

Children's Folklore

Every child carries a special collection of his own folklore. He or she might become a collector of elephant jokes, or jump rope rhymes, or limericks. We all probably remember a variant of: "One fine day in the middle of the night; two dead men got up to fight." Or: "Owhay otay eakspay iglatingay," or perhaps even: "hopow hopo spokeak opop lopangopuage."

In a country as large and culturally diverse as America, there are also many ethnic traditions which become part of a child's lore, special ways of celebrating holidays, games, dances and songs in languages other than English.

Children's folklore is in constant change as is all lore. The past models are varied and thus created anew; sometimes being conserved by children in one form for hundreds of years. You might be surprised to find that some of the rhymes sung by black children in Washington, D. C. bear a close resemblance to rhymes collected in 19th C. England from adults. Consider this comparison:

*Little Sally Walker
Sitting in a saucer
Weeping and crying all over
She have done.
Rise, Sally rise
Wipe your dirty eyes.
Put your hands on your hips
and let your backbone slip.
Oh, shake it to the east,
Oh, shake it to the west,
Oh, shake it to the one that
You love best.*

Washington, D. C. 1974

*Little Sally Walker
Sitting on the sand
Crying and weeping for a
Young man.
Rise Sally, rise, Sally
Wipe away your tears.*

*Try for the east
Try for the west
Try for the one that
You love best.*

London, England 1898

In addition to the oral traditions of childhood, most people vividly recall the pranks, fads, and the private fantasy life of playing house, school, cowboys and Indians, spacemen and cars. A teenager recalls spying on the neighbors, tactics for disrupting class, trading baseball cards and marbles, and games of poisoned messages.

The children's area was created to encourage children's participation in the Festival, teaching and learning dances, games and songs, telling jokes, listening to tales, recording their impressions in drawings, and discussing and sharing their own folklife.

All children are invited to explore the children's area, accompanied by a responsible adult.

Participants

Bessie Jones
Janie Hunter
Ann Mitchell

*Children's folklorist
Children's folklorist
Cornhusk doll maker*

Family Folklore

At some time in history it must have happened that a person attended a performance of celebrities, and, in a marvelous turn-about, found himself the celebrated. Perhaps he made a spectacular catch of a home run in the grandstands. Suddenly, it was *his* autograph being sought, obscure anecdotes about his past became crowd pleasers.

A similar turn-about takes place at the new Family Folklore Center in the Festival of American Folklife: the festival-goer who comes to see the celebrated folk, finds at the Family Folklore Center, himself celebrated as "folk."

Traditional cultures, as we know, transmit their lore across generations, some of it surviving with only small changes for hundreds of years. A family represents a mini-culture, but, most modern American families do not preserve their folklore across generations. Folklore is created anew in every family: family traditions of things to do on Sunday, private jokes, endearments, nicknames and expressions; gestures and caresses which take on special meaning; anecdotes concerning eccentric aunts and in laws; memories of "good-times," frequently recounted, which take on a kind of mythic quality and help the family through the "not-so-good-times."

Does this fact—that the lore is created anew and does not travel down through the generations—make it of any less interest? Quite the contrary.

Folklore that travels across generations is of interest because of what it can tell us of the past; it can give us a sense of historical permanence and continuity. But folklore created anew by individuals confronting similar situations such as family life can also give us a sense of what is permanent and lasting—not so much in history as in the human condition.

The 1974 Festival of American Folklife makes a marvelous turn-about and celebrates the lore of the festival-goer.

At the Family Folklore tent a group of folklorists are on hand to speak with festival-goers about several areas of family lore: *Names and expressions*: nicknames, pet names, names for automobiles, endearments, euphemisms, greetings, and family words and expressions of all kinds. *Foodways*, traditional family foods: Descriptions of holiday foods and traditional ethnic dishes will be collected, as well as special treats made for the children—and invented by the children! *Family anecdotes*: ranging from what has been termed the "family saga"—legends of a family's ancestors, often including such elements as lost fortunes—to quirky family experiences. One part of the Family Folklore tent will be devoted to children. Here the folklorists hope to learn from the children themselves selected portions of their family lore, such folkloric items as remedies for bad dreams and procedures for "dibbing," to learn the kind of lore which adheres to the experiences of childhood.

It is our hope that efforts at the Family Folklore Center will result in good published collections of family lore. But far more important is our hope that the process of collection will be a rewarding one for the festival-goer, that it will also enable him to bridge the gap between the great traditions he sees expressed on the various stages and displays, and the small traditions which are such an integral part of his everyday life; to make the connection between the traditions of ethnic and occupational groups, and the traditions in his own family.