

Folklore: In All of Us,
In All We Do

Folklore: In All of Us, In All We Do

Edited by
Kenneth L. Untiedt

Publications of the Texas Folklore Society LXIII



University of North Texas Press
Denton, Texas

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Printed in the United States of America.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Permissions:
University of North Texas Press
P.O. Box 311336
Denton, TX 76203-1336

The paper used in this book meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48.1984. Binding materials have been chosen for durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Folklore : in all of us, in all we do / edited by Kenneth L. Untiedt.
p. cm. — (Publications of the Texas Folklore Society ; 63)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57441-223-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-57441-223-X (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Folklore—Texas. 2. Occupations—Texas—Folklore. 3. Texas—Folklore.
4. Texas—Social life and customs. I. Untiedt, Kenneth L., 1966- II. Texas Folklore Society.

GR110.T5F65 2006

398'.09764—dc22

2006024644

Folklore: In All of Us, In All We Do is Number LXIII in the Publications of the Texas Folklore Society

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PREFACE



History and folklore go hand in hand, and people frequently confuse the two in light conversation. There may be good reason, for in many ways the subjects are closely related. The study of folklore is often historical in its focus. Folklore is the *traditional* knowledge of a culture, and the word “traditional” carries with it the idea of things that are established, time-honored. We recognize things folkloric as those things that are passed down from one generation to another. We look at what came before us and try to keep alive the “old ways,” usually by word of mouth, a method of instruction which in itself seems old-fashioned or even antiquated. Also, to fully appreciate folklore one needs to have an understanding of the history behind it. When does folklore become historical fact? When ceremonies or customs are documented, do they not become historical accounts of the people who practice them? Folklore provides unique views of the events, beliefs, customs, ceremonies, materials, and skills of a particular group. History provides the factual circumstances that may have influenced each of those things, or more specifically, the members of the group. In history, you get the ingredients; in folklore, you get the flavor. The two can complement one another and give us a finished product. However, you must be prepared to decipher both and understand the difference.

Why is this important? History might tell us that a person was a doctor or a politician or an oilfield worker, but folklore provides insight into those individuals’ professions that might otherwise be lost. The same is true for every person whose knowledge we learn, for folklore can come from anyone. Indeed, it comes from all of us. This sixty-third volume of the Publications of the Texas Folklore Society is a traditional miscellany, and it contains articles on many diverse topics and individuals, including articles on topics not frequently discussed, and ones by people who have

never published anything with us before. However, even a miscellany must have some structure. Therefore, I have arranged the articles in five chapters. The first tackles this issue of folklore and its relationship to history, with some of the articles trying to provide some of that folkloric filler to historical facts. Another chapter focuses on women; one features various types of occupational lore; and another is a tongue-in-cheek look at “shady characters” such as police officers, politicians, and horsetraders. A final chapter has no theme; it is a catch-all, containing a few interesting articles you may remember from some of our most recent meetings.

I have included another “throwback article.” J. Frank Dobie’s article in the first chapter tells a little about our history as an organization and why he settled on the roadrunner as our symbol. “The Roadrunner in Fact and Fiction” first appeared in the 1939 PTFS *In the Shadow of History*. I doubt that many of our current members have a complete collection of our publications, and even if they do they probably have not read all the articles in them. Therefore, my goal in reprinting older articles is twofold. First, I want to share select articles with readers who have never read them, thereby presenting them with something new even when it is quite old. Second, I want to expose readers (and perhaps researchers) to the original source for those articles, perhaps to encourage readers to obtain the past issues from which they came. This way, they may discover other articles they might enjoy, from contributors they never had a chance to meet in person, thereby maintaining a link to our folklore ancestors.

Early in the process of selecting which papers to include in this book, I decided on Mary Margaret Dougherty Campbell’s paper about Bill Phillips, who routinely hosts a gathering where friends swap stories and keep alive the lore of their local area. This article verifies that the “spit and whittle club” is not dead. In today’s world of isolation through global communication, it is important to realize that some people still honor the oral tradition. As we were communicating regarding the article, Mary Margaret sent me what she called her follow-up to the article, and although it is unusual to feature two articles by one author, I decided to include both. This

second article is a good way to transition into the chapter on women. “The Cooking Extravaganza” shows men and women doing something together in a setting traditionally viewed as a woman’s place. It also shows how folklore can be found somewhere as simple as a kitchen. This group of lay cooks is challenging the past, experimenting with the future, and rediscovering uses for skills long-forgotten. Their language, the tools they use, and the rules to which they adhere are all distinct to a particular group. All of these activities blend, much like their recipes, and their time together as a group is time spent sharing with and learning from each other.

The chapter on women covers a lot of ground, both socially and historically. It examines brave women of the early frontier days, a mystic, and La Llorona, that centuries-old symbol of a woman who suffers eternally for her mistakes. However, I also wanted to include contemporary women and their connection to folklore. I found Kelly Mosel-Talavera’s paper on the ceremonies and rituals associated with beauty pageants interesting and unique, even if I had a bit of a hard time finding Kelly. The detective work was worth it, though, as it was on a couple of other articles whose authors I had to track down (because they were out of the country, hard to reach after having moved, or were deceased and only next-of-kin could be located). I extended my goal of finding more recent examples of folklore to the chapter on occupational lore, a topic which certainly deserves more study. Especially now when modern technology allows instant access to people and places practically anywhere anytime—all of which is generally taken for granted—it is good to look back at the beginnings of that technology and learn about those who created it. Hopefully, these articles will help us have a better appreciation for those who came before us, whose experience and knowledge not only established policies that others could follow, but also set standards for their occupations.

Many of these articles focus on oral history; several feature excerpts from diaries or personal accounts that show the less glamorous sides of professions such as medicine and politics, in the own words of the people who worked in those fields. Some things would never be written today, in our ever increasingly politically correct

world. We see how one mail carrier not only provided a service for a community throughout his career, but how he also kept alive traditions and history of that community over a few generations. We get to meet some rather famous—if not seedy—characters who have ties to Texas. We learn not just the lore of various trades such as water engineers and nurserymen, but also legends of the area where the work is done, as well as folk remedies, customs, and superstitions. The sources for this information come from some unusual places, including back yards, garages, laboratories, and retirement homes.

These articles are from members who are alive and still active at the annual meetings, as well as from members who are no longer with us. They cover diverse topics: at home and at work, about serious business and things just for fun, related to the mystical and the factual, in the distant past and in our contemporary lives, by and about the professional and the layperson, women, men, politicians, doctors, legendary figures, housewives, cooks, preachers, inventors, beauty pageant contestants, teachers, and the elderly. These people have shared their knowledge, and that knowledge becomes a part of us, for what they have to say is important to all of us, in all that we do.

I give thanks to several people, including all of the contributors, the administrators and my colleagues at Stephen F. Austin State University, Karen DeVinney and the staff at the UNT Press, and especially to Janet Simonds, our new office secretary. She came in at the early part of this publication, and she has been a tremendous asset. She eagerly took part in the 2006 meeting, and she has made many changes to our office procedures and recordkeeping, dramatically improving how efficiently we do things. Her ideas are innovative and yet simple, and they are very much appreciated.

This publication is dedicated to Kenneth W. Davis, a teacher, a mentor, and a friend. He has enriched my life more than any other person I know. Kenneth is the one who first introduced me to Elmer Kelton and Clay Reynolds, Robert Earl Keen and the Gillette Brothers, and Shiner Bock beer and Whistlin Dixie BBQ. In many ways, he is himself a miscellany. He once told me he knew

everything there was to know about English. Surely this was in jest, but still, it took me a considerable time before I discovered something he did not know—and know thoroughly. I’m sure there were courses he did not teach during his thirty-nine years at Texas Tech University, but they probably were not introduced until after he was “no longer bucking for tenure or promotion.” A master of many areas, he is very much responsible for my association with this organization, for it was he who first encouraged me to submit a paper. That was only eleven years ago, and I thank him for all he did to expedite my rise through the ranks. I am not the only active member he introduced to this organization, and we all should be grateful for his role as a faithful contributor, Board member, and all-around advocate of the Texas Folklore Society.

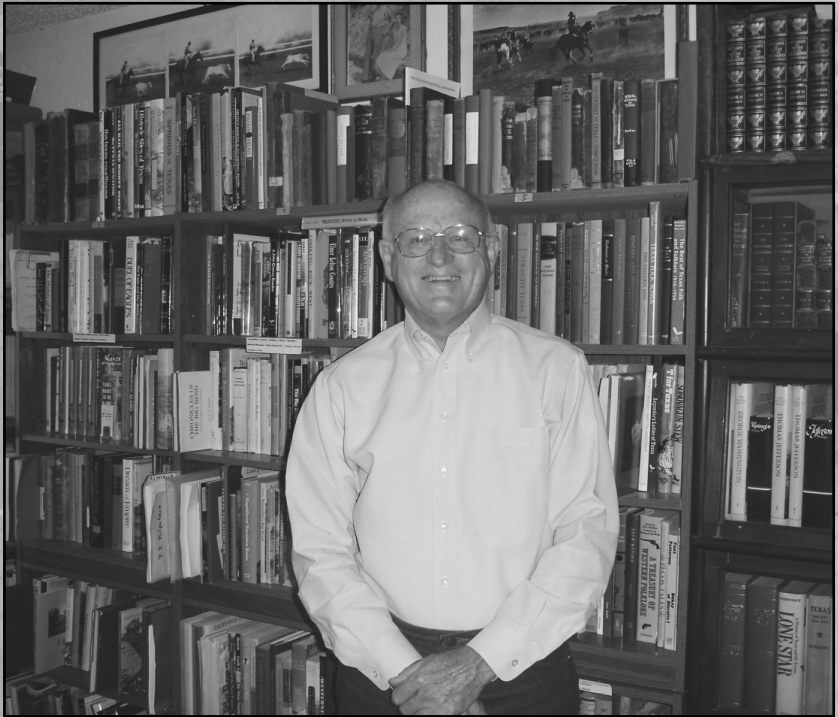
Kenneth L. Untiedt
Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, Texas
July 5, 2006

A black and white photograph of a wooden plank background. The planks are arranged horizontally and show natural wood grain patterns, including knots and variations in tone. The lighting is somewhat dramatic, with darker areas and lighter highlights. Overlaid on the center of the image is the text "FIRST COUSINS:" in a white, serif, all-caps font. The text is centered horizontally and vertically.

FIRST COUSINS:

A black and white photograph of a wooden plank background. The planks are arranged horizontally and show natural wood grain patterns, including knots and variations in tone. The lighting is somewhat uneven, with darker areas and lighter highlights. Overlaid on the center of the image is the text "FOLKLORE AND HISTORY" in a white, serif, all-caps font. The text is split into two lines: "FOLKLORE" on the top line and "AND HISTORY" on the bottom line. The font is clean and classic, contrasting sharply with the textured wood background.

FOLKLORE
AND HISTORY



Tom Crum in his library of history and folklore books

IS IT FOLKLORE OR HISTORY? THE ANSWER MAY BE IMPORTANT

by Tom Crum



There is a great deal of history in folklore, and that's good. There also is a great deal of folklore in history, and that's not good. I suspect that many of you are either historians or folklorists. I am neither one. I am a lawyer, although I do have some friends in both camps. If you look around, you will be able to tell which people at this meeting are historians and which are folklorists. The folklorists are the ones who look smug and content. That is because they know that unless they are foolish enough to write about the *history* of folklore it's impossible for them to make a mistake. They know that no one will ever accuse them of getting their facts wrong or of writing politically correct folklore and, of course, there is no such thing as revisionist folklore. If someone ever said that a folklorist got it wrong, all the folklorist has to say is, "that's the way I heard it" and immediately he or she is off the hook and waiting for an apology. Sadly, it is not the same for historians; they are seldom off the hook and never receive apologies. It's enough to make even folklorists sympathetic toward historians, and I am sure the more charitable ones are. I personally have never witnessed any concern on their part, but that may say more about the company I keep than folklorists as a group.

Although they would be hesitant to admit it, historians are much like trial lawyers, in that both historians and trial lawyers look at the world from a perspective a little different from most people—and certainly from folklorists. They have acquired the habit of skepticism, which W.J. Cash claimed, in *The Mind of the*

South, is essential to any generally realistic attitude.¹ They seek proof, for they understand, like Thoreau, that no way of thinking can be trusted without proof.²

In contrast, it's not that folklorists are naïve or don't care about the truth, it's just that by the very nature of folklore the folklorist does not need proof or skepticism. In fact, in an article in the Texas Folklore Society's publication *In the Shadow of History*, Radoslav Tsanoff tells us that folklore "falls to pieces under the stern touch of factual research."³ Folklorists may search for folklore, but they never research for it. Their attitude is that if you have to research it, it ain't folklore. Folklorists are so laid-back that if indeed Jimmy crack corn, they don't care. They just blame it all on the blue tail fly.

If historians and folklorists have such different perspectives, how would their worlds collide? It is not the folklorist who has difficulty in navigation. Wilson Hudson writes in his preface to *In the Shadow of History*, "Every folklorist is aware of the interaction between historical events and popular imagination."⁴ In his 1949 article "American Folklore," B. A. Botkin tells us that "the relation of history to legend is close in America—and that the mixture of the two has given rise to a large body of unhistorical 'historical' traditions—or apocryphal traditions of doubtful exploits of historical characters and untrustworthy traditions of doubtful events."⁵

Francis Abernethy has defined folklore as the traditional knowledge of a culture.⁶ J. Frank Dobie claimed that an anecdote of doubtful historicity might reveal more about a man or a people than a bookful of facts.⁷ Joyce Roach states that folklore exists on two levels, one of which is historical myth. She describes these myths as "those stories which often explain a culture's conception and birth and of the heroes and heroines who accomplished the deeds to bring it about. . . ."⁸

These and other folklorists point out that to understand a culture you need to know not only the facts of its history but also its perception of that history. In her article in *Texas Myths*, Louise Cowan states, "One discerns a society's vision of the nature and destiny of humanity through its legendary material, its folklore, its fairytales."⁹