SSU PROFESSOR

Looking For a Tale? Hector Lee Was the Man to Ask

By Kim Wallis

The Center for Folklore Studies at Ohio State University’s website states that “[f]olklore is a slippery term to define.”

The term was first used in 1846 by the English scholar William J. Thoms, as documented by The Oxford English Dictionary. It was felt the term gave a proper name to tales, customs, and beliefs that were the “Lore of the People”.

At one time folklore was considered a regional method to explain local occurrences, place names, and local legends. With the advent of radio, television and the internet, folklore has become a part of not just local culture, but culture throughout the world.

Is It True?

Some scholars today have compared folklore to gossip that has been handed down from generation to generation, where the tale changes over time as people add their version of the story. Urban legends are sometimes considered a form of folklore. With an urban legend, the truth of the tale is not what is important, but the fact that people believe it is important to share the tale.

Hector Lee was born in 1908 in Decatur, Texas. He obtained his Master’s degree in English from the University of California at Berkeley in 1938 and his Ph.D. in American Civilization from the University of New Mexico in 1947. He was an assistant professor of English at the University of Utah, the Dean of Instruction and a Professor of English at Chico State College until 1961, and the Dean of Instruction and a Professor of English at Sonoma State until his retirement in 1973. He continued to teach a course in American Folklore at Sonoma State until 1982.

During Dr. Lee’s illustrious career as a folklorist he served as President of the California Folklore Society, published numerous stories and books, had a radio series, recorded several records, and participated in many speaking engagements throughout California and the West.

Press Democrat newspaper columnist Gaye LeBaron referred to Lee in a 1974 article as an “accomplished storyteller” who was very much in demand as a dinner speaker. She went on to say how Lee “localized” a story he was telling at a speaking engagement about the bandit Joaquin Murrieta. Lee said a wounded Murrieta hid in a feed and grain store near where the speaking engagement took place.

When questioned by LeBaron later, Lee stated it was an “old Cotati-area story he heard in an interview a dozen years ago” and the accuracy of the location of the feed and grain store was not really important to the story.

In the foreword to Hector Lee’s 1984 book titled Heroes, Villains, and Ghosts: Folklore of Old California, he stated legends tend to drift from the truth and storytellers often retain what they consider the most important facts and add what they deem necessary to make the story better.

Collection

The Hector Lee Folklore collection at Sonoma State University includes transcripts of folktales from Dr. Lee’s radio show Tales of the Redwood Empire and offprints and reprints of scholarly articles on subjects related to folklore. The library also owns numerous audio recordings, video recordings, and books authored by Dr. Lee.

The California Folklore Miscellany collection consists of a 42 volume set of interviews, pictures, and stories collected from 1963 to 1982 by students in Dr. Lee’s Sonoma State folklore classes. Included in this rich collection are remedies, songs, poems, jokes, photographs, ghost stories, explanations of place names, rhymes, superstitions, drawings, recipes, and much

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Hector Lee, cont.

more. Lee’s students primarily interviewed contributors who lived in or had ties to Sonoma, Marin, Mendocino and Lake counties, rendering the collection rich in local customs, beliefs, and history. It is a fascinating collection to browse and study, to see how local place names, legends, customs, and stories developed over the years.

Local Folklore

Of special interest in the collection are stories with a local flavor about bandits such as Joaquin Murrieta and Black Bart.

Murrieta was an outlaw who was supposedly killed by California Rangers in 1853. His head was cut off, displayed in a glass jar of alcohol, and taken on a road show for all to see.

There have been numerous tales that dispute whether the head in the jar belonged to Murrieta and some tales claim the head was his, but the jar was destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Another story in the collection states the jar was not destroyed in the earthquake and that the interviewee’s father obtained the head from an antique dealer.

Another story in the collection was told by a 77-year-old gentleman whose father had been a deputy sheriff in Willits.

The interviewee’s father claimed Black Bart was actually a gentleman who never killed or hurt anyone or never carried a loaded gun, and that Black Bart’s holdup companions were strategically placed, stuffed dummies. The interviewee’s father claimed that, eventually, stagecoach drivers would not stop for Black Bart as they believed he was too much of a gentleman to hurt them.

There are numerous stories about the experiences of immigrants in the community, which provide a fascinating look into what life was like for those who struggled to make their way in a new country.

In 1978 Margaret Wagner placed a notice in a local newspaper “inviting women who had come to the United States in the 1940s as war brides to get in touch with her.” Many World War II war brides were interviewed and the women told stories of amazing determination, fortitude, and ability, all while navigating a country that was new to them.

The term war bride refers to foreign-born women who marry American soldiers during war and is most often used in connection with World War I and World War II. The United States Army made a promise that these war brides and their children would be transported and “delivered” back home to soldiers at the end of the war. Stories in the collection tell of crowded ships with poor-quality food, little sanitation, constantly

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crying babies, and sea sickness. After their ships docked in New York, many of the brides had long train rides to distant cities throughout the United States. There was an adjustment to new customs, new clothes, and new food. There are tales in the collection of people trying to eat corn on the cob with a knife, not knowing what a tea bag was or what to do with it, and tales of curiosity about bread that looked like white cotton.

The war brides did not always make friends quickly and were often homesick. One interviewee told of how she did not like the United States at all but she decided to stick it out in the town of Sebastopol.

After several years she returned to England to visit and realized she did not really like England as everything was “too close, too packed in.” She discovered she really did like her new home of Sebastopol after all.

For those interested in a creative watering system from the past, the collection has an extensive survey (including pictures) of tankhouses which existed in Sonoma County in the summer of 1964.

From 1850 to 1930 tankhouses were an inventive way to harness wind power for the home and garden.

The tankhouse consisted of a well with a windmill over it that pumped water up into a redwood tank, and the water then flowed by gravity pressure into the house and garden. Today you can still glimpse the remnants of a few tankhouses in Sonoma County.

A collection of stories submitted by Marjorie Gardner Hodapp in August of 1963 consists of tales about the local author Jack London.

London purchased land which had a creek flowing through it from a local land owner. One of the conditions of the purchase was that London refrain from obstructing the flow of the creek as it was used for irrigation by many people in the town of Glen Ellen. However, London proceeded to dam up the creek so he would have a pond to use for recreational purposes. He was taken to court by members of the community and he lost the court case.

**Dangerous Driving**

Another London story concerns his step-sister Eliza Shepard. Eliza purchased a car from the interviewee’s father, a local car dealer. She had difficulty driving the first car she purchased in 1927 and wrecked it. When she decided to purchase another, she told the interviewee’s father he would only receive the car payment balance after she had been given driving lessons.

She was given lessons for 90 days and then “turned loose.” However, she quickly had another accident while driving the new vehicle.

**Value of Folklore**

Why is folklore an important part of our culture?

Folklore can be a window into our past that helps us better understand the present. Sometimes folklore can become part of our everyday life and customs.

To this day many people do not walk under ladders, do not cross paths with black cats, and throw a pinch of salt over their shoulder if any salt is spilled.

The California Folklore Miscellany and Dr. Hector Lee’s legacy provide an opportunity for scholars, historians and students to see how historical events and issues played out on a local scale. An introduction preceding a story in the collection sums up the importance of folklore. The paragraph, written by one of Dr. Lee’s students, Ellen F. Beans, suggests that “history is a fascinating subject to explore, but even more intriguing when it is correlated with folk stories and reminiscences. History seems to ‘come alive’ when little-known stories are told illustrating the time, the place, the people of an area.”

To view the California Folklore Miscellany and SSU’s Hector Lee Folklore Collection, contact Dayle Reilly or Lynn Prime of Sonoma State University Library by email (northbay-info@sonoma.edu) or phone (707/664-4152).

**Oyster Farm Closes**

It appears the long legal battle over harvesting of oysters in Drake’s Estero in Marin County is finally over with a victory for nature lovers and the National Park Service.

Drake’s Bay Oyster Co., a family-owned operation, locked horns with the federal government in an eight-year struggle to determine whether the firm could continue to harvest oysters at the location.

The final decision was made in 2014, two years after the final effort of the company to get an extension.

The operation was scheduled to close down at the end of 2014.