

Hoosier

Indiana
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Folklore

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HOOSIER FOLKLORE

VOL. VI

SEPTEMBER, 1947

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THE VITALITY OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*

By J. W. ASHTON

Some years ago at the meeting of the Western Folklore Conference in Denver, Professor Ernest Leisy of Southern Methodist University read a paper on "Folklore in American Literature" (it was subsequently published in *American Literature*, I believe). It was in effect a bibliography of works of standard American literature which had to one degree or another taken over folk themes or folk tales. It was an extensive and impressive list, indicating a wide variety of contacts between professional literature and that great body of popular belief, custom, and story which constitutes American folklore. It is not my purpose here to recapitulate or to summarize Professor Leisy's analysis. It is enough to point out that one of the surest marks of a living folk tradition is its ability to put its imprint on the learned literature of a nation. If American literature has never yet seen so excellent a blending of folklore and profound learning as are to be found in *The Fairy Queen* or in *Paradise Lost*, there is none the less a healthy feeling for popular belief and story in many of our outstanding works, from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" or "Rip van Winkle" to "The Devil and Daniel Webster" or *The Green Pastures*. This is not a matter of literary influences in the technical historical sense, it should be understood, but it is rather a matter of a creative idea or spirit at work at the very center of American life which can be drawn upon and which enlivens and enriches our literature.

*This paper was read at the annual meeting, August 15, 1947.

Associated with this, of course, has been that interest in regionalism in literature which had a particular vogue during the thirties and a little earlier, but which is also a constant characteristic of a large section of American literature. As a political and social factor we have come to see fully the significance of the regional patterns of American life. We have been able to reject the derogatory statements about the humdrum uniformity of life from one end of the country to the other which used to be the stock of critics of this country. We are learning that however much of fundamental likeness there may be in the various areas of the country, there is the regional folklore which gives particular flavor to the area where it exists. It may be a turn for salty phrase, a talent for tall stories, a touch of mysticism or a combination of several qualities such as these which gives to a region its particular characteristics. And these are essentially aspects of the folklore of an area. You will understand, I am sure, that this is not to deny the fact that folklore too has its universal patterns, perhaps best exemplified in the motifs of the folktale.

Another contributing element to the liveliness of our folklore is the fact that so many foreign cultures have contributed to it. This kind of contribution has often been hampered by the tendency of the foreign born to feel sensitive about anything that smacks of the Old Country and hence to forget if possible or at least to be reticent about their native folklore. This process is often hastened by the second generation who by their own sensitiveness to "foreignness" increase the reticence of their parents. In spite of all this, however, American folklore has profited from the impact of other cultures, has been better able to withstand the impact of a technical and skeptical and pseudo-sophisticated culture because of the many strains of influence which it has enjoyed so steadily.

The real mark of vitality in folklore, however, is unquestionably its ability to go on reproducing itself, naturally and un-selfconsciously, and this is definitely characteristic of folklore in America. A good many years ago when I first became interested in this field of investigation and study, folklore was pretty widely looked upon as something that was to be collected in the Southern Appalachian Mountains or among the American Indians in a hurry since it was already dying out and in the course of a relatively short time was likely to

be no longer existent. By and large, ballads, for instance, were thought of as survivals from a culture that had nearly died out. They were memorials of a vanished or vanishing past. Folktales had been embalmed a century or so ago by the Brothers Grimm and were no longer of living significance. They were all fossils out of early ages, interesting as fossils are to geologists and perhaps valuable as records of man's earlier thinking and creation, but hardly valid documents of contemporary life. More extended study in the intervening years, however, has testified to the living quality of our folklore, its continuing regeneration and its constant relationship to many aspects of our life. With the development of this understanding has gone the development of interest in folk arts like music and painting, and we are just beginning to see how rich has been their influence on our civilization, how much they are steadily contributing to richness in our culture.

The means of this continuing renewal of folk culture are of course many, as they have always been. People still sing as they work, though it is true that the tendency is to turn on the radio and make a noise instead. And among humble people the songs are still often those which have been handed down to them traditionally even though the songs still are found in some hymnal from the Moody and Sankey revivals or had their origin in some sentimental (or comic) song of minstrel show or vaudeville turn of an earlier generation. Notorious criminals still may be the subject of ballads, like one about Clyde Barrows, which was apparently sung about the time of his death.

There is also a large body of stories, often apparently created for a particular purpose (like the Paul Bunyan stories, perhaps), which come into being as full fledged folk stories in a remarkably short time. The most striking of these at the moment is perhaps the story of "The Vanishing Hitch-hiker," some further examples of which appeared in the last issue of *Hoosier Folklore*. On the way to joining the company of such stories is the one which had some currency a few years ago and dealt with a hitch-hiker disguised as a woman. I was amused to read recently in Wyoming in a clipping with a Los Angeles date line an account of the discovery of a cave in California containing mummified bodies dating back 80,000 years. They were, according to the report,

found in a kind of ceremonial room with decorations resembling those of Masonic lodges, and the figures were those of giants. It is a good illustration of the old adage that if you want to tell a lie, you ought never to give too many or too positive details. This story is not as yet a folktale, but it has all the elements to make a good one.

There is also the turn for proverb making, which is not to be confused with mere "folksy" speech, but which represents the statement of a fact or, it may be, an opinion, by a vigorous shortcut that intensifies the meaning by its overtones (to mix my figure badly). We think of these ordinarily as being pretty well set and thoroughly traditional, but actually they are being created all the time. Sometimes they are modern variations of older ones: "Familiarity breeds contempt—and children"; "Don't count your chips until the game is over." Some are close to the soil: "As classy as a sow with side pockets"; "He has no more sense than a June bug in a hailstorm." And there is a whole cycle of statements dealing with booby prizes for unsuccessful (usually half-hearted) efforts. The most favorable of them is "He wins the ruby cuff links," but there is a large group which is essentially vituperative.

"She wins the rubber-tired corset."

"He wins the barbed-wire drawers."

"He wins the busted mustache cup."

"He wins the concrete pants."

Beside which "That takes the fried egg" (or the "cold fried egg") pales into insignificance.

I leave untouched that great body of teen age slang and the even greater vocabulary of jive and the specialized lingo of armed forces, soda fountains, and the like, which have been studied recently by John L. Riordan and published in the *CFQ*. They all testify to the richness of this particular aspect of folklore.

Apparently one of the most fertile sources for popular beliefs and fancies (they are hardly superstitions in any technical sense) is high school youngsters, whose ingenuity in developing such beliefs is stimulated by an increasing interest in the opposite sex. Along with the desire to know who will be the future mate goes also a great interest in the kind of luck that is represented by wish fulfillment. While

apparently some beliefs continue from generation to generation, it is clear that there are changes from time to time in the bases which adolescents use for divining the future. The following examples have been largely contributed by my two daughters and represent some pretty well established customs of eastern Kansas and southern Indiana. Apparently there are only minor differences between the two areas.

Of all the wishing formulas which were popular twenty-five or thirty years ago, the only one which I have found regularly recurring is that of wishing on a star, with the usual formula:

Star light, star bright
First star I see tonight
I wish I may, I wish I might
Have the wish I wish tonight.

As far as I can learn, however, this formula is no longer restricted by the necessity of looking at the first star, then looking away and not looking at it again until one had seen another star. In Maine thirty years ago to have looked a second time on the first star without in the meanwhile having seen another would have broken the wish.

There are other wish patterns, too.

If your eyelash comes off, put it on your finger and blow it away, making a wish as you do so. (It is possible that sometimes the effectiveness of the wish depended on the way in which the eyelash then behaved, but my informants were vague on this point.)

When you are served a square of butter, if you cut off a corner of the square as soon as it is served, you can make a wish and it will come true.

More complicated is the proper procedure when two people say the same thing at the same time. Then they should hook their little fingers (either right or left hand) and go through the following dialogue:

A	B
Needles	Pins
Triplets	Twins
When a man marries	His troubles begin
When a man dies	His troubles end
What goes up?	Smoke
What comes down?	Santa Claus

whereupon each makes a wish and they pull their little fingers. The one who is able to pull away from the other with finger still crooked will get her wish.

On concrete pavements there is sometimes an octagonal stamp imprinted by the contractor who laid the pavement. If you step on one of these, say 1, 2, 3, and make a wish on 3, your wish will come true. (This is somewhat akin to the older belief that if you stumbled as you were walking along the sidewalk you should go back to the object on which you had stumbled, step on it, kiss your thumb, and make a wish.)

A few have to do with smoking. If for instance you take the first cigarette from a package, you should make a wish on it. Or if you step on an empty Lucky Strike package, you may make a wish on it. Testimony to the power of advertising or something of the sort is given by the fact that it must be this particular brand of cigarette, no other. Of that I was assured emphatically.

The most complicated of all of these are the Padiddles. A one-eyed automobile is a padiddle. (I can not explain the term nor justify the spelling except phonetically.) The formula was first quite simple: see a car with one light, say "padiddle," kiss your thumb and stamp it in your palm; on the third one within a single day you could make a wish.¹ But now it is considerably more complicated. In its latest form it has these details: count fifty one-eyed cars; turn twenty rings;² count seven girls in purple (or lavender) dresses, or seven red headed boys; then the first boy who asks the girl a question will be the one that she will marry. To anyone beyond high school age and interests it hardly seems worth the trouble!

There are others that deal with the question of a future husband. Almost infallible, according to popular report, is the use of a piece of pie. You should cut in it as soon as it is served the initials of a person from whom you want a letter (or whom you would like to marry). Then cut off the tip and turn the plate around three times; eat your pie without speaking, the tip last. Then speak only when questioned thereafter. You will get the letter or the husband.

¹ Mr. William Jansen has pointed out to me that this is probably derived from the older practice of counting white horses and wishing on them.

² This refers to turning a ring on the finger.

Now soda straws have taken the place of daisies for learning if one is beloved. Squeeze the straw at the bottom with the thumb and first finger of the left hand, then immediately above with the fingers of the right hand and so on alternately to the top of the straw, with each squeeze spelling out the beloved's name and, when that is finished, going on with "He loves me; He loves me not. . . ." That being done, the process can be repeated with this formula (presumably on another straw): "Kiss, date, letter, call." And a third straw treated the same way will indicate as one names the days of the week, on what day this will happen.

Finally, if one burns a match completely and there is no red tip at the end, it is a sign that he still loves you.

These are samples of only a few of the many ways in which folklore underlies our experiences even in so highly sophisticated a world as we like to think ours is. We are amused at times and yet at the same time we as folklorists recognize how significant even these often trivial details become in the pattern of a developing culture. They are a part of the endless process of understanding people, of seeing why we are as we are.

Indiana University

Bloomington, Indiana

WATER WITCHING

By LELAH ALLISON

Water witching is not new, and, no matter where one goes, he will find someone who can witch water in that community. The methods used are almost the same, but there are certain techniques which differ. A small fork from a green tree with the limbs long enough so that the fork can be held upside down over one's head with the ends held in each hand seems to be the method accepted by all who have the power of locating water underground. Other than that, each witcher has his own method.

Southern Illinois has many wells which have been dug at places which have been designated by a water witch. Other regions have many such wells also, but the methods herein described are those used by southern Illinois water witches.

John Todd Spruell of Wayne County likes a fork from a live peach tree, but he can use a fork from any tree, so long as the tree is alive. That is the term meant when a green tree is referred to. He cuts the fork from the tree just below the point where the limbs branch. He then trims the limbs, leaving them long enough to turn the fork upside down over his head and hold on to the ends of the limbs with each hand. The remainder is cut off from the ends of the limbs. He holds the fork in front of the body with the apex of the V extending away, grasps the end of each limb in each hand, and raises the arms up to each side of the head so that the limb is over the head. The witcher is now in position to walk about until he feels the force of an underground stream pulling on the fork.

He walks back and forth across a lot or field in which the owner would like to have a well, to see if the fork will pull downward. If there is no feeling of "pull" on the fork, there is no water underground in that area. If the owner is insistent on digging a well, especially at a dry time when he must have water for his stock, he selects the next desired lot or field in which the witch walks back and forth until he is sure that he has covered all the territory. When he feels the fork pulling downward, he walks back and forth until he locates the exact spot at which there is a stream of water underground. He then turns each way and follows the vein of water so that the most desired spot can be located for the owner.

To locate a vein is not enough, he must be able to tell the power of the underground stream. If there is a heavy pull on the fork, there is much water. If the pull is slight, the vein is a small one. The owner will not locate his well at that point.

As the witch approaches the vein, the fork begins to pull downward. At the point at which he stands directly over the vein the apex of the stick will point directly downward. He approaches the vein at right angles from both directions to be sure that he has located the exact spot. When that is located, it is easy to follow the vein toward its source and toward its destination.

After he has located the vein and estimated its strength, he estimates the depth by walking back at right angles until he feels the first pull on the fork. He then walks to the vein counting the feet. That is the number of feet it will be necessary for the owner to dig to find a good supply of water. Mr. Spruell says that he has witched dozens of wells in several counties of southern Illinois, and that there has always been water at the spot he has designated, when the owner has dug, and the depth of the water has never missed but a few feet of the measurement he has foretold.

Al Snowdell, now of Iowa but a native of Edwards County, Illinois, says that any green fork will serve, but he likes a peach fork. His method is the same except for the means of locating the depth. After he locates the vein and its direction and force of water supply, he estimates the depth by standing over the vein. Holding the fork in position in front of his body, he counts the number of times that it is pulled downward, each time turning it back, of course. The number of times that it is pulled down is the number of feet to the water.

He says that he witched wells in the panhandle of Oklahoma, which was so dry that settlers left their homes to move back to regions where water was plentiful. He says one well he witched in that dry region was strong enough to keep a deep pond filled for a rancher's herd of cattle and that a large windmill pumped that water twenty-four hours a day. He witched many wells in southern Illinois before he felt the urge to move westward. He has also used the fork in southwestern Iowa, where he now lives.

John Mossbarger used to witch wells, if he were asked to do so; but he did it with a sly grin on his quiet face. He in-

sisted on using a peach fork, but it had to be green. He estimated the depth of the water by the force of the "pull" on the stick.

This method sounds fantastic, but it is surprising how common is the use of these and other water witches when a landowner wants to dig a well. If he spends money to dig a well, he wants a supply of water. He needs water, or he would not go to the bother and expense of digging a well. In order to be sure that his venture is successful, he asks a water witch to come to his farm and use his power to locate the hidden stream that can supply the needed liquid. He may do it on the sly when he asks the water witch to come, but the latter is almost sure to point to the well, when it is done, as another of his "finds."

The owner may give the man a dollar or two for his trouble. The witcher likes to show his power and tell what he located.

Water witching has turned into another type of witching in southern Illinois. Some have used their power to locate the hidden pools of oil common in much of that area—which is more sought than water. It is doubtful whether they can say that they never failed to locate the source of the hidden "black gold."

Ellery, Illinois

(There are many references to water witching in folklore publications. Indiana readers may be interested in knowing that the *Indiana Farmer's Guide*, a well-known farm weekly published at Huntington, Indiana, published a series of letters, pro and con, several years ago—in 1943, I believe.—The Editor.)

FOLKLORE FROM SOCORRO, NEW MEXICO

By DOROTHY J. BAYLOR

The following stories are a selection from *Socorro Folklore*, a mimeographed publication of the English III Class of Socorro High School, under the direction of Dorothy J. Baylor. The collecting was done in the first semester of the school year 1946-47.—The Editor.

I. GHOST STORIES

1. *Indian Ghost as Flower*

Told in Spanish to Eloisa Martinez by her father.

There were three brothers who were sent by their dad to camp. While there the two elder brothers were so envious of their younger brother that they killed him and buried him up there. No one knew about him or heard of him again.

One day an Indian who was roaming around was attracted by a flower—a beautiful flower. This flower happened to be on top of the grave of the buried man. This Indian cut it and smelled it. When he was smelling it, the flower talked to him. It said that he was killed at camp and that he should talk to him with sorrow. The Indian took this flower to the chief and the flower said the same thing to him. The chief had all the town people over and he passed this flower to all. When the flower was passed to the two brothers, it said something different. It said that they should talk to it with sorrow for they had killed him. This is how it was revealed that the two brothers had killed the younger brother.

2. *Headless Woman*

Told to Betty Matlock by Mrs. Ella Matlock.

There is a place near a lake in Texas that a headless woman walks every night between ten and eleven o'clock. Some boys were there one night and they saw her and ran home, telling others about it. Some men didn't believe it, so they went there. They waited around awhile and finally their horses started cutting up and trying to get away. They looked up and saw a woman coming down the path and disappearing into the trees. They were so scared they couldn't stay, and neither could their horses.

3. *Ghost Takes Man*

Contributed by Aguinaldo Baca.

This story was told by an old man who died several years ago. He used to say that when he was in his fifties he used to ride a horse almost every day. There were always two persons with him, his two best friends.

He claimed that almost every day, for two weeks, while he and his companions were passing through a wooded path they would see a ghost in front of them. They could not make out what it was, for it was covered from head to foot. He ran about fifty feet in front of the horses, and the riders could never catch up with him. Later one of the three men died. The other two claimed that the ghost was his guarding angel and had been trying to take him. He had never had the chance until that night when the man was alone.

4. *Priest Returns because of Unfinished Masses*

Told by Sister Melitina to Joe Armijo.

A priest made a promise that if his wish came true he would go to the church at midnight and say some prayers. It so happened that he got his wish. That night he went to the church and started saying his prayers. At the half of his prayers he looked up towards the altar; and, to his surprise, there stood a man dressed in priest's garments. He knew he had never seen this priest in his parish before, and he didn't recall anyone mentioning anything about a new priest coming to the parish. Then he noticed something peculiar about this new person standing before him; he could see through him. This made him so scared that he froze stiff. The intruder moved closer to the frightened priest and said in a faraway tone, "Do not be afraid; what you are thinking is true. I am a ghost. I would like to ask of you a favor, but first let me tell you the reason for my being here. Some years ago I made a promise to give twenty masses; and, in case I never lived to complete my promise, I vowed to come back and finish. I've been coming every night, for some number of years, but I haven't found anyone to serve mass for me yet. Tonight you happened to come, and now I want to ask you to do this favor for me."

The priest served the mass. Next morning priests asked him about it and he told them about the night before.

5. Ghost Prepares Breakfast

This is the story told by a man about his wife who had just died. They had buried her that afternoon and all that night he dreamed about her. About two o'clock in the morning he woke up and went into the kitchen. There he saw his wife cooking breakfast for him. Neither was able to speak to the other. All he could do was watch her till she cooked his breakfast, after which she walked out. She headed straight for the graveyard. He tried his best to catch up with her, but he never could. As she arrived at the graveyard, she disappeared. Very unhappy, he returned to the house where his breakfast stood in the same place his wife left it. Next morning he told his friends all about it. He claims that his wife left something unfinished and returned to have it done or that probably she meant to tell him something before she died and never had the chance.

6. Ghostly Return because of Unfulfilled Promise

Told in Spanish by Lucia Ortiz to Tom Crespín.

When my aunt was about 10 years old her aunt promised to give my aunt a fryer and a pullet whenever her baby chicks grew up. My aunt was always helping her aunt with the chickens.

One night my aunt and a Mrs. Chavez went to their friend's house, which was about a quarter of a mile away. My aunt was never afraid in her life, but this particular night she was very much afraid on the way up and back. When my aunt and Mrs. Chavez were coming back home, my aunt saw a light in the house. My aunt went in the house and saw her aunt sitting next to the fireplace. There wasn't any light in the room. My aunt talked to her aunt sitting next to the fireplace, but she didn't respond. They locked the door and went to the kitchen. When Mr. Chavez came from town, he told them that my aunt's aunt had died that night. They went over to see if there was anybody in the room that my aunt and Mrs. Chavez had locked. There wasn't anybody there. They went in the kitchen where they sat eating some candy. As my aunt turned around, she saw her aunt. Then my aunt remembered about the fryer and the pullet that her aunt had promised and told her that she need not bother to give her the fryer and the pullet. From then on she never bothered my aunt any more.

7. Ghost Attends Dance

Told to Lucy Padilla by her sister Jackie Padilla.

A girl in a beautiful white gown attended a dance two years ago. This girl was different from any other girl at the dance. She was pale and had a frozen look.

A service boy spotted her and later asked her to dance. They danced together all night long. The girl didn't talk unless the boy asked questions.

After the dance was over the boy took her home. Because she was so cold and stiff, he lent her his jacket. When they neared a graveyard the girl said, "This is where I live. If you want your jacket go over to my house for it. You know where I live." She then disappeared. The boy stood motionless and knew that she must have been a ghost. He returned to camp very frightened.

Next morning he decided to go for his jacket. He asked the girl's mother for his jacket. The lady was puzzled and thought maybe he was crazy. The boy said, "Your daughter borrowed my jacket last night."

She said, "I have no daughter. I did have one, but she's been dead for five years."

The boy was very much frightened because the mother told him to go to the grave and that maybe he would find his jacket there. He went, and there it was spread over the grave. The service boy couldn't believe this. He told his buddies about it, but nobody believed him.

This news spread around soon. To find out they dug her up, and she was just the way she had appeared at the dance, and the way they had buried her. Her orchid was even fresh.

This is true, and many people who attended the dance saw her.

Afterward this boy didn't attend any dances for fear that this girl should reappear.

8. Ghost at Dance

Told to Joe Garcia by his grandmother.

This is about a boy who liked a girl very much. This girl died some time ago, and the boy didn't know it. One night the boy went to a dance and saw the girl there. He went over and talked to her. Then he danced with her; and while he was dancing with her, he noticed that her body was cold. When they got through dancing, the boy went to a friend of his

and told him to dance with her and see if he noticed anything about her. He came and told him the same thing, that her body was cold. Then the boy decided that he would give her his coat so she wouldn't be so cold. She said she wasn't cold, but she put on his coat. After the dance he took her home. The next day he went for his coat at her mother's house, but the girl's mother didn't know anything about a coat. The boy told her that he had accompanied her daughter to this house. The lady said that her daughter was dead. The boy said she couldn't be because he brought her home that night before. She took him to the grave to prove it to him, and there they found the coat on the top of the grave.

9. *Ghost Haunts Murderess*

Contributed by Marion Esquivel.

Not long ago a lady murdered an old man. She is now in prison. Her daughter claims that she can not eat nor sleep, and that every time she tries to eat or sleep she can see the man everywhere she goes; that he follows her.

10. *Ghost Sounds*

In an old haunted house on the 85 Highway about twelve o'clock at night you can hear the rattle of bottles and then the wails of a lonely woman. The explanation to this is that many years ago a couple lived in this house very happily until one night about twelve the man went down to the wine cellar to set a mouse trap. While going down the stairs he tripped and fell and hit the table leg with his head and knocked some bottles on the floor. Then his wife, hearing the noise, ran downstairs and found her husband dead. That is why you can hear these sounds in the still of the night.

11. *Ghostly Protest*

Told to Dorris Olsen by her grandfather, Mr. W. L. Jones.

When my grandfather was a small boy, he went to Oregon from Texas in a covered wagon with his brother. On their first night out they camped under a huge tree by the side of the road. They found a place in the ground where it had sunk down about six inches, and they decided to sleep there. During the night they heard moans and groans, and they heard someone saying, "Get off of me." They thought it was just the wind in the trees; so they went back to sleep. The next morning when they got up they found that they had been sleeping on top of a Negro's grave. He swears the story is a true one.