



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at [info@nyfolklore.org](mailto:info@nyfolklore.org). Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE  
129 Jay Street  
Schenectady, NY 12305  
518/346-7008  
Fax 518/346-6617  
Email: [info@nyfolklore.org](mailto:info@nyfolklore.org)  
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

# The “Lore” Back to the “Folk”

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

We all know that time flies when we’re having fun. As for me, I can scarcely believe that thirty years have passed since the summer of 1979, when Valerie Ingram and I, both recent Cooperstown “folkies,” organized a conference we called *Getting the “Lore” Back to the “Folk”* for anyone interested in folklore, particularly applied folklore, as it was called in those days. It was the ’70s, and this was a new field.

We had recently completed a federally funded survey of traditions and practitioners in our county and had lots of information that we weren’t at all sure what to do with. As we had gained great knowledge from over 600 informants, we decided that we owed the local public some insights into what we were learning. We planned a festival featuring all kinds of traditional artists, organized a small exhibit of local folk art for our county’s history museum, and published weekly columns in area newspapers about one topic or another from our research.

Despite our training as folklorists, we wondered frequently about what we should—and shouldn’t—be doing, philosophically and ethically, as we went about our work. What were the effects of our fieldwork on informants? How should we be preparing and storing these valuable materials we were collecting? How would we speak to reporters or community groups about our “finds”? Is a festival on a college campus the best way to show off folk culture? And more. We didn’t study those things in graduate school. We called upon colleagues in other places and discovered they faced many of the same challenges. What to do?

The more we thought about it, the more we wanted to be part of a larger conversation with professors and practitioners and thought such an event might appeal to others. So, with an equally large measure of naïveté (What really *were* the questions?) and chutzpah (Why should we expect the folklore world to come to us?), I proposed a three-day conference to the New York

Council for the Humanities. Fortunately, they bought the idea, and we were off. My institution was the willing host, so Canton was the place and early summer was the time.

Asking busy scholars and professionals to travel all the way to Canton was a challenge, and I’m amazed in retrospect that it was so easy. Just consider this roster of invited speakers who agreed to participate: Alan Jabbour (American Folklife Center), Bruce Buckley (Cooperstown Graduate Program), Sandy Ives (University of Maine), Chuck and Nancy Martin-Perdue (University of Virginia), Susan Kalčík (Smithsonian), and Judy Peiser (Center for Southern Folklore). We would later find that the issues were as perplexing and interesting to all of them as they were to us. By the time June came and sixty-six people began to arrive, we knew we had really stumbled onto something in organizing this event. There were graduate students and public school teachers, 4-H leaders and economic developers, museum directors, librarians, and more.

As those more involved in the field at the time knew, there were already strong disagreements between folklorists in academic institutions and those in public settings. On the very first evening, Alan Jabbour made a strong case for applied folklore—and for why we had come together—in his keynote speech, when he confronted the controversies of pursuing folklore as a scholarly discipline versus a public service.

For all three days, I personally was spellbound by the remarkable talks, comments, and questions from a fascinating audience. Bruce Buckley spoke of the uses and abuses of fieldwork; Sandy Ives talked about accessibility and protection of archival materials; Chuck and Nan Perdue cautioned against exploitation of our sources, especially in publications. Susan Kalčík discussed the possibilities and shortcomings of presenting folk culture in public settings, like festivals, and Judy Peiser showed various media examples featuring folk artists and their arts.

The rest of the time, mini-sessions proposed by participants produced lively discussions on many relevant topics. One was a paper titled “What the Right Hand Doeth,” by Horace Beck, a wise elder of folklore studies, which warned of the paradox that the same government that would support folk arts programming also regulates local traditions out of existence. You can imagine the responses that charge provoked.

We had fun, too. A bus trip to Upper Canada Village and a behind-the-scenes tour gave us a chance to see one of our continent’s best folklife museums; a temporary shop gave visitors an opportunity to purchase local Mohawk baskets and other traditional crafts; and a meal of local specialties, including bullheads, tourtière, johnny-cake, head cheese, and crow’s nest, got rave reviews. And there was music every night.

Whether or not we realized it at the time, we had produced a genuine public folklore event. But we were not unique. Since our issues were on lots of colleagues’ minds, we learned along the way that there were similar gatherings that year in Florida, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, New York City, and, yes, Cooperstown.

In the thirty years that have passed since then, many things have happened in our field. It would take several more pages to provide a list of accomplishments in public folklore programming in New York State alone. Along the way, I think we all have profited from the kinds of discussions we had that summer in Canton. I know I did. Maybe we should try it again! ▼

Varick A. Chittenden is professor emeritus of English at the State University of New York in Canton and Heritage Center project director for Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY). This column is dedicated to the memory of Horace Beck, Bruce Buckley, Bert Hemphill, Sandy Ives, and Vaughn Ward, who were there. Photo: Martha Cooper



# Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

## For the General Public

*Voices* is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

## For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development  
Folk Artists Self-Management Project  
Folk Archives Project  
Consulting and Referral  
Advocacy  
A Public Voice

## Membership Levels

### Individual

\$ 50.00	Basic Membership
\$100.00	Harold W. Thompson Circle
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

### Organizations/Institutions

\$ 75.00	Subscriber
\$100.00	Partner
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

**For payment, choose the option that works best for you:**

**Use our website, [www.nyfolklore.org](http://www.nyfolklore.org)**

**or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;**

**or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.**