"Who Are The Folk?" by Alan Dundes

For the beginning student of folklore, an answer to the question "Who are the folk?" can provide both a fascinating and informative background on the subject of folklore. I have found the following definition from Alan Dundes' Interpreting Folklore to be one of the best descriptions available:

"To discuss folk or folklore in the context of the advancement of science seems somewhat paradoxical. For the long-standing pejorative association of error with folklore as with such other terms as myth, superstition, old wives' tales, etc., would make it appear that folklore is precisely what science has advanced *from*!!! Folk medicine continues to be contrasted with scientific medicine- the implication clearly being that in an ideal world the former should be completely replaced by the latter. I hope to show that this definition of folk and folklore is false and, furthermore, that one essential part of the science of folklore includes the study of the folklore of science (and scientists).

The discipline of folklorists began in the nineteenth century. To be sure, one can find precursors. In the late eighteenth century Herder had used such terms as *Volkslied* ("folksong"), *Volksseele* ("folk soul"), and *Volksglaube* ("folk belief"). His famous anthology of folksongs, *Stimmen der Vilker in Liedern*, was first published in 1778-79, but folklorists proper, in the sense of the scholarly study of folklore, did not emerge until later. The Grimm brothers published the first volume of their celebrates *Kinder and Hausmarchen* in 1812, but the English word *folklore* was not coined until Thoms first proposed it in 1846. Closely tied to currents of romanticism and nationalism, the serious study of folklore found an enthusiastic audience among individuals who felt nostalgia for the past and/or the necessity of documenting the existence of national consciousness or identity. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, national folklore societies had been formed in Europe and the United States: among them, the Finnish Literature Society, 1831; the English Folk-Lore Society, 1878; and the American Folklore Society, 1888.

The critical difficulty in the various nineteenth-century usages of the term *folk* lay in the fact that it was inevitably defined as a *dependant* rather than an *independent* entity. In other words, *folk* was defined in contrast with or in opposition to some other population group. The folk were understood to be a group of people who constituted the

lower stratum, the so-called *vulgus in populo* – in contrast with the upper stratum or elite of that society. The folk were contrasted on the one hand with "civilization" – they were the uncivilized element of a civilized society- but on the other hand, they were also contrasted with the so-called savage or primitive society, which was considered even lower on the evolutionary ladder.

Folk as an old-fashioned segment living on the margins of civilization was, and for that matter still *is,* equated with the concept of peasant. The way in which folk occupied a kind of middle ground between the civilized elite and the uncivilized "savage" can be perceived in the emphasis placed upon a single culture trait: the ability to read and write. The folk were understood to be "the illiterate in a literate society" as opposed to the primitive peoples, who were ethnocentrically labeled "preliterate" (implying that they would achieve literacy as cultural evolution progressed). More recently the term was changed to "nonliterate." (The ethnocentric bias in labeling other people continues with such terms as "developing," "underdeveloped," or "non-Western.") The key to this definition of folk is "in a literate society." It was not simply that an individual could not read or write, but that he lived in or near a society that included a literate elite. The association of folk with rural is similarly defined. Rural is implicitly compared with urban. The folk were rural because they could be contrasted with city dwellers. Primitive people since they supposedly lacked cities could not be termed rural.

In terms of the assumed unilinear cultural evolutionary sequence of savagery, barbarism, and civilization through which all peoples were believe to pass; the folk were more or less considered as barbarians. More civilized that savages, the folk had not yet attained civilization. However, the folk were believed to have retained survivals of savagery. Since the elite (which included anthropologists and folklorists) was vitally interested in its own origins, it sought to collect the traditions of its adjacent folk. These traditions could then be compared with the supposedly fuller versions to be found among savage societies. Through this form of the comparative method, historical reconstruction of the origins of the elite, literate, civilized European cultures was to be undertaken.

Let me illustrate the nineteenth-century view of folklore by citing several passages from on of its most eloquent and articulate spokesmen, Andrew Lang. I feel that

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Lang's essay "The Method of Folklore," which appeared in his <u>Custom and Myth</u> published in 1884, is a representative statement:

> There is a science, Archaeology, which collects and compares the material relics of old races, the axes and arrow-heads. There is a form of study, Folklore, which collects and compares the similar but immaterial relics of old races, the surviving superstitions and stories, the ideas which are in our time but not of it. Properly speaking, folklore is only concerned with the legends, customs, beliefs, of the Folk, of the people, of the classes, which have least been altered by education, which have shared least in progress. But the student of folklore soon finds that these unprogressive classes retain many of the beliefs and ways of savages... The student of folklore is thus led to examine the usages, myths, and ideas of savages, which are still retained, in rude enough shape, by the European peasantry. (1884:11).

Here we find the folk defined as peasants, lower-class and lacking the benefits of education and "progress."

Lang's answer to the question, "What is the method of Folklore?" shows very well his conception of folk:

> The method is, when apparently irrational and anomalous custom is found in the country, to look for a country where a similar practice is found, and where the practice is no longer irrational and anomalous, but in harmony with the manners and ideas of the people among whom it prevails... Our method, then, is to compare the seemingly meaningless customs or manners of civilized races with the similar customs and manners which exist among the uncivilized and still retain their meaning. It is not necessary for comparison of this sort that the uncivilized and the civilized race should be of the same stock, nor need we prove that they were ever in contact with each other. Similar conditions of mind produce similar practices, apart from identity of race, or borrowing of ideas and manners... Our method throughout will be to place the usage, or myth, which is unintelligible when found among a civilized race, beside the similar myth which is intelligible enough when it is found among savages. A mean term will be found in the folklore preserved by the non-progressive classes in a progressive people. This folklore represents, in the midst of a civilized race, the savage ideas out of which civilization has been evolved. (1884: 21-22,25).

The notion of "non-progressive classes in a progressive people" is obviously analogous to the "illiterate in a literate society." The folk possessed what Lang called a "mean term," the intellectual link between civilized and primitive.

If we were to list the principle characteristics of folk as defined by nineteenth-century scholars, we might include the following traits:

SAVAGE or PRIMITIVE	FOLK or PEASANT	CIVILIZED or ELITE
Pre- or Non- literate	Illiterate	Literate
	Rural	Urban
	Lower Stratum	Upper Stratum

Because folk was defined primarily with respect to its supposed relationship to the civilized or elite, folklore was presumed to exist only where a civilized or elite group existed. Thus large parts of the world, deemed uncivilized by ethnocentric European intellectuals, had no folk and hence no folklore. North and South American Indians, Australian aborigines, native peoples of Africa, etc., were not civilized and therefore did not constitute folk in the strict sense of the term. In large measure then, the term *folk* in its initial meaning referred to European peasants and to them alone. To this day, some European folklorists consider peasant life to be the subject of their inquires. Such folklorists study the totality of the life of the peasants, not just selected genres such as folktales or ballads. This study is sometimes called folklore rather than folklore and it corresponds to what American anthropologists call ethnography (except that American anthropologists consider that ethnographic description can be carried out with respect to any people anywhere in the world.)

One might expect this narrow nineteenth-century definition of *folk* as "European peasant" to have disappeared, but it has not. One rarely hears the music of the American Indian referred to under the rubric of folk music or the art of the Australian aborigine listed as folk art. Folk music and folk art still tend to be restricted to European or European-derived cultures. Only a few genres of folk literature, for example, folktales, are considered to be cross-cultural. Yet how is it that American Indians can have *folk*tales but not folk music or folk art? Or course, they have music and art, but it is typically referred to as "primitive" and "non-Western" or some such value-charged ethnocentric term. In Latin America, for example, folklorists insist upon the nineteenth-century folk-as-peasant definition. In 1948, American folklorists Ralph Steele Boggs entered into a

spirited debate with Argentinean folklorist Bruno C. Jacovella on this very question of the exclusion of so-called primitive people from consideration by folklorists. Boggs pointed out that while the concept of folk as initially conceived did refer exclusively to European peasants, it was later expanded to include primitive societies. Boggs cited the title of G.M. Theal's *Kaffir Folk-Lore* (London, 1886) as an example of the expanded usage. It is true that British folklorists were willing in theory to consider a broader use of the term. In the 1914 edition of *The Handbook of Folklore*, we find the following discussion of the beginnings of folklore study. The study "began with the observation that among the less cultured inhabitants of all the countries of modern Europe there exists a vast body of beliefs, customs, and stories, orally handed down from generation to generation, and essentially the property of unlearned and backward portion of the community." Then it was noted, "that similar, and even identical beliefs, customs, and stories, are current among savage and barbaric nations." Accordingly, this definition of folklore was offered: "the generic term under which the traditional Beliefs, Customs, Stories, Songs and Sayings current among backward peoples, or retained by the uncultured classes of more advanced peoples, are comprehended and included" (Burne 1914: 1-2). Jacovella's response was that the study of American Indian peoples belonged to the discipline of ethnography or anthropology and therefore they should not be included as folk to be studied by folklorists.

The continued use of this narrow definition of folk as peasant excluded not only primitive peoples but urban ones as well. And American anthropologists are partly to blame for this. Redfield proposed an ideal typology, in which folk and urban were at opposite ends of a continuum. In this scheme, it would be absurd to speak of urban folklore. Peasants as they moved from a rural area to a city might bring some of their folklore with them, but the idea that urban dwellers could constitute a folk or actually many different folk groups, each with its own folklore, was hardly tenable to anyone subscribing to Redfields dichotomy. In his 1953 essay, "What is Folk Culture?" Forster tired to refine the Redfield distinctions. He suggested that a folk society was not a whole society, not an isolate in itself. It was rather a "half-society," a part of a larger social unit (usually a nation). The folk component of the larger unit bore a "symbiotic spatial-temporal relationship to the more complex components, which is formed by the upper

classes of the preindustrial urban center." Here the folk are defined, once again, in terms of opposition to the upper class and to an urban center. By this definition, Foster says, "True primitive cultures are excluded from the folk category. They are, in theory at least, isolates, which are complex themselves" (1953:163). Foster's distinctions are remarkably close to the nineteenth-century restricted definition of folk. (Foster's elitist bias is also manifested in his acceptance of *Gesunkens Kulturgut* theory, which argues that folk culture retains "sunken" scientific and artistic materials form the upper classes of earlier centuries.) Foster concludes that "folk cultures will disappear in those places where a high degree of industrialization develops"; and "true folk culture can hardly be said to exist in countries like the United States, Canada, England, and Germany, though in peripheral areas there are perhaps marginal manifestations. It also seems improbable, in view of the trends of the modern world towards industrialization in all major areas, that new folk cultures will rise" (1953:171).

If modern folklorists accepted the nineteenth-century definition of the folk as illiterate, rural, backward peasants, then the study of the lore of such folk might well be strictly a salvage operation and the discipline of folklorists might in time follow the folk itself into oblivion. Certainly it is conceivable that eventually all the peasants of the world will become urbanized or, at least, so much influenced by the urban centers as to lose their peasant qualities. The impact of the mass media- transistor radios, motion pictures, and the like- has tended to encourage standardization of food, dress, language, etc. But if we look at the question, "who are the folk?" in a new light, we shall see that the folk are not dying out; that there are folk cultures alive and well in the United States, Canada, and Europe; and that new folk cultures are bound to rise.

I have defined folk in the following way. "The term 'folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is- it could be a common occupation, language, or religion- but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity" (Dundes 1965:2).

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With this flexible definition of folk, a group could be as large as a nation or as small as a family. One can speak of American folklore or Mexican folklore or Japanese folklore in the sense that there are items of folklore shared by all or nearly all members of the group in question. Presumably most Americans, for example, know who Uncle Sam is (and what he looks like), can sing "Jingle Bells" or "Happy Birthday to You", and are familiar with such idioms as o.k. Each family has its own folklore, often involving a mixture of traditions from each parent's side of the family. Family folklore might include accounts of how the family came to settle where it did or how the family name evolved. It might include a family whistle (a tune or sequence of notes) used in public places, for example, in a department store, to assemble members to depart for home. It might include a reference, normally derogatory, to a member of the family with an unfortunate personal characteristic, such as being stingy or having a boarding-house reach. The allusion in the family circle might take the form or "Don't pull an Aunt Josephine on me!"

But there are many other forms of folk in addition to nation and family. Geographical-cultural divisions such as region, state, city or village may constitute a folk group. In the United Sates, one can speak of the folklore group of New England or the Ozarks, the folklore of California, the folklore of, and about, San Francisco. Even more obvious as folk groups are those of an ethnic, racial, religious, or occupational character. Each ethnic group has its own folklore, as does each occupational group. Baseball players, coal miners, cowboys, fishermen, lumberjacks, and railroadmen all have their own lingo, legends, and in-group jokes. It should be noted that this is not idle speculation on my part. Decades of fieldwork have demonstrated conclusively that these groups do have their own folklore. Moreover, as new groups emerge, new folklore is created. Thus we have the folklore of surfers, motorcyclists, and computer programmers. From this perspective, it would be absurd to argue that there is no folklore in the United States and that industrialization stamps out folk groups and folklore. There may be a diminution in the number of peasants, but peasants constitute only one type of folk. Industrialization has in fact created new folklore, for example, the folklore of computers.

Marxist folklorists have made a useful contribution with respect to the folklore produced or inspired by industrialization. They saw that the concept of folk had to include both peasant and proletariat, that is, folk in the country and folk in the city.

However, Marxist theory erred in limiting folk to the lower classes, to the oppressed. According to strict Marxist theory, folklore is the weapon of class protest. Numerous folksongs, for example, articulate discontent with social ills, racism, and other issues. But there is also right-wing folklore expressing the ideology of groups of conservative political philosophy. If one carries Marxist theory to its logical extreme, then on that day when the perfect society is achieved, there will be no oppressed group, hence no folk and folklore. But the fact that while there is factory folklore and the folklore of labor unions, there is also folklore of big business and big businessmen. The traveling salesman joke cycle, for example, is clearly a reflection of capitalistic free enterprise as well as a vehicle for a city slicker trickster's attempt to seduce a country farmer's daughter.

With this modern conception of folk, we see that we can no longer think of the folk in monolithic terms as relatively homogenous group of peasants living in a symbiotic relationship with an urban center. Folk is not a dependant variable but an independent variable. We must see members of modern societies as member of many different folk groups. A summer camp can constitute a folk group (with its own folksongs, initiation rituals, and customs). Many of these folk groups may be considered as part-time folk. One participates in a summer camp, for example, for a month or two. The experience may be repeated for several summers, but being a member of a summer camp "folk" is not the same as being a full-time member of a homogenous peasant community. Yet there are plenty of summer camp folklore traditions. Moreover, the same individual who can claim membership in a summer camp group may also belong to a number of other folk groups, formed by religious, ethnic, or occupational ties. These groups may overlap. For instance, a Catholic Afro-American who attended a Boy Scout summer camp would almost certainly know Catholic folklore, Afro-American folklore, and Boy Scout folklore.

One importance consequence of the notion of part-time folk is the possibility for the study of code-switching. As an individual moves from one of the folk groups to which he belongs to another, he must shift gears, so to speak. A man normally wouldn't tell jokes exchanged in a military setting at a Church-sponsored meeting. It could be argued that the amount or importance of the folklore of part-time folk groups, such as summer camps, is much less than the folklore of peasants, but I believe that to be a

subjective value judgment. All folk groups have folklore, and the folklore of such groups provides a socially sanctioned framework for the expression of critical anxiety-producing problems as well as a cherished artistic vehicle for communicating ethos and worldview.

I should like to demonstrate the rich variety of folk groups by using selected examples of a single genre, the joke. A given folk group may utilize any number of folklore genres, for example; superstitions, recipe, folk dance. For this reason it would take a book-length discussion to document the folklore of any one folk group. One might have a chapter on legends, another on proverbs, a third on folksongs, and so forth. My purpose is not to document the existence of any folk group in particular but rather to suggest that there are many folk groups besides "peasants." In this way, I hope to provide a partial answer to the question, "who is the folk?"

Jokes about groups do provide an index of the existence of such groups. Sometimes the jokes about groups are told only by other group members; sometimes only by nonmembers; sometimes by both. Context is often critical. Catholics may tell anticlerical jokes and Jews may tell anti-Semitic jokes, but usually not in the presence of non-group members. Military groups have rich folklore. I recall from the late 1950s a Navy sea story (the generic term for stories told while away on the long hours of a sea voyage). A famous sea captain had an incredibly good record. Every time there was a crisis, the captain would rush down to his cabin to consult something and then he would return on deck to make a correct decision, such as "come right to course 270," or "commence firing." The officers and crew wondered what it was that gave him the inspiration or confidence, but no on knew. Finally, one day the old captain died at sea – of natural causes. Curious about the captain's secret source of knowledge, the executive officer went to the captain's stateroom and opened up his safe. Inside was a single piece of paper on which was written: *Port, left; starboard, right.*

This anecdote is easily localized to adapt to other folk groups. For example, consider the following bit of bank folklore, which circulate in the 1930s. "There was the old bank employee, a cashier, who started every day by going to his desk, opening the top drawer, looking at a piece of paper, and putting it back. Finally, after forty years of flawless service to the bank, he retired. After he left, curiosity was just overwhelming and the other employees just had to look in his desk for the piece of paper. In the top drawer,

they found and read it: *The read figures must equal the black ones."* Here is a musical variation: "There was a famous conductor who was greatly respected in all of the music circles throughout the world. Before ever concert, right before he raised his hands for the orchestra to begin playing, he would take a small piece of paper out of his pocket, read it, and put it back into his pocket. He never failed to perform the little ritual which the musicians had long since taken for granted and which the ignored. One night, however, the maestro dropped the little piece of paper. The concertmaster picked it up, and accidentally, innocently read it. The message was brief. All it said was: *Violins on the right, violas on the left.*"

From this kind of data, one can see that there are an infinitude of folk groups. The Navy constitutes a kind of folk; bankers are another; musicians yet another. Moreover, each of these groups may in turn be shown to consist of smaller constituent folk groups. For example, within the general folklore of musicians, we may point to the special folklore (especially folk speech) of jazz musicians (as opposed to other kinds of musicians). The idea that a particular folk group may in fact consist of a lumping of smaller folk groups is not an idle theory. (The notion is implicit in defining folk from a nation to a family.) The critical test is inevitably whether or not there is folklore of, and about, such smaller groups. Let me illustrate this important point by referring to the widespread joke cycle involving "the priest and the rabbi," surely one of the best-known cycles in American folklore. Dozens of examples of this cycle continue to be in active circulation. Typical is the following text collected from a Protestant informant in 1964:

> A Catholic priest and a rabbi were driving down the highway one day, the priest behind the rabbi in the same lane. They came to a stoplight and the rabbi applied his breaks and came smoothly to a stop. The priest, however, was lost in meditation and failed to notice the rabbi's stoplights and slammed into his car doing 40 mph, completely demolishing both autos. A squad car pulled up and a large Irish cop came over with a ticket book in hand. After surveying the situation and learning that the first was a rabbi's car and the second a Catholic priest's, he came over tot eh priest and said (in a heavy accent): "Sure and I'm sorry to bother youse, father, but how fast was the rabbi going when he backed into you?"

Of course, no one needs extensive proof to accept the fact that there is folklore of, and about, Jews and Catholics in the United States. In this sense, Jews constitute a folk and so

do Catholics. What may or may not be quite so obvious is that each of these folk groups consists of a variety of smaller groups. For example, within the broad framework of Catholicism, one finds numerous Orders, each with its own identity and its own attributed characterological traits. Typically, there are a Dominican, a Franciscan, and a Jesuit (although the particular groups and their sequence may very in accordance with the identity of the joke teller and the makeup of his audience.) In one such story, the three are in the middle of a meeting when the lights go out. "Undeterred by the darkness, the Dominican stands up and says, 'Let us consider the nature of light and of darkness, and their meaning.' The Franciscan begins to sing a hymn in honor of our little sisters darkness. The Jesuit goes out and replaces the fuse." The practicality of the Jesuit in contrast with the more mystical nature of the Franciscan seems praiseworthy, but the Jesuit is not always seen in such a favorable light.

> There was a Jesuit and a Dominican on a shipobard. There was a little bit of contention- you know the old rivalries between the orders. Well, somehow or other, the Jesuit fell overboard and was immediately surrounded by sharks. It looked bad for a while, but they just swam around in a circle and finally swam away. Oh, there was a secular there, too, and he says, "The saints be praised, it's a miracle!" But the Dominican said, "No, just professional courtesy."

Among non-Catholics, there may be relatively little knowledge of ongoing inter-Order rivalries and stereotypes. But within Catholicism one can identify specific folk groups- and one can do so on the basis of the in-group folklore itself. The point is that *it is in folklore that folk groups are defined.* In much the same fashion, one can discover within Judaism such distinctions as Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism.

> A Jewish couple residing in a gentile area were struggling with the annual Chanukah- Christmas problem of whether they should deprive their children of a Christmas tree or desecrate their home with a Christian object. The father thought of a solution. He called the orthodox rabbi, explained the problem, and asked if there were a "Broche" [blessing], which he could say to decontaminate the Christmas tree. The rabbi replied, "A Klog aff dir" [A curse on you], and slammed the receiver on the hook.
> The man was taken aback, but then on consideration decided to try the conservative rabbi. He replied that he understood and appreciated the problem, but that there was no conceivably appropriate "Broche" so there was nothing he could do.

As a last resort, the father turned to the reform rabbi. This rabbi replied, "A Christmas tree I know, but what's a 'Broche'?"

The same three groups are involved in a joking comparison of the recitation of the Shema, the most common prayer in Judaism: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Elchad* ("Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One"), (Deut, 6:4).

When an Orthodox Jew recites the Shema, he says, "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Echad."
When a Conservative Jew recites the Shema, he says, "Shema Yisrael, IdonKnow Elohaynu, IdonKnow Echad." [Hear O Israel, I don't know God, I don't know one.]
When a Reform Jew recites he Shema, he says, "Shema Yisrael, Ideny Elohaynu, Ideny Echad." [Hear O Israel, I deny God, I deny one.]

In a descending scale of religious faith, we have the pious Orthodox Jew followed by a near- agnostic Conservative and then an atheistic Reform Jew. Moving from religion to science, we find folklore defining similar subgroups. Consider the following typical specimen of the folklore of academe:

A chemist, a physicist, and an economist are marooned on a desert island without food. Suddenly a cache of canned goods is discovered, but there is no opener. The chemist begins looking about for chemicals in there natural state so he can make up a solution that will dissolve the tops of the cans. The physicist picks up a rock and begins calculating what angle, what force, what velocity he will need to strike the can with the rock in order to force it open. The economist merely picks up a can and says, "Let us assume this can is open." [In a variant, "Let us assume we have a can opener."]

In many academic disciplines, including both the natural and the social sciences, one can find a sharp decision between those individuals interested in theory and those interested in solving practical problems. Economists are frequently singled out for comment, however, because of their penchant for "as if" model building in lieu of working with empirical data. Within the natural sciences, similar stereotypes exist. Here is a typical text, told in 1969 by a statistician:

A physicist, a statistician, and a mathematician were in an airplane flying over Montana. They looked out and saw below a herd of sheep all of which were white, except one, which was black. The physicist began calculating the probability of a black sheep occurring in any given herd. The mathematician, on the other hand, knew that there exists at least one sheep that is black, ON TOP!

In view of the fact that any group can theoretically be subdivided into smaller subgroups (there are, for instance, various specializations within physics), the question might arise: Just how small can a folk group be? I have argued that for the purpose of definitions, a folk group could consist of as few as two individuals. It is possible for two individuals to develop a special set of traditions including gestures, slang expressions, and so forth. This would certainly be a very restricted and limited "folk." I suppose one might be tempted to test the limits of the definition by asking if one person could constitute a "folk." If an individual created a set of idiosyncratic gestures, terms, etc., would he be a "folk" unto himself and would his gestures, terms, etc., be folklore? I would say no on the grounds that the notion of folk does imply some form of collective plurality. Individuals do have idiosyncrasies, but at least two individuals would have to share them before I would be comfortable in calling such behavior traditional or folk. I must stress the idea of a two-person folk group is essentially a matter of theory; I don't know any two-person folk groups. The family is surely the smallest folk group presently studied by folklorists. I should also point out that most of the folk groups actually studied, that is, religious, occupational, or ethnic groups, consist of thousands of individuals.

It is worth recalling that not all members of a folk group necessarily know one another. If we speak of the folklore of Mormons or the folklore of lumberjacks, what we mean is that body of folktales, legends, folksongs, superstitions, folk speech, etc., that is shared collectively by Mormons or lumberjacks. No one lumberjack is likely to know every single item of lumberjack folklore. If we were to represent the folkloristic repertoire of each individual lumberjack as a circle, then the totality of lumberjack folklore existing at anyone point in time would be the sum of all the areas obtained by combining all the circles. In most cases, there would be overlap between one circle and another, that is, between the repertoires of any two lumberjacks, but the degree of overlap might vary with the ages of the two individuals, where they lived (Maine or Oregon), and their life experiences. Probably no two circles would be perfectly congruent- no two

individuals know precisely the same folklore. By the same token, it is at least theoretically possible (though not very likely) for two circles to share no common ground. Thus lumberjack A and lumberjack B might conceivably share no traditions in common but lumberjack C and others would presumably share lumberjack folklore with both A and B.

Folklorists have rarely sought to ascertain just how many individuals in a folk group actually know and use a particular item of folklore. (Nor have folklorists sought to investigate exhaustively the entire folklore repertoire of a single informant. There have been extensive collections of folktales from a single raconteur but that same informant's knowledge of folksong or folk speech or games may not have been tapped at all. "Questionnaires are more common in European folkloristics, but even there it would be difficult to provide hard data attesting to the fact that a given item of Irish folklore was known to every single Irishman.

Let me illustrate the difficulty of determining the size of a folk group. In the United States, there is folklore concerning the Reader's Digest. It would not be easy to ascertain just how many Americans have heard one or more of the following three items of Reader's Digest folklore. The Reader's Digest sells more than 18 million copies monthly and most copies are read by more than one reader. Of those Americans who do not read the Reader's Digest regularly, many have read it at one time or another, perhaps in a doctor's or dentist's waiting room. I venture to say that not all of the total number of Americans who have read or who are to some extent familiar with the Reader's Digest will have heard each of the three jokes about to be cited. But the jokes exist and can be collected from informants. And so we have indisputable de facto evidence that folk who creates, transmits, and enjoys these jokes also exists. I frankly do not know how many Americans make up that folk, except that it is a number greater than two!

> Q: How do you keep a WASP uninformed?
> A: Take away his Reader's Digest.
> Q: How do you keep a WASP misinformed?
> A: Give it back to him.

The joke itself suggest that the folk in question may include WASPs, WASP being an item of folk speech, a traditional acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. (I

would think WASP is an item of folklore known by a goodly portion of the entire American population.) The jokes comment upon the average American's propensity to depend upon digests or summaries of news and information, no to mention the alleged inaccuracies in such synopses.

Do you know the Reader's Digest version of the Star Spangled Banner?
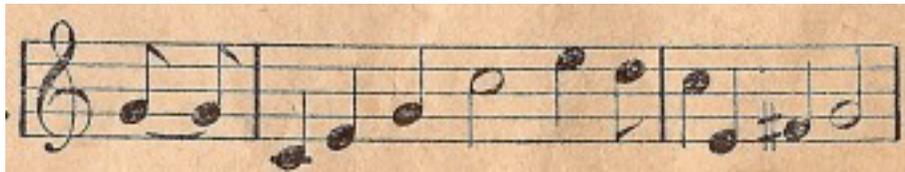
This joke confirms the Reader's Digest tendency to abridge materials, even whole books, as well as its penchant for patriotic subject matter. The third example plays upon the formula quality of the writing, the favoring of success stories written in the first person and general themes of political conservatism and religion.

A man was on a geophysical survey and he was assigned to the Artic Pole for about six months in this little shack. And everyday he'd go out and he'd measure the rainfall. And the only thing he had to read in the shack were stacks and stacks of Reader's Digests from about 1945. So he started to read them and pretty soon he thought, "Well, I think I could write a story for Reader's Digest 'cause I think I have the format down." So he wrote a story and sent it off to Reader's Digest. And a while later he got back a nice letter which said, "Dear Sir, We enjoyed your article, "I fucked a Polar Bear," very much. Except, we are a family magazine and it's not exactly our type of article, but we like your style- keep trying." So the man thought he'd gone wrong somewhere so he read about 300 more Reader's Digest and he said, "Ah, I think I've got this now." So he wrote another story and sent it off. And pretty soon he got back an even nicer letter- "Dear Sir, We are very interested in you and we're quite pleased with your story, "I fucked a Polar Bear for the FBI." But still, we are a family magazine and we don't think that this is what Mr. and Mrs. American are looking for, but please, please keep writing and submitting your material to us as we like your style." So he read some more and finally he wrote another story and sent it off and a week later he got a check and a letter that said, "Congratulations, Sir, here is a check for your story. We're very happy to have accepted it and we're pleased to announce that your story, "I fucked a Polar Bear for the FBI and found God," will appear in our next issue. [In another version the anit-Communist theme is parodied, the final article title being "I fucked a Russian bear for the FBI and

found God." One informant indicated that this joke was in circulation in 1949 in the New York area.]

If these items constitute folklore- and I cannot imagine on what grounds they could possibly be excluded- then to the question "Who are the folk?" we would have to answer: anyone who has told or heard any of these items. Members of the folk in question are not limited to a family or a region or a religious, occupational, or ethnic group. Now we can see the inadequacy of the nineteenth-century definition of the folk as the illiterate in a literate society. The folk in this case (and in the case of the "port-starboard" messages written on slips of paper) are literate. They are regular or, at least, occasional readers of a nationally (actually internationally) distributed magazine. Nor are the folk in this instance rural or lower-class. Many would surely be urban and middle-class, if one were interested in making such distinctions or using such labels. For the modern folklorist, there is no paradox whatsoever in speaking of an urban folk. There are urban folk just as there are rural folk.

One final issue remains, which I should like to discuss briefly. This is the matter of the relationship between science and technology on the one hand, and folklore on the other. Partly because folklore was wrongly tied to illiteracy, it was wrongly assumed that as literacy increased, folklore would decrease. Technology, especially as it impinged upon communication techniques, was thought to be a factor contributing to the demise of folklore. Not true! The technology of the telephone, radio, television, Xerox machine, etc., has increased the speed of the transmission of folklore. What used to take days, weeks, or months to cross the country can move around the world in a matter of seconds. Moreover, the technology itself has become the subject of folklore. Experimental scientists (and engineers) constitute a folk group with their own folklore. For example, Murphy's Law and its corollaries are an excellent illustration of the folklore of this group. Many versions of Murphy's Law exist, but the most common is, "if anything can go wrong, it will." In traditional parody of the scientific penchant for reducing the universe to principles and laws, we find that even experimental errors can be codified into a "law" that guarantees predictability and regularity, two important desiderata of the scientific community.

So technology isn't stamping out folklore; rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore and it is providing an exciting source of inspiration for the generation of new folklore. The rise of the computer symbolizes the impact of technology upon the modern world. My point is that there is folklore of and about the computer. Among computer programmers, one can find elaborate, quite technical in-group jokes, some involving pseudo-programs and others involving the specialized terminology of various computer languages. As early as 1958 one joke concerned the difficulty for the computer in handling a metaphor. Thus, "the spirit is willing by the flesh is weak," was translated by the computer into, "the liquor is good but the meat is terrible."

Even the wider American public has come to accept the computer as a feature, if not a character, in contemporary folklore. Old traditional issues such as the nature of God and the nature of man appear in new guises in the folklore of computers. Man's fear of being replaced by the machine is a prominent theme in this folklore. (The concern of workers that they may be replaced by increased automation in factories is a very real one.) Many computer jokes begin with the premise that it is possible to feed all of the world's knowledge into a computer. Let me close my discussion by citing three examples of this modern folklore.

> 1) All the greatest scientists of the world gather together and decide they are going to find out the answer to the ultimate question- is there a God? So they build this gigantic computer, the most complex and fantastic computer the world has ever seen. They program all the knowledge of the world into it, and finally they are ready to feed in The Question. So they feed it in, and the machine blinks and whirs and buzzes for some time, and finally the answer comes out... "There is now!"
>
> 2) A skeptic was being shown around the biggest computer facility in the world. He was told that all human knowledge had been programmed into the computer and that he was welcome to ask the computer any question he wished. The computer would answer it. "Any question?" "Yes, any question." So the man said he'd like to ask the question, "where is my father now?" "Fine," said the computer operator and he punched in the question. After several seconds of flashing lights and a series of clicks, a printout appears saying, "Your father is on a fishing trip off the coast of Baja, California." "Is that right?" asked the computer operator. "No," said the man, "that's wrong. MY father is at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Denver." "Are you sure?" asked the operator. "Yes, I just spoke to him last night." "Well, let's try it again." The question was punched in, "Where is my father now?" Again after

lights and clicks, the printout appeared, "Your father is on a fishing trip off the coast of Baja, California." At this point, the computer facility man is really concerned. The installation has cost millions of dollars. "Let's try it once more." This time, besides the question "where is my father now?" the additional instruction is given to search all memory banks. After the lights and clicks, the print out appears, "Your father is on a fishing trip of the coast of Baja, California; the man who is married to your mother is at a meeting of the American Associations for the Advancement of Science in Denver."

There is widespread genuine anxiety that the use of the computer to gather personal data may bring us to the point where dossiers contain more information about a person than the person himself knows. More and more often, people are demanding (and receiving) the right to have access to their personnel files. The final example suggest that it is folklore itself- including the joke telling process- that ultimately separates man from machine, or does it?

> 3) A super computer is built and all the world's knowledge is programmed into it. A gather of top scientists punch in the question: "Will the computer ever replace man?" Clickety, click, whir, whir, and the computer lights flash on and off. Finally a small printout emerges saying, "that reminds me of a story."

Who are the folk? Among others, *we* are!