The Texas Folklore Society: Preserving and Presenting Folklore for One Hundred Years

Ken Untiedt

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj

Part of the United States History Commons

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol47/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.
The Texas Folklore Society celebrates its one hundredth anniversary in 2009. Not many other academic organizations have done that. In fact, there are only two that I know of in Texas. The Texas State Historical Association and the Texas State Teachers Association. Detailing the history of the TFS could be quite an undertaking. Indeed, F. E. Abernethy chronicled the organization’s origin and activities from 1909 through 1971 in three volumes of the Society’s annual publications. This article serves a different purpose – to examine what makes the Texas Folklore Society unique among other scholarly organizations and sum up why we have lasted so long.

The Texas State Teachers Association was formed in 1880, and the Texas State Historical Association began in 1897. Other regional organizations such as the West Texas Historical Association and the East Texas Historical Association, both of which share members with the Texas Folklore Society, began in the 1920s; ETHA disbanded in 1932, and did not reorganize until 1962. In the field of folklore, only the American Folklore Society has been around longer than the Texas Folklore Society – since 1888. The Missouri Folklore Society began in 1906, but between 1920 and 1977, it lay in what Susan Pentlin and Rebecca Schroeder called as a “coma” of inactivity. Several other folklore organizations were formed in the teens and 1920s, including those in North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and Oklahoma. Few of them are still active. But the TFS has done more than merely survive when others have not. It has thrived.

In 1935, J. Frank Dobie summed up the importance of the Texas Folklore Society in the program for that year’s annual meeting:

The Texas Folk-Lore Society is twenty-six years old. It has published nearly 2000 pages of lore pertaining to Texas and the Southwest. It has contributed enormously to such books as [John] Lomax’s American Ballads and Folk Songs, [Carl] Sandburg’s The American Song Bag, [J. Frank] Dobie’s Coronado’s Children, and other books. It is by all odds the most important state organization of its kind in America.

That was over seventy years ago. The TFS was practically still in its infancy. It has now published over 14,000 pages of folklore material in sixty-five regular publications. It also assisted in the publication of another thirty-six publications, ranging from pamphlets on collecting Negro songs to full-length books on cowboy life, the lore of Native Americans, and even traditional oral narratives from Ireland. Hundreds of members continue to meet each year to fulfill the Society’s purpose: to collect, preserve, and share the lore of Texas and the Southwest. People from all over the country regularly contact our office to ask questions about legends, schedule special presentations, and request per-

Ken Untiedt is an assistant professor of English at Stephen F. Austin State University and is the director of the Texas Folklore Society.
mission to reprint materials from our publications. But why has the TFS endured? The Texas Folklore Society’s secret for longevity lies in those things that make it unique among other scholarly organizations – its publications, its people (especially a few key leaders), and its meetings, which seem more like social events or family reunions than formal academic gatherings.

Technically, TFS is barely ninety-nine years old, and has held only ninety-two annual meetings. The story behind the creation of the Society will explain why it celebrates its centennial in 2009. John Avery Lomax had been collecting cowboy songs in Texas since he was a teenager, and in 1907 he shared them with George Lyman Kittredge, his Harvard professor, who was active in the American Folklore Society. Kittredge encouraged Lomax to continue his study of cowboy ballads and other folk music and to start a folklore society in his home state. When Lomax returned to Texas, he called upon a linguist he knew at the University of Texas, Leonidas Payne. They first discussed the possibility of forming the organization after a meeting in 1908, at which they nominated and elected each other as president and secretary (Payne and Lomax, respectively). A year later, after an A&M football game at the University of Texas, they decided to formalize the Society at the upcoming meeting of the Texas State Teachers Association on December 29, 1909.

Unlike other state folklore organizations then getting started, the TFS flourished from the beginning, listing sixty-six charter members and adding two dozen more within a month. Membership in the TFS continued to grow, and the annual meetings were popular among scholars throughout the state. Kittredge, the famed Shakespeare scholar from Harvard, attended the third annual meeting in 1913 and acknowledged the impressive work Lomax, Payne, and the presenters had done. By 1927, the TFS officers called for a membership drive to increase membership from 500 to 1,000. By contrast, the Missouri Folklore Society struggled with nominal membership and poor attendance at early meetings: “Membership in the Society had gradually declined. The 1914 records show only 20 regular members and 15 associates.” Folklorists in Texas realized that their state was a rich source for folklore, as Kittredge had predicted.

Kittredge wrote the preface to the Society’s first major publication, simply titled *PTFS I*, although it was eventually titled *Round the Levee* in a reprint version. The book was conceived by Payne and Stith Thompson on a train ride back home from the fifth annual meeting, held at Baylor University in Waco. Thompson edited the work, a collection of only thirteen articles, mostly collected from the first several meetings, and thereby became the first editor of a publication of the Texas Folklore Society. He left Texas and the Society in 1918, eventually settling at Indiana University, where students came from all over the country to study folklore in his program. Thompson later wrote the six-volume *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, an impressive work that is of great value to folklorists, but his contribution to Texas folklore is also noteworthy.

The organization could easily have died after that first book. WWI prevented members from holding annual meetings, and as F. E. Abernethy states
in the first volume of his history of the Society, it had "...lain dormant between 1917 and 1922..."^{11} However, a former UT professor who had joined the Society in 1915, decided he would rejuvenate the organization. J. Frank Dobie had left the University of Texas in 1920, but he discovered a love of Texas legends while managing his uncle's ranch and felt that the Texas Folklore Society could serve as a vehicle to help him share them with others.^{13} Dobie returned to teaching at the University of Texas in 1921, and he assumed the positions of secretary and treasurer for the Society, and Dobie began work on a meeting and another publication immediately. For *PTFS II*, he followed the example set by Stith Thompson in the first book, producing a simple collection of articles, most of which had been presented at meetings. However, *Legends of Texas, PTFS III*, was completely different. It was nearly three times as long as either of the first two books and, more importantly, Dobie had called on members – any members – to contribute to the manuscript, a tradition which continues today.

Publications of the Texas Folklore Society are quality books that contain a balanced mixture of collected lore and scholarly analysis. Most similar organizations publish periodical journals, or an occasional special collection of articles in a hard cover book to celebrate a notable member or event, such as an anniversary. The Texas Folklore Society publishes a full-length, hard-cover book each year; every volume contains all kinds of folklore from Texas and the Southwest, including ghosts stories, legends, tales of buried treasure, folk art and crafts, music, and academic research in the field of folklore. The books include photographs, illustrations, and original artwork from members and nationally renowned artists such as Jose Cisneros. The volume published in the fall of 2008 was the sixty-fifth *PTFS*. Many of the books are miscellanies, or collections of articles on all types of folklore solicited from the general membership and presentations at the annual meetings. Some are special topic books that focus on specific areas of folklore, including Mexican-American or African-American folklore, folk architecture, toys and games, and the family saga. F.E. Abernethy's three-part history depicts the life of the Society, set in the context of Texas and American culture throughout its existence. The volume for 2009 will overview the significance of the organization, and provide personal perspective from members who cherish the meetings, members, and lore they have encountered throughout their involvement. Speaking of the legends he so loved, Dobie stated, "People of Texas soil still have a vast body of folk-lore, and whoever will write of them [the legends] with fidelity must recognize that lore as surely as Shakespeare recognized the lore of his folk, as surely as Mr. Thomas Hardy has recognized the lore of Wessex."^{14} Publishing that lore is still at the heart of what TFS does.

Dobie revived the organization after World War I, and over the next two decades he worked to restore interest in folklore and the TFS. He wrote in 1939, "As no other state in the Union contains such a wealth and variety of folklore, such a highly lighted and highly individualistic history, such a sweep of land and land-dwellers, so no other state has an organization in any way approaching the Texas Folklore Society in energy or in output, both as respects quantity and interest."^{15} Dobie was but the first of several individuals who pro-
vided the leadership that guided the Society through challenging times. No organization can rely on one individual, as evidenced by the Missouri Folklore Society, which stopped meeting when its founder and motivating force, Henry Belden, turned its operation over to Wayland Hand in 1920. As secretary-editor, Dobie realized the value of motivated individuals who could assist him with editing and handling the business affairs of the Society.

Mody Boatright succeeded Dobie as secretary-editor and sustained the organization through World War II. Although they were unable to hold annual meetings, Boatright wrote in a newsletter to members in 1944, “When an organization does not meet, there is grave danger that it may become anemic. It is more important than ever that we maintain a vigorous interest in our work and that the flow of manuscripts to the editors be maintained. We willingly sacrifice for the war effort, but we must not become a war casualty.” After two decades at the helm, Boatright asked that Wilson Hudson be elected to the vital role of secretary-editor. Hudson served in that position for several years before turning the job over to F. E. Abernethy, who provided leadership for an amazing thirty-three years. These four individuals were instrumental in energizing the membership and keeping the Society vibrant and strong for over eighty years.

From the beginning, the Society also has been blessed with other people who contributed to the organization and its purpose in significant ways. John Lomax and Leonidas Payne were not only the driving forces behind getting the organization started, but Lomax’s fame also attracted others who brought recognition to the Society. Dorothy Scarborough and Louise Pound were prominent members throughout the Society’s first few decades. Other influential and renowned scholars who presented papers and held offices or who contributed regularly to the publications include Walter Prescott Webb, J. Mason Brewer, Harry Ransom, C. L. Sonnichsen, and Allen Maxwell, the director of the SMU Press. Current active members include Lou Rodenberger, James Ward Lee, Joyce Gibson Roach, Robert Flynn, and Elmer Kelton.

The annual meetings of the Texas Folklore Society are also attended by other important if less well known members. Bess Brown Lomax, wife of founder John A. Lomax, delivered her own papers as well as those of her husband when he was unable to attend. Working anthropologists, photographers, artists, and ranchers have come to share folklore in their fields, as have musicians and storytellers who make their living on the road, keeping their crafts alive through the oral tradition. Some members have become fixtures at the annual meetings because of special talents, or just their personalities. Paul Patterson entertained members with his humorous stories, paper presentations, cowboy poetry, and signing for fifty years before his death just before the meeting in 2008. Lee Haile, an entomologist turned singer and storyteller, for years has been instrumental in leading the traditional Thursday evening celebration at annual meetings. These and many other members, such lay people—secretaries, police officers, farmers, lawyers, journalists, housewives, are all involved in every aspect of the Society’s meetings and publications.
One duty members share is hosting the meetings in a different city in Texas each year. Meetings originally were held on the weekend nearest to San Jacinto day, but to provide additional travel time, the meetings now take place over Easter weekend," from Thursday afternoon until Saturday at noon. Meetings have been held in thirty-two different cities, including Arlington, Alpine, College Station, El Paso, Sherman, San Angelo, Victoria, and Wimberly. Members enjoy tours of local attractions, which are often just as enlightening as the formal presentations. They have been treated to tours of campuses of host universities, local museums, and historic sites such as Fort Chadbourne near San Angelo. They have also enjoyed boat trips around Corpus Christi Bay and Galveston, as well as day trips into Mexico and held sessions out-of-doors at Santa Helena Canyon in Big Bend National Park. During programs and Friday night banquets, members have been entertained by folk singers and groups, dancers, traveling medicine shows, and other folk performers of every sort.

Members who present papers do so to the entire meeting body, something unique among organizations that seem to offer multiple panels and presentations, forcing attendees to choose between them. Those who attend a meeting of the Texas Folklore Society do not have to decide which papers they want to hear, and presenters are guaranteed that their hard work will be heard by an audience of 150-200 people. The one exception to this tradition occurred during the meeting in Victoria in 2002, when a concurrent session was held especially for the many children who regularly attend. Adult members, some of whom slipped away from the regular program to attend the children's session, strongly voiced their disappointment over having had to miss any part of the presentations. A children's session is now frequently part of the regular program, and attendance remains high – both adult and youth members share folklore together, passing traditional knowledge from one generation to another.

Perhaps the most unusual – and seemingly unscholarly – part of our annual meetings is the Thursday evening get-together. Singing folk songs and sharing tales had been part of TFS meetings from the beginning, but in 1956, Hermes Nye, who hosted a popular radio show that featured folk music, introduced members to the term "hootenanny." Nye, the program chair for 1956, wrote to John Q. Anderson, president for that year, suggesting a structured approach to sharing lore in a more entertaining fashion: "Can beer be bought in College Station or is this a silly question? In the interest of art and science I will run a few cases through the blockade if need be. Is there any place where a hootenanny could be arranged thereabouts and a little mead quaffed among friends without any professional careers being cast in the balance?" The hootenanny serves an important role in maintaining the ways of the folk. It provides a casual atmosphere where people are encouraged to share lore through the oral tradition. Members play traditional musical instruments (or any they can play), sing folk songs, recite cowboy poetry, and tell stories – of all kinds. Everyone is welcome to participate, and the activities usually go on late into the night. Even Janis Joplin, a former student of Ab Abernethy's, attended a Hoot in 1965."
The hoots, though they frequently involve adult beverages, are never wild affairs. Rather, they are part of what makes the Society so family-oriented. Many members bring their children or grandchildren, and the kids enjoy taking part in the festivities and performances as much as the adults. In recent years there has been an effort to involve more young members, and college and even high school students have given papers during regular sessions. Several younger members have "grown up" at the annual meetings, attending their first while still in diapers. In 2004, my daughter, Miché Untiedt, became the youngest member ever to give a paper at a meeting of the Texas Folklore Society. It was titled "First Generation Texan." She was fourteen years old.

My involvement in the Texas Folklore Society, and hence my family's, began at the near insistence of a professor at Texas Tech University. Kenneth W. Davis had been teaching a section on folk art during an undergraduate folklore course. When, after much hesitation, I told him that his examination of graffiti was limited because he had said nothing about gang graffiti, he encouraged me to write a paper on what I had learned about the subject through my experiences as a police officer in Lubbock, Texas. I gave my first paper at the meeting in 1996 in Fort Worth. In 2000, at the eighty-fourth annual meeting in Nacogdoches, where the TFS has been headquartered since 1971, that same professor told me that he had heard through the grapevine that I was being considered as the next secretary-editor. Three years later, I made the move to East Texas and Stephen F. Austin State University.

The TFS had moved to Nacogdoches from Austin partly because the University of Texas had not responded to Mody Boatright's numerous requests for administrative assistance adequately. It is surprising how well the organization had operated for so long with so little institutional assistance, especially during the years when financial and editing operations were divided between Austin and Dallas when Boatright was serving as both secretary-editor and head of the English Department at the University of Texas. Even more amazing is the fact that we didn't even have an official certificate of incorporation until 1968 and bylaws did not exist until 1989. Wilson Hudson had made similar requests for assistance from the University of Texas, and they finally provided a part-time secretary to assist with record keeping and typing manuscripts. The TFS obviously felt more support was warranted, especially considering how much recognition it achieved through its publications and meetings. When Hudson resigned his position in 1971, the Society moved to SFA, and the leadership of F. E. Abernethy. President Ralph Steen assured Abernethy that Stephen F. Austin would provide the type of assistance the Society had been requesting from the University of Texas for so long.

Abernethy moved the headquarters into the Rusk Building, Room 108, and led the organization with enthusiasm and foresight for over three decades, a remarkable feat for a leader of any organization. The current headquarters remain in that same office; it has been expanded, but the archives of manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, and artifacts representative of a century's worth of folklore occupy every inch of space we have.
I moved in during the summer of 2003. My primary responsibility is editing the publications. In 1927, J. Frank Dobie asked, "And what, some people are asking, is to be done with all this collected folk-lore? For one thing, a number of intelligent people read it and enjoy it and are instructed by it as they read and enjoy and are instructed by history. This folk-lore is a part of our social history, as legitimate in its way as the best authenticated papers." He went on to explain how many poets referenced the Society's publications, as did Dorothy Scarborough in her novel *The Wind*. Elmer Kelton has pointed out the value of the TFS and the lore presented at its meetings as sources for material in his novels: "Meetings of the Texas Folklore Society are like having the doors of Neiman-Marcus flung wide open, with no cashiers and no guards on duty." Many individuals, as well as schools, libraries, and academic databases that maintain memberships with the TFS, do so primarily for the publications, even if the people writing the checks have never attended a meeting.

In addition to editorial duties, I am also responsible for the day-to-day business of the Society, and I am involved in collecting and maintaining the TFS archives, increasing membership, and continuing my own research in the field of folklore. I plan to continue the traditions that have made the Texas Folklore Society unique and resilient for the last century, but I am also investigating plans to expand its horizons. As early as the 1930s, Mody Boatright saw "...the need for filing and storing collected materials for study by future "social historians, novelists, artists, etc." The Texas Folklore Society created an archive in 1958, but all of its holdings were turned over to the University of Texas in 1966; they formed the core of what is now the Center for Intercultural Studies in Folklore and Ethnomusicology. My plan is to archive all future Society materials on the SFA campus, making the Texas Folklore Society a research base for folklorists from all over the state and the Southwest.

The Texas Folklore Society has a rich history and it continues to set an example for other scholarly organizations in the state and across the nation. The publications, the people, and the fellowship among members that takes place at the annual meetings are what make the Society so special. Those are the features that have also made it endure. According to F. E. Abernethy, "The Texas Folklore Society is that important and that ancient that its progress can be a guide to other institutions and individuals. Some of the nation's most notable [sic] folklore scholars have passed through its portals, have had their professional beginnings in its meetings, and have sent their influence out to other folklorists." We continue to support folklore scholarship in Texas and the Southwest, even if we do it a bit informally at times. We'll celebrate turning 100 at our ninety-third annual meeting in Nacogdoches, April 9-11, 2009. Join us, we'll make you feel like part of the family.

Notes


