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The Life Story*

A life story is, simply, a person's story of his or her life, or of what he or she thinks is a significant part of that life. It is therefore a personal narrative, a story of personal experience, and, as it emerges from conversation, its ontological status is the spoken word, even if the story is transcribed and edited for the printed page. The storyteller trusts the listener(s) and the listener respects the storyteller, not interrupting the train of thought until the story is finished. That is not to say the listener is passive as a doorknob; he nods assent, interposes a comment, frames a relevant question; indeed, his presence and reactions are essential to the story. He may coincidentally be a folklorist, but his role is mainly that of a sympathetic friend.

This essay is directed to folklorists whose fieldwork, like my own, involves talking to people and finding out about their lives. My intention is to define and develop an approach to the life story as a self-contained fiction, and thus to distinguish it sharply from its historical kin: biography, oral history, and the personal history (or "life history," as it is called in anthropology).

Among the dimensions of folk culture which Richard Dorson observed during his 1968 field trip to Gary, Indiana, and East Chicago, was something he called "personal history." In the 1970 article which resulted, "Is There a Folk in the City?" he told folklorists to cast aside worries over whether the personal history is a traditional oral genre, and urged them to collect the "thousands of sagas created from life experiences that deserve, indeed cry for, recording." Dorson caught the documentary spirit of the times. The following decade witnessed a rebirth of interest in the experiences of ordinary Americans, especially blue-collar workers, racial and ethnic minorities, and women. Not since the New Deal era was there such a burst of documentary energy. Studs Terkel's books became best-sellers; Robert Coles's books influenced public policy; Theodore Rosengarten's life of black Alabama sharecropper Ned Cobb won the National Book Award; professional sociologists turned out monographs on the lives and opinions of the so-called silent majority; hundreds of oral history projects were born at the local level, thousands of people were interviewed, and millions of pages of typescript were produced. Folklore's contribution to the documentation decade, in the popular mind, resides in the Foxfire concept of education, and the resulting Foxfire books, now including five volumes.

In the midst of all the documentation it is well to recall what Thoreau wrote: "Much is published, but little is printed." Most of the published documents appear to be life stories but are not. That is, they give the impression that someone is speaking about his life in his own voice, but in reality someone else has muffled and distorted it. What appears to be a person telling a life story is usually an informant answering a series of questions. Then by a common ruse the interview comes to masquerade as a life story. The interviewer or an editor selects the relevant answers; arranges them according to editorial purposes, be they chronological, topical or historical; smooths out the talk for the printed page; and then removes the questions. This false alchemy is clear enough when one compares Terkel's writings with his tapes; it is a brazen art in the hands of Coles (who does not use a tape recorder), it is obvious in the two or three segments of each Foxfire book given over to personal narratives; and it is evident, also, in the relatively small number of personal documents which professional folklorists have published.

The reason we transform interviews into life stories on the printed page without much uneasiness is that we habitually fail to distinguish story from history when the medium is talk. Dorson's choice of the phrase "personal history" is illuminating, for he used it interchangeably with the phrase "life story" when recalling how he happened upon examples of them: "Several

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* A slightly different version of this essay formed the basis of an illustrated lecture before the Graduate Colloquium in Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania on October 1, 1979. I am grateful for their invitation and for their suggestions in the discussion which followed.

1 Studs Terkel's *Division Street America* (New York: Random House, 1967) was the first of four volumes; Robert Coles's *Children of Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967) was the first of five; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers* (New York: Knopf, 1974).


3 *Walden*, chapter 4: "Sounds."

4 Interviewed by Dick Cavett on a television program I saw in Boston early in 1978, Coles said the tape recorder made the people he spoke with nervous. He said he learned to catch language by watching William Carlos Williams emerge from house calls and jot down his patients' phrases.
memorable life stories," he wrote, "came to my ears without prompting." As a good historian, Dorson knows that story is not the same as history. If he sometimes conflates the two, it may be because his concept of folk history relies on the transformation of oral traditions and personal documents, set in the structures of everyday life, into the history of the folk.  

The difference between story and history is perhaps best understood through what Charles Olson, that most historical of poets, labeled "stance." Olson identified two complementary stances toward life: fiction (story, including poetry); and history. In its root sense, fictio, fiction is not a lie but a "making"; whereas history, istoria, is "found out." To Herodotus, the Greek verb poiein (from which our poet derives) meant "to make," whereas the noun histor means a "learned man" and the verb istorin meant "to find out for oneself." A story is made, but history is found out. Story is language at play; history is language at work. The language of story is charged with power: it creates. The language of history is charged with knowledge: it discovers. Story is a literature of the imagination; history, though it be imaginative, drives toward fact. The generation of historians who were my teachers believed, along with R. G. Collingwood, that history was a branch of the humanities. So long as history is humanistic, it is a complement of story; but they are not the same and certainly not interchangeable.

"The real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" was how Wordsworth characterized the source of his own poetic diction, contrasting it with the language of artifice used by poets who had been long out of touch with genuine human sympathy. The romantic baggage which accompanied Wordsworth's revolutionary ideas placed a value on rustic life which few modern folklorists would publicly embrace; nonetheless, his interest in the common man and woman of the countryside was chiefly an interest in the renewing power of a natural language that arose from deeply felt, personal experience. This, of course, is the language of the life story, not the language of history. It is particularly not the language of history today, for increasingly during the past twenty years the narrative mode of writing history has been attacked for its failure to meet adequate standards of scientific explanation. Many historians now believe that so-called covering-law explanations—that is, explanations of specific events by a general law which "covers" the specific conditions—are the only valid form of historical explanation. Whatever its value in historical writing, this scientific criterion is irrelevant to explanation in storytelling. Why it is irrelevant is best illustrated by an example, a life story. The following life story is the religious conversion narrative of blues singer Son House, which he told to me in response to my asking why he waited until adulthood to become a blues singer. I have transcribed it verbatim from my field tape:

When I was a kid, a youngster, a teen—a young teenager and up like that I was more churchified. Then that's mostly all I could see into. Cause they'd had us go, we'd had to go to the Sabbath school every Sunday. We didn't miss goin to no Sabbath school. We'd be into that and then in this church there, some of the ones a little larger than me and like that, and it come time of year for em to run revival meetin. Some pastor come to open up the revival meetin, oh, for a week or more. [Coughs.] Well, we'd all be goin to the thing they call the mourners' bench. Gettin on your knees, you know, and lettin the old folks pray for you. Yeah, and in a couple of days or weeks, somebody'd come up,oller out they had something. They had religion. They'd squall round man, go on. So they left me thataway I guess, oh about, near bout six or eight months sometime. I didn't fall for it because I, I figured they was puttin on and I didn't want to be puttin on. I wanted mine to be real and so I just kept on until finally, [clears throat] the next session, I said, "Is there—this one time I'm just goin see it—is the way to get this thing religion they goin round here talkin about, puttin on and goin on." I prayed and played, commenced prayin, man, every night, workin in the field, and plowin the mule and everythin. Work all day hard, and go on home, whew, tryin to pray, tryin to pray, and work. So, finally, I kept on like that until they come back home that night, middle of the night after the pastor turned out. So I went on home. And I was livin down in the lower part of the place from where my daddy an' they stayed, down to my cousin's. Went down there, I didn't want to be up there around the old folks. And man, I went out back of the house a little bit, in this old alfalfa field out there. I had been scared of snakes, 'cause snakes would be bad in the summertime, you know, crawlin through them weeds and things. But I wasn't studyin them snakes then. I'd say they better get out of the way if they don't want to get their heads mashed off. [Laughs.] I went on. I was there in that alfalfa field and I got down. Pray. Gettin on my knees in that alfalfa. Dew was fallin. And man, I prayed and I prayed and I prayed and I waited and man I hollered out. Found out then. I said, "Yes, it is somethin to be got too, 'cause I got it now!" [Laughs.] Sure did. Went on back there to that house and told my cousin Robert and all them bout that and went, walked about two miles and a little better, and up to another white fellow's house, and woke him up and told him all about it. We was workin for him, too. But I wouldn't care how tough he was or what not. "Get up out of that bed and listen to what I got to say." [Laughs.] He thought I

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4 Dorson, "Is There a Folk," p. 67.
7 Collingwood's views may be read in his The Idea of History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948).
8 Preface to Lyrical Ballad (1805). The quoted phrase appears in its second sentence.
was crazy! Yeah. Name was, we all called him Mister Keaton, T. F. Keaton. Yeah, I say, "Oh yeah!" Found out better now.11

On hearing this story, a doubting Thomas might object that it contains a hollow core; that the before and after of conversion is described, but not the moment itself. Someone who had undergone a similar experience and was less of an empiricist would perhaps say such a demand was philistine. But proof is not at issue here. Nor is it a question of whether the religion Son House was converted to is a delusion. What is at issue is a human being recollecting, in a state of vivid sensation, a critical moment in his life, and to a degree reexperiencing it by means of storytelling. Covering laws stating conditions under which conversion is probable operate in an entirely different dimension. A sophisticated religious critique might score Son House for confusing an intensely felt experience with the validation of a world view, but no critic could rob him of the memory of his religious conversion. His life story is not a historical description, and it does not obey historical laws. It is a fiction, a making, and, like all powerful fictions, it drives toward enactment.

**Biography, Oral History, and the Personal History**

Among the historical kin to the life story are biography, oral history, and the personal history (or anthropological life history). Any folklorist interested in the life story would do well to become familiar with the procedures of these historical genres, if only to avoid them. Folklorists practicing these historical genres, which of course are perfectly legitimate folkloristic interests, should, on the other hand, understand why they cannot pretend, to themselves or others, that their products are life stories.

The word *biography* came into English with Dryden, who in 1683 defined it as "the history of particular men's lives."12 The biographical impulse is praise for an exemplary life, and so the public function of most biography is didactic, either implicitly or explicitly.13 Modern standards of professionalism in biographical writing, however, dictate that the biographer owe his allegiance not to his subject but the facts of his subject's life. In *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek explains why the biographer adopts historical methods:

The problems of a biographer are simply those of a historian. He has to interpret his documents, letters, accounts by eye-witnesses, reminiscences, autobiographical statements, and to decide questions of genuineness, trustworthiness of witnesses, and the like. In the actual writing of biography he encounters the problems of chronological presentation, of selection, of discretion or frankness. The rather extensive work which has been done on biography as a genre deals with such questions, questions in no way specifically literary.14

The biographer is thus a historian, a life writer aiming to describe and explain the circumstances of his subject's life, personality, and influence. Yet because his product is the record, sometimes even the story, of a life, the historical imagination will sometimes crawl out from the avalanche of data available to the modern biographer and turn its subject into a palpable human being, usually by giving him or her words to say. Boswell, the first modern biographer, catches Johnson's person through his conversation more than anything else. When we hear him, then we know him, or at least we think we do.

A biography which announces itself as the writer's account of someone else's life is not likely to be confused with the life story because there is no question about who is the author. The question of authorship is central to the problems of oral history and the personal history, but the lines are clearly drawn in biography. Biography per se has not had much of an appeal to folklorists, particularly in recent years, when the main lines of research and writing have concentrated in collection, annotation, and analysis of texts; in folkloristic theory; in material culture; and in the application of folklore to the concerns of local, tradition-bearing groups.15

Oral history, like biography, proceeds from a historical rather than a fictive stance. Like biography, its overriding concern is with factual accuracy. Unlike biography, its focus is chiefly on events, processes, causes and effects rather than on the individuals whose recollections furnish oral history with its raw data. A recent development, oral history dates from just after World War II, when Allan Nevins of Columbia University convinced his institution to become a repository for interviews with the men—and in most cases they were men—who had "made history." Historians were trained to ask lawyers' questions in an effort to get evidence from living witnesses. By 1974 more than 300


institutions in the United States housed more than 500 different oral history projects.\footnote{For textbooks in collecting and editing oral history, see, for example, Oral History: From Tape to Type (Chicago: American Library Association, 1977), and Willa R. Baum, Transcribing and Editing Oral History (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977).}

Not all the projects in oral history are elitist. Possibly in response to the climate of the "new" social history, oral history projects now sometimes focus on the experiences of ordinary Americans. When Richard Dorson called for a folk history built up from the personal histories whose collection he urged, he could not have anticipated the local oral history projects that were springing up even as he was writing. Yet his assessment that professional historians would not be the ones to undertake folk history projects is still correct.\footnote{Dorson, "History of the Elite," pp. 239-241.} The new social history's emphasis upon quantification and its distrust of literary evidence drive historians into harder and harder "scientific" lines in order to maintain professional respectability.\footnote{For a review, see Lawrence Veysey, "The 'New' Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing," \textit{Reviews in American History}, 7 (1979), 1-12.} Charts, graphs, tables, Greek symbols, and a variety of English sentences reduced to laws expressed by mathematical equations now stare out from the pages of the historical journals, while personal documents are left far behind in the quantitative analysis.

Scientism of this sort has not yet appeared among folk-culturally oriented oral histories, but they suffer from other problems. The Appalachian Oral History Project, for example, based at Alice Lloyd College in eastern Kentucky, began interviewing residents of central Appalachia in 1971. In 1977 it published \textit{Our Appalachia: An Oral History} and introduced the book as a "social history" which "has provided the opportunity to let residents of the region tell their own story" (my italics).\footnote{\textit{Our Appalachia}, ed. Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 3.} Here is another illustration of the confusion of history with story. This oral history is really the product of highly directed interviews, and we know this because the editors had the good sense to print some of the questions. When we come across a leading question in \textit{Our Appalachia}, such as "What was it about John Wright that made his word law among the children?" (p. 60), we know we are not listening to a story. Instead, we are reading the result of a collaborative venture between the historians and the informants. This collaboration is the nature of oral history, as Edward D. Ives recognizes in his introduction to \textit{Argyle Boom}, an oral history of log transportation on the Penobscot River:

\footnote{Argyle Boom, ed. Edward D. Ives, \textit{Northeast Folklore}, 17 (1976), 18.}

The descriptions men like Ernest Kennedy and Alphonse Martin gave came in response to the questions the students put to them, and new questions grew out of their responses. Oral history interviews are the joint creations of two people, interviewer and interviewee. . . .

In oral history the balance of power between the informants and historian is in the historian's favor, for he asks the questions, sorts through the accounts for the relevant information, and edits his way toward a coherent whole—as, for example, Ives quite properly did in \textit{Argyle Boom}. But in the life story the balance tips the other way, to the storyteller, while the listener is sympathetic and his responses are encouraging and directive. If the conversation is printed, it should ideally be printed verbatim, or if presented on film it should ideally be unedited.

Folk-cultural oral histories often share a curious editing technique which is worth comment here. It may be observed in the aforementioned oral histories and the Foxfire books. The editors do not hesitate to splice together sections of one or more interviews outside the chronological order of the telling. They do not hesitate to delete sections of interviews or words from the informants' sentences. Yet they seem to believe that by bracketing words which they supply for continuity, thereby distinguishing them from words which the informants actually spoke, they are remaining faithful to their informants' language. This bracketing procedure seems to me to pretend to a degree of scrupulousness that is unjustified, given the editorial liberties taken in excision and rearrangement. The false claims that result—and I am aware of the problem because I have been one of the claimers—can sometimes even go so far as to convince the editor that what results is what the informant had in mind and would have said if he had been more articulate.

Of the historical kin to the life story, the personal history is the most problematic, for it is a written account of a person's life based on spoken conversations and interviews. The anthropological literature is filled with hundreds of these personal histories, called life histories, while folklorists and ethnomusicologists have produced perhaps two dozen. In his 1965 treatise on the anthropological life history, L. L. Langness views the enterprise as essentially biographical rather than autobiographical, and in this he is surely correct.\footnote{L. L. Langness, \textit{The Life History in Anthropological Science} (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 1-7.} In his review of the literature he acknowledges that anthropologists
collect life histories primarily to obtain information about culture, not individuals. Given its orientation toward culture, it is no wonder that the typical life history strips the individual of his voice. Langness advises the would-be collector that "Life history materials are seldom the product of the informant's clearly articulated, expressive, chronological account of his life," without stopping to ask whether that might be the fault of the collectors' close questioning and frequent interruptions, or perhaps the result of difficulties in translation from the native language. Langness continues: "This means that a certain amount of editing must be done ... particularly when commercial publication is concerned." In other words it is the pressure of the marketplace which forces the anthropologist to take the raw material from choppy interviews and turn it into a biography which pretends to be an autobiography. But it is just as likely that these pressures repose in his colleagues, his readers, and he himself, all of whom might find verbatim transcripts of the interviews tedious, unrewarding, and at times embarrassing.

My position with regard to life histories is similar to but not so radical as Linda Dégh's. She writes that "The anthropological concept of life history collection is unacceptable to the folklorist, basically because of the lack of accurate and exacting methods of recording and publication which reflects the lack of interest in human creativity manifested in the formulation of the narrative." That creativity cuts both ways, for the life history narrative is as much the creation of the anthropologist as of the informant. But the anthropological concept of life history collection cannot always be "unacceptable" to the folklorist. Sometimes it is impossible to obtain a life story, either because of poor rapport, or because the informant is unwilling, taciturn by nature, or incapable of a sustained narrative. Yet the life history of an important tradition bearer whose life story cannot be obtained will surely contribute folk-cultural information. The anthropological literature contains some life histories, moreover, which are products of sympathetic conversations among friends; and they usually can be told from the rest because, Langness not-

withstanding, the informants are articulate and expressive in the context of friendship.

Folklorists have not published as large a proportion of their informants' personal histories as anthropologists have. But since the personal history is closer to the life story than biography or oral history is, folkloric publications in personal history, however small their number, merit attention here. I shall concentrate on easily accessible, English-language examples. In this genre, then, we may note the early influence of the Lomaxes: John Lomax was the guiding force behind the WPA slave narrative collection and the life histories published in These Are Our Lives and Such as Us, while Alan Lomax recorded Jelly Roll Morton's life story for the Library of Congress in 1938. The resulting life history, Mister Jelly Roll, exhibits unusually strong tension between story and history. Morton was a splendid narrator and Lomax knew it: "To every query his responses were so instant and so vivid with time and place and who was there and what they said, that I knew Jelly was seeing it in fancy if not in actual recollection." But much of what Morton said was extravagant, and in writing his book Lomax was torn between his interest in getting the facts about the birth of jazz and this incredible and bizarre relic who was desperate to tell his boastful story. Lomax finally decided it was personal history that he was hearing: "That hot May afternoon in the Library of Congress a new way of writing history began—history with music cues, the music evoking recollection and poignant feeling—history intoned out of the heart of one man, sparkling with dialogue and purple with ego" (p. xiii). Mister Jelly Roll is an extraordinary mix of fact and fiction, life story, personal history, and oral history, served up by a folklorist whose creative energies were a sympathetic match for his informant's.

The majority of folkloric personal histories have taken musicians for their subjects. My own published attempts in this genre have been no better than most. I miscalled the personal histories of Lazy Bill Lucas and Baby Doo Caston autobiographies, put their statements into chronological order, and

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83 Ibid., pp. 8-12.
84 Ibid., p. 48.
86 A view similar to my own is expressed in Gelya Frank, "Finding the Common Denominator: A Phenomenological Critique of Life History Method," Ethos, 7 (1979), 68-94. I am grateful to Barbara Tedlock for pointing this out and showing me Frank's essay.
87 See, for example, Sidney Mintz, Worker in the Cane (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), and Son of Old Man Mist: A Navaho Autobiography Recorded by Walter Dyk (1938; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967).
then deleted my questions. A few years ago when I had second thoughts about the standard editorial procedure, I decided to publish Son House’s personal history as a verbatim transcript of our conversations. Robin Morton’s life of John Maguire is similarly a personal history in the words of the informant, and the product of a conversation among friends. Here is what he says about his nondirective interviewing method, and it is good advice:

First of all I knew John very well before I ever started this project. I discussed with him what I wanted to do and he agreed to “have a go.” So we sat down with an empty tape on the recorder and began. I first asked a very general question—“Tell me about your early life.” I always asked general questions except when I wanted something explained in more detail. Once I had asked a question I sat quietly and let John talk. Even when he seemed to have finished I sat with an expectant look in the hope that he would continue, as he often did. Only when he seemed to have nothing more to say did I continue with a subsidiary query, or go on to a new area altogether. To the extent that I asked questions at all the “story” probably tells us much about me and my interests as it does about John. It is difficult to see how one sidesteps such a danger completely.

One cannot sidestep such a danger so long as there is an audience for the story in the anticipatory mind of a storyteller who conceives of his task as communicating with that audience. But that only means that unless the informant is talking to himself, what seems a “danger” is inherent in any conversation, and the folklorist therefore should pay attention to how the talker’s ideas about who their audience is shapes their conversation. This aspect of the relation of text and context has of course been the focus of a great deal of recent theory from folklorists who conceive of folklore as “communication” based on “performance.” But despite Morton’s awareness of Maguire’s story as a collaboration between the two of them, he followed the accepted historical editing practice and rearranged Maguire’s answers according to topic, whereupon he deleted his questions and departed, ghostlike, from the text. The resulting personal history serves mainly as a vehicle for introducing the songs in Maguire’s repertoire, whose texts and tunes are printed. In a similar vein is Roger Abrahams’ A Singer and Her Songs, a book that contains important information about Almeda Riddle’s song sources and her aesthetic criteria as well as the texts and tunes of a large portion of her repertoire. Although the book is in Riddle’s own words, Abrahams correctly claims that it centers on “the ways in which folklore has persisted, emphasizing the hows and why of performance and transmission.” We learn about Granny Riddle’s personal history from time to time insofar as it bears on her songs, but the edited product is not meant to be a life history; and at times one feels in it the cumulative effect of Granny Riddle introducing her entire song repertoire at a folk festival.

Two folkloric personal histories which do not concern themselves with musicians are focused on work as a means of individual identity. Me and Fannie is billed as the “oral autobiography” of Maine woodsman Ralph Thornton, (Fannie, his wife, is seldom on center stage, but her presence is felt.) Resulting from tape-recorded conversations, it was edited by the interviewer, Wayne Reuel Bean, who chronologized and spliced, deleted his questions, and then supplied comments for continuity. If it deserves to be called an autobiography, it is because Thornton himself selected the material from the interviews; and this selection gave Thornton a greater degree of control than most personal history informants are allowed. Best regarded as a memoir, Me and Fannie is an unusually external account, with almost no reference to Thornton’s inner life. Page after page goes by in which he recalls the adventures of his workday life, mostly as a cook; and it comes as a surprise when, toward the end of his chronicle, he casually observes that he does not like cooking. Another personal history concerned mainly with work is Bruce Jackson’s A Thief’s Primer, but here the account is more introspective, and Jackson, who in editing did not delete all his interviewer’s questions, shows himself responsible to the ironies of criminal pride and self-respect which permeate his informant’s recollections.

Even when they are mistakenly presented as stories, biography, oral history, and the personal history share a historical rather than fictional base. The editing procedures, the data gathering, the research plans, and the resulting publications are oriented toward factual accuracy. The historical method is well suited to the folklorist seeking folk-cultural information. But it sometimes happens that in doing fieldwork we folklorists find ourselves caught up with the lives of our informants, not so much because of what they

30 J. J. Titon, From Blues to Pop. The brochure notes to Lazy Bill Lucas, 12” LP, Philo Records CRC 1007 (North Ferrurburg, Vt., 1974) contain Lucas’ personal history.
35 Ibid., p. 73.
can do, or what they know, but who they are. In their stories of personal experience, they try to tell us.

The Life Story as a Fiction

Folklorists have published few personal documents sensitive to the fictive aspects of the conversational situation in which a person tells the story of his or her life or a significant portion of it. I have argued that most personal documents in which the informant supposedly speaks in his or her own voice are historical in nature, the folklorist destroying by design or accident the fictive potential inherent in the original conversations. One exception is Linda Dégh’s *People in the Tobacco Belt: Four Lives*, a verbatim publication of four life stories, with brief analyses of the stories, storytellers, and their backgrounds. Although Dégh uses the terms life story and life history interchangeably, her rejection of standard anthropological field and publication methods and her interest in the individual storytellers led her to publish the transcripts of conversations in which they told her, and usually a few friends and family members as well, about their experiences as Hungarian immigrants in Canada. Reviewing this book in *Folklore Forum*, Larry Danielson pointed out that “On occasion . . . the informant’s remarks indicate that a question has been asked, though not included in the transcription,” and that probably “certain speaker’s designations disappeared between transcription and publication. Such details may be trivial, but they assume importance if we are to rely on texts as unedited and authoritative.” Now of course the mere transcription of the spoken word onto the printed page involves editing, for one must decide at the very least how to render it, in prose or ethnopoetic transcription, for example. And even if one chooses the conventional rendering in prose paragraphs, one must edit to the extent of inserting punctuation, which, as anyone who has ever done it knows, can lead to difficult decisions about emphasis and meaning. This aside, I take it that since there was no reason for them, the omissions in Dégh’s published transcript were editorial accidents, pure and simple.

How, then, is the dearth of unadulterated life stories in the folkloric literature to be explained? The most insidious reason, I have argued, is the conflation of story with history and the transformation of the one into the other. Kenneth Goldstein’s *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore* is an interesting case in point. Thorough and useful though it is, it exhibits the classic difficulties of approaching fiction as if it were, or ought to be, history. Using the framework of cultural anthropology to approach the “data” of folklore, Goldstein writes: “One of the most important contributions which the field worker can make to folklore studies is the gathering of data for use in personal history documents. As they apply to the field of folklore, such documents may be defined as the story of the life (or some part of it) of an individual folklore informant. The data for these documents are obtained mainly by the use of interview methods. . . .” (my italics). To be fair, Goldstein elsewhere is sensitive to the advantages of a fictional stance when he advocates verbatim publication of interviews when the informant describes in detail a topic or activity of interest to folklorists, and when he reveals his preference for the nondirective interview. Still, the Guide’s folk-cultural orientation dominates, and the would-be field-worker comes away with the clear impression that life stories of tradition bearers ought to be treated as historical documents.

Aside from the conflation of story and history, other causes may be cited to help explain the scarcity of folkloric life stories presented and interpreted as fiction. One is that folklorists are better read in contemporary anthropological verbal-art theory than in contemporary literary theory. Another is the debate over the folkloristic legitimacy of the personal experience story. Another is the hit-and-run approach to fieldwork, a method based on the assumption that folklore consists of items to be collected on field trips. Armed with finding-aids and eager for data, the hit-and-run field-worker is like the botanist who brings back a great variety of specimens for analysis and preservation. Under these conditions of efficiency, any life stories collected are likely to be mined for traditional elements, then stored on reels of tape until they are erased for future field trips. Fortunately, this type of field collecting is on the wane, though why some of us accept it from—even encourage it in—our students is beyond me. But as folklorists increasingly come to develop friendships with their informants over several months, even years, time, the word “informant” becomes inappropriately impersonal. As those friendships deepen, the

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37 See note 25.


39 For examples of ethnopoetic transcription, see Dennis Tedlock, *Finding the Center* (New York: Dial, 1972). See also the journal *Alkenings: Ethnopoetics*.


41 Ibid., pp. 123–124, 127.

42 See, for example, the special double issue of the *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 14:1–2 (1977), which is devoted to the personal experience story.
opportunities for life story conversations increase. Seeking cultural information, the folklorist is likely to conceive of these conversations as life history. But if he is interested in his friend as a person, and what it is that makes him or her a tradition bearer, he will look to the life story as an expression of personality and self-conception—the who and why rather than just the what and how of his friend's life.

Personality is the main ingredient in the life story. It is a fiction, just like the story; and even if the story is not factually true, it is always true evidence of the storyteller’s personality. The most interesting life stories expose the inner life, tell us about motives. Like all good autobiography, as opposed to mere chronicling, the life story’s singular achievement is that it affirms the identity of the storyteller in the act of the telling. The life story tells who one thinks one is and how one thinks one came to be that way.

The naive listener might assume a life story to be a truthful, factual account of the storyteller’s life. The assumption is that the storyteller has only to penetrate the fog of the past, and that once a life is honestly remembered it can be sincerely recounted. But the more sophisticated listener understands that no matter how sincere the attempt, remembering the past cannot render it as it was, not only because memory is selective, but because the life storyteller is a different person now than he was ten or thirty years ago; and he may not be able to, or even want to, imagine that he was different then. The problem of how much a person may change without losing his or her identity is the greatest difficulty facing the life storyteller, whose chief concern, after all, is to affirm his identity and account for it. So life storytelling is a fiction, a making, an ordered past imposed by a present personality upon a disordered life. Yeats acknowledged in the preface to his Autobiographies, “I have changed nothing to my knowledge, and yet it must be that I have changed many things without my knowledge.” We do not turn to Yeats’s autobiographies if we want to know the facts of Yeats’s life; we turn to them if we want to know Yeats.

We can learn much from life stories. We can learn how the tradition bearer thinks of himself, and why he or she continues to make chairs or play the fiddle or preach as the Spirit moves. What is it about this person, we ask, that makes him an artist in the face of all the pressures to stop? What makes him an exceptional artist? Obviously his self-conception, who he thinks he is, is greatly responsible for what he does. We get behind the mere facts of his life, the historical data, when we let him tell his story. So conceived, the life story need not be “used” for folk-cultural information or as a “specimen” of oral performance or as “data” for oral history.

The life story need not be “used” for anything, because in the telling it is a self-sufficient and self-contained fiction. Fictions go on all the time, as Gertrude Stein pointed out: “I do not believe that anything is or can be more interesting than the fact that everybody is always telling everything and that anybody can in their way go on listening or not go on listening. But everybody can feel about telling and about listening like that. Anybody can.” We are curious, and the life story is intrinsically interesting. If not, we do not listen. If it is interesting and we do listen we are moved with pleasure. Stein also wrote that, “If you live a daily life every minute of the day the description of that daily life every day must be moving, it must fill you with complete emotion, and it must at the same time be soothing.” The life story told to a sympathetic listener is a fiction complete in itself. The trouble with most poets, Wordsworth wrote, was that they could not fix their gaze steadily upon their subject. They jumped away too quickly, classified it, transformed it, used it. Let us not use the life story too quickly; let us know it first. Charles Olson had this in mind when he wrote:

... that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. That is what we are confronted by, not the thing’s “class,” any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its relevance to ourselves who are the experience of it (whatever it may mean to someone else, or whatever other relations it may have).

An approach to the life story which recognizes its validity as a fiction, quite

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45 See Spacks, p. 28. Her analysis of autobiography as a genre is outstanding.
Pleistocene Animals in Folk Memory*

Mammals and mankind lived together in North America millennia ago. One human even carved the image of a mammoth on a shell, but because of geological ambiguity in the Delaware River Valley it is impossible to assign a precise date to the occurrence. It could be an extraordinarily ancient artifact (circa 40,000 B.C.), but it is safer to assign a transitional Paleo-Archaic date to it (circa 8000 B.C.). The latter date will occasion little surprise among archaeologists, even though there is little actual documentation of the relation of mammoths and *Homo sapiens.*

At an unknown date the mammoths were gone (by 6000 B.C. at the latest), but *Homo sapiens* continued. In the wake of the Delaware River find, one archaeologist urged the examination of Native American legends for examples of the retention of the mammoth in oral tradition. She offered a Huron legend of a "great Moose" as "an obvious attempt on the part of people who had never seen a mammoth or mastodon, and hence had no idea of its size, to relate the story of the largest animal they knew." This is by no means obvious, but it is not an implausible idea, since the question of the retention of Pleistocene megafauna in Native American folktale has been continually debated by scholars for two centuries.

The problem is of some importance, despite its antiquarian subject matter, for all disciplines which deal with human prehistory must confront the problem of the persistence of folk memory. In the light of the great antiquity of some motifs in Native American lore, it is tempting to seek in legend collections ancient ethnographic data applicable to current archaeological problems.

It is an old temptation. As the New World began to produce fossil bones in

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* An earlier version of this study will be published in C. B. Curren's *The Pleistocene in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: Bulletin of the Alabama Museum of Natural History, in press.) This revised version has benefited from comments by Richard M. Borson, Wayland D. Hard, and Richard S. Thill at the "Conference on Creatures of Legendry" (University of Nebraska at Omaha, October, 1978).


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