

# The American Folklore Society:

## One Hundred Years of Folklore Study and Presentation

by Roger D. Abrahams

*The American Folklore Society Centennial Program is supported, in part, by the L.J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation through the American Folklore Society.*

It seems especially appropriate for the Smithsonian Institution's Office of Folklife Programs to help celebrate the American Folklore Society's Centennial. For twenty years the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife has embodied many of the Society's founders' perspectives: to observe and collect traditional performances and practices of the American peoples; to study this expressive life scientifically; to celebrate the diversity of American culture through presenting publicly the accomplishments of master performers and artisans. Both the Smithsonian and the Society have worked for a century with this common approach.

The American Folklore Society began publishing the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* in 1888; this announced the start of the formal study of folklore in North America. In the summer of 1887 an unsigned circular letter announcing plans for a society reached a number of literary figures, journalists, historians, anthropologists, educators, psychologists and others identified as interested in traditional customs. The positive level of response led to an organizational meeting early the next year in Cambridge. As a way of alerting the world at large to the importance of professional attention to traditional cultures, the AFS centennial year will include many special events, and the Society will "return home" to hold its 1988 annual meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Society's founders aimed high: the planning letter proposed that such an organization should bring together those interested in the "mental tokens which belong to our own intellectual stock, which bear the stamp of successive age, which connect the intelligence of our day with all periods of human activity. . . ." Joining hands in mutual endeavor involved face-to-face encounters by scholars as well as the publication of a journal. Indeed, by the time the first annual meeting took place in Philadelphia, 1889, the *Journal's* second volume had already been published.

To be sure, a number of scholars previously had carried out significant projects dealing with traditional forms: games, rhymes, ballads, folktales, beliefs, proverbs. At the Smithsonian Institution the massive task of documenting American Indian traditions had been launched

by members of the Bureau of American Ethnology: John Wesley Powell, James Mooney, Otis T. Mason and others. These ethnologists joined with literary colleagues to the north in forming the AFS.

Thus, upon inception, AFS founders already understood that the traditions of *all* Americans had to be studied in the new organization. In addition to the relics of ancient British practices the founders called specifically for work in the lore of "ex-slaves" among Afro-Americans, American Indians throughout the continent, Hispanic-Americans and French-speakers from Canada and Louisiana. Eventually the *Journal of American Folklore* devoted a yearly issue to Afro-American traditions, another to French-American and a third to Hispanic-American lore. While then-recent immigrants (1880-1900) did not figure in the initial publications of the Society, many local branches in fact called for such study.

The unfashionable idea of pluralistic cultural exploration challenged but a handful of scholars in the 1880s. The Civil War had been brought to a head by the radical vision of Abolitionists. One of these, Wendell Philips, advanced the notion of *cultural* as well as *social* equity for the slaves. Though many Society members participated in the northern cause before and during the Civil War, strong sentiment arose afterward throughout the nation to put the experience and that style of radical thought out of mind.

The American Folklore Society's multi-cultural approach arose out of practical, organizational and empirical necessity: the organizers drew on the talents of the widest range of students of tradition, no matter their concerns or target populations. But in the 19th century scientific professionalism meant developing upon biological (usually evolutionary) models for organizing data in many fields. Thus some folklorists analogized customary traditions and practices to natural systems of growth and decay, seeing all cultures going through a series of developmental stages.

Such reductionist thinking, however, was explicitly rejected by William Wells Newell and Franz Boas, the two men who held greatest influence in the formation of the Society. Newell, a Unitarian minister from Cambridge, came from an Abolitionist family and had worked for the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War. After serving as a schoolteacher he found his way to the field



William Wells Newell, one of the founders of the American Folklore Society. Photo courtesy Harvard University Archive

of folklore through studying children's games. Boas could not have been more different than Newell. As a deracinated German Jew, and Berlin-trained physicist turned ethnographer, he devoted much of his life to confronting racist thinking and racialist arguments regarding patterns of culture. Boas worked primarily with American Indian materials; he exhibited life-long interest in Afro-Americans; he encouraged his students and correspondents in the task of looking to the cultural persistences from Africa exhibited by ex-slaves and their descendants.

To build the Society professionally Newell and Boas learned that they had to make common cause against the genteel amateurism then rampant in all of the sciences until late in the century. They had as well to oppose naive social evolutionist ideas that dominated thinking about folk society and lore in North America, England and on the European continent. For both practical and scientific reasons, then, leaders of the American Folklore Society came to insist on the equal value of *all* traditions. Indeed, Newell, despite his privileged upbringing and elitist cast of mind, asserted that everyone should be regarded as "folk." As he put it a hundred years ago:

By folklore is to be understood oral tradition, – information and belief handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing. There are reasons why this mass of knowledge, – including history, theology and romance, – which has been orally preserved in any people should be set aside as capable of

independent treatment. Such matter must express the common opinion, or it would not be preserved; it must be on the level with the notions of the average rather than of the exceptional person; it must belong, that is, to the folk rather than the individual.

These words from a speech in 1890 to the New York Scientific Academy seem amazingly close to the way in which most folklorists presently define their field. In Newell's time, folklore accepted an evolutionary model which saw all cultures as belonging to one or another stage of human development from savagery to civilization. Newell's words directly contradicted this notion; he pursued the concept that everyone, no matter how civilized, has a primitive, savage or barbaric side to his or her life.

The informal quest for an *American* folklore arose well before 1888. After 1776 American intellectuals felt that, as a nation taking its place in the world, the United States must have a unique culture. Men of letters self-consciously attempted to constitute a national literature built on native conditions and indigenous traditions. Thus our writers made efforts to fashion "the great American epic" on the trans-Atlantic journey, the frontier experience or (in the case of Longfellow) on American Indian mythology and Acadian lore. Indeed, a great number of these seekers of a particular American culture and a parallel American language became early members of the American Folklore Society: Mark Twain, Edward Eggleston and Joel Chandler Harris among the "regionalists" or "local colorists"; Francis Parkman and John Fiske among the national historians; Franz Boas, John Wesley Powell and Otis T. Mason among the ethnologists already at work collecting American Indian lore. Of the Society's founders only a few, such as ballad scholar Francis James Child and his student George Lyman Kittredge, subscribed to the European style of study, which emphasized collecting and comparing "surviving" examples of lore from earlier periods.

These organizing members faced a major question: how to delimit "American folklore." Though influenced by The Folklore Society in England, the existence of a new nation of immigrants and indigenous peoples of a wide variety of life styles inevitably led to broad defini-

tions in pluralistic terms for the American Folklore Society. At the same time, collecting the remains of Western European traditions became the major objective of several local offshoots of the Society. Many cities had their own folkloric organizations: Philadelphia, Chicago, New Orleans, St. Louis. One of the most active local groups emerged at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. More than this, the discovery of the important countryside traditions spawned state societies, such as those in Virginia and Mississippi, and regional groups, such as the Folksong Society of the Northeast.

In addition, feelings developed that occupational



Major John Wesley Powell, first director of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology and charter member of AFS. "Inquiring for the water pocket," 1873, Kaibab Plateau near the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona. Photo courtesy National Anthropological Archives

folklore might be carried by "sodbusters," mountain men, lumberjacks and cowboys, who stood in strange and vigorous contrast to the denizens of the industrial world. A number of folklorists, such as Robert Winslow Gordon and John Avery Lomax, attended to these impulses, writing of frontier technologies and play practices. Gordon, after writing a popular column in *Adventure Magazine*, became the first field collector and archivist at the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Lomax, the son of an East-Texas dirt-farmer, traveled the cattle areas of the state to com-

pile his great *Cowboy Songs* (1910). He, too, headed the Library's Archive. The third folklorist to carry this important post, Benjamin A. Botkin, like Gordon had begun as an English teacher. Botkin compiled the popular *Treasury of American Folklore* (1944) and gathered other regional treasuries. Botkin made an especially significant contribution in developing a national agenda for folklore study that paid serious attention to plural voices.

Not until after World War II did the work of the American Folklore Society assert itself in more than the content of the *Journal*. In great part, because of the development of graduate folklore programs at universities



Alice Cunningham Fletcher (seated in middle holding a letter), first woman president of AFS (1905), with women at the Omaha Indian Mission (1880s). Photo courtesy National Anthropological Archives

such as Indiana, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and the University of California at Los Angeles, and the entry into those programs of students with interests beyond collecting, Society members began to center on tradition-bearers themselves. Again, the discipline adjusted its use of the term "folklore," gravitating toward definitions that underscored the ways in which living people maintained traditions. During the 1930s to some degree this "new" position gained attention from left ("popular front") ideology, which conceived of one perfect union of people's culture to include farmers, laborers and unionists. In short, "working stiffs" became "folk."

Having redirected interests from the items of lore to tradition-bearers themselves, folklorists in the New Deal era became concerned with the "common man." That is, they looked for deep understanding and feelings shared by those in household, village, town, locale, neighborhood – even those belonging to voluntary associations. How judgements of truth and beauty arose from members of such groups also came to importance. By looking at folklore through its bearers and the communities of interest in which they live, some folklorists in time felt that they might represent these tradition-bearers to the general public. Hence American Folklore Society mem-



Benjamin A. Botkin, AFS president, 1944. Botkin was director of the folklore project of the Federal Writers' Project during the 1930s and director of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. He is shown here at the Library of Congress around the time his book *A Treasury of Railroad Folklore* (1953) was published. Photo courtesy Gertrude Botkin

bers came to notions of cultural conservation. In this past decade they linked interest in the continuity of tradition to questions of cultural equity within a plural nation. Many folklorists now look for the very best tradition-bearers and the newest outgrowths of small-group

stylized activities, seeking to both study and present such cultural phenomena through publications, festivals and other representational modes.

While present-day definitions of folklore have changed with the Society's enlarged mission, our notions of the authentic development of common culture have also altered. Work on behalf of "traditionalizing" communities has led to a sense that folklorists need not be bound entirely by classic forms studied in the past: ballads, folksongs, fairy tales, myths, legends, for instance. We look for any activity entered into creatively and enthusiastically by peoples living in face-to-face groups.



In previous years, the Cultural Conservation program at the Festival of American Folklife has presented tradition-bearers to the public on the National Mall (left). Photo by Kim Nielson, Smithsonian Institution  
Folklorist Betty Belanus interviews Gladys Widdis, a Wampanoag Indian potter who will participate at this year's festival (right). This year's program features a "cultural conversation," which will explore the relationships between tradition-bearers and the folklorists who document and present them. Photo by Daphne Shuttleworth, Smithsonian Institution



Today, then, the study of folklore maintains both "old" and "new" ways of approaching how people learn from and perform to each other. We combine fresh definition and growth with a strong interest in under-represented and threatened traditions of work and play. In all such efforts we continue to seek cues from people living in small groups: what they consider most exciting, artful and technically accomplished in their expressions.

The American Folklore Society remains a vital organization with an interest in scholarly study and presentation of folklore research. As well, its members wish to protect the world's cultural resources. Hence the Society program this summer at the Smithsonian Festival touches more than cultural conservation. It concerns also cultural conversations, the kind held between tradition-bearers and folklorists collecting in the field.

In celebrating the folklore collector as a cultural mediator, bringing together traditional performers and craftspeople with the public, the Smithsonian dramatizes what folklorists actually do in their chosen tasks. We observe the life of groups at human scale; we interact with those working and playing in their everyday environments, places in which traditions live; we seek out new ways of informing and delighting each other. In short, we face traditions newly invented and quickly traditionalized. Guardians of "authentic" traditions, folklorists today, also pursue fresh, emergent ones. We can see and sense, then, in a tent on the National Mall the living traditions of folklorists themselves – values and practices forged a century ago by pioneers, conserved, traditionalized and elaborated by a new generation of their cultural descendants.

*Special thanks to Archie Green for help in preparation of this article.*

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*Suggested reading*

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