

The Intersection of the School with Children's Culture: Two Examples

Kate Rinzler

In the United States, public schools have become an extraordinary force in the folklife of children. On school playgrounds children have been brought together in large numbers. Physical education teachers have taught organized sports which the children have taken out to their neighborhoods. In classrooms a counter culture has developed, characterized by children's organized efforts to subvert the educational process. Fights, friendships and flirtations (some of the performances of children's folklife) often preoccupy students to the detriment of the learning process.

To counter children's counter culture, public schools have offered activities throughout the year that are designed to answer children's social needs. Among these are birthday parties, religious and secular celebrations, and innovations such as field days and "school breakings" (elaborate commencement days). Such events frequently have incorporated folk traditions and in time have become traditions in their own right, anticipated and practiced for each year. The guardians and developers of these traditions are school administrators and teachers.

This year the Children's Area will present aspects of two such school-sponsored events, Halloween and May Day. Halloween traditions from four cities will be celebrated as they are in schools, churches, and neighborhoods. May Day will be celebrated as it is in the Lumbee Indian schools of Robeson County, N.C.

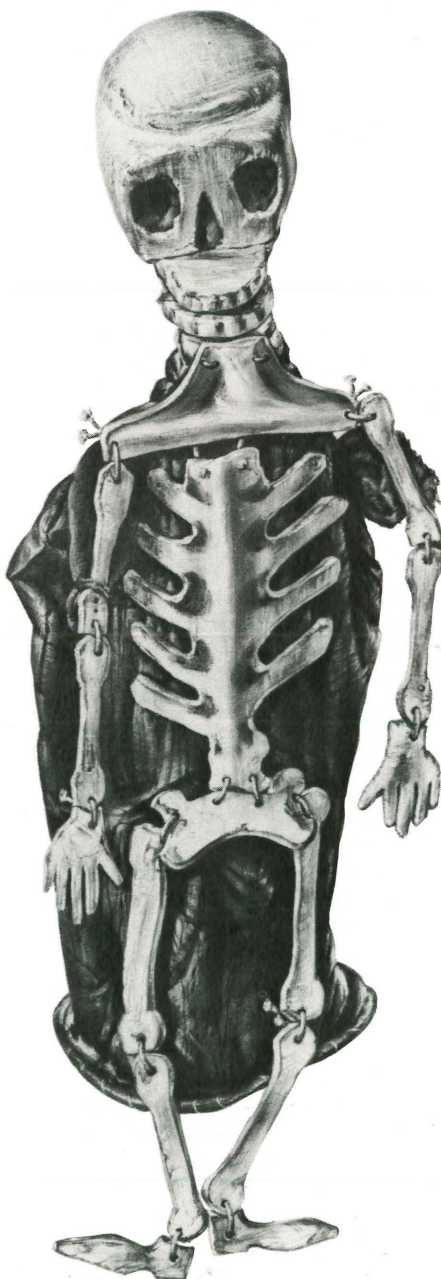
Halloween

That Halloween customs are by no means uniform throughout the country is well demonstrated by the St. Louis German tradition of "a trick for a treat" described by

Phyllis Ward. For weeks prior to Halloween, adults and older children teach younger children "tricks" to offer in exchange for their treats: elaborate recitations like one about a butcher with a terrible sausage machine, gymnastic stunts and, for the toddlers, how to say their name and age. On Halloween night the children enter their neighbors' decorated homes to perform and receive treats: candy homemade popcorn balls, candy-apples and cider from cauldrons bubbling with dry ice. Hosts often dress in costumes as well. While the middle children take this ritual somewhat seriously, the oldest children perfect an art of giving the shortest tricks possible and moving on to collect more loot.

In another regional tradition, neighborhoods in Pittsburgh still erect scary harvest figures, now wired with eerie sound recordings or live children's voices directed at unsuspecting passersby. Schools and churches have also long been the perpetuators of Halloween traditions. They sponsor parties gauged to keep the children off the streets and out of mischief. The haunted house, the costume parade and variations of folk games such as drop the handkerchief, musical chairs, Simon says, relay races that feature mildly embarrassing stunts, and bobbing for apples are long-time favorites at these parties.

Sylvia Grider describes an elaborate Halloween activity, arranged by mothers at the Gosport Christian Church in Gosport, Ind., entitled "The Haunted House of the Blue Lights." As the children arrived for their party they were escorted by white-sheeted ghosts down blue-lit basement stairs, through hanging rubber lizards and spiders. After a costume-judg-



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County-wide Field Day events held at Pembroke State College Teacher Training Institute. Photo by Elmer W. Hunt

ing parade, refreshments, and games, the scary part began. Seated in a dark room in a tight circle around a mother with a flashlight, the children heard the spine-tingling story of the outlaws and the haunted house. At a point in the tale where the outlaws are feeling around in the dark, the children were given grapes to be passed from hand to hand as the storyteller intoned, "Does this feel like an eyeball to you?" Having passed and variously named a wig, a plastic mask, a frozen rubber glove, a sponge, a piece of raw liver and cold, wet spaghetti, the children screamed with terrified delight when "lightning" flashed and several ghosts entered screaming "Give me back my liver." Often children will borrow the idea of constructing haunted places and move them out to neighborhood alleys, barns, and vacant lots. Halloween is one setting where children's folklife is shaped by adult-run institutions.

May Day

Public schools have been an important cultural force in the lives of the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County. The Lumbees live in southeastern North Carolina and are the second largest tribe of Indians in the United States. The Lumbees did not live on reservations but have always lived in communities.

Indian schools were established in 1885 in Robeson County by state legislation. This legislation authorized separate schools, created a separate Indian school committee and gave the committee authority to hire and dismiss teachers. Unlike other Native American peoples, the Lumbees operated and staffed their own school system with Indian teachers. In addition to the elementary school operated at Pates, N.C., the state of North Carolina organized an Indian Normal School in 1887, to train teachers for the Indian schools. Curriculum and texts were dictated by the state. Nothing cover-

ing North Carolina Indians was taught in the schools. While their language, customs, oral history, physical appearance, and some surnames have lead Lumbee and other historians to trace their origins to the lost colony of Roanoke of 1586 as well as to a number of Indian tribes, the present culture of the Lumbee has been deeply affected by the curriculum of the school. Current programs bring Native American culture to Lumbee children through the schools. Today, Lumbee students are learning about other Native American cultures as well as their own heritage in the schools.

Early in the 1900s schools organized events such as "school breaking" (commencement), field days, and May Day. These became important additions to traditional Lumbee culture. The annual May Day celebration drew participation from schools gathered together at the big playing field of the teaching training institution at Pembroke. Families traveled by mule-drawn wagons from their often distant farms to celebrate their

children's achievements. The physical education curriculum provided the events of the day. These included games that were taken into childrens' neighborhood tradition as reported by elders in their 70s and 80s as well as by younger members of the community: games such as Pretty Girl Station, Poison Stick, Little Sally Walker, Blue Bird, Go In and Out the Window, and Drop the Handkerchief. May Pole wrapping evolved over the generations from an event in which any school that successfully wrapped the pole was bound to win first prize, to a precision dance in which all school groups started simultaneously as their teachers, who undoubtedly learned the Maypole dance in Lumbee schools of an earlier generation, wound gramophone records. When the May Court had been crowned, the children performed the unwrapping of the pole and then wrapped it again, thus demonstrating the high degree of perfection attained in this intricately coordinated dance.

Events changed over the years. In the early years spelling and multiplication bees and dramatic recitations were popular. As it evolved, May Day usually included an opening parade, and assembly in the auditorium, a picnic, and outdoor activities including the May Pole dance, the May Court, and sports events. Miss Mary Lee Goines, Lumbee teacher for many years, recalls one particularly splendid parade lead by two mounted men, one in black on a silver-decked white horse and one in white on a gold-decked black horse. Helen Scheirbeck recalls the wonder of the girls' May Day dresses during the Depression. While school dresses were made from printed cotton feed sacks, on May Day the girls emerged like butter-

flies in pink, yellow, and pale blue dresses and hats of starched organdy, dotted swiss, or gathered crepe paper.

On the night before there were plays and operettas. On May Day itself the families assembled in the Indian school assembly room. The children paraded in with the American and Protestant flags, a local preacher gave the invocation and all assembled sang hymns. The principal delivered an address in which he always stressed the value of education and the progress of the Lumbee children. After the principal a prominent local citizen elaborated on these themes, the community sang a few more songs and broke for a lunch of fried chicken, potato salad, biscuits, corn bread, cakes and pies. Delicacies such as home-churned ice cream, pink lemonade, and novelties such as fresh bananas were sold at stands.

After lunch, activities began with the May Pole Dance, the May Court, and then sports events, including traditional games for the young and three legged race, gunny sack, and running races for the older children. There were also high jump and broad jump competitions and a baseball game. Sometimes children and their parents engaged in a tug-of-war. Events like climbing a greased pole or catching a greased pig were also staged. The day's solemnities and hilarity were closed with an address by a member of the prestigious School Masters' Club, to which the Lumbee teachers belonged. May Day is remembered by many as a high point in the community's year, an event that brings people together from far and near to celebrate, in an educational setting, cultural traditions and achievements of Lumbee parents and children.

Suggested Reading

For some more interesting reading on childlore, see:

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