

BUTTERFLIES, CYCLONES AND JEWELRY TREES:

My Family Folklore

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Folklore Genres

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When I mentioned to my family that I would be collecting our family folklore, my father, Bob, said, "We're not into all that. We're just working people." To him, folklore was quilt-making and wood-carving, and nothing that a working class man had time for. It wasn't until I asked him questions about "Tar Baby" that he started to understand that his image of folklore could include automobile nicknames and half forgotten stories about his younger days.

"With two working parents these days," my mother, Juanita, said, "the traditions don't get passed down like they used to." She too, thought of folklore as a product of the past which is fast disappearing in these modern times. Yet, she admitted that our immediate family custom of going to Grandma Donner's on Christmas vacation was a carry-over of her own family's trips to see her mother's mother, Mammaw Suzy, on Christmas Day.

My family's folkways have been influenced not so much by ethnicity as they have by regionalism. Although my parents share the same German ethnic background, both of their families' connections to the Old Country are separated by several generations.

Juanita, 53, the middle child in a family of five, is from Morehouse, Missouri, a small, rural community outside of Sikeston, Missouri. She was raised on a farm where her parents, Joe and Dorothy Donner, managed a thousand acres of land for the production of cotton, wheat, soy beans, and milo maize. Bob, 50, the youngest of four boys, was raised in Charleston, Missouri, a small town thirteen miles from

Sikeston. My parents share a common rural and "Southern" identity, that has in turn, affected their folkways and attitudes about life.

NAMING

In the Donner family, the use of a person's first and middle names in addressing that person is prevalent. In her family, my mother is called Juanita Joyce. Her eldest sister is called Betty Jo, and her brother is called Don Wayne. In turn, Don Wayne's sons are addressed as Joe Wayne and James Lee.

My father's mother, Marie disliked nicknames. "Mama didn't have nicknames," he said. "She wouldn't allow anyone to have nicknames." "Until I called you 'Bob'," my mother said. "She didn't like that either, but it was an honest mistake." Mom explained:

We were leaving the house one night. His dad was standing at the door, and he said, "Be careful,- " and I thought he called him "Bob." I thought, oh, they call him "Bob." But they didn't. By then, all my friends knew him as "Bob." And then he told me later, too, that everyone called him "Bob" in the service. So, he's been "Bob" ever since.

Another example of naming in our family is that of naming automobiles. Dad's older brother, Clarence, gave him a Black 1952 Lincoln Continental when Dad was a senior in high school. Dad explained the origin of the car's name.

Had "Tar Baby" painted on the side of it. It was just a thing going on at that time where people put different names on their vehicles. There was another car in town called "Alley-oop" and all this kind of stuff. It was just a phase they were going through. Anyway, this car had "Tar Baby" on it.

My father did not name the old Continental but he continues to call the Lincoln by that name in his stories. Later, Dad called his 1973 AMC Hornet the "Little Green Hornet". "It didn't have much get-up-and-go," he said. "I just had to put it on the floor. I'd just start hollerin' out, 'Go Green Hornet, Go!'"

Regionalism is reflected in our family's use of addressing a person by his or her first and middle names. This naming practice can be found especially in rural regions and in the South. Neither of the naming practices in my parents' families carried over to our immediate family. I am not addressed as Ann Marie or as Annie, but as Ann. My younger sister, perhaps due to her being the "baby" of the family, has been called Christy or, on occasion, Christine. She has never been addressed as Christine Gerise. While my father's naming of vehicles cannot be attributed to regionalism, he does describe car naming as a regional fad.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Sandra K.D. Stahl states that the typical American will have a repertoire of from three to four stories, and the experience "recreated in the narrative may be an amusing incident from the teller's childhood, a school or work experience..." (Stahl 1983: 268). Personal narratives also "represent a segment of the teller's personal system of ethics" (Stahl 1983: 270). My father's stories reveal humor and a degree of optimism about life; many of his attitudes about hard work are shown as well. When I asked him what it was like being the youngest of four boys, he said:

They always got to do the chores they wanted to do, and I had to do what they told me. With boys in the house, you did everything. We washed dishes, cleaned windows, and cleaned house and everything else as well as yard work and everything like that. I'd stand at a chair at the sink to wash dishes. I always got to wash out the fruit jars Mom used for cannin' 'cause my hands were so little, I could get down to wash them.

I wonder if my father's and uncles' roles in performing household duties would have been altered if Dad had had a few sisters. His attitude toward housework persisted after he married. "Everyone works until the work's done," he says. Dad does more than his fair share of the housework, though he now lives in a house full of women.

Most of Dad's stories concern "Tar Baby".

The day we graduated from high school, my mom and I and some friends took off for California to take it (Tar Baby) back to Clarence. Transmission fell out of it before we got out of Missouri. We had that fixed. Then, when we hit White Sands Desert in New Mexico, it just blew up completely. The oil pressure dropped, the heat went up. It just blew up. I got out to hitch a ride. There wasn't any traffic. Directly, a state trooper comes by, stops. I ask him, "What happened to all the traffic?" There was cars going every which way when we first come in - hit that desert. He said, "They got the highway shut off both ends of the desert 'cause they're gettin' ready to shoot a missile across there." It was a missile firin' range. I said, "Well, if my mama wasn't in the car, I wish it would hit that damn car." Anyway, I got a ride back into town. I got a tow truck to haul it in. Then we rode a bus rest of the way into San Diego. Hit San Diego, there was four of us, and I think we had two silver dollars between us.

My father does not initiate the telling of his stories. The first time I heard about "Tar Baby" was at the last Leible Family Reunion in Kingdom City, Missouri in 1985. Aunt Cotton, his brother Donald's wife,

told Dad that she missed "Tar Baby" with that pint of Vodka he kept hidden in the floorboard of the back seat.

My mother's childhood story of "when the cyclone hit" depicts a rural way of life influenced by nature. Regionalism is reflected in "cyclone," the term she used to refer to a tornado.

They called it a cyclone. When the cyclone hit, Mother made us all get under her bed, and Daddy could see everytime it would lightning, he could see this house over there sitting in the middle of the field. We had some people that worked for us that lived in that house. They weren't really share croppers. Anyway, it looked like this house had been blown away. So he - I remember watching him through the window, and everytime the lightning would flash, we could see him running across the field toward the house. And then he came back. The house had been picked up off its foundation and just set back down. So, they were okay but Mother made us all get under the bed. And we were trying to say the Rosary. And it was so cold under the bed on the bare floor that my teeth were chattering, while we were saying the Rosary.

An attitude of responsibility toward others is reflected in this story. When I asked Mom what Grandma thought of Grandpa's going out into the storm, Mom said, "She was worried, but it was something that had to be done." These stories concern several of what Amy J. Kotkin and Steven J. Zeitlin call recurring themes in American families, including stories of wild antics and natural disasters (Kotkin and Zeitlin 1983: 93).

In "'Woof!' A Word on Womens' Roles in Family Storytelling," Karen Baldwin discusses the differences between men's and women's narratives. Men are more interested in the entertainment value and dramatic effect of the story, while women are more concerned with "accuracy of details,

of texture, of aroma, social relationships, color and chronology" (Baldwin 1985: 155). Men's stories are more apt to have a definite point worth telling and a fixed beginning and ending (Baldwin 1985: 155). My father's story about going to San Diego contains humor and drama as well as a beginning and an ending. My mother's story about the cyclone does not have a fixed beginning or ending, though it is highly dramatic. Her story contains a certain amount of texture and color, as she describes how cold it was under the bed on the bare floor.

SUPERSTITIONS AND BELIEFS

When I asked my grandmother, Dorothy, if she knew any superstitions that she or Grandpa might have used while farming, she could only tell me that they "went by the old almanac" and that she didn't have any superstitions. "They used to say that if a black cat walked across the road then that was bad luck. But I don't believe in that," replied Grandma. When my mother prompted her, Grandma was able to recount beliefs she had concerning child birth:

We went by the New Moon. That was pretty accurate. Anybody about to have a baby, we went by the New Moon. First quarter, second quarter, third quarter, New Moon. And actually, doctors would even get to where they would go by it, because they would have a lot more babies around the New Moon than they would at any other time of the month.

My mom could always tell. They say you carry your girls high up and your boys real low. I can remember carrying Don Wayne real low, back before he was born. I could hardly walk. I waddled spraddle-legged!

Michael Owen Jones distinguishes between a folk belief and a superstition. "Superstition is a value judgement employed... to

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discredit practices and ideas not acceptable to ego" (Jones 1967: 306). My grandmother was not able at first to give me any examples of her folk beliefs. I asked her if she had any superstitions. She gave me the example of the black cat as a superstition because she did not believe in it and had discredited it. According to Jones, a folk belief is "a neutral term for any item which may be accepted by ego as valid, can be verbalized into a brief statement... and embodies knowledge as well as action" (Jones 1967: 306). My grandmother's beliefs concerning childbirth are folk beliefs because she accepts them as valid, because they have proven to be true through her observation and personal experience.

My mother says of Grandma Donner's beliefs concerning menstruation, "We couldn't take a bath, and we couldn't wash our hair. I guess that was the way she was brought up. But you just didn't do that when you had your period."

Although Christy and I were allowed to wash ourselves during our periods, I do remember Mom telling me on the first day of my menstruation to be careful and not play or jump around too much. She was able to discredit many of Grandma Donner's beliefs as superstitions, but she believed generally that certain restrictions must be placed upon one's behavior during menstruation.

CHRISTMAS AS A CALENDAR CUSTOM

Christmas is the one holiday that we continue to celebrate as an extended family. My mother explains how our Christmas custom originated:

Thanksgiving and Christmas were the two main ones. And we always went in the summer months to see Mom and Dad. I think this came about because I can remember when I was little, we always went to see my mother's mother, Mammaw Suzy. We always had Christmas at her house. And all my cousins and aunts and uncles were there, too.

When we were younger, Christy and I would sleep most of the way from Owensboro, Kentucky to Sikeston, Missouri, a 250 mile drive. We would play "slug-a-bug" or read books. Dad drove and listened to Country music on the radio, while Mom tried to ignore the music. Now, when we can, we continue to go as a family. We usually stop once outside Paducah where we get bags of potato chips, cheese crackers, Slim Jims and cokes for snacks.

Christmas Day begins about 7:00 A.M. when Grandma Donner starts preparing the food for the early afternoon meal. My grandmother's foodways are reflected in her typical Christmas meal of roast turkey (which has usually been smoked by Don Wayne), mashed potatoes, corn on the cob from the freezer, the green beans Grandma canned in the summer, steamed broccoli and cauliflower. She also serves baked sweet potatoes with melted marshmallow on top, a regional dish. The dinner begins around one o'clock. Usually, my mother's sister, Darlene, and her family as well as Don Wayne and his family are also present. It is a leisurely meal, sometimes lasting a full hour and a half. People leave and return to the table for seconds and dessert between watching football or "visiting" with each other in the den. Charles Camp makes an interesting observation concerning our yearly repetition of the

Christmas dinner custom. "Households repeat the cycle of year-end holiday meals... in exactly the same menu and eating time... to avoid the prospect of not having successfully completed the rites of the season" (Camp 1989: 42).

The dishes are cleared from the table, usually by my mother who is the last to finish eating. They are then rinsed and placed in the dishwasher by whomever is caught in the kitchen when Mom begins clearing the table. The family gathers in the living room around the Christmas tree which is a white, artificial tree that my grandmother has had for years. The youngest member of the family passes out the packages. I usually receive money from Grandma. When I was younger, she and Grandpa would give me a two dollar bill every Christmas. I still have a few of these bills which I keep in my billfold. Everyone spends the rest of the day watching football and movies or playing Poker at the kitchen table.

FOLK ART

According to Grandma Donner, Mammaw Suzy was an excellent seamstress, and she taught all her girls to sew. Kurt C. Dewhurst, Betty MacDowell and Marsha MacDowell explain that the importance mothers placed upon their daughters' mastering of sewing skills directly influenced the creation of folk art. "The early emphasis on training in the fundamental technical skills of sewing... provide the American woman with the technical basis for... embroidery, samples, bed rugs, quilts and rugs" (Dewhurst, MacDowell and MacDowell 1979: xviii).

Grandma Donner enjoys crocheting "afacans" and likes to "embroidry" pillow cases. For several years, she collected butterflies. She attempted to dry them, but they wanted to "crumble on her", so instead, she made butterflies out of ribbon and pipe cleaner from a pattern. Grandma also collected Queen Ann's Lace, Money Trees and other wildflowers which she dried and made into bouquets.

My grandmother is proud of her 'Family Jewelry Trees' which were "made out of jewelry from your kin folks" pasted onto a framed velvet backing in the shape of a Christmas tree. She says she got the idea from her niece who made 'Friendship Trees', in Blytheville, Arkansas. Her niece would "paste gold cord against the velvet backing as branches and put the jewelry here and there like leaves." Grandma took this idea and changed it: "I filled the tree completely with jewelry, filled it solid." Recently, my grandmother came to visit my parents. She told me who some of the jewelry belonged to on the tree which she had given to my parents many Christmases before. "There's a pin there from Aunt Agnes," she told me, "and those earrings used to belong to my mother."

Grandma Donner has passed on her enthusiasm for folk art to some of my family. Aunt Darlene enjoys working in crafts. She makes stuffed animals, fancy pillow cases, and wreaths out of colored paper, straw and grape vine. My grandmother taught my sister how to crochet when Christy was eleven years old. Many of Christy's endeavours have ended up as doilies and pot holders, but she did finish a rose colored afghan last year.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to show how my family's folkways have been passed down from generation to generation and how each generation accepts or disregards these folkways in meeting its own needs. The naming practices of my mother's family reflect a regional influence, but these practices have not been carried on by the next generation. Many of my grandmother's rural folk beliefs have become my mother's superstitions. My grandmother uses natural products such as wild flowers and butterflies in the making of her crafts. My aunt uses processed items. Of all the folkways in my family, only the custom of Christmas has remained essentially unchanged as it has been performed over the years. The members of my family see themselves as "working people;" this practical and industrious worldview is reflected in the stories they remember, in the customs they practice, and in the crafts they make.

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