

Family Folklore

Every person's life contains at least one great novel, or so the saying goes. Be it the lady sitting next to you on the bus whose wallet unfolds into 120 photographs, or the man on the park bench whose memory is so good he doesn't need the photographs, everyone has a story to tell.

There is a touch of the friendly stranger in each interviewer at the Family Folklore tent. But unlike that friendly stranger, the interviews heard in the tent amount to more than scattered reminiscences. At last summer's Festival, we heard of human experiences in forms which best express them—family stories, family names and expressions, family jokes and traditions. Taken together, this material often becomes the stuff around which a family celebrates itself. As one of last year's festival-goers put it, family folklore is a kind of glue.

"You remember things that you did together," the same informant had said. "I think it's an attempt to dust off, get rid of the cobwebs on memories which were pleasant. It isn't a particular story or a particular event so much as an attempt to get everybody on the same wavelength.

"We've always had dogs in our family," he went on. "And a lot of the things we do seem to get back to, 'do you remember when such and such a dog did this.'" He was not the only festival-goer to talk with us about the relationship between the dog and family folklore: "When I was 12 or 13 I got a dog and his name was Snoopy. And my sister and I had always fought with each other a lot—she's 5 years younger than me. But somehow when the dog came, we became friends through the dog. We developed a full language around him, about 112 names! There were a series of about 6 years when these names evolved into a whole culture." He then went on to say that the dog is



In the Family Folklore tent, festival-goers share stories, names and expressions, heroes, and holiday traditions. Visitors find themselves celebrated as "folk."

now called "Chi"; "I think it's an abbreviation of Chimain which was a name that came out of Chudy-Chimain which is a name that came out of Chudy which is a name that came out of my sister's best friend in kindergarten whose name was Judy."

The Family Folklore Program was begun in 1974 for the purpose of collecting the lore of the festival-goers at the Festival of American Folklife. A simple turn-about took place in our tent: the festival-goer who came to see the celebrated folk on the stages at Family Folklore found himself celebrated as the "folk."

Close to 300 interviews were conducted with persons at the Festival. For those of us on the other side of the tape recorders was unfolded a whole panorama of American life. Family stories seemed to express America's fascina-

tion with what is often depicted as her notorious past. As many times as there were heroes, there were anti-heroes. A person who did not realize the amount of imagination that mixes with fact to produce an item of folklore, might think it was a veritable gallery of rogues that "great-grandfather and grandmothers" those interviewed at Family Folklore—horse thieves, cowards, courtmartialed generals. "I should probably tell you about my great-great grandfather being killed by the Indians," one informant explained. "There were about 11 Texas Rangers—and he was one of the Rangers—and one Indian. And the Indian got about six or seven of them before they finally got him. So that's one of the not-so-brave things in the family."

Whereas family stories represent one way in which families "image" themselves verbally, family photographs represent the way this is done visually. But while family stories seem to portray events as they were or indeed as worse than they were, family photographs seem to portray them as they should

have been. Family photograph albums preserve the best of life—the birth of the baby, his first steps, birthdays, graduations, weddings, golden wedding anniversaries. . . .

It is in the nature of human experience, of the interplay of time and human life, to bring the past to bear upon the present and to make the present memorable for the future.

This year the Family Folklore Program is expanding to include home photography as a form of folklore. In addition to interviewing festival-goers, we are presenting a chronicle of the American life cycle as it is depicted in home movies and family albums.

Another new kind of material which brings the past to bear upon the present is perhaps best called "reminiscent history." The self-imaging of families, both in stories and photographs, is concerned with the preservation of the personal experiences of family members. A portion of these personal experiences, however, is shared cultural experience. This kind of story might include reminiscences about one's grandfather in the Civil War, or of one's father having eaten one of the first ice cream cones at the 1904 World's Fair, or of one's self having attended Woodstock. In photographs they might include home movies of Dwight D. Eisenhower in a motorcade, a photo of an old snow plow, or, as one family wrote to us, a photo of "the first Third Avenue Elevated train leaving the northernmost 241st Street station in the Bronx." The Family Folklore Program will collect this kind of material at the Festival with the hope of expanding it into a living history project for the Bicentennial.

In the home movies and albums at the Family Folklore tent we hope you will see a reflection of segments of your own lives, and in the interviews we hope you will share some of them with us.