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

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 folklore 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' caulking boots; rituals like topping a scraper 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. When he is pointing.

In logging occupations as seafaring and coal-mining, music has been used as a means to pass the time that retains a connection to the past, and even customs have been created for other occupations, such as the folk hero among miners and 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 less known analogues created for other occupations, served as popular symbols of American economic expansion, but do not accurately reflect the life of the worker. These 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.

The Folk Heroes of Occupational Groups
by Jack Santino

"All they 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 popular symbols of American economic expansion, but do not accurately reflect the life of the worker. These 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.
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 carefree days than those 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, 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, fellas 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 lollipops 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 lollipop.

“Sucking a lollipop!”

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.

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:

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