

Tales and
Traditions from
the Smithsonian
Collection



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A
Celebration
of
American
Family
Folklore

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For our parents:



Irving Zeitlin
Shirley Stein Zeitlin



David Kotkin
Eve Goldfeld Kotkin



Dick Cutting
Ruth Murray Cutting

BLESSING
THE TIES
THAT BIND:
Storytelling
at Family
Festivals
Margaret
Yocom

Storytelling has long been a way of life in my Pennsylvania German family. Tales of Grandfather Keck getting kicked by a bull as he walked the stubborn animal back to his father's slaughterhouse in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and Grandmother Yocom's recitation of how, as a 1908 graduate of the local business college, she left her parents' farm with money her brother loaned her to hunt a job in the big city of Philadelphia are standard fare at family gatherings. My parents, too, tell tales: dad, about growing up on a farm in the 1930s; and mother, of childhood summers in the central Pennsylvania mountains.

Like any family's stories, those of my family highlight the unusual habits, unique talents, fateful accidents, and characteristic sayings and actions of our relatives. Some of the stories document not individual feats, but, by telling about the birth of a child or the first meeting of a husband and wife-to-be, recount how the family in a sense became a family. And always between the tales flows information about the family as it ages, oral history that places the people and events in context.

Often, the stories burst forth unannounced, as a part of everyday conversation. But the finest tale-telling sessions come at those festive times when the whole family gathers together, whether at life-cycle events such as weddings or funerals, or holiday celebrations. Storytelling is an integral part of these festivities, but not necessarily a deliberate one. Rarely does a relative say, "Well, let's talk about some of the things that have happened to us." Rather, one topic of conversation leads to another and without realizing the choice, someone pulls an example out of the past and reminds everyone of how Uncle Dave or Aunt Catherine reacted to a similar situation. Then, the family easily turns to other escapades of Dave and Catherine, or to comparable activities of other relatives.

It is no accident that families tell stories during celebrations for, stimulated by seeing everyone together, storytellers recreate in words the physical gathering that stands before them. Although a story may feature the activities of only one of the relatives present, most family members listen anyway because they enjoy hearing about someone they know or are related to by blood or marriage. Some nod their heads as they hear the oft-told tale, and others who may be hearing the nar-

rative for the first time, form an opinion about the actions of the men and women in the tale. Thus, through the shared memory and participation of all present, the stories convey new information to some, reiterate the familiar to others, and help celebrate the family itself.

Since festivals and celebrations are recurring moments of special significance, junctures that seemingly exist outside of normal time, the day-to-day pattern of family activities halts.¹ Relatives break from work or from pleasures with non-related friends and, laden with food and warnings to behave and be cheerful, come together at an agreed upon location to celebrate or witness a special occasion. Because these are special times, family members often pause and look around at themselves, their growing children, and their aging parents. As they pull out photographs of one another, they ponder the future and reconsider the past. Stories appear, then, because through them relatives can reassess the past and feel able to believe that whatever is yet to happen, the family will be there as it always has been.

Stories also appear at family festivals because relatives see any one celebration as an appropriate and important time for stories about any other. After all, no matter what the event, family celebrations do resemble one another. Whether a birthday party or a funeral reception, the same core of relatives gathers to eat together, bestow gifts on one another, and exchange good wishes. These similarities, then, among all life-cycle events and celebrations—past and present—stimulate family storytelling.

Although storytelling relatives may say they are just "telling lies," their tales told during festive occasions do more than just fritter away the time between dessert and dishwashing. Their tales unite them, teach members about their family heritage, and remind all that they, as parts of one another, should help each other. They also set family members apart from everyone else, emphasizing unique qualities relatives should be proud of and promoting a cohesiveness which comes from such differences with the outside world.

Joyful family life-cycle celebrations, like weddings and all the events that lead up to them, are especially filled with family stories. One Sunday evening, for example, while most of my immediate family finished off their supper and talked about my sister's upcoming wedding, our cousin Scott

called to invite my parents, Norman and Betty, to a fifteenth wedding anniversary dinner in honor of Norman's brother, David, and his wife, Marie. "Fifteen years, boy," my brother exclaimed after Scott hung up. "Doesn't seem that long." "Well, look at all that's happened," Betty reminded him. "All your marriages, and their kids. Why, we were married in forty-six and Dave and Fern before us, and then Don and Jean in forty-nine or was it forty-eight."

"It was forty-nine," Grandfather Elmer Keck spoke up. "It might have been forty-nine," seconded Norman. "We were building [this house] in forty-nine. Remember, we hid their car up here so nobody would do anything, but Rufus put Limburger cheese on it. . . ."

"And David," Elmer broke in. "David Fry."

"Imagine that!" Norman turned to his son-in-law, George. "Ugh, that smelly cheese melting all over the car engine. What a mess."

"Yes," Elmer said, "when Donnie got married, what Rufus (Rufus) does, he and David Fry, they bought some Limburger cheese and they put it on the manifolds, smeared it on the manifolds of the car and different parts of it that would heat up at different times as the motor got hotter, you know. And, of course, Donald thought everything was fine. His car started. But the stink of this Limburger cheese as the car heated up—and of course, he couldn't get this off. It had melted; the hotter the car got, the worse it got! And they had put it on the exhaust pipe, on the manifold, and everything else. All over the car! He had this for a long time, and he finally had to get out to clean the car off all over."

"But," Elmer continued, "it all goes back to what they did to Rufus, you know, when he got married. Well, Harold had the wedding, you know, in that old church up there outside of Shireman's town where they had services once a year. So Rufus got married and everything was just hunky-dory; everything was fine. So what we did was: we crossed the wires on his car at the back so when he got in the car to start it, the car wouldn't go. And then we had the exhaust pipe plugged up, you know, so it'd run, but it would go "kaput-kaput" if he would get the wires fixed. So people got out [of the church] and the car wouldn't start. Well, right away he started looking, and he found the wire and got the wires fixed up. But he got in the car, and it wouldn't go again. And, of course, he

got out again and got to working. They lost a lot of time. They wanted to get going, you know. He finally got it started, but it took another hour and a half, two hours. So, of course, Donnie knew about this."

"You talk about things—the worst I ever knew was a trick they played on Wilmer, my cousin. Did I ever tell you that? Well, Wilmer had his house bought at 22 West Fifth Street. He had the house all furnished and everything, and he went away on his honeymoon with Stelletta. Well, Wilmer had it coming to him because he had played tricks on Elmer Breuninger, his brother-in-law, and Harve, Elmer's brother. So they decided that they would fix Wilmer when he got married. They didn't do anything to him right after he got married. But, when he went on his honeymoon, they got the keys to the house, and they put the upstairs downstairs, and the downstairs upstairs. Everything upstairs and the bedroom, downstairs! The only thing they couldn't change were the bathrooms. And they had signs up: 'Milkman stopped here,' 'Baker stopped here,' 'Butcher stopped in.' They had them all over the house, on the outside. And when Stelletta came home and saw it, she just sat down and cried."

"Did they help Wilmer move it back?"



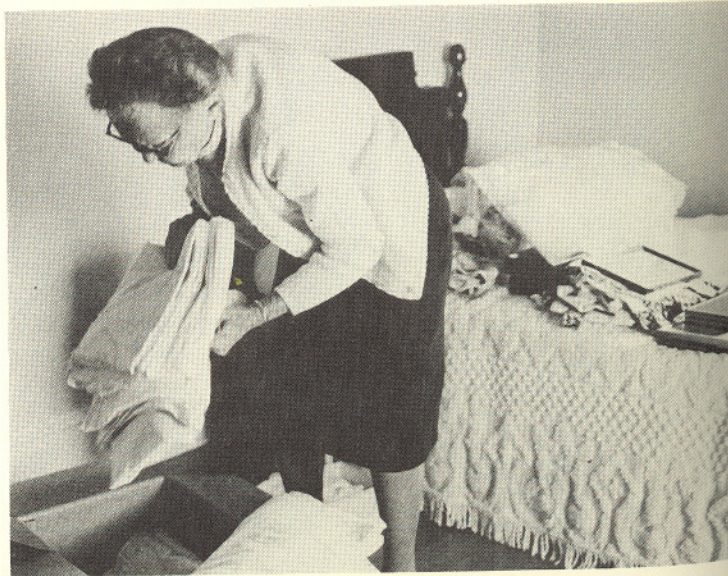
Storytelling at family festivals: Marie Yocom delights the family at a fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration.

"Oh, no. Oh, heck no. No, they didn't lift a finger!"

"But wasn't he sore at them?"

"What could he do? He had played tricks on these others. I guess Wilmer figured that if you gave it out, you had to take it."²

Although storytellers and their tales of family antics may at first seem more fitted to joyous family life-cycle events, it is actually during moves from a homeplace, funerals, and other family crises that family stories seem most needed and, in the end, quite appropriate to both tellers and listeners. Family stories and history buoyed up the Yocom-Keck family when, in the spring of 1976, the home of Grandmother and Grandfather Yocom, so often the gathering place for the family, was sold and its contents put up for auction. Grandfather Isaac, because of illness, had moved to a nursing home and Grandmother Bertha went to live next door with her daughter Gladys and family. The auctioneer's sign went up on the front lawn in early May; and Bertha, preparing to sell most of the goods she used during her life as a farm wife and mother, walked back and forth from her house to Gladys' trying to give away her most prized possessions before the auctioneer's gavel put them in the hands of some stranger.



Storytelling at auction time: Bertha Yocom talks as she prepares household goods for sale.

In anticipation of the sale, everything was laid out on tables. Kitchen utensils spilled off the table and into the boxes on the floor: dishes, vases, plates, and silverware filled every inch of the dining-room table; sofas, benches, and chairs of all sizes littered the livingroom; and boxes of books, bedding, and mementos stood like silent sentries over the stone house on Yocom Road. "Did you see the sign for the auction?" Bertha pointed to the front yard:

"Your daddy put it up the other day. Oh, I never appreciated the house enough when I lived there. I never appreciated the farmhouse either, but when I had to leave, I was so worked up—and weak—that the girls did all the packing for me. I just couldn't do it. You know I'm not going to the sale, are you?"

Remembering that previous move and seeing many of the possessions spread before her, Bertha shared much family history with me, which I recorded in my journal. As we entered the livingroom, she mentioned,

"This couch! It's so good, so sturdy. You see, the nurse slept on this when Grandpop Yocom [great-grandfather Albert] was sick, and then, for grandmom. It's a shame that no one can take it." On the couch lay a brown woolen scarf. "Oh, this muffler! You know, it saved Oscar's [Bertha's brother's] life! One day—bitter cold—he was coming back from the city with friends. It was a car with no top. He would have frozen to death if it hadn't have been for the scarf. Imagine! This scarf!! Can you use it?"

Up the stairs to the second floor she went, leaving one of her two canes behind. In the hallway she opened up a few small boxes lying on the day couch. "Look here, Peggy," she called. One box had several quilting patterns, flax, and lead vices for a quilting frame. "Why, these must be Grandma Yocom's. I wonder where the quilt frame is? Here, take these. Do you want them?"

She walked over to the old hatboxes: "Oh, here's Grandmom Yocom's fox [stole]; she always wore these." From a trunk she took a linen tablecloth and gave it to me: "Here, it's nine feet long; you can cut it. Grandmom Yocom gave this to me. Once I took care of them when they were sick; they wanted to give me

money, but I wouldn't take it. So she gave me this. I always used it with my best china."³

Although an emotionally difficult event, the auction gave birth to a humorous family story, as several relatives witnessed a memorable event and reported it to family members. I recorded it in my journal as follows:

Just after Aunt Edie bought a white steel cabinet, she saw auctioneer Victor Rhoads hold up a pair of brown riding boots she wore as a girl. No one would bid even a quarter. "What about a quarter?" Vic thundered. "A quarter?" But no one would bid even that. Edie jumped up: "For a quarter, I'll take them!" As she ran forward to get them, her two brothers laughed. "For a quarter!" she exclaimed later. "Why they're good, yet. Look at the leather. I couldn't see my boots going to somebody who couldn't wear them anyway!"

Similarly, toward the very end of the sale, my father Norman reached for an old rubber baby doll among the litter of items on one remaining shelf of things to buy. His sister Gladys caught his hand: "Oh, that thing. Don't sell that!" "No, put it up," his brother Dave advised. "I saw some people eyeing it a while back." As the doll went up for sale, Norman whispered to me, "Why Pop used that doll; he tied it in the cherry tree to keep away birds." And the auctioneer who had just sold a rock for a dime, sold the rubber baby doll, too.

Family members immediately fashioned these two events into stories. After the sale when my father and I visited Grandfather Isaac, Norman said that the sale had gone well and, smiling, he told Isaac about Edie and her boots and about the doll. "That and the doll were the best," Norman repeated. "You know, that doll brought a dollar seventy-five!"⁴

Norman told the stories not only to his father, but to his father-in-law and his children, even though they were all at the sale and had seen Edie buy back her own boots. Grandmother and Grandfather Yocom did not want to talk much about the sale, but they did enjoy the stories. After all, they confirmed that the sale had gone well: if someone was fool enough to buy a twenty-year-old dry and cracked rubber doll, surely the best furniture brought a good price. Also, the objects themselves brought back memories of a cherished past

on the farm when they were young and the children were home.

Although the story of the doll was great fun during and immediately after the sale, it is the story of Edie's boots that family members still tell more frequently. Perhaps it owes its life to a kind of tension: just as the auction mingled the joy of family fellowship and the antics of the auctioneer with the sorrow of the death of a homestead, so the story fuses the apparent silliness of buying back your own boots with the sober awareness that you had to do it before strangers walked off with your own past.

Like the death of a homestead, the death of a family member also brings relatives together to comfort one another and to rejoice in the family bonds that remain. Unlike other celebrations, funerals impart a sense of urgency to their storytellers, for here the sorrowers especially need to feel family about them. And storytelling, which may last from the moment relatives hear about the death until long after the funeral reception, brings family members close together. Even in the midst of such solemnity, there is laughter, at least at Keck funerals.

One Saturday afternoon in early June as I visited with Grandmother Louisa and Grandfather Elmer Keck, we were talking about Elmer's brother Dan, when the phone rang.

Immediately after he hung up the receiver, Elmer told us that his first cousin Bessie Keck Klein had died. Once again I recorded the conversation in my journal:

"Her father," Elmer explained to me, "was Jonathan Keck, my uncle. So she is your cousin. I've got to go call a few people."

Elmer spread the news to several branches of the family. He called his first cousin Leidy Gaugler; then he talked to another cousin, Mary Hipple. He also called his sister Martha long distance. When Leidy and Elmer made plans to go to the funeral together, I asked if I could go along. Elmer quickly agreed. "It would be nice for you to see the relatives you haven't seen in a long time," Louisa smiled.

Three days later, Leidy and his Chevrolet pulled up in front of Elmer and Louisa's. Elmer, his black suit, white shirt, and red tie freshly cleaned and brushed, and I hopped in the car.



A new family story begins: Edie Yocom buys back her own boots at the family auction.

After he and Leidy discussed the best way to travel the twenty miles to Lutz's Funeral Home in Reading, we left. Leidy, just back from visiting his son David in California, talked of his two grandchildren there and how old they were. "I have five brothers and sisters," Elmer replies, "and do you know how I remember their ages? Simple. 3-3-5-3-3. Alan was born in 1890, me in ninety-three, Rufus in ninety-six, Dan in 1901, Mim in 1904, and Martha in nineteen aught-seven."

As we eased into the parking lot, Elmer pointed, "Oh, there's Mary and Elwood [Hipple] and Sadie and Harold [Ziegenfus; Elmer's first cousins]." As we talked about the last time we saw each other at the Keck reunion several years back, Elmer herded us all inside. There among the brocade and velvet drapes and the thick maroon carpet stood Mildred, Bessie's daughter. "Well, Mildred, you're looking good. How's your leg?" Elmer laughed and clasped everyone's hand. Then, after some words of comfort to Mildred and her husband Dick, Elmer and I viewed Bessie, her white hair and pink skin in stark contrast to the shiny satin lining of the bed-like coffin.

As we signed the guest register, Elmer asked me, "Do you know? All the family is represented: me from David (Elmer's father), Bessie from John, Leidy from Cora, Sadie from Emma, and Mary from Hen (Henry)." During the day, he told this fact to several people, including Betty, his daughter, when we got home.

As we sat down in the second section of seats, Harold Ziegenfus walked over, pulled a bedraggled piece of newsprint from his wallet, and stuck it in front of Elmer's face. Elmer read it, a "One Hundred Years Ago" column from the Reading Eagle, about William Keck and Dutch Liz who, in 1871, were arrested for keeping a "disorderly house." As Elmer laughed, Harold winked, "Black sheep of the family, say Elmer?" The clipping traveled through several more hands until the minister walked to a small lectern.⁵

After the service, the funeral men closed the coffin and called for the pallbearers. "That's Dick's son," Elmer whispered as the men filed by, "and that's an intended bridegroom."

The car was hot as we climbed in for the trip to Forest Hills Cemetery. "Boy, this reminds me of something that happened to Uncle Bill when we were out on the farm," Elmer said as he turned to Leidy. "It was a hot, hot day; and he was up in the

hayloft. All of a sudden he fell out and landed in a big pile of hay, underneath. In a minute or so, he dug himself out, and said, 'Bissel kiel heit!' (Little cool today)."

As we all laughed, Elmer observed that Bill and other Kecks like to joke. "Once," Elmer continued, "Bill tried to play a joke on me with a horse, but the horse kicked him instead. And one day a cousin of mine came over, and Dad told him, 'Bumblebees don't sting today.' So he picked up a bee and got stung. Boy, did Mom yell at Dad. Yes, we Kecks had a lot of capers; but you know, it was all good fun. You remember the good times we had with that Grafanola in the front room?"

Leidy laughed as we drove on, closer and closer to the burial site.

Celebrating life-cycle events and holidays often sets the stage for family storytelling. And anyone who would like to collect family tales and history would do well to watch for and collect during such settings.

Although these many narratives provide much family history, a collector would be wrong to see the tales only as enjoyable efforts at keeping the past alive. Tales are not told simply to jar our memories. A bride and bridegroom do not forget the tricks a cousin pulled at their wedding. A mother hardly needs to be reminded where her children were when she gave birth to her youngest. And relatives do not forget especially embarrassing childhood incidents. Such tales are, rather, the sound of a family very much in the present celebrating, renewing, and reestablishing itself through its stories.

How to Collect Your Own Family Folklore

We hope that the stories, photographs, and accounts of traditions in this book have inspired readers to collect the folklore of their own families. But where do you start? Through the years we have developed some guidelines, which may be adapted to your own needs and circumstances. You might want to get started before the inspiration slips away, and even to jot down some of the stories and traditions this book has brought to mind.

Before you begin. Because family folklore belongs to a living family, it is constantly evolving. Each generation will forget and alter the lore that it has received; on the other hand, that same generation will add new verbal lore and new traditions. This creative aspect of family folklore affects the researcher in several ways. First, no matter how hard you try, you will never record the entire body of your family's folklore since there will never be a time in which it will be totally static. Don't despair. Get down what you can and encourage other family members to do the same. Just think of collecting family folklore as a pastime for which you have an infinite supply of raw material close at hand.

Second, think about your time orientation. The family folklorist cannot be so absorbed in preserving the past that he neglects to record the present. Keep your eyes, ears, and mind open. A tradition does not have to be old to be worth recording. In fact, a good part of any family's tradition is ephemeral and may not last long enough to pass from one generation to another. Collecting family folklore is one case in which too much is better than too little. Tapes can be edited and transcripts can be discarded, but the tradition, story, or expression that you neglect to record today may be lost.

Finally, remember that family folklore exists as part of the day-to-day living of a family, changing and moving with that family. To separate it abruptly from this natural context would rob it of its vitality and its existence as folklore. It is essential to remember that the story itself—including where, when, and how it is told—is as important as the information it conveys. This is the essential distinction between family folklore and the closely related disciplines of genealogy and family history. The following suggestions are designed to help you focus on these folkloric aspects of your family.

As self-appointed family folklorist you now have two tasks ahead of you: to learn your family's folklore and to record it for others to enjoy.

The equipment. Note-taking and tape recording are the usual means of recording family folklore. The tape recorder is the means of choice. Writing during an interview or family event has a number of disadvantages. Most people find note-taking to be both tedious and difficult. It is hard to maintain a conversation or participate actively in the ongoing activities, especially since you can't look at your subject. A complete, accurate account of the story—especially if it is long and detailed—is difficult to obtain. Although the words may be written down, the subtleties of the performance are inevitably lost.

Although both you and your informant might be uneasy and uncomfortable with a tape recorder, you'll probably soon get accustomed to its presence. A small cassette machine with a separate omni-directional microphone will give good results. It is easy to use and so inconspicuous that its presence will soon be forgotten. A sixty-minute cassette (30 minutes per side) is a good choice since it is economical, unlikely to tangle, and long enough to record substantial segments of an interview without interruption.

The microphone should be placed so that all voices, including yours, can be picked up. Run a test before you begin the actual interview and adjust the machine accordingly. The end of a two-hour interview is no time to discover that the volume control was too low! Read carefully any instructions that come with the particular tape recorder you are using.

As far as possible all extraneous noise should be eliminated. Turn off the radio, close the window, move away from the window fan. A few minutes spent finding the proper spot for the tape recorder can save you many hours when it comes time to transcribe the interview and you struggle to distinguish grandma's voice from the roar of a passing truck. The recorder should also be placed where it will not be disturbed during the interview and where you will have easy access to it when it becomes necessary to change tapes.

Although not as essential as a tape recorder, a camera is a useful piece of equipment. It provides a visual record of the



*Four generations of one family.
From left to right. Brady Dickerson,
Katie Dickerson Greene, Mildred L.
Henderson Maiden, and in the
center, Beverly J. Robinson,
as a baby.*

interview and the informant. It can also be used to copy any documentary records that the informant might offer, such as letters or scrapbooks.

Family tape recordings and photographs that are worth collecting are also worth preserving. Although professional archival techniques are rather elaborate for home use, some simple, commonsense measures will enable future generations to enjoy your research efforts. Heat, humidity, and light, especially sunlight, are the principle causes of deterioration of tapes, photos, paper, and other artifacts. Storing material in a damp basement or a hot, unventilated attic is not recommended. In fact, people and research materials do best in about the same environment—a temperature between sixty to seventy degrees fahrenheit and a relative humidity of fifty percent. If you're comfortable, your research material is probably safe. The problem of light is more difficult, especially for photographs which are often displayed under damaging conditions. The best solution is to display only copies, keeping the originals in albums and boxes.

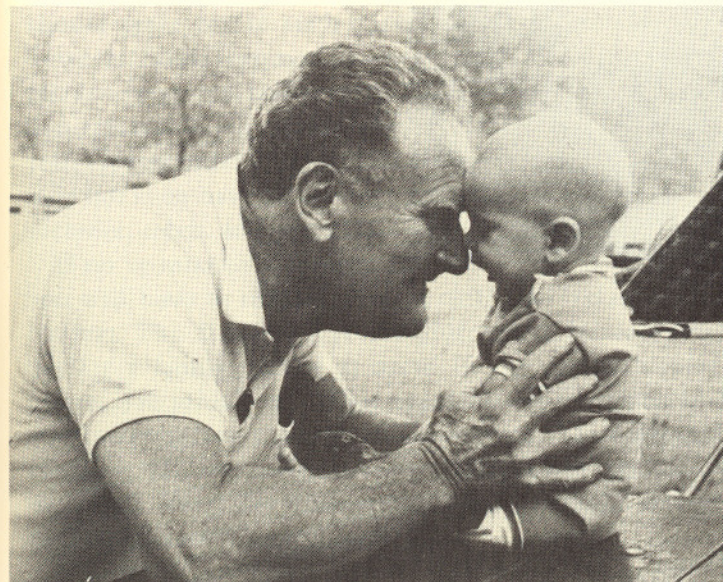
At the present time, you can't assume that color photographs and slide transparencies will be permanent images. Black and white copies should be made of those photographs that you wish to preserve indefinitely. Most commercial photographers can provide this service, but it is possible for an amateur to do an adequate job at home. Thomas L. Davies gives detailed descriptions of simple home copying methods in *Shoots: A Guide to Your Family's Photographic Heritage* (Addison House: Danbury, NH, 1977). For best results, the black and white film should be archivally processed, that is, thoroughly washed at the time of developing to remove any residual chemicals that could eventually damage the film. Again, both professional photo labs and the family photographer who processes his own film can perform this essential step. Acid-free file folders, photo albums, scrapbooks, and storage boxes are available from office and library supply companies and are worth the extra cost because of the added protection they provide.

The people. With whom should you start? Your oldest relative? The one you feel most at ease with? No. The place to begin is with yourself. You are just as much a bearer of your family's traditions as any member of your family. Use your-

self as an informant and ask yourself the questions that follow on pages 269–71. You may be surprised at how much you know about some areas and how little about others. It is very likely that you will know more about one side of the family than another, for instance. Once you have collected family folklore from yourself, use your answers as a starting point for questioning other family members. Try to remember family structure. Who are your relatives? Which ones are most likely to have information and be willing to share it? Who gets along with whom? What topics are likely to be sensitive? These are all essential questions that you have to tackle yourself, first.

The first outside person that you interview should be someone with whom you feel very comfortable. Interviewing is not easy and you would do well to get your introduction to it in the presence of a friendly face. A parent or sibling might be a good choice. Young children often have great success with grandparents.

As you continue your interviewing you will pick up clues that will help you find potential narrators: "You should talk to Uncle Joe about that," or "Aunt Jane is a much better story-



M. A. LEARY



CAROLYN MITCHELL

teller than I am." Whenever possible ask directly for sources: "Can you tell me who might know more about that?" As you become more and more involved with the search you will meet relatives that you never even knew you had! Don't neglect non-relatives, either. Your grandfather's best friend may be able to tell you things about him that no family member would know. Don't overlook other members of the household who were not relatives, such as nursemaids or longterm boarders. Try not to be misled by terms of address. Aunt, uncle, sister, brother, and cousin are especially troublesome words since they can indicate respect, affection, and brotherhood as easily as blood or marriage relationships. And although they won't be much help as sources of information on family folklore, don't forget family pets since they can frequently be found as characters in family stories.

The interview. The most productive family folklore interviews are those that take place in a natural context for the reasons explained at the beginning of this guide: family folklore is a living part of a family and cannot be successfully separated from the everyday activities of that family. This can present problems since it will be impossible for you to be present during every naturally occurring folkloric event. You should make use of such opportunities whenever possible, however. Some common natural contexts are family dinners, picnics, reunions, and holidays. These are the times at which families would tell stories whether or not you are there with your tape recorder. Under these circumstances you will probably not even have to conduct an interview — just adjust the recorder, relax, and participate as you would ordinarily.

If no spontaneous natural context seems to be available you will have to rely on what is called an induced natural context. The distinction is straightforward. Instead of waiting for a family dinner to occur in the normal course of events, you initiate one. This approach has the added advantage of giving you a degree of control over the situation. For example, you can invite specific relatives who interact well with each other. Try serving foods that you know will bring back memories from the past.

The group interview context, whether natural or induced, has one major characteristic that makes it extremely fruitful.

The interaction that occurs as a matter of course serves to spark the memories of the participants. One story leads into another, one interpretation elicits cries of "but that's not really the way it happened at all!" The end result of such an interview will differ greatly from private interviews with the same relatives.

Private interviews can also be either natural or induced. If grandma begins to talk to you about her journey to this country while you are washing the supper dishes, fine—unfortunately, you probably won't be prepared with a tape recorder. If you wish to privately interview a relative, try not to do so under formal circumstances. Suggest some activity that will allow you to maintain a conversation easily but will help keep the session natural and low key: going for a walk, sewing, baking. If you know beforehand that a particular activity is usually a time for storytelling, schedule your interview to coincide with that event. Familiar surroundings and routine activities will also help to distract the informant from the fact that he or she is being interviewed and will lessen the unsettling impact of the tape recorder.

Every interview that you do will be unique. The questions on pages 269–71 will supply some uniformity, although you will probably be selective in using them. These brief suggestions should be helpful in most circumstances.

1. Start with a question or a topic that you know will elicit a full reply from your subject, such as a story you have heard him tell in the past. This will give your relative confidence in his ability to contribute something of value to your collection.

2. Avoid generalities. "Tell me about your childhood," for instance, often elicits nothing more than a list of names and dates.

3. Ask evocative questions. Nothing can kill an interview faster than a long series of questions that require only yes or no as answers.

4. Face up to the fact that there will be some information that you will not get. You may be the wrong sex or age. A relative may simply not trust you with sensitive data. If you feel you must have the missing material you may be able to solicit the help of another relative or friend as an interviewer.

5. Be aware that role switching will occur. You have changed from a son or daughter to an interrogator. Both you and your informant may feel uneasy in these new roles. A low-key approach in a natural setting should help relieve some of the discomfort.

6. Show interest. Encourage your informants as much as possible. Interject remarks whenever appropriate. Take an active part in the conversation without dominating it. Learn to be a creative listener as well as a good questioner.

7. Know what questions you want to ask, but don't be afraid to let your informant go off on a tangent. He or she might just touch on subjects of interest that you never thought to ask about.

8. Never turn off the tape recorder unless asked to. Not only does it break the conversation, such action suggests that you think some of your informant's material is not worth recording.

9. Use props whenever possible. Documents, letters, photo albums, scrapbooks, home movies, and other family heirlooms can all be profitably used to stimulate memories.

10. Be sensitive to the needs of family members. Schedule your sessions at a convenient time. Older people tire easily; cut the interview off at the first sign of fatigue. Don't slight



SUSAN MITCHELL



TOM THOMPSON

family members who show interest in your project. Interview them, even if you have reason to believe their material will be of minimal value.

11. If possible, prepare some sort of written report for the family as a tangible result of their participation. Remember to save all of your tapes, notes, and any other documentation that you have accumulated. Label everything with names, dates, and places. Ideally, all tapes should be indexed and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. You will be more conscientious about documentation if you place yourself in the position of your great-grandchild who, many decades in the future, will be using your project as a source for his reconstruction.

12. Before publishing diaries, memoirs, letters, or other written artifacts, you would be wise to find out about copyright regulations. For example, the writer of a letter owns the copyright, not the recipient nor the present owner of the letter. The same principle holds true for tape-recorded oral history and folklore—the speaker, not the tape owner, holds all rights to his material. Most family members will gladly allow you to make use of whatever resources you need for documenting the family's traditions, but it never hurts to be prepared with copyright information. The Copyright Office at the Library of Congress will send a packet of information upon request (Copyright Office, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20560.)

A question of ethics. Most of your relatives will be delighted by your new-found interest in collecting family folklore. Some will undoubtedly wonder if you've gone slightly mad. Unfortunately, a few may be uncooperative and even hostile. Because of the personal nature of the folklore that you will be collecting, you should be very careful to protect the privacy and rights of all family members. Be honest about your intent from the very beginning. Explain your reasons for doing the research. Is it a school assignment? Do you simply want to learn more about your family? Do you plan to publish your findings? The ultimate disposition of the collection may affect their willingness to talk about certain subjects.

You may find it difficult to explain what family folklore is and why you want to record it. Your relatives will most likely equate your research with genealogy and family history. No

harm will be done if you explain your research in those terms since the areas are so interrelated. Showing them books like this may help, too.

Don't make promises you can't or don't intend to keep. If you say you will erase part of a tape, do so, even if it means losing some important information. Respect confidences and privacy. Let your informants see anything that will be published before it is too late to alter the manuscript. Although the intimate nature of family folklore places restrictive and sometimes frustrating burdens on the researcher, the bulk of your collection will probably be non-controversial.

Finally, never record secretly. There is no justification for dishonesty and the bad feelings within the family that may result.

One last word. Please do not be discouraged by all the dos and don'ts that we have suggested. Once you have begun collecting your own family's folklore you will realize that the guidelines are based on commonsense and lots of practice. Vary them to suit your own family circumstances. Improve them with our blessing and encouragement. And above all, enjoy yourself, your family, and your folklore.

A possible questionnaire. Every family is unique. Every folklore fieldworker has his or her own special interests and style of interviewing. Because of this diversity, no single set of questions will successfully elicit folklore from all families. The most useful questions will be those that you develop through knowledge of yourself and your family. For your initial efforts the following questions may be helpful. Just remember that they are meant to be suggestive, not absolute. Pick and choose among them as you see fit. By all means change the wording to suit your own situation and personality.

1. What do you know about your family surname? Its origin? Its meaning? Did it undergo change coming from the old country to the United States? Are there stories about the change?

2. Are there any traditional first names, middle names, or nicknames in your family? Is there a naming tradition, such as always giving the firstborn son the name of his paternal grandfather?

3. Can you sort out the traditions in your current family according to the branches of the larger family from which they have come? Does the overall tradition of a specific grandparent seem to be dominant?

4. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors? How have these relatives described their lives to you? What have you learned from them about their childhood, adolescence, schooling, marriage, work, religion, political activity, recreation? Are they anxious or reluctant to discuss the past? Do their memories tend to cluster about certain topics or time periods and avoid others? Are there certain things in your family history that you would like to know, but no one will tell you? Do various relatives tell the same stories in different ways? How do these versions differ?

5. Do you have a notorious or infamous character in your family's past? Do you relish stories about him/her? Do you feel that the infamy of the ancestor may have grown as stories passed down about him/her have been elaborated?

6. How did your parents, grandparents, and other relatives come to meet and marry? Are there family stories of lost love, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, elopements, runaway lovers?

7. Have any historical events affected your family? For example, how did your family survive the Depression? Did conflict over some national event such as the Civil War or Vietnam cause a serious break in family relationships?

8. Are there any stories in your family about how a great fortune was lost or almost (but not quite) made? Do you believe them? Are these incidents laughed about or deeply regretted? If a fortune was made, who was responsible and how was it achieved?

9. What expressions are used in your family? Did they come from specific incidents? Are there stories which explain their origin? Is a particular member of the family especially adept at creating expressions?

10. How are holidays celebrated in your family? What holidays are most important—national, religious, or family? What innovations has your family made in holiday celebrations? Has your family created entirely new holidays?

11. Does your family hold reunions? How often? When? Where? Who is invited? Who comes? Who are the organizers and hosts? What occurs during the reunion? Are there traditional foods, customs, activities? Are stories and photographs exchanged? Are records (oral, written, visual) kept? By whom?

12. Have any recipes been preserved in your family from past generations? What was their origin? How were they passed down—by word of mouth, by observation, by written recipes? Are they still in use today? When? By whom? Does grandmother's apple pie taste as good now that it's made by her granddaughter?

13. What other people (friends, household help, etc.) have been incorporated into your family? When? Why? Were these people given family title such as aunt or cousin? Did they participate fully in family activities?

14. Is there a family cemetery or burial plot? Who is buried with whom? Why? Who makes burial place decisions? If there are gravemarkers, what type of information is recorded on them?

15. Does your family have any heirlooms, objects of sentimental or monetary value that have been handed down? What are they? Are there stories connected with them? Do you know their origin and line of passage through the generations? If they pass to you, will you continue the tradition, sell the objects, or give them to museums?

16. Does your family have photo albums, scrapbooks, slides, home movies? Who created them? Whose pictures are contained in them? Whose responsibility is their upkeep? When are they displayed? To whom? Are they specially arranged and edited? Does their appearance elicit commentary? What kind? By whom? Is the showing of these images a happy occasion?

* We would like to thank Margaret Yocom, who co-authored this section.

