

The Occupational Community

Occupational folklife has always been an important part of the Festival. It is an aspect of folklife in which most Americans participate: work-related experiences, values and norms that one shares with others in his or her vocation and their expression in work-related language, tales, joking and rituals. Members of an occupational community hold these traditions in common, and often the degree of one's membership is judged by one's ability to perform both the skills and the lore of a particular occupation. For example, a "rail" (that is, an experienced railroader) not only knows the rules and procedures of railroading; he also knows how to speak railroaders' language. The Festival celebrates and explores this form of American folklife and is happy to see a growing interest in occupational lore, on the part of both workers and scholars.



The Community that Works Together

Jack Santino

The sizzle and smell of deep fried foods fills the large room. Everywhere are groups of men, sitting at tables playing poker, standing in circles gesticulating animatedly, gathering by the food table with paper plates in hand, anticipating the oysters that will soon be ready. Everywhere are groups of men, talking. Always, they are talking, joking, swapping stories. They take great pleasure in each other's company, in telling dramatic tales and

hilarious incidents. They share a lot, these men. On the second Tuesday of each month they meet to do business, to cook, and share food, to play cards with each other, and to engage in storytelling. They do all of these together because they work together.

They work for the telephone company, but their situation is not unique. For centuries now, people have found both personal identity and a sense of community in and through their occupation. One identified himself as a miller, a baker, or a window maker (a fenstermacher!), and members of the same occupations joined together in guilds for their own protection and for that of their crafts.

The local store is the center of the Smith Island fishing community. Here watermen swap stories about their daily activities on the Chesapeake Bay.

Photo by Janet Stratton for the Smithsonian.

Today, as then, each craft and each occupation carries with it its own set of challenges that require specialized skills and knowledge on the part of the workers, and this is true of *all* jobs. The sense of community is derived, ultimately, from those skills, and also from knowledge, ability, and sharing: *knowledge* of the esoteric skills, of how to do the work well and efficiently; *ability* to carry out the demands of the job, to use the tools and machines; and

Jack Santino is a doctoral candidate in folklore and folklife at the University of Pennsylvania and is on the staff of the Smithsonian Folklife Program. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in folklore at The George Washington University.

the *sharing* of the common experiences with co-workers. At the same time, community is derived from *knowledge* of the special language, the technical jargon, the hand signals, and the "in jokes" that arise out of the job; *ability* to use and understand these terms, to tell jokes and stories relevant to the job and also the ability to understand them; and the *sharing* of these stories, this occupational folklore, with fellow co-workers. Knowledge of these stories, the ability to tell them, and, perhaps even more importantly, the ability to understand them, is a kind of badge, a symbol of an "in group" identity. The joke "when is a plasterer like a bird dog? When he is pointing," is only funny to the layman when he knows that "pointing" is a plasterer's word that means smoothing out and putting the finishing touches on a job.

Often a novice is initiated into a work group by means of traditional pranks. How many young men have been sent off to get a "bucket of steam" or a "duberator" when they first began work in a factory or a garage? And there is the story of the new airline flight attendant who was told by her fellow workers that the first class section of the plane was going to be filled with monkeys and she was sent off to get bananas for them. She did her best to get the bananas from the catering truck, but the caterer refused to take her seriously. Finally, frustrated and desperate, she screamed, "I'm having all these monkeys in first class; they aren't giving my any bananas, what am I going to do?" Overhearing, a passenger replied, "Excuse me, but I'm one of those monkeys and I don't want a banana!"

These stories document the fact that everyone goes through a period of hazing and initiation while being incorporated into the group. As part of the group, the individual partakes of the special customs that group practices. The office workers' lunch-time whist game is one example; the Washington Cathedral stone carvers' practice of inscribing the names of the work crew on the label of a champagne bottle every New Year's Day is another.

A member of an occupational community may be known by his or her "costume"—the specialized clothing worn on the job—from the bus driver's uniform to the construction worker's hardhat to the lawyer's



Telephone workers need specialized skills and knowledge to carry out the challenges of their job.

Photo by Sam Sweezy for the Smithsonian.

three-piece suit. The customs, the costumes, the initiation rituals—all these comprise an *occupational folklife* of a group. Workers often share similar demands, pressures, job tasks, bosses, dangers, and deadlines, and they translate their day-in, day-out experiences into a kind of verbal art. They add artistic dimensions to their lives by creating and sharing stories that derive from the job and capture its essence. These stories, along with jokes, jargon, talk of the old days, of accidents, of notorious bosses and clever workers who outsmart them—these comprise the *occupational folklore* of the job. Occupational *folklife* encompasses the entire unique occu-

pational life-style; occupational folklore derives out of that life-style, comments on it, and helps foster the sense of community that participation in the occupation brings.

When members of an occupation can share so much, express so much of themselves and their concerns, enjoy and understand each other so much, there is community. Their folklore defines their community, and gives it life.

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