"Fakelore"

Von Richard M. Dorson

All folklorists know that "folklore" was coined in 1846 by William John Thoms but relatively few know that the present writer has the dubious distinction of coining the word "fakelore" in 1950. Since Time magazine and the Saturday Review have used "fakelore" in their pages, the term has by now attained national currency. The reasons that led to my contriving this neologism derive directly from the state of American folklore studies in the 1940's, and in a larger sense the state of American mass culture, as I perceived them. The following account is therefore highly subjective and personal.

Folklore as an academic subject was barely lifting its head in the 1940's. At Harvard, where I completed my Ph. D. in 1943, in a new field called History of American Civilization, folklore was almost wholly unrepresented. George Lyman Kittredge, whose eminence as a Shakespearean scholar lent prestige to his studies of balladry, witchcraft, and popular belief, had retired and left no successor. My own interest in and awareness of the subject matter of folklore developed accidentally through an undergraduate paper on Mark Twain's debt to the oral tall-tale tradition of the frontier. This interest led to my publishing, in 1939, two years after my graduation, an edition of almanac tall tales from the 1830's, 40's, and 50's, under the title Davy Crockett, American Comic Legend. As I had just entered graduate school, I felt keenly the need for some direction in folklore, and learned by chance of the presence on the faculty of one folklore-minded professor, Kenneth H. Jackson, in the Celtic department; he agreed to give me a reading course, and initiated me into the mysteries of the Motif-Index. (Professor Jackson shortly after left Harvard to take the chair he presently occupies at the University of Edinburgh.) My dissertation on "New England Popular Tales and Legends", completed in 1943 and published in 1946 under the title Jonathan Draws the Long Bow, while it was based entirely on printed sources, did carry me deep into folklore research. Then in 1946, when I had begun teaching at Michigan State University, I undertook my first expedition into the field, in the remote and ethnically varied Upper Peninsula of Michigan. This same year I attended the summer Folklore Institute at Indiana University that Stith Thompson had initiated in 1942 on a quadrennial basis as a means of bringing together the relatively few scattered folklorists around the country.

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So much for autobiographical background. The one point I would underscore is that I stumbled into folklore from a training in American cultural and intellectual history, and that no other folklorist at that time had entered our common field through that particular door. Stith Thompson came to folklore through English literature, Archer Taylor through Germanics, Ralph Steele Boggs through Spanish. Consequently the folklore scholars of the ’40’s were comparative, or literary, or ballad, or anthropological folklorists. But they were not American folklorists; that is, although Americans, they were not Americanists.

Then in 1944 Benjamin A. Botkin published his A Treasury of American Folksong. This fat volume of over six hundred pages, which sold at the time for $3.95 (today it would sell for at least $12.50) proved an immediate and enormous success, both commercially and critically. It received feature reviews in the New York Times and New York Herald Tribune weekly book sections and in the Saturday Review of Literature, and was adopted by the Book of the Month Club as a bonus dividend. Millions of Americans came to know the subject of American folklore through this book and its successors. The first treasury has gone through more than twenty editions and remains in print up to today. Its popularity led Mr. Botkin to resign his position as Curator of the Archive of Folksong in the Library of Congress and to become a free-lance writer and compiler of subsequent treasuries, covering the geographical regions of the United States. It was directly as a consequence of these treasuries and their influence that I publicized the word ”fakelore”.

My personal reaction to these treasuries was one of shock, or actually double shock, first as to the method of their compilation, and second, at the approval they received by professional folklorists. The method, in a word, was that of the scrapbook. The treasuries were in the most literal sense a scissors and paste job, with no philosophic unity and a wide discrepancy of sources. Yet the reviewers in the folklore journals — Wayland Hand in the Journal of American Folklore, Levette J. Davidson in California Folklore Quarterly, and Arthur Palmer Hudson in Southern Folklore Quarterly — uniformly praised A Treasury of American Folksong. It is noteworthy that Hand was a professor of German and Davidson and Hudson were professors of English. But since no academic specialists in American folklore then existed, these reviewers were as qualified as any.

These uncritical encomiums seemed to me seriously to injure the cause of the serious study of American folklore. It was clearly a commercial rather than an intellectual venture, cleverly packaged for the American mass audience: a lot of book for little money, selections chosen for light bedside reading and appeal to superficial American nationalism. Fur-
thermore, the *Treasury* brought within its covers a number of writers who regarded the materials of folklore as subjects for romantic and sentimental treatments. One can open any of the Treasuries at random and find a wide disparity of sources, ranging from purely literary to journalistic to some field texts, although these latter are a small minority. For instance, in the section on "Liars" in *A Treasury of American Folklore* (New York, 1944, pages 490–650), there are selections from Mark Twain; the collector-retoucher Vance Randolph; memoirs of chatty Texans; manuscripts of the Federal Writers Project in various states (a praiseworthy project but untrustworthy in its methods and materials); the rewritten tall tales of Carl Carmer in *The Hurricane’s Children*; the romantic local colorist of the Southwest J. Frank Dobie; a pre-Civil War North Carolina humorist; verses about tall tales by Carl Sandburg; jokebooks and humor anthologies; the somewhat rewritten Florida Negro tale collection of Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*; recollections of a circus clown; an overly precious book of Cape Cod legends by Elizabeth Reynard called *The Narrow Land*; coy invented tall tales about Paul Bunyan, the pseudo-hero of northern lumberjacks; and so on. The treasuries are essentially packages of literary confections. There is little doubt that the raw field texts would never have commanded a mass audience.

My own chance to review Mr. Botkin came with his second treasury, *A Treasury of New England Folklore*, which I was asked to review for the *Saturday Review of Literature*. In low key I opened with a paragraph of mild praise, and three columns of softly expressed criticism (Vol. XXXI, Jan. 17, 1948, pp. 9–10). A couple of friends confided to me their view that this criticism was "devastating." But its effect was nil, and the *Book Review Digest* for 1948 reprinted the entire first paragraph and only one sentence of the criticism. There was however one unexpected consequence. The editor of the *American Mercury*, Charles Angoff, who had succeeded the celebrated baiter of the American "booboisie", Henry Louis Mencken, saw the review and asked me to write an article attacking the misrepresenters of folklore. Accordingly I wrote the piece "Folklore and Fake Lore", which appeared in the *American Mercury* in March, 1950 (LXX, pp. 335–343). This was the first use of the word and the concept of "fakelore". Mr. Angoff arranged for a reply, immediately following my article, by James Stevens, author of *Paul Bunyan* (1925), the most successful popularization of the Bunyan stories. In his rebuttal, "Folklore and the Artist", Stevens contended that he was taking liberties with folk traditions in the manner of Homer or any man of letters who wrote as an imaginative author. The trouble with this argument is that Stevens claims, and the public believes, that they are
reading genuine folklore. (See his "Introduction" to the second edition of Paul Bunyan, New York, 1928.)

This article, "Folklore and Fake Lore", kindled a furious and bitter controversy whose scars still remain. It was at this point that I decided to abandon efforts at polite and decorous criticism and resort to forceful language. The word "fakelore" was conceived in this spirit. By 1950 my thinking had reached the following position: (1), American mass culture was highly commercial, blatant, loud, aggressive, and the book industry partook of these traits; (2), in another age, say Victorian England, subtle thrusts might be appreciated, but in twentieth century United States one needed to shout at the top of his voice; (3), the study of American folklore was being invaded by commercializers and could not as yet be protected by scholars, since specialists in American folklore had not yet been trained; (4), the distinction must be made between the frivolous and the serious investigation of American folklore; (5), even some respected scholars of American literature and American history turned fakelorist when they dabbled with folklore.

Accordingly in that article I wrote these words: In recent years folklore has boomed mightily, and reached a wide audience through best-selling books, concert and cabaret folksingers, even Walt Disney cartoons. But far from fulfilling its high promise, the study has been falsified, abused and exploited, and the public deluded with Paul Bunyan nonsense and claptrap collections. Without stirring from the library, money-writers have successfully peddled synthetic hero-books and saccharine folk tales as the stories of the people. Americans may be insufficiently posted on their history and culture, as the famous New York Times survey indicated, but their knowledge of these subjects is erudition, compared with what they know about their own folklore. The saddest aspect of this fraud is that the spurious article is so dull and thin, and the genuine material so salty and rich.

These charges I repeated in book reviews in the Journal of American Folklore and in other journals. At that time only one other critic shared my views, Stanley Edgar Hyman, who two years earlier had written a vitriolic critique of the state of American folklore scholarship, which he called "appalling" and "monstrous" ("Some Bankrupt Treasuries", Kenyon Review, X, 1948, pp. 484–500). Hyman was, and is, an extremely gifted literary critic, a New Yorker staff writer, husband of the late novelist Shirley Jackson, and he brought to his attack on American folklorists the kind of ferocity which apparently is needed to gain the attention of apathetic and preconditioned American readers. However Hyman has for some years ceased to have any connections with the
Richard M. Dorson

American folklore movement. His premises differed completely from mine, as he was firmly, even fanatically committed to the thesis of myth-ritual origins of all folk expression, and he clubbed everyone in sight from Ben Botkin to Stith Thompson. The articles and reviews by Hyman and myself provoked bitter responses. In the "Editor's Page" of the New York Folklore Quarterly (VIII, Spring 1952), Harold W. Thompson, author of a book on New York State folklore, Body, Boots, and Britches (1940) and teacher of folklore courses at Cornell University, referred to "certain neurotics swollen with envy and arrogance" who were criticizing successful folklorists. But the recriminations in print were mild compared to those uttered in living rooms and dark corridors.

What precisely did I mean by "fakelore"? Fakelore is the presentation of spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore. These productions are not collected in the field but are rewritten from earlier literary and journalistic sources in an endless chain of regurgitation, or they may even be made out of whole cloth, as in the case of several of the "folk heroes", written up in the image of Paul Bunyan, who had at least some trickle of oral tradition at the beginning of his literary exploitation. The impulse to present so-called American folklore suddenly developed in the 1920's and '30's in response to the nationalistic mood following World War I and America's new place in the sun. Why should not Americans possess their own folk heroes, folktales, and folksongs, instead of having to depend on imported folklore and mythology from Europe? So a mass market existed, and publishers and writers rushed to supply the need. Hence the great success of Paul Bunyan. Some writers knew better, some did not, but in either case the product they tendered was ersatz.

These rewriters of folklore tailored their writings to their market. They followed the popular stereotypes of myths, legends, and folklore in the mind of the public, and so what they wrote was intended to be quaint, cute, whimsical, syrupy, and childlike. Children as much as adults constituted the market. Out of a thousand examples let me give this one, "How Annie Christmas Mourned for Her Gambling Man", in a book by Carl Carmer, The Hurricane's Children (1937), devoted to American hero giants. In his preface Carmer writes, "I owe a great debt to the patient workers in American folklore who have collected these stories". Then he adds that he has set them down "wherever it is possible, as they have been told to me by folks throughout the country . . ." In the Annie Christmas story, he introduces a giantess supposedly known around the New Orleans waterfront as a fighter and lifter of great weights.

Annie Christmas could carry three barrels of flour at once, one ba-
lanced on her head and one under each arm. When the river got high one spring and was about to flood the country above New Orleans, Annie Christmas prevented the disaster by throwing up a new and higher levee all by herself in one day (p. 104).

Now this is double fakelore. In the accounts of Annie Christmas written by Herbert Asbury and Lyle Saxon, two popular authors specializing respectively in city underworld and Louisiana local color non-fiction, Annie Christmas was a legendary whore of New Orleans. Naturally Carmer could not so describe her in a book for children, so he suppressed this the central element. But in fact there never was any Annie Christmas. She was completely concocted by Lyle Saxon for a sensational newspaper feature story. To Mr. Botkin's credit, he reprints Saxon's disclosure in *A Treasury of Mississippi River Folklore* (1955). We now know that a number of the alleged regional demi-gods brought out in the wake of Paul Bunyan were similarly contrived by publicists: Old Stormalong, King of Yankee sailors; Joe Magarac, hero of Pittsburgh steelworkers; Tony Beaver, the West Virginia lumberjack; Bowleg Bill, the seagoing cowboy of Cape Cod; Febold Feboldson, the Nebraska plainsman. No oral legends about these figures have ever been reported, although their promoters, and the assemblers of hero-tales, all claim them as genuine American folk heroes. Most of these writers know little or nothing about the discipline of folklore, and simply jumped on the bandwagon when these comic demi-gods became fashionable, turning out one children's book after another on one pseudo-hero after another. You can find these books listed under such authors as James Cloyd Bowman, Harold Felton, and Irwin Shapiro. But scholars respected in their own fields also entered this lucrative market place. Walter Blair, professor of English at the University of Chicago, who has written excellent studies of American humor and Mark Twain, committed a juvenile folk-hero volume, *Tall Tale America*, subtitled "A Legendary History of Our Humorous Heroes" (1944), embodying all the worst sins of fakelore. The canons of scholarship in other fields were simply left behind when a literary critic or historian or anthropologist dabbled in folklore. Here is a passage from *Tall Tale America* about the birth of Johnny Appleseed, the name given John Chapman, who planted apple trees in the Ohio Valley in the early nineteenth century.

Back there in Massachusetts on the day Johnny was born, there was one of those Massachusetts May storms that rain cats and a fair number of dogs. But along about when Baby Johnny had polished off his first big cry, the sun came out and made a handsome rainbow.

One end of this rainbow was hitched to Monadnock Hill, where the great carbuncle sparkled in the sunshine. From here the rainbow arched up in the grey-blue sky until the other end swooped down right smack into the Chapman
dooryard near Ipswich. There, this end of the rainbow got all tangled up in a big Spitzenberger apple tree which was so loaded with blossoms that it looked more or less like a big snowball. Result was the rainbow colored up the blossoms with all the colors you can think of, off hand, at any rate.

The nurse that was taking care of Johnny and his mother claimed that she picked him up and carried him over to the window for a look at the tree.

“You’ll never believe the way he carried on”, she said. “Why, he humped and gurgled and stuck out his little white paws as if he wanted to pick all those blossoms! And he was only forty minutes old, too!”

Well, frankly, some of us historians don’t believe this story – sounds fishy to us. But it’s a known fact that as long as Johnny was a baby, each spring he’d whoop and squall and holler around, not giving the family a lick of peace, until they handed him a branch of apple blossoms to hang onto. Then he wouldn’t bang the petals off, or eat them, like other babies would. Instead, he’d just lie there in his crib, looking at those apple blossoms, sniffing at them now and then, and smiling as happy as an angel plumb full of ice cream.

This gooeey fabrication gives a fair idea of the style and mood of ersatz folklore. The few actual oral traditions known about Johnny Appleseed indicate a virile and coarse-grained figure.

Where did the American Folklife Society stand on the folklore controversy? Here is another element in the situation that needs explaining. During the early 1940’s this Society, although founded back in 1888, was having difficulties staying afloat. Through the first three decades of the twentieth century it had been maintained by the anthropologists, with Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict serving as successive editors of the Journal of American Folklore (1908–1939). Then came a vacuum, and MacEdward Leach, professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, filled it as longtime secretary-treasurer. During the 1940’s, the Society could never count on continuous attendance at its annual meetings, which were divided between the Modern Language Association and the American Anthropological Association. University professors considered themselves first literary scholars or anthropologists, and dropped in on the folklore sessions only if they happened to be available. In 1946 I attended my first convention of the American Folklore Society and thereafter went regularly, but the only other person who also attended annually was MacEdward Leach. Accordingly the Society could not count on professional supporters and to remain solvent depended on a sizable number of amateurs and dilettantes attracted to the entertainment aspects of folklore. Throughout the 1950’s and into the 1960’s the Society was caught between the claims of the “purists” and of the “popularizers”, and it polarized further between Indiana University, representing the professionals, and the University of Pennsylvania, the home base of the Society and hence the spokesman for dues-paying amateurs. Some of the national meetings in those years turned into bitter shouting matches.

62
The center of the popularizers came to be New York, both the city and the state. A New York Folklore Society was organized in 1945 and began issuing the *New York Folklore Quarterly*, strictly on a lightweight basis. Articles were brief, chatty, unburdened with documentation. Mr. Botkin contributed an anecdotal news column reiterating his conception of applied folklore. His close friend Moritz Jagendorf, a dentist, and a prolific writer of regional folklore for children in a bouncy style, contributed regularly and served as president. This group deeply resented my use of the word “fakelore,” and in a paper presented to the American Folklore Society in 1957, Mr. Jagendorf called it “discourteous,” accused me of envying authors whose books sold widely, and restated his position that writers were like folk who could change stories as they pleased. The bitterness of these years came to a climax in the annual meeting of 1964 held in New York City, when for the first time in the history of the Society the nominee for president presented by the nominating committee—myself—was challenged by a packed business meeting and a substitute elected. I was in England at the time, and received a host of angry letters from members of the Society resentful over this affair.

The discussion of “fakelore” has taken a different turn from what the editors of the *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, or I myself, had anticipated. Instead of defining a term, I have indulged in a personal history of the American folklore scene. Let me at once add that this *memorat* is written in no spirit of rancor, that it has a happy ending, and that it does contain a moral. As matters now stand, the battle of fakelore is largely won, at least within the universities. The American Folklore Society has met independently for the past two years (and I was elected President in 1966), with the support of a substantial number of faculty and graduate students who now make folklore their chosen careers. The Society is truly a professional and learned society. Indiana University has turned out some twenty-five Ph.D.’s in folklore in the past ten years, who are well established at other universities, and other folklore Ph.D.’s are beginning to be produced at the Universities of Pennsylvania, Texas, and California at Los Angeles. An Indiana doctoral candidate in folklore has been appointed editor of the *New York Folklore Quarterly*. The American Folklore Society is prospering financially while maintaining scholarly standards. True, the public at large still has little understanding of folklore as a scholarly subject, and the federal government fails to give the support that folklore enjoys in European countries, in Brazil, and in Canada. But this too may come.

A final word should be said about Mr. Botkin and his series of treasures. In any history of the American folklore scene Ben Botkin deserves a respected place. His first series of *Folk-Say* volumes, published annually
Richard M. Dorson

in Oklahoma from 1929 to 1932, directed general attention to indigenous oral traditions as a source for regional literature. When as a callow graduate student in 1939 I first met Ben in Washington, D.C., he showed me every kindness, and he has always generously assisted younger folklorists. The treasuries made an impact on the public imagination that is in itself a phenomenon for the folklorist to contemplate, and they do point to sources that the folklorist can consider and screen. Had they not received such extravagant praise, no controversy would have arisen.

The moral of this tale is perhaps now evident, "Fakelore" was intended as a rallying cry against the distortion of a serious subject. It seems almost incredible that such elementary principles as the necessity for fieldwork and the faithful rendering of texts had to be debated. It all goes back to the curious lack of specialization in American folklore, which fell into a no-man's land between comparative folklorists and scholars in American Studies. To overcome this lack of any body of theory fitting the needs of the United States, I presented two lengthy papers to the Society, "A Theory for American Folklore" (1957) and "A Theory for American Folklore Reviewed" (1968). In essence, this theory holds that the folk traditions of countries colonized in modern times – in North and South America and Australia – must be correlated with their major historical developments from colonization to industrialization.

There appears to be no close parallel in other nations to the fakelore issue in the United States, where popularization, commercialization, and the mass media engulf the culture. "Folklorismus" does not seem to have affected the vigorous growth of folklore institutes, seminars, archives, and investigations described in the impressive issue, now in press, of the Journal of the Folklore Institute devoted to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Yet it can also be said that the sentimentalizing and prettifying of folklore materials is preferable to the ideological manipulation of folklore, a more insidious kind of fakelore which so far has made little headway in these States.