

Working Americans

Occupational Folklife: An Introduction

by Robert S. McCarl

One of the first things we want to learn about a new acquaintance is how he or she makes a living. Although it seems so important to know whether a person is a cook or a construction worker, a secretary or a bus driver, most of us know very little about the special circumstances of any occupation but our own. The Working Americans section, then, explores and celebrates work-related traditions, looking at Americans not as people from a certain area of the country or from a particular culture, but in terms of how they make their livings and what they must know to do their jobs.

Each occupation has its own traditions and its own body of skills. In the Working Americans section, Festival-goers can meet and talk with members of many unions and organizations while they demonstrate the particular know-how that is essential to their varied tasks and while they share, in the workshop areas, the particular tales and jokes that grow out of the nature of the work they do.



The influence of occupations upon the American character stretches from Melville's *Moby Dick* to Terkel's *Working*, from the development of the clipper ship to the skills involved in the construction of a modern skyscraper. And although we continue to be influenced by and identified through the work that we do, we know very little about the work done by others. By examining the broad categories of occupational "folklife" and the main ways in which it is expressed, it will be possible to gain a better understanding of its impact upon our lives.

Our occupations demand various kinds of skill and knowledge. Even though the basic techniques may be studied in the classroom or read from a textbook, the only realistic way to learn how to do a particular job is through experience. The separation of the work group from the rest of society, its internal cohesion, and the distinctions made between insiders and outsiders, in addition to the passage of work-related information from the experienced to the inex-

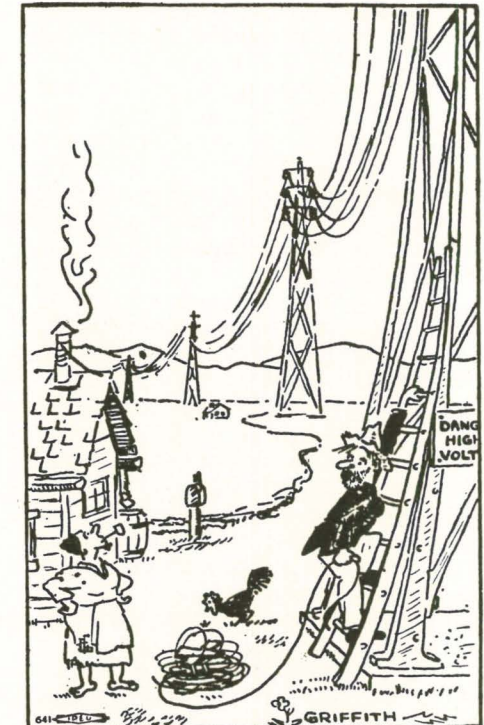
perienced workers defines an occupational "folk" group. The stories told within the work context can be referred to as the *folklore* of the occupation and together with work skills, dress and the special language of the group, the entire complex comprises the workers' occupational *folklife*. This folklife cuts across regional and ethnic lines and it includes among other things beliefs and superstitions arising from the work place, many of which are told as legends with local details added to substantiate their believability. They include stories about dead construction workers or even entire trains rumored to be encased in concrete bridge supports, the ominous sounds of tommyknockers creaking out impending mine cave-ins, and hitchhikers stopping trucks and either vanishing, or disappearing and taking the driver and truck with them.

Perhaps the most common form of occupational folklore and that most seldom heard outside the work group is the accident or unusual incident story. First or third person accounts of ironworkers being knocked over the side by a swinging beam or of loggers "buying the farm" when a ton of loose bark suddenly crashes on top of an unwary tree-faller exemplify this form. These stories are often filled with too much jargon for the outsider to understand completely, but within the occupation they reinforce the unity of the group members and (particularly in dangerous or monotonous jobs) act as teaching devices to careless or unthinking workers.

Skill is another aspect of occupational

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The placement of a steel girder requires the skill, timing, and coordinated efforts of several workers. Photo by Syeus Mottel.



**THAR'S NOTHIN' TO IT MAW!
YOU GO RIGHT IN AND SEND
FOR THAT 'LECTRIC STOVE.**

"Electrical Workers," May 1946

folklife which is passed from one member to another and is closely related to experience. Accumulated years of experience are expressed eloquently in the confident setting up and machining of a "no tolerance" compound die part by an experienced tool and die maker and the delicate maneuvering of a twenty-five barge tow by a Mississippi tow boat captain. These subtle skills are evaluated by other workers through their narratives, jokes and gestures. Through these expressions the work group communicates to the individual its approval, disapproval, respect and ridicule for a work skill well or poorly performed. It is

this interaction between folklore and skill that is the basis of occupational folklife.

PLASTERETTES

When is it too cold for plastering?
When a plasterer has to put on three coats.

When is a plasterer like a bird dog?
When he is pointing.

"The Plasterer," Oct. 1927

In addition to the aspects of occupational folklife cited above, there are many other ways in which workers communicate work-related information. Jokes are an important part of any occupation and they may take the form of xeroxed cartoons depicting an office supervisor in a variety of unflattering poses, or anecdotes concerning the clumsiness of a particular worker. Pranks like welding a lunchbucket to a table or sewing the sleeves of a work shirt together; graffiti on the bathroom walls; particular kinds of dress like the grey flannel suit or the loggers' caulk boots; rituals like topping a skyscraper by placing a tree on the highest structural member and having a ground level party or initiating new pilots by ripping off their shirt-tails when they receive their licenses; and even customs like pouring champagne over the heads of the super bowl or world series winners or going without a bath during finals exam week in college. In the past, occupational songs and music could easily be added to this list, but the impact of popular music coupled with a decline in the communal work tasks and union solidarity that characterized the early trades has diminished the "pure" work music found in such occupations as seafaring, logging and mining. In its place popular country-western music that parallels the concerns and emotions of a wide variety of workers through mass media presentation is also adapted to fit into the repertoires of local bands, combos and single performers. This does not totally deny the impor-

tance of music in the work group, it merely makes it a more generalized form and one which is difficult to relate to any one occupational group without considerable research and study.

Although occupational folklife communicates the skills and stories which continue and revitalize the work group, it also expresses the concerns and negative feelings that many of us feel toward our work. These concerns are expressed as stories about impending job loss through automation, excessive noise, division of labor and assembly line monotony that precludes verbal communication and results in production games and intentional sabotage, or repressive office regimens that bind the office worker into a cycle of doing time that retains not even the slightest semblance of purposeful work. Also, folklore expressing positive and negative feelings toward organized labor and management reflect a collective concern about the worker's future in an increasingly automated world.

AT A MAIL'S PACE?

One of our patrons seems to be a little fed up with his postal service. To show his sentiments he put a note on his package which read: "I am sending you this by U.S. Snail."

—Michael Barket
St. Louis, Missouri

HI HO

PO Clerk: I'd like to arrange a loan—and fast.

Banker: Sorry, but the loan arranger is out to lunch.

Clerk: In that case, let me talk to Tonto.
"American Postal Worker"
Feb. 1974

A few basic aspects of occupational folklife have been discussed in this brief introduction. Most, if not all, of this information is not surprising or new because we all maintain differing yet parallel forms of work-related knowledge. It is important, however, that all segments of the popula-

tion (not just a small cadre of specialists) take part in the collection, presentation and study of this material. If we all become more sensitive to the influence of our work upon our lives, then in addition to the need for job quantity we can seek the equally important requirement of job quality. Peter Kropotkin in 1899 stated that

... precisely in proportion as the work required from the individual in modern production becomes simpler and easier to be learned, and, therefore, also more monotonous and wearisome—the requirements of the individual for varying his work, for exercising all his capacities, become more and more prominent.

(P. Kropotkin
Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow, ed. Colin Ward,
Harper & Row, 1974, p. 25.)

By recognizing the role of occupational folklife in this process we can preserve the richness, humor and rewards of our work experiences and perhaps improve our occupational futures.

The following books will provide the interested reader with a general background in occupational folklife.

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The Folk Heroes of Occupational Groups

by Jack Santino

"All them lies we tell is the truth!"
—a worker participant
at the 1975 Festival of American Folklife

The 'lies' this man was referring to are the stories, jokes, and tall tales that he and other workers were swapping at the 1975 Festival of American Folklife narrative center. The 'truth' he was referring to is the values, conditions, and concerns that are expressed in these stories. Inevitably, the stories centered around a central figure, a hero figure, who himself was a symbol of the values and concerns of the worker.

Although most people think immediately of Paul Bunyan as the great American folk hero of the working man, the fact is that Paul enjoyed very little, if any, status as a hero among lumberjacks. His story was not told among them, it was created by a logging company in Minnesota and lived on the printed page. As a result, Paul, and his lesser known analogues created for other occupations, served as great popular symbols of American economic expansion, but do not accurately reflect the life of the worker. The true folk heroes of occupational culture are to be found in the folk songs workers sing and in the stories they tell. Two distinct hero types emerge; the ballad hero who is usually tragic, and the hero of tales, who is triumphant.

A ballad is a song that tells a story, often about a legendary hero or event. One striking fact about many worker-hero ballads is that they document the destruction of the hero by the occupational hazards of the particular job. John Henry, the legendary steel-driver, suffered a heart attack and died, after out-performing a drilling machine

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