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. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
http://www.nyfolklore.org

Fieldwork, Memory, and the Impact of 9/11 on an Eastern Tennessee Klansman:

A Folklorist's Reflection

BY TREVOR J. BLANK

There is an old proverb that I've often heard: "Controversy sells." It is common folk knowledge today that the more contentious a subject matter is, the more intrigue it will attract. With this reality in mind, I wish to share a personal account of my first folkloristic encounter: the series of events that led to my choice of a career in folklore. While many folklorists may recall their excitement and fascination with their first informants and the unique narratives or artifacts that they produced, my tale involves near-accidental fieldwork in the company of a less-than-savory group in American society: the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

Stetson Kennedy has long been hailed as one of the leading scholars on the history and culture of the Ku Klux Klan. In his undercover ethnographical foray into the underbelly of the KKK, *The Klan Unmasked* (1954), Kennedy infiltrated Klan society and acted as a participant-observer for more than a decade, all the while collecting valuable information on Klan lore, ideology, and activities—a dangerous task, to say the least. The book was originally penned under a pseudonym for his protection and wasn't released in the United States until several years after its initial publication. In his reportage, Kennedy wrestled with the ethical implications of publishing the activities of the Klan, stating that "the silent treatment is usually the best treatment" (285), and encouraged countermarches to offset any public display of Klan pride and an assortment of other "Klan-busting" activities.

Kennedy raised important points. By publishing a report on a Klansman's activities or sharing insights into Klan worldviews, we become coconspirators in bringing their message of discrimination to the listening world. It is a scholarly paradox: on one hand, we have the power to share knowledge about a real and still-viable organization that intends to incite fear and bigotry—perhaps warning or educating the public against its cause—but simultaneously, we must pause at seemingly celebrating or gawking at a sordid group's credos. With tremendous respect for Kennedy's work, however, I disagree with the notion of maintaining silence on the activities of the Ku Klux Klan—or any group that may be involved in unwholesome activities, for that matter. I truly believe that there is good, worthy data to be found in socially deviant communities, and not just in the academic avenues that have been thoroughly trodden. As folklorists, it is our responsibility to examine how humans express themselves in all of their unique manifestations and not to pass judgment upon their folkways. We are to analyze to the best of our abilities and interpret the worldly texts that surround us in an effort to gain a greater understanding of humankind.

It is easy to wipe one's hands clean of something that is difficult to process; in some ways, I suppose it is natural to want to dodge this contentious scholastic battleground. Still, analyzing the Klan provides a greater understanding of a culture that most academics are not readily able to engage. In doing so, we not only acquire information on an existing force within American society, but also neutralize the mystique of the group's secrecy. As Kennedy himself said:

> Hanging the Klan's blood-stained linen on the line for all the world to see not only exposes its true terrorist nature but makes it abundantly clear that, far from being the pillar of society it claims to be, the Klan is rejected by the body politic as beyond the pale, criminal, and cancerous. (1954, 278)

We can exert our influence on the social relevancy of the Ku Klux Klan in the manner that Kennedy suggests by simply acknowledging the Klan's crude existence, and then collectively rejecting and condemning its ideologies. The Klan will exist whether we study it or not. But to invoke another proverb, wouldn't it be best to keep our friends close, but our enemies closer? If we quietly analyze pernicious groups in society while consciously blocking their intended messages, we can, in a sense, filter out information on the underground elements of society. We can demonstrate to our children

that these groups of people exist within society while simultaneously bestowing our traditional folk values of right and wrong. In this regard, I believe that we can learn a great deal from untraditional informant groups. While we are free to choose our values based on our experiences, we occasionally forget that the experiences of Klan members likely shaped their worldviews, too. I'd like to know more about how individuals are conditioned to respond to social constructions such as race and class—and we don't seem to talk about this much in public because it is uncomfortable.

In sharing my story, I am certain that much of what my informant had to say will be offensive to many readers. I do not condone his hate-speech, nor do I wish to suggest that his ideologies are acceptable or worthy of ongoing consideration. I submit, however, that his commentary is fascinating and revealing. As my story unfolds, it is my hope that readers will come to recognize the "good" data that I saw within this experience. While our conversation was initially shackled by my knowledge of the informant's Klan affiliation, looking past this social barrier allowed me to view my informant's humanity as I grew to understand how his life had evolved and was reshaped by a unifying national tragedy: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

How I Accidentally Made a Klansman My First Informant

It is no exaggeration to say that my fateful journey to the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee in 2004 is largely responsible for my pursuit of a career in folklore. It was on this trip that I made contact with the individuals that were to become my first informants; they captured my attention with sordid tales of their past activities and their intriguing hopes for the future. I was just a long-haired musician from Maryland who had traveled that summer to play some tunes at a festival in eastern Tennessee. Conversations I had with various crew members of the convention center—proud, native Tennesseans—between sound checks and smoke breaks revealed much about their ideas about the world and how those ideas were reshaped by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

As a very young man, I was astounded that these folks would share their stories, hopes, dreams, and ideologies with me, a stranger in a strange land—somewhat out of place, yet curious and (mostly) unassuming. Perhaps, I thought, I could learn some interesting stuff to share with friends back home, so I stuck around and listened attentively to the stories that came my way over the course of our brief chats during my three-day stay just outside of Knoxville, Tennessee. After knowing me for less than thirty minutes, my first informant revealed that he was a former member of the Ku Klux Klan and that the attacks of September 11 were responsible for his departure from the organization. In addition, he shared his new perspectives and taught me a good deal about his community's purported ideology.

Sitting on the bleachers behind the convention center, the crewman and I found the small bit of shade that the building provided. We had talked inside for about ten minutes, filling in each other on our obligatory introductory information—where we were from, and so on. It was a hot summer day, and the whole town seemed excited: tourist traps lurked down the street, the Oak Ridge Boys were coming to town later that week, and sights new to me (such as a Bible warehouse next door to an adult toy shop) abounded. This was all in addition to the usual vigor of the festival enthusiasts.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, the crewman turned to me, whipped out his wallet, and began to show me pictures of his fiancée, his band-mates, and his friends. Each photograph had a story—some humorous, some disgusting—and each friend had a feature that the crewman thought I would surely appreciate. He must have had over two dozen pictures in there, but only one stood out in my mind as he casually flipped through: a portrait of about thirty members of the Ku Klux Klan in full regalia that ended his collection.

He chuckled as I saw it. "Ya ain't got none of those in yer little blue state, do ya?"

We did, but suddenly uncomfortable and unsure of how to respond, I played along, firmly stating, "No, sir."

As I said it, I started framing questions and wondering if I was being prompted to inquire about his life. I think of this moment as my crossover into the world of folklore fieldwork. My liberal Maryland sensibilities told me to find an exit and leave this foreign ideology behind, but my curiosity wouldn't allow me to leave—and I am ever thankful for it. I took the bait, and he seemed to lighten up when I asked, "So you're a member of the Ku Klux Klan?"

Slightly smirking, he answered coyly, "Well, I used to be . . . but I don't really do that no more." He took a drag off of his cigarette, paused, and continued, "But you know, the Klan is one of those things around here that don't turn nobody's head. You see, the Klan started in Pulaski, which isn't too far away from here, and I think that the fella who ran the thing even lived in Gatlinburg or Pigeon Forge at one point or another. If you live in this part of Tennessee, things are white, and we don't mind it that way. The Klan isn't what you probably think it is—it's more of a social club, a gathering of friends, than some terrorist group, at least that's how it was when I was involved."

He was right about the Klan's birthplace of Pulaski, Tennessee, a Klan stronghold from the group's founding in 1865 until the 1880s, when the federal government cracked down on the Klan, effectively shutting it down across the country. In *After Appomattox* (1990), Stetson Kennedy hypothesized that racism in the South was symbolized by successive changes of uniform from Confederate gray to Ku Klux white. Following the 1915 motion picture release of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, the moribund Ku Klux Klan reemerged as an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic organization. Griffith's film glorified and mythologized the early Klan as a patriotic and protective organization

formed in the interest of Reconstruction-era Southerners overburdened by their defeat in the Civil War. Buoyed by frustration with the advancement of non-Protestants and minorities, the newly reorganized Klan intimidated or murdered minorities and their advocates and also began the practice of burning crosses, a tactic not used by their predecessors. Klan members infiltrated state governments, effectively controlling the politics of Tennessee, Oklahoma, Oregon, and especially Indiana. By 1920, the Klan boasted a membership of over four million, or approximately 5 percent of the eligible voters in America at the time (Bowers 1974; Blank 2009).

The Klan has not always been a Southern or rural phenomenon and is not only a remnant of the past. In the years following the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), a resurgence of Klan violence erupted, and well-known Klansmen began running for public office, especially in the South. David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Klan, was elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1989. The Klan has since declined to an extent, but the organization's activity continues steadily into the present, penetrating the folklore of communities. These days, New Yorkers whisper about possible Klan activities in Auburn and Plattsburgh; Marylanders see the Damascus chapter of the old Coon Hunters Club as a cheeky front to what was really behind the club's closed doors. Local newspapers from Maine to California have printed stories of Klan members' threats to hold rallies in their communities, and cross-burning demonstrations still occur.

The Internet has provided a platform for the Klan to spread its message of discrimination and xenophobia under the guise of Christian fellowship and brotherhood. The online effort has been carried out in various formats: full-on Klan web sites, like that of the Church of the National Knights of the Ku Klux Klan; web sites for politically motivated organizations, such as the White Christian Revival's Knights Party; or cleverly devised web sites such as www.martinlutherking.org, which on the surface appears to be an educational site profiling the civil rights pioneer, but is actually a storehouse of "facts" aimed at debunking King's accomplishments.

Despite its troublesome and complex history, there is rich folkloristic data to be collected at the local level on the Klan. The Klan is still a mystery to many, yet it is a visible and vocal entity, which makes it an excellent purveyor of folklore. In my opinion, regional folklorists should examine the group further. Still, in my case there was no mystery about whether or not the Ku Klux Klan existed in this Tennessee town. I had a former member right in front of me, so I asked him what kinds of activities—if not threatening or racist ones (as he claimed)—Klan members pursue. "Pretty much," he said, "we would go out in the woods, drink lots of beer, and shoot AK-47s at stuff." With a bit of smarmy pride, he added, "That's harmless, if you ask me."

The crewman spoke with confidence about the Klan's role in the community, asserting that it was a neutral, if not positive, entity. Still, there was one piece I didn't understand. Why then, if the Ku Klux Klan was a misunderstood group that was simply a gathering of those interested in the predominantly white tradition and history of the region, did he no longer participate with fellow members? The answer was surprising: "After September 11," he said, "I decided that I wanted to try out this whole 'brotherhood and humanity' shit."

After pausing again, he told me that a few other former members had felt similarly:

> When [the attacks] happened, I kind of just realized that someone else from somewhere else wanted to hurt Americans. It didn't matter to them whether they were white or colored, if they were American, they wanted them dead. And I got thinking that no black guy had really ever done me wrong in that kind of way, personally. But those dumb towel-heads . . . they did [hurt me] when they crashed those planes into those towers. It kind of put it in perspective. . . . Some of my friends don't really care for blacks still, but the Klan just didn't feel right after 9/11 in a lot of ways. It felt like we were part of the problem and not part of the solution. I still have guns and still watch over my back, but for now we [Americans] are all in it together.

"What about the remaining Klansmen still involved in the group?" I asked. He scratched his chin and remarked, "Well, some of those guys are a little nuts. They think all blacks are n—s. Some are, some aren't—but for them, no amount of Osama-like A-rabs blowing themselves up is gonna change that. They're still my friends, and we still talk, but we're all responsible for our thoughts and actions, and I own mine."

The crewman pulled his wallet back out and shared some of the pictures again. This time, however, he pointed out little artifacts hidden in the shots that indicated Klan activities. "Look in that corner over there," he gestured. "See that picture that's out of focus? That's a Klan portrait again after we went on a big hunting trip last year. I told you, it's all about the brotherhood there, man."

Feeling a bit more confident with my fieldwork technique, I asked: "But you got out 'cause there wasn't enough humanity to go with that brotherhood?"

Pausing again, he replied, "I suppose you could say that . . . but even though I changed," he added with a smile, "I'm still a redneck. If that son of a bitch Michael Moore came down here, I'd be liable to shooting his ass."

I was struck by a few things that he said. First, for all of his claims of newfound tolerance, I simply noticed a shift in his perception of the world. It appeared that he had developed a mistrust of Middle Easterners, thereby replacing some of his mistrust of African Americans, the assumed focus of the Klan's rage in years past. If passive racism was indeed the norm during his upbringing, it seems logical that this may be a central component of his community's identity: that at least one group, at any given time, deserves communal contempt. The 9/11 tragedy, for him, appears

to have shifted his concentration from the standard Klan ideology to a more current, "we've-been-attacked" mentality. Still, he personally took pride in no longer holding unprovoked mistrust or hatred of African Americans.

My informant's statements raised more questions than my brief time with him could answer. In retrospect, I've yearned to understand the psychological underpinnings of where this deep-rooted mistrust began for him and his closest friends and what experiences shaped him into feeling the way he did. Moreover, how was he able to open up to me, a stranger, with such offensive terminology after only knowing me for less than an hour? I had entered my dialogue with him as an unsuspecting musician with no interest in what made him tick. It was his forwardness and brash commentary that urged me to grab a pad of paper and pen; I was unprepared and captured only scant notes to embolden the narrative captured in my memory. Due to the impromptu nature of our interviews and my lack of experience in fieldwork methodology at the time, I was never able to gather information to conduct follow-up interviews or establish a forum for discussing his belief systems in greater detail at a later date. I never spoke to him again after the week had passed, and I don't recall any distinguishing information about him.

As for the interviews themselves, I can distinctly recall thinking, "I can't believe this peculiar man is preaching his experience to me in such detail and with such passion," despite the troubling nature of his account. The content, while disturbing, was not the greatest draw in my interviews with him, however. I was interested in the excitement of communication dynamics between an informant and a fieldworker and intrigued by the uncouth manner in which he relayed his life experiences to me.

One may ask, then: why recall the nuances of my encounters with this informant if I have not remained in touch with him or conducted subsequent interviews? As a folklorist, I am aware of how ambiguous or coded were many of the remarks my informant made. I also see the range of interpretations they could suggest to folklorists or any questioning reader, as well as the range of objections they might meet if spoken to a diverse, well-educated audience at large. To this point, I again reference the work of Stetson Kennedy, who demonstrated with the ethnography of his undercover experiences in the Ku Klux Klan that there is great value in examining the subversive agents of society. Despite my personal perception that my informant was somewhat ignorant and culturally isolated, I heard a naive, sensitive humanity in his tone. He was a complex individual—troubling yet fascinating, impetuous but sincere. I view our chats as both a small window into my informant's world (which I am very distanced from in my day-to-day life) and a narrative of my very first encounter in fieldwork, albeit an impromptu one.

As someone who was living near Washington, D.C., on the day of the attack, I was surprised that the events of September 11 were a watershed moment in my informant's life. I'm fascinated by inland citizens' reactions to this primarily coastal tragedy. One of my colleagues described 9/11 as "our generation's JFK assassination," meaning that it was a moment when everyone could recall where they were and what they were doing when the attacks occurred. For my own part, I can clearly remember my high school principal announcing the attacks over the P.A. system; my father, who worked in D.C., called me from the roof of his building and was able to see the Pentagon burning.

I've spoken with a handful of New Yorkers about their personal narratives of September 11. One man recalled being late to work on the day of the attacks; if he had been on time that day he would have been walking right under Ground Zero when the first plane hit the Twin Towers. Instead, he was on a ferry when the attacks occurred and witnessed the entire event. For the New Yorkers and Washingtonians with whom I spoke, the hours and days that immediately followed the terrorist attacks were moments of great uncertainty: we were unsure if more attacks were coming, let alone whom had attacked us. Yet for the crewman, a native Tennessean, geography was never an issue. September 11 was every bit as real, frightening, and life-changing for him—in his mind—as it was for those closest to the terror. This was a feeling held by most of his friends, he claimed, as he felt they were powerless to aid in the situation.

As the weekend rolled on, the crewman introduced me to his brother and some of his friends, who in turn relayed their stories of run-ins with the Klan, either as members or observers. Still, it was my original informant whose words stuck with me the most—he wanted to try out *real* brotherhood and humanity, not some brotherhood hidden behind a white robe. A single event—one that affected all Americans in different ways—had changed his worldview. I would imagine that this sort of change is no easy task for a Klansman whose lifelong indoctrination of racial prejudice, he asserts, comes with his territory. As the crewman and I parted ways, he asked me if I was leaving Tennessee with the idea that everyone there was racist and ignorant. "Not at all," I replied. "Quite the opposite." We never spoke again.

Fieldwork Afterthoughts

My research interests never coalesced around the Ku Klux Klan following my brief interviews with the former Klansman. While the experience opened my eyes to the possibilities that folklore fieldwork presented, I instead chose to examine other genres within the discipline, particularly that of folklore on the Internet, material culture, and the history of mental illness. I was glad to have extracted interesting (although incomplete) data in my brief interviews with my informant, but I found the politics of reportage to be extremely taxing. As a person very sensitive to the importance of equality and tolerance, simply writing the vile words that I heard bothered me a great deal. Fieldwork surrounding contentious folk groups is not for everyone, and I saw myself finding a more comfortable niche in the material world and the limitless borderlands of

cyberspace. This does not in any way undermine the importance of studying groups like the Ku Klux Klan, but the work involved is highly emotional and often runs counter to the fieldworkers' viewpoints. On the surface this is a typical problem in fieldwork, yet I felt that the negativity was too great to pursue this area for my future research.

So if the data is so toxic, so vile, and so deviant, why publish it? Politics seem to dictate what will make it to print. It cannot be understated that we should allow our fellow scholars to cast judgment on the validity of research *after* thoughtfully digesting new information, rather than assuming the research is worthless. In his 2004 presidential plenary address to the American Folklore Society, Alan Dundes lamented incidents of publishers' censorship towards his work deemed offensive to certain readers. Fortunately for Dundes—and folkloristics—many of these works eventually saw the light of day after considerable delays in production (Dundes 2005, 403). Dundes continued by stating that delaying publications due to their controversial nature is "not an intellectually valid reason not to publish a well-researched paper or monograph" (404). Dundes' larger point is that the discipline of folklore has been marginalized in the academy due to some of this editorial fussiness. It is our duty as folklorists to engage all aspects of the cultures we critically examine, including the unsavory and subversive.

In the preparation of this essay, there was considerable editorial discussion of some of the content; it was by no means a task taken lightly. These are delicate issues, but issues that merit study nevertheless. We have neglected to study the Ku Klux Klan, yet somehow managed to condone a study of "Proverbs in an LSD Cult" (Bauman and McCabe 1970). So where do we draw the line on what constitutes appropriate scholarship? Some folklorists seem determined to avoid engaging subversive elements of society or even untraditional areas of folkloristic inquiry, such as the Internet and the possible avenues of inquiry it presents. Yet only if we carefully and dutifully collect data on fringe groups within society can we begin to theorize on the extended, complex nature of humankind.

I recently reexamined Henry Glassie's important 1968 article "Take That Night Train to Selma: An Excursion to the Outskirts of Scholarship," and I found myself really wishing that I had the opportunity to revisit my informant and get to know him over the years. Glassie's familiarity with his subject and the social circumstances in which he existed allowed Glassie to theorize on the nature of the man's prejudices and creative outputs. I never had similar time to acquaint myself with the inner workings of my informant's mind. As a novice, I was a bit lost, grasping at information as it came in, but not knowing how exactly to process it. Glassie's work shows that we can learn about the socially "unsavory" aspects of society in an enlightening manner; his informant, Pop Weir, is a complex character whose creativity reflects a sample of the beliefs held by many of the people of his region (and perhaps similar rural areas across the United States) during a tumultuous time in American history, the Civil Rights era. Glassie's notion that he is embarking on an "excursion to the outskirts of scholarship" is telling. In a version of "Night Train" reprinted in *Folksongs and their Makers*, Ray Browne prefaces Glassie's piece by commenting that it was "trail-blazing," despite its controversial nature. As editor of the *Journal of Popular Culture* (the article's original home), Browne had thought the work was too important to be overlooked. This is the kind of bravery that the folklore discipline needs in order to remain a viable source of scholarship. Glassie's piece mirrors some of what I believe further fieldwork with my informant may have yielded: a deeper understanding of an individual's dual role in his community as both a purveyor of folklore and a recipient of folk values.

The Ku Klux Klan remains uncomfortable and disturbing for many people, but it is a cultural force that is important for us to understand. A lot of folklore scholarship travels in safe territory these days. We all know that there are subversive agents in our culture—the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazism, bigotry, social phobias. The work of Glassie and Kennedy, though important, is dated. My hope is that this short reflection can complement their endeavors and provoke other scholars to consider more in-depth treatments of this area of folkloristic inquiry.

Sources

Author's note: In the interest of protecting my informant, I have deliberately withheld his name and specific personal information, as well as the fieldwork location and interview dates. The interview was preserved by transcription.

Bauman, Richard, and Neil McCabe. 1970. Proverbs in an LSD Cult. *Journal of American Folklore* 83:318–24.

Blank, Trevor J. 2009. Rural Life. In *The Progressive Era and World War I: 1890-1920*. Ed. Rodney P. Carlisle. Life in America Series, Vol. 5. New York: Facts on File: 81–96.

Bowers, William L. 1974. *The Country Life Movement in America: 1900–1920*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press.

Dundes, Alan. 2005. Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address, 2004). *Journal of American Folklore* 118:385–408.

Glassie, Henry. 1968. Take That Night Train to Selma: An Excursion to the Outskirts of Scholarship. *Journal of Popular Culture* 2.1:1–62.

Glassie, Henry, Edward D. Ives, and John F. Szwed. 1970. *Folksongs and Their Makers*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Kennedy, Stetson. 1954. *The Klan Unmasked*. Gainesville: The University Press of Florida.

———. 1990. *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War*. Gainesville: The University Press of Florida.

Trevor J. Blank is a doctoral student in American studies at Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg. He earned his master's degree in 2007 at Indiana University's Folklore Institute. He has published articles in folklore journals and is the editor of *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009).

He would like to thank *Voices* editor Eileen Condon for her helpful suggestions for improving this piece.

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

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.