

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.

Bibliography

Beck, Horace. *Folklore and the Sea*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.

Boatright, Mody. *Folklore of the Oil Industry*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963.

Garson, Barbara. *All The Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work*. Doubleday and Company, Garden City, N.Y., 1975.

Green, A. *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Korson, G. *Black Rock: Mining Folklore of the Pennsylvania Dutch*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960.

Kouwenhoven, J. A. *Made in America*. Doubleday and Company, Garden City, N.Y., 1962.

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

Jack Santino, folklorist from the University of Pennsylvania, is presently working as folklore specialist for the Transportation Project of Working Americans for the Festival of American Folklife. He has taught courses at the University of Pennsylvania on American Folklore and popular culture. His primary research interests include symbolic aspects of heroes as well as popular culture and mythology.



with his ten pound hammer. Casey Jones, the brave engineer, died at the throttle in a train wreck. Among lumberjacks, disaster ballads are legion. The famous "Jam on Gerry's Rocks" tells the story of the successful breaking up of a log jam on a Sunday at the cost of the lives of "six brave youths, and their foreman, young Monroe."

Consider these significant verses from the lumbering ballad "Johnny Stiles":

On the river there never was better
As I said, my young friend, Johnny Stiles
He had drove her far oftener than any
But he always seemed careless and wild
Bad luck seemed against him this morning
For his foot it got caught in the jam
And you know how those waters go howling
In a flood from the reservoir dam

"Careless and wild" . . . the tragic hero usually breaks some taboo, either by being careless and wild, like Johnny Stiles, or by going out on Sunday, as did Young Monroe, or by working double shifts, as did Casey Jones, or by simply trying to do too much, like John Henry. These men, although heroes, outstep their bounds, and ultimately lose control over the situation and are destroyed by it.

The ballad heroes are traditional heroes of occupational culture and reflect workers' legitimate concerns. What do they tell us? To think. To use common sense, to avoid unnecessary risks. The ballad heroes are admired as brave men, victims of the dangers of the job, perhaps even as martyrs to some extent. But it is recognized in the songs that the worker put himself in a dangerous position by being wild and reckless, or by flouting a taboo, or by simply trying to do more than a reasonable man should.

It is in the spoken narratives that the workers swap with each other, and which may represent a more personal and direct expression of their concerns and values, that the worker-hero is clever, a thinker. If the popular mass media heroes are repre-

Photo by Syeus Mottel.

sented as supermen whose physical abilities are highly exaggerated and whose mental abilities are secondary and often minimal; and if in the ballads the heroes display a final inability to control their circumstances because of their own overzealousness and thus contribute to their own downfall; then in the workers' spoken narratives the heroes are clever tricksters who, although unsavory and even wild, are not careless. They do not lose control, but ultimately they prove their control over the situation by means of their wit. Their ability is mental ability *along with* the physical prowess and know-how of their cousins in song and popular publications, who lack this crucial quality.

George Knox, for instance, is a legendary lumberjack from the Maine woods who made good his boasts of clearing great tracts of forest overnight, and of lifting heavy boulders. He had, in fact, made a pact with the devil and was receiving supernatural aid. Thus, he managed to accomplish these tasks without doing any physical labor.

Knox, by procuring supernatural help, is an extreme. A more typical story is the one of the trainman named Hoover who was having a lot of trouble with the job, with being on time. He was called before the trainmaster, who told him, "Mr. Hoover, I don't know what I'm going to do with you. You're costing us a lot of money. I mean, put yourself in my place." So he changed seats with the trainmaster, and Mr. Hoover, who is always in trouble, looked over to the trainmaster and said, "Mr Hoover, I'm going to give you one more chance!"

The trickster heroes of the spoken narratives are on top of every situation. They are workers who are tough, able, and physically strong, and who are mentally alert, active, and capable.

Roy Reed, a conductor with the United Transportation Union, told this one on himself at the 1975 Festival of American Folklife:

"Right before Christmas we had this girl porter. We're going down the road, must've been about Hancock and this girl porter comes back. I was with Pete Ervin on the #8. She said something to him, I went out and, when I came back in, Pete's gone. So I go sauntering in through the cars, when I get up to the club car that girl porter says to me you'd better get up there, fella's gonna beat Pete up. So I go on up to the car.

At that time, around Christmas time, I always carry a pocket full of lollypops to give the *kids*, you know. They get a *big* charge out of that. So I go up to this car and there's this big fella standing up and, man, he's just cussing *everybody*. Somebody's stole his ticket. And he said, god damn he said, I'm from West Virginia and he doubled his arm up and he said I'm tough, he said, I'll whip anybody on this damn train. I take my coat off, fold it up nice, you know, double my fist up. I said I'm from West Virginia too, but I guess I'm as tough as *you* are. I said now sit down, I don't want to hear no more out of you." Now Pete he done sent the message off for the law to pick him up, when the law pick him up, I had him suckin' a lollypop.

"Sucking a lollypop!"

Physical power is not enough in dealing with the totality of occupational culture. The hero of workers' tales seems to combine a number of attributes and presents a picture of the idealized worker as both a thinker and doer.

Bibliography

Dorson, R. M., *Blood Stoppers and Bearwalkers*, Cambridge, Mass., 1952 *America in Legend*, Random House, New York, 1973.

Fowke, Edith, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1970.

Hoffman, D., *Paul Bunyan: Last of the Frontier Demigods*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952.

Mitchell, Roger E., *George Knox: From Man to Legend*, Northeast Folklife no. 11, Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1970.