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Doing Fieldwork in the City

RICHARD M. DORSON

THIS essay is dedicated in affection and heartfelt tribute to Katharine Briggs. I first met Katharine at the inaugural meeting of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research at Kiel in 1959, and our friendship grew through the years, sharpened by my delight at encountering so active and capable a leader giving new energy to the Folklore Society. In Katharine I saw a successor to the illustrious tradition of English folklore studies so firmly established in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. We co-organized the Anglo-American Folklore Conference held at Ditchley Park, Oxfordshire, in 1969, the first of its kind (the Proceedings were subsequently published in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute*), and a landmark in the relations between English and American folklorists. Katharine nourished her connections with colleagues in the United States, and we grew accustomed to seeing her gracious and courageous presence at our meetings, even when she was largely confined to a wheelchair, and to hearing her elegantly delivered recitals and quotations.

Katharine's substantial achievements in British folk narrative and folk belief have won an honoured place on our shelves. We will cherish her memory and rejoice in her works.

When folklorists change their field sites from small towns and villages in rural areas to cities, they encounter new and unexpected problems. Where does one reside, how does one make contacts in an impersonal and sprawling metropolis?

In 1975 and 1976 I spent some six months in the Calumet Region of northwest Indiana, a conurbation of industrial cities east of Chicago bordering on Lake Michigan. My quest was for the folklore of the steel industry and its black and ethnic labourers, and of the Region itself. Seven years earlier during a pilot trip of three weeks I had stayed in a dingy hotel in downtown Gary, but in 1975 its doors were boarded and shuttered, like many of the neighbouring stores, and like the brand new Holiday Inn facing Mayor Hatcher's City Hall. So I could not live in the interior of my site. As it turned out, this made little difference in developing social networks; one needs the car wherever one resides. I gathered leads and sought out social networks. To enter homes I needed an invitation, but I could walk uninvited into restaurants, churches, law courts, and shopping centres, and attend civic events and ethnic occasions announced in the newspapers. Frequently—I would say invariably—the fieldworker will encounter a sympathetic soul who interests himself in the project and sets up interviews for the collector.

My most helpful bridge person turned out to be a restaurant owner-manager who worked full-time as a welder in the Gary Works. Larry Regan, thirty-four when I met him, ran 'Jennie's,' a family restaurant in a converted house in

midtown Gary on Broadway, right across from the Indiana University Northwest campus. Several strains mingled in Larry, none Irish, despite his name which originally included several additional syllables better reflecting his Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, and German forebears. He named the restaurant for his mother, Jennie Regan, a marvellous matriarchal figure, wise in the ways of Gary, who catered dinners and banquets to ethnic clubs and societies in the Region. Larry's wife Sandie, a wholesomely beautiful woman, casual and friendly like Larry, supervised the cooking. Their three young daughters literally danced up and down the aisles, especially on Fridays when a band performed, as all had grown up singing and dancing with the Gary Junior Tamburitzans. Amiable Larry enjoyed people, enjoyed welcoming them to his restaurant, which constituted his 'other life,' the creative outlet totally separate from the job in the mills that, I soon learned, many steelworkers developed. Into this other life steelworkers, white and black, poured their main energies and talents and, so far as Larry was concerned, I thought 'Jennie's' was his whole life.

One entered 'Jennie's' through a dark narrow hallway decorated with photographs of early Gary that Larry had salvaged from the Gary Hotel. The hallway broadened out into a dining room with a row of square tables on either side of a central buffet counter. At the far end the kitchen closed the dining area. The Regans usually sat with friends and relatives at tables near the kitchen, but moved to other tables too as new friends entered. Their menu featured Slavic dishes such as Polish *pierogis* and Serbian *chivapchichi* and *buraku*.

'Jennie's' provided me with a home away from home, and there 'the Professor,' as I was habitually called, could drop in for a late dinner or mid-afternoon Fresca, or music and aisle dancing on Friday nights. On two occasions I brought my fall and spring classes to 'Jennie's' for a Slavic dinner and a talk by Sandie on her ethnic dishes. I introduced my 'Gary Gang' of graduate students to 'Jennie's,' and one Friday in June 1976 our film unit from Indiana University in Bloomington drove up to shoot colour footage of a festive evening in 'Jennie's.'

Nowhere in Gary, or in the Region, did I encounter a similar establishment. 'Jennie's' stood by itself on a nearly deserted block just north of the store-fronts running from Glen Park to Merrillville and south of the midtown black section of deteriorating businesses and soaring insurance rates. Only the Regans' capacious warmth and the good cheer of their East European specialties kept this oasis alive. Larry did much more than make me feel at home, he grasped my quest quickly, and made a point of introducing me to the personalities who dropped in, and setting up special appointments for me to interview and record black fellow-workers.

My classes at Indiana University Northwest formed another network on which I leaned in the Region. This was a university unlike any I had known, a mirror of its community. Glen Park High School it was called, good-humouredly, and consisted of two buildings (a third was under construction) and some barracks in midtown Gary. The students, including many blacks and ethnics, lived in the city and suburbs. In my evening class almost all came directly from work, in offices, shops, and the mills. They included three young steelworkers, a bank teller, a dunes ranger, a bartender, two secretaries, a bailiff. Over the months several rewarding relationships blossomed, and some students proved to be splendid informants. They knew nothing about folklore, but they did know aspects of the Region—the mills, the dunes, local politics, the ethnic mix—and

gradually our minds converged. Each meeting I brought my little Sony tape recorder to class and recorded their personal experience tales and collecting reports, to make the recording techniques familiar to them.

For their class collecting assignment two brothers who worked in the mills gathered several of their buddies together to drink beer and swap mill stories for a couple of festive evenings. They obviously relished the gruesome and comical incidents they shared, as they reproduced the ethnic accents of fellow-workers and laughed hilariously at pranks and pilferings committed against the company. The tapes show forth in full candour and glee the scorn of the young generation of millworkers for their jobs and employers.

Over the months the web of acquaintanceships thickened, and my chances to meet, talk, and record Region personalities with something to say multiplied daily. Every resident in the Region was a potential informant, and I sought to reach as many as I could. Often my forays were random and serendipitous, based on newspaper announcements in the *Post Tribune* and the *Times* of ethnic festivals, church anniversaries, murder trials, holiday parades, beauty pageants, historical society meetings. Myriad events unfolded continuously; each ethnic group had one or more calendar of performances, banquets, celebrations, feast-days, each city had its public occasions, and the trick was to learn about them and to view them through a folklorist's lens. Reading an item in the paper announcing a Mexican national holiday parade in East Chicago on a Sunday at 10 a.m., I alerted two of the Gary gang and we left Bloomington at five in the morning to make it on time, only to find Main Street deserted; the parade did not commence until after noon, and then indeed Main Street bloomed with *charros* and floats and bands. Following the account in the *Post Tribune* of a gruesome execution of a brother and sister by Gary white and Mexican youths influenced by a Charles Manson type ringleader, I attended the trial in the federal courts of nearby Crown Point, and watched the dramatics of the trial lawyers, the sobbing witnesses, the stunned defendants, the stone-faced jurors. On Sunday mornings, or Wednesday evenings, I could select from a beckoning gallery of black preachers, choirs, accompanists. At intervals I gained access to a steel mill and gaped anew at the infernal processes conducted in those caverns. My life was free and wide open, to drink in the thousand enactments of oratory, song, dance, and work in the despised Region. Any chance encounter might throw a blaze of light on some corner of Region life and lore. Each day could bring a different experience, a different event. The field technique might be called, to borrow a phrase from the ballad critics, incremental repetition. In the urban situation, the fieldworker establishes one or more orbits and several listening posts (the 'bridge' contacts). In these orbits—in my case the Gary classes and 'Jennie's' and the outside visits to which they led me—I see familiar faces who understand something of my mission, and through these networks the circle of sympathetic informants keeps enlarging. 'Bridge friends' will also bring to my attention good talkers and newly-heard urban narratives. So the urban folklorist retraces his trails, but meets new passers-by along the way.

Incremental repetition is not the only technique, for the collector in the city must never relax in too comfortable haunts, but should retain his adventurous spirit and follow whatever leads open up, from the newspapers, the bulletin board, the posters in the shop window announcing some happening. For an example, I attended a banquet in a restaurant for IUN faculty and staff,

and recognized no one present, but a chance inquiry from a lively lady two seats from me led to an extended and animated conversation with her and her husband on folkways of the steel mills, and culminated in ninety minutes of recording in my motel. In the city, as in the country, certain individuals possess the gifts of narrative, or song, or music, or craft, and the folklorist tries to discover them, with the assistance of social networks or by striking out randomly. On some occasions, when observing a civic or ethnic event, the folklorist does so less in the hope of finding informants or making contacts, although he may do so, than of filling in the ethnographic record of urban folklife.

In the Region I adopted two separate techniques of collecting and recording folklore. One was the conversational interview using the tape recorder whenever opportune. Since modern folk expression does not take the form of structured fairy tale and ballad, I asked certain leading questions of the speaker, or, if he or she were so disposed, let them talk on about their personal history and life experiences with little interruption on my part. The questions I posed dealt with general concerns of the Region, such as its parameters, its characteristics, its quality of life, its special problems connected with the white flight and the domination of the steel industry. From ethnic persons I inquired about their activities, possessions, and outlooks that reflected an ethnic element. From steelworkers, after some uncertainty, I asked for responses to a list of themes, from industrial accidents to mill thefts and goofing off, that would invariably set them going, if they were raconteurs. In time I came to recognize a Region conversation from its reference points: housing, crime, local politics, steel ethnics, blacks, decline of the downtown. Ethnics, blacks and whites all shared these topics.

The rule in the field, urban or rural, is always be prepared with tape recorder in the satchel and notebooks in the pocket. Wherever I went, to class, to 'Jennie's,' to churches, to homes, to parades—but not into the mills, where such equipment was forbidden—I carried a shoulder bag full of pouches, in one of which nestled the Sony and blank cassettes. Once, for instance, I attended Sunday service at Saint Sava Serbian Orthodox Church with Richard March of our Gary Gang, who was himself of Serbo-Croatian background, and recorded the service, then joined the church members in their splendid Serbian Hall by an open field in Hobart for a ceremonial banquet of beef, lamb, chicken, potatoes, and vegetables on heaping platters at long tables. A jolly stranger took a seat next to me, which I had been saving for Richard, but he seemed so companionable I invited him alongside, set the Sony on the table, and recorded Mike Vuckovich all during dinner. He said he had seen me at Saint Sava earlier, and felt like talking with me.

How does folklore enter into these conversations? In the conventional mode of fieldwork, the collector solicits tales or songs from the rural bard. We are entering a new era of the folklore enterprise, in which we listen to conversational flows, to life histories and personal experiences, and wait for the anecdotes and proto-legends to surface. Storytellers in our culture transmute the episodes of daily life into narrative form, filled with dialogue, delineation of character types, and set apart from the rest of the discourse by beginning and ending markers. As I read over my transcripts such stories leap out at me: a veteran steelworker active in precinct politics relates the amazement of an immigrant woman on learning the United States was both a democracy and a republic, or

so she interpreted the two-party system; a Hammond realtor retells the funny-sad business of how Alva Roebuck was laughed out of town, in Hammond's early days, when a friend took his girl from under his nose, and so Roebuck fled to Chicago to team up with Sears; a young white housewife living in an integrated section of Gary recounts the desire of a black doctor's wife to move away from the abusive poor whites on the block to a better neighbourhood. Stories such as these, which I could never have anticipated or classified, emerge from the tapes.

But the more-or-less true experience story still conforms to the familiar genre of the folktale, and urban folklorists must broaden their sights beyond the conventional categories collected in the countryside. Who are we to determine *a priori* the forms that the folk will use for self-expression? In one case, a black steelworker produced, directed, and acted in a home-made folk movie. By and large the most common mode of traditional expression I encountered in my Region fieldwork might be called the stock conversation. Such dialogue combines stable themes with new twists—traditionality and creativity—in the manner of all folkstuff. This talk contains what might be called folk attitudes, folk prejudices, folk stereotypes ingrained in the world-view of the speaker and likeminded peers. A favourite theme of Regionites is housing: the fluctuating values of homes due to the changing racial neighbourhoods, the search for bedroom communities, the requirements of Mayor Hatcher to improve—to 'Hatcherize'—Gary homes before they could be put up for sale. A related theme is crime: the incidence of criminal assaults and break-ins in certain neighbourhoods, security measures, the indifference of the police. Anecdotal tales fasten onto housing and crime, but ordinary conversations about the subjects themselves partake of folkloric elements. The fear of fleeing whites that blacks will penetrate their new retreats, or the resentment of the burglarized against what they consider police irresponsibility or even connivance, represent such elements, reinforced in a hundred conversations and amplified with concrete illustrations.

While all residents in the Region think and talk about such pressure points as housing and crime, various subgroups possess their own esoteric concerns and topics of talk. Among the Serbs in Gary and East Chicago, the most burning issue revolves around their relations to the Serbian Orthodox Church. The rival factions, united by blood and culture and history, have divided over the question whether American Serbs should continue allegiance to the mother-church in Tito's communist Yugoslavia, or support the independent church with a bishopric in Libertyville, Illinois. Furious charges and counter-charges and litigation inflame the question and lead to the anomaly of two Serbian churches side by side in East Chicago, one belonging to the Feds (the mother-church group) and the other to the Roskos (the breakaway group). Press this button in conversing with a Serb from the Region and a gush of emotional talk will follow, with heroes and villains writ large: Gary-born Bishop Varnava Nastich, a martyr-hero supposedly poisoned by the communist regime in Yugoslavia, Bishop Dionisije of Libertyville, an ogre-renegade to the Feds. The task of the modern urban folklorist is to search for these central issues that dominate the thought and talk of each subculture, and see how they explode into folklore.

A second technique relies on ethnographic observation of the urban scene, from folk artifacts to festive events. Material culture as well as oral expression—

the two halves of folklore-folklife studies—takes new forms in the city. Ethnic stores sell imported objects with symbolic and ritual values, for example amulets to ward off the evil eye, which are commercially manufactured but conform to village traditional handcrafts. The student of vernacular architecture can observe a curious replacement process, as a black Baptist church purchases and refurbishes a Jewish synagogue. In the workshop of a second-generation Serbian tamburitza-maker I beheld a dozen or so of these traditional Serbo-Croatian instruments, that he, a Gary fireman, was working on to fill orders in the Region and other parts of the country. Somewhat to my own surprise, since I had not calculated on such tangible returns from the urban quest, I found myself acquiring ethnic artifacts and displaying them in talks I gave on the Region, and describing them in my field notebooks.

Complex public and ethnic events, such as festivals, church services, and musical entertainments, taxed the recording powers of the solo fieldworker, or even a whole team with their videorecorders. To capture some of the essence of these occasions, I depended upon the tape recorder for the spoken and musical aspects, programme leaflets for documentation, and my field diary for general impressions. This latter aid I found indispensable for every phase of my field experiences. The diary, which is a running log of my activities, interviews, and reflections, provides the frame for the whole enterprise. I learned that, no matter how fatigued and exhausted I felt after a spell of running around, I must maintain the diary, or the impressions would pile up beyond recovery. Much of what I observed, and many conversations I enjoyed—on visits to steel mills for example—could not be tape recorded, and I had to rely on jottings in my pocket notebook and on memory. After the habit is fixed, writing up the field diary each twenty-four or thirty-six hour period becomes compulsive and pleasurable, for the mind takes on the structure of a tape- and video-recorder, and plays back scenes and situations with eerie recall. Also the ethnographer keeps honed the writing practice which would otherwise be neglected until the return from the field.

Through these two techniques, the taped interview and the ethnographic note, I captured a fraction of the talk and scenes that the Region offered me. A social scientist seeking firm empirical data would no doubt be disturbed by the fluid character of this enterprise. Yet fieldwork cannot be too rigidly structured; we set our goals, but in their pursuit we must allow for chance and surprise and the vagaries of Dame Fortune.

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