

Week 2: Introduction, Part 2

Focus Concepts: How Folklore Develops

Familiar to All

Anyone who has grown up in a particular country can hardly avoid learning at least some of its folklore. Chances are, in fact, you have already enjoyed quite a bit of American folklore. How many of the items in the following list do you recognize?

1. Lucky rabbit's foot
2. "Teddy bear, teddy bear, turn around" jump rope rhyme
3. Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox
4. "O, give me a home where the buffalo roam . . ."
5. Johnny-cake
6. "Blind-man's Bluff"
7. "A penny saved is a penny earned."
8. Jaw-harp
9. The fat old elf who wears a red suit with a white beard and pipe as he drops gifts down your chimney on Christmas, shouting a jolly "ho, ho, ho!"
10. "Bubble gum, bubble gum, in a dish, how many pieces do you wish?"
11. Lone Ranger and Tonto
12. "I know, right?"
13. Licking a finger to tell the direction of the wind
14. "Step on a crack, and you'll break your mother's back."
15. Bigfoot (a.k.a. Yeti, Sasquatch)
16. "Why did the chicken cross the road?" and its variants

This is only a small smattering of American folklore, but chances are you recognize them. While it is true that the richest and purest collections of folklore are found within rural communities,

Americans have moved so much between city and country and to such a wide variety of places that folklore can be found everywhere.

Because of the mysterious ways in which folklore develops, however, it is not always easy to tell whether something is truly folklore or not. Sometimes folklore appears to be genuine (meaning it has been handed down orally over generations and has obscure origins) but, in reality, is the product of clever authorship and marketing! And sometimes folklore can begin life with clear, recorded origins and *become* part of a nation's body of folklore as it becomes so ingrained in a nation's culture that its origins are forgotten. For example, Paul Revere is a historical figure, and the true story of his midnight ride to warn the colonists of the Redcoats' impending attack is recorded by historians. But the version many people believe is the true account actually comes from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous semi-fictional poem, "Paul Revere's Ride"! In other words, the Paul Revere story many Americans know is partly folkloric myth, not history.

To see what I mean, check out the origins of the items in the awareness quiz you just took:

1. Lucky rabbit's foot (**The custom is found in many countries and was probably begun by pre-Christian Celtic people in Britain.**)
2. "Teddy bear, teddy bear, turn around" jump rope rhyme (**author unknown**)
3. Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox (**It was possibly begun by French Canadians during Papineau Rebellion of 1837; other historians say that the tale was created for an advertising campaign in the 20th century, which would make the legends "fakelore"—modern stories passed off as older folktales.**)
4. "O, give me a home where the buffalo roam . . ." (**Origin is unknown, and though some have asserted their knowledge of the identity of the author and composer, their assertions don't agree.**)
5. Johnny-cake (**Origin is somewhat a mystery; however, they were also called "journey cakes." Some thought that they were originally called Shawnee Cake and the colonist slurred the words into Johnny Cake. Modern historians have also found that the word joniken, an American Indian word meaning corn cake could possibly be the origin of the name.**)
6. "Blind-man's Bluff" (or "Buff") (**Origin was the Tudor period in England, possibly played by the courtiers of Henry VIII.**)
7. "A penny saved is a penny earned." (**Though this is how the proverb comes to us today, Benjamin Franklin actually recorded it as "A penny earned is two-pence dear" in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. He began publishing the periodical in 1733, but the maxim was already in use before he made it popular. Other sources say the last phrase is "two-pence clear."**)
8. Jaw-harp (**This folk instrument has been in existence for hundreds of years around the world but was introduced to America by European colonists. The name "jaw harp" is a misnomer, however. Its real name is actually "Jew's harp."**)

9. The fat old elf who wears a red suit with a white beard and pipe as he drops gifts down your chimney on Christmas, shouting a jolly “ho, ho, ho!” **(Of course, you will recognize this character as Santa Claus, whose legend stretches back to the 3rd century. This popular image of Santa Claus, however, only goes back to 1822 with the publication of “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” by Clement Moore.)**
10. “Bubble gum, bubble gum in a dish, how many pieces do you wish?” **(traditional American counting rhyme of unknown origin)**
11. Lone Ranger and Tonto **(It's not true folklore but he's become somewhat of a folkloric hero. Though he emerged in popular culture in a 1930s radio show and subsequently a TV series, there was a real-life inspiration behind the characters—legendary African-American Bass Reeves, an 18th-century former slave who became a Deputy U.S. Marshall. He really is said to have had an American Indian companion who rode with him.)**
12. “I know, right?” **(One source says it originated with Snookie from *Jersey Shore* in 2009, and another source says it was made popular by the movie *Mean Girls* in 2004, but nobody seems to really know for sure how it became a national idiom.)**
13. Licking a finger to tell the direction of the wind **(very old custom but origin unknown)**
14. “Step on a crack, and you’ll break your mother’s back.” **(The saying originated in the late 18-early 20th centuries as a racist superstition; however, the words were a little different and derogatory toward Black people.)**
15. Bigfoot (a.k.a. Yeti, Sasquatch) **(He's legendary throughout the world for centuries, including among the Americans Indians; intense North American interest began in 1958 when construction worker Gerald Crew found a mysterious set of footprints.)**
16. “Why did the chicken cross the road?” and its variants **(The original version was printed in an 1847 edition of *The Knickerbocker*, a New York periodical; it then became part of American folklore and people spread the joke and created variants over time.)**

How folklore develops

Although folklore can originate as a published work or have a clear historical foundation, recall that the purest forms of folklore generally have obscure origins. They were created “once upon a time” by people whose names have often been forgotten. Then they were handed down orally (that is, by word of mouth) throughout a particular geographical region from one generation of people to the next, often undergoing many changes during the transmission. Once the nation’s or region’s people grew so familiar with the tale, poem, or song that they embraced it as a part of their cultural heritage, it became “traditional” and part of their body of folklore. To understand just how a piece of folklore can start as one thing and become quite another over time, read this story of a real young woman and see if you can guess which fairy tale she might have inspired.

[The Tragic Tale of Margarete Von Waldeck—PDF](#)

So, what beloved fairy tale does this unhappy account remind you of? If you guessed “Snow White,” then you know a piece of European folklore. But are folklorists certain that Margarete Von Waldeck is the true origin of “Snow White”? No, as with much folklore they can only speculate. The character also could have been inspired by Maria Sophia Margaretha Catharina von Erthal, another German young woman who lived in the 19th century. Her home was a castle, and it contained a mirror that was given as a gift by her father to her—you guessed it—stepmother. There were even nearby mines in which only men of small stature could fit. Today you can go to Lohr, Germany, and see the mirror, but whether or not the original author of this fairy tale drew inspiration from it is still only speculation.

The other reason we cannot be certain is that other countries have their own very old versions of this story, including Italy, Greece, and Scotland. Perhaps one of these versions inspired the Germanic version and not Maria or Margarete. However, it is certainly very possible that one or both of these women were the inspirations, for the tale was part of Germanic folklore long before the Grimm brothers came around and recorded it in their famous *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* in 1822.

As discussed in lesson 1, though, folklore develops and changes over time. Did “Snow White” stop changing just because it was finally recorded and published by the Grimm brothers? No, it is likely that by now you have probably seen or heard several versions of the story—picture books, novels, the TV show *Once Upon a Time*, perhaps a play or puppet show, and, of course, the most famous American version of all, Disney’s 1937 full-length animated movie. They are all different from the original and from each other, yet all are recognizable as “Snow White.” Not only that, you could probably tell a child the story at bedtime without needing a book to help you. This European folktale belongs to Americans now, too, having crossed the ocean for new generations to enjoy.

Assignment

- 1) Choose another popular fairytale or nursery tale and research its origins and development over time. Present the story’s history by creating a poster (any size) that shows the story’s history. Depending on the story, you may want to use a timeline, tree, arrows, or other kind of graphic to show the story’s development.
- 2) Let’s talk a moment about our favorite subject—food! Now, why would we talk about food after a lesson about how folklore develops? We will begin doing a lot of other things next week when we begin our study of American Indian myths. A study of folklore, however, is not complete without a sampling of the traditional foods of our rich and varied nation. This will take a little planning on your part, so I would like to introduce your food-sampling assignment now. If you enjoy eating like I do, this might be your favorite assignment, because you will get to enjoy it throughout the course. Here are the instructions for the food-sampling project, which you will begin next week.

At the beginning of the study of each region/group, research its traditional foods and choose one or two to sample. I will remind you of this each week. Sampling a traditional food does not have to be a complex exercise in cooking. Many foods are very simple and familiar to you already, such as popcorn and maple syrup. Try to choose a food you haven't tried before. If you do choose a familiar food, try preparing it the way the region/group traditionally did (such as over a fire for popcorn).

SAMPLE