became interested in and developed skills at particular kinds of work. And gradually, workers who specialized in such trades as tinsmiths, silversmiths, goldsmiths, tailors, bakers, stonemasons, builders, artisans of all kinds founded guilds and developed high standards of excellence for admission into a given trade.

The unions invited by the Smithsonian Institution to take part in the Folklife Festival are, in a very real sense, the descendants and inheritors of the guilds of the Middle Ages and those artisans that preceded them.

The point is, millions of American men and women make the things that all of us take for granted—our food, clothing, housing, medicines, airplanes, trains, automobiles, plastics, computers, matches, etc. In large measure the high standards of production, the extraordinary skills so frequently required in performing these tasks are skills preserved by the unions.

Labor is a vital part of life. Unions belong in the Folklife Festival.

*Tom Cummings, retired lithographer from Canada, preparing a litho stone.*

