

A Folklorist's Perspective on Man-Machine Relationships in a Living Museum

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When beginning preliminary fieldwork for this Festival, I wondered: just what does a folklorist have in common with an historian of technology? The former's concern is with *people* and how small groups (whether joined by age, ethnicity, occupation, religion, region, or blood) traditionally confront and organize the world through artistic and communicative forms (names, proverbs, riddles, games, stories, and songs). The latter is chiefly fascinated by *machines* and by the way in which, over time, energy has been harnessed and employed through technology.

When the folklorist acknowledges the existence of mechanical artifacts, his concern is *socio-aesthetic*: how do machines function in a group's symbolic system; in what ways are machines used as devices for organizing social interaction? Conversely, the historian of technology's perspective on human-mechanical relationships is more *practical*: how do certain mechanical devices serve man's biological needs, and when were they invented, manufactured, marketed, operated, and maintained by men?

I learned quickly that, while both points of view are important, they are seldom considered simultaneously. Museologists characteristically present past technology through static exhibits. Meanwhile folklorists—especially those concerned with occupations—cull oral historical accounts of work situations without having a firm understanding of yesteryear's machines.

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From 1870 to 1928, wheat germ was separated from the chaff when processed through a thresher powered by a wood or coal-fired steam engine, as illustrated in this 1908 threshing scene.

Through the "living museum" concept, the Smithsonian Institution is highlighting both men and machines. Just as historians of technology have sought appropriate mechanical devices for presentation here, folklorists have attempted to locate equally appropriate participants. Several problems and guidelines evolved through the selection process.

First, machines, once made, are rarely altered through time though they may change slightly as a consequence of use, maintenance, and exposure to the elements. It is easy to locate an artifact and—with minor restoration—present it essentially "as it was" when first manufactured. Models of that machine produced in succeeding years can readily be found. By placing examples consecutively, continuity and change can be illustrated.

People cannot be managed similarly, their transformations through time are not only unpredictable but also full of fluctuations derived from economic, social, cultural, and idiosyncratic factors. Thus, in choosing participants for a "living museum" demonstration of folk technology, it was not simply enough to pair an enthusiastic, talkative owner with a chronologically "right" machine. The person also had to be "right."

Folklorists have developed the basic concepts of "survival" and "revival" to distinguish the nuances of man-artifact relationships over time. Simply put, for a phenomenon—the relationship between a farmer and a steam

traction engine, for example—to be “survivalistic,” that farmer should have actually worked for a significant period of time with a steam traction engine. Accordingly, his attraction to an historical machine has the effect of uniting past and present. The machine is more than an intriguing mechanical object: it (like a photograph or a memento) is symbolic of bygone days and triggers a chain of memories (which can be verbalized) about everyday life.

The person who has not experienced machines in a working context cannot similarly conjure up the past. He can say “back then they used to . . .” but his knowledge (like that of third-generation, assimilated Polish-Americans learning forgotten traditional dances, or college students taking up ancient Scottish handweaving) is second-hand. He can repeat others’ stories about the past or he can speculate. From a folklorist’s point of view, he is a “revivalist.”



Holzer Threshing Machine, 1911

Beyond seeking “survivalist” participants, we also wanted those who could—and would—talk interestingly about human aspects of machine use. This was not as simple as one might guess. Conversations with some machine owners revealed that those presently involved with old technology can be placed roughly on a continuum between the opposite roles of “native engineer” and “native occupational folklorist.” The former exchanged information on make, design, production, performance, and maintenance; the latter told anecdotes about many aspects of his life: the

routine labor of bygone days, the seasonal variation of work, the exemplary deeds of workers or mechanics, their accidents, pranks, and pleasures. Some meetings of old-timers seemed to gravitate toward opposite ends of the “engineer-folklorist” continuum. The focus of a recent gathering at Bridgewater, Va., was definitely on machinery. Here, steam engines were not used to recreate old-time threshing events; they were instead displayed along with acres of shiny antique cars and trucks. The crowd was enormous and heterogenous, united only by a common fascination for machines. But at the “Steam-o-rama” in Stewartstown, Md., steam tractors were used to pull equipment, run threshers, and power sawmills. Adjacent to their operation were gas engines powering corn mills; a dog-powered treadle; an apple-butter making demonstration; a flea market; and a display of home-made pastries. The crowd was smaller, the atmosphere localized and rural; men and women were clustered in groups reminiscing about times past. While conversation was concentrated on machines, it acknowledged their existence primarily in social, not mechanical terms.

To insure authenticity we have sought participants who combine qualities of the “survivalist” with those of the “native occupational folklorist.” Through listening to them and asking questions, you—the festival-goer—will gain an appreciation of the humanistic side of man-machine relationships in American history.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Information on the history of technology may be obtained from the Society for Industrial Archeology, Room 5020, National Museum of History and Technology, Washington, D.C. 20560.