Family Folklore

The Family Folklore program helps visitors discover and recognize their own particular traditions, the home-based folkways that decorate life and make it meaningful. At the Nation of Nations exhibit in the National Museum of History and Technology, a group of folklorists will interview Festival-goers about their own family customs, sayings and stories, and also about the memories sparked by the exhibit on American history. Listen to suggestions for collecting your own family folklore at workshops in the museum. Ideas for printing or mounting a family history, including free guides and discussion of interviewing techniques, will be presented.

The following essay discusses a function of storytelling in family life, and invites you to remember some of your own family stories.

Good Stories from Hard Times

Steven Zeitlin

Anyone who reads the comic strips on Sunday morning, takes a child for a walk on a Sunday afternoon, tells a family story at dinner or a fairy tale before bedtime, may soon find that these events become family traditions. Traditions may be as commonplace as the evening meal with its ceremony of carving and serving, tossing the salad, or they may be as ritualized and sanctified as a wedding, funeral, or Christmas celebration.

In some instances, these traditions are ethnic in origin. However, this next tradition is practiced in families with different ethnic backgrounds:

"We had a tradition just in our immediate family that I really liked. My father died about five years ago but we still carry it on. On my brother's birthday and on my birthday, the family always has dinner together. And Dad used to sit down with a drink and recount the day of our birth: what happened, how he felt, how my mother felt, what was going on that day. And he did it every year. You know, he'd say, 'Oh 18 years ago at this time, or 21 years ago at this time,' or whatever. My brother and I have kind of carried that on."

As this account suggests, storytelling is a particular sort of tradition, and is often part of the larger tradition of the evening meal or, in this case, the birthday dinner.

The dinner is often a time of reunion when old customs are observed, old values are honored, and old stories are retold. At the head of this table sits the patriarch of the family, flanked by sons and daughters and their children.

Steven Zeitlin *is a doctoral candidate in folklore and folklife at the University of Pennsylvania and is on the staff of the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Program. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in folklore at The George Washington University.*

The family meal is not only a favorite occasion for storytelling, but is often one of the most common topics of family lore. In a sense, the meal is an affirmation of the family as a unit.
Photo from the Library of Congress.

In American families the evening meal seems to be the most common setting for storytelling. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the emotional satisfaction one enjoys by telling stories is accompanied by the physical satisfaction one enjoys by eating a meal. In fact, families often have dinner traditions which limit storytelling to the latter part of the meal, after the initial urge to eat has been quelled a little, and relaxation becomes both physically and psychologically appropriate.

In some families storytelling is permitted only over dessert. In others it begins at the table and then moves into the more comfortable areas of the house. Sometimes a particular family member, generally an elder such as a grandfather or an aunt, begins the tale-telling activity, often with a chuckle or a twinkle in the eye. Sometimes children begin the storytelling by asking questions: what was it like in the old days, Daddy?

The evening meal is not only the most common occasion for storytelling, but food is among the most common topics for the stories. Cooking disasters, for instance, are a staple in the repertoire of the family tale-teller. Stories are also told about feeding families during the Great Depression. In one, a grandmother prepared a Depression meal of vegetable soup and a salami. Uncle Bill, a young boy at the time, was throwing a dirty ball against the wall when he was not tossing it to the dog, King. On a misthrow, the ball splashed into the vegetable soup. The grandmother was so enraged that she threw the hunk of salami at the boy. King leaped up, caught it in his teeth and ran outside to savor it. The Depression meal was ruined.

This story does more than treat the topic of food in a humorous way. It represents a break in the storytelling routine in a literal fashion; if any stories were to be told around the table that night they certainly wouldn't after the dog ran off with the meal. Family stories do not refer to the day-to-day routine, but to specific incidents and dramatic occasions that disrupt that routine—ruined meals, burnt turkeys, not the usual fare.

Transformed into story form, the incident of the dog and the salami was repeated as part of ordinary dinner conversation. It became part of the recurring meal activities, part of the very routine it disrupted. Through storytelling, the *faux pas,* the cooking disasters, the Depression traumas, the Civil War cowards and all the other misfortunes celebrated in family stories became institutionalized; they become part and parcel of holiday celebrations, of long rides in the car, or of the evening meal. Family stories serve as a way of making the unexpected, the unforeseen, and the disastrous part of the smooth and routine functioning of the family.

Family members seem aware of this function for their storytelling. After a particularly harrowing or traumatic experience the remark is often heard, "at least it will make a good story." Or, "we'll look back on this and laugh." Clearly, the story form makes it possible for people to laugh over incidents that were anything but funny at the time. This laughter, which so often accompanies storytelling, can not be overlooked. It signals that the trauma of the original incident has been incorporated into the daily round of family life.

The most decisive break in the routines and day-to-day traditions of family life is the death of a family member. One man talked about the death of his father and the role of storytelling in the mourning process. During the seven days of "sitting Shiva" as the formal Jewish grieving period is called, the stories went through several stages. First, a period of speechless grief gave way to stories of his father as a saint; later they changed to stories of his father as an ordinary man; by the end, stories were told of his father as a trickster, a shrewd and funny man, good and bad by turns. These last were the permanent family stories that still serve to maintain his father's spirit as a force in the life of his family.

In the family, as in every community, members gather on certain occasions to share in their leisure. The emotional investment of the members often serves to transform recurring activities into a set of binding traditions. Storytelling is a particularly meaningful tradition in the family as it is in all communities. It serves not only to bring the past to bear upon the present, but to make the disruptive, disturbing and tragic breaks in the routines part of the smooth, ongoing life of the community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baldwin, Karen. "Down On Bugger Run; Family Group and the Social Base Of Folklore." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Pennsylvania, Department of Folklore and Folklife, 1975.

Bossard, James H. S. and Eleanor S. Boll. Ritual in Family Living; A Contemporary Study. *University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1950.*

Cutting-Baker, Holly et. al. Family Folklore. *Smithsonian Institution, Folklife Programs, 1976.*

Family Heritage Magazine, *P.O. Box 1809, New York, N.Y. 10001.*

Kotkin, Amy. "Family Photography As A Form Of Folklore." Exposure, *16:1, 1978, pp. 4-9.*