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Remembering Bill Nicolaisen (1927–2016)

BY LIBBY TUCKER

*F*rom 1977 to 1992, I had the great pleasure of teaching folklore with Bill Nicolaisen at Binghamton University, then known as SUNY B. I have always been grateful that he picked me out of a crowd of hopeful young folklorists looking for a job. We developed our English

Department's specialization in literature and folklore together, and planned a New York Folklore Society meeting in Binghamton, as well as visits by folklorists and singers. When we traveled to New York Folklore Society meetings, I got the chance to hear place-name legends and jokes that

he had collected over the years. His well of wonderful narratives never ran dry, and his kindness was extraordinary.

Bill was an inspiring teacher and scholar who made important contributions to folklore, onomastics, and linguistics. He received the Chicago Folklore Prize for



Elizabeth Tucker, Bill Nicolaisen, Max and Toni Treppenhauer Lüthi, and Katherine Briggs at an International Society for Folk Narrative Research meeting in Edinburgh in 1979. Photo courtesy of the author.



Bill Nicolaisen with his wife May in 2002. Photo courtesy of Birgit Nicolaisen.

his book *Scottish Place-Names* and wrote hundreds of scholarly articles. The number of his publications was even more remarkable, because he also served on what seemed to be thousands of committees, contributed to many cultural indexes, taught wildly popular classes, and became president of numerous organizations—including the American Folklore Society, the Folklore Society in the United Kingdom, the American Name Society, and the New York Folklore Society. Throughout all of these involvements, he was a devoted family man who had countless friends in the United States and Europe.

Remembering Bill's many roles, I like to think about two of them: father and teacher. Daddy, Opa, and Professor were some of Bill's favorite terms of address; his daughters, grandchildren, and students comprise his living legacy. During the years we taught together, I noticed that Bill was never happier than when surrounded by his wife May and his four daughters, Fiona, Kirsten, Moira, and Birgit. He was extremely proud of his family and delighted in teaching the girls linguistic games, which I got to hear when enjoying the family's warm hospitality. One funny and challenging game was "Drei Japone-

sen mit dem Kontrabass," which involved vowel exchange through eight verses sung vigorously in German. The girls sang all the verses loudly and precisely, enunciating the vowels like little linguistics scholars. Bill smiled, knowing that he was passing his love of speech play on to the next generation.

When the girls were small, Bill told me, it was not easy for him to find time to get work done. His creative solution to that problem was to take the baby out of her playpen, put in some books and papers and get into the playpen himself, pretending to get to work on an article. I can only imagine how much the girls laughed at the sight of their dad sitting in the playpen. By the time I got to know the Nicolaisens, the playpen was gone, but it stayed with them in family stories.

As the girls grew older, they enjoyed trick-or-treating on Halloween. Birgit has told me that they had to watch out for their Halloween masks, because their dad liked to take them to the university campus. One Halloween I saw him striding across campus, wearing a bright green and yellow witch mask that must have come from one of the girls. There he was in his navy blue raincoat, balancing a full brief-

case and an umbrella, disguised as a Halloween witch. Of all my memories of Bill, this one is my favorite.

Sometimes the smallest details offer the best sense of a person's nature. On the SUNY B campus Bill had two offices, both at Hinman College, and both overflowing with books, posters, and folk toys. When I visited him at Hinman, he was always working on at least two projects at once, moving from one stack of books and papers to another. Close to his desk he kept a poster with a simple but emphatic prayer: "Slow me down, Lord." He may not have slowed down much while he was at work, but the strength of his faith was always clear.

Bill was intensely proud of his students and followed their careers with great happiness. Two of his students became lifelong friends of his and offered important support in his later years. Both of them have achieved a high level of success. Simon J. Bronner, who graduated from Binghamton University in 1974, is Distinguished Professor of American Studies and Folklore at Penn State Harrisburg and director of the Doctor of Philosophy program in American Studies. He is also the Lead Scholar in the Holocaust and Jewish Studies Center and the developer of the folklore and ethnography certificate program at Penn State. This year he received the American Folklore Society's Goldstein Award for Lifetime Academic Leadership, and he has also received many other forms of recognition for his numerous publications and service. Like Bill, Simon has done much to promote folklore studies and to bring folklorists together in constructive dialogue. His support of graduate students and fellow folklorists has made an important difference in our field. Simon's Festschrift for Bill, *Creativity and Tradition in Folklore: New Directions*, was published in 1992.

Another highly accomplished student of Bill's is Michael McGoff. Michael wrote his dissertation, "Computer-Oriented Onomastics: The Toponyms of New York State," under Bill's direction and defended

In His Own Words

BILL NICOLAISEN: New York Folklore Society President 1972–1976, 1981–1983

[*Editor's Note:* The following remembrance was part of the New York Folklore Society—50th Anniversary Issue of the NYFS Newsletter (Fall/Winter 1994, Vol. 15, No. 3–4, p. 7). From 1964–1985, presidential terms were limited to four years and, with the exception of Bill Nicolaisen, no president served two separate terms.]

My first contact with the New York Folklore Society was in Scotland, almost 30 years ago. Having joined the School of Scottish Studies in the University of Edinburgh on May 1, 1956 (what a May morning!), I made an extensive use of its excellent research library, and there on the shelves in the journal section, among the plethora of periodical publications from all over the globe, the earlier issues of something called *New York Folklore Quarterly* had begun to make their demands for ever-increasing space, adding to their growing number four times a year. I remember *NYFQ* distinctly not because I had, at the time, developed an interest in North American folklore (far from it!) but because of its appearance, which was so different from anything else the mail brought from Finland and India, from Hungary and Texas. There was an old-worldly touch about the journal's cover, an appropriate quaintness, a sense of the homespun and of surviving good graces that made it both fascinating and attractive, apart from being out of the ordinary.

My second contact happened more than a decade later when Bruce Buckley was on a tour of Britain and, I believe, the European continent, visiting museums and research institutions specializing in folklife. Then, on the southern slopes of the Scottish capital overlooking the Pentland Hills, we listened with wonder to his tales of Cooperstown, Fenimore House, the Farmers' Museum, the Graduate Program and, of course, the New York Folklore Society; and the *NYFQ* cover began to take on an even greater sense of appropriateness. The world of Leather-stocking and of Glimmerglass Lake translated itself from the youthful delight it had been into serious scholarship in pleasant surroundings and shared adventures. Could such a place really exist, had fiction produced reality—it all seemed so remotely transatlantic and yet so unlike the inherited European view of the New World.

My third contact, not long after, was miraculously in upstate New York, at my very first meeting of the Society itself. In order to prove Bruce Buckley right, somebody had obviously quickly built a place called Cooperstown and an open-air museum and Fenimore House overlooking—well, not Glimmerglass but Otsego Lake. That name was a disappointment, but it sounded so persuasively Native American, and there was the source of the Susquehanna, anyhow. And the people behind the *NYFQ* cover were there, the Editor and some of the contributors, and their European reader stood in the spot where most of those quarterly issues crowding the shelves of that Georgian house in Edinburgh's George Square had originated.

I was not allowed to plead stranger value for long, however, and the following year I was elected president of the Society for my first two-year term, two more such terms followed, and I belonged. Annual, sometimes semi-annual, pilgrimages to Cooperstown became routine, where setting and activity, budding scholarship and personal involvement in song and story, custom and tradition, encountered each other and often blended and merged imperceptibly.

Were those the golden days of the society? I do not know. They seemed like it but perhaps their apparent stability and tranquility already contained unread signs of stormier and less settled years to come. But why speculate? The quaint old *NYFQ* cover may not be there anymore, there may be difficulties in publishing the journal even twice a year, the Society's structure and membership may have changed drastically, the Cooperstown idyll may be over—but who is prepared to say that these are of necessity changes for the worse? Leading the Society, administering its finances, increasing its membership, editing and publishing its journal may be less comfortable tasks now, but they are certainly more challenging than ever,—and I remember distinctly that Deerslayer never refused a challenge.

—W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 1985

it in 1980. This dissertation, which received the university's Distinguished Dissertation Award, made a groundbreaking contribution to onomastics. As Binghamton University's Senior Vice Provost and CFO, Michael is one of our university's leaders. He is also known for his skill in reading the names of students from around the world aloud at commencement: a feat of onomastic daring that few others would dare to undertake. Michael's Festschrift for Bill, a special issue of *Names: A Journal of Onomastics*, was published in 1999.

Bill's four daughters have all made significant contributions to their fields: Fiona as a minister, Kirsten as a doctor, Moira as a teacher of special education, and Birgit as the director of the National Student Exchange at Binghamton University. It

has been a joy to work with Birgit, who has a sense of humor much like her father's. Because of her, I can now say that I have worked with Nicolaisens for almost 40 years.

Soon after Bill's passing, I received an invitation to lecture at Inner Mongolia Normal University, and I asked Birgit if she thought her dad would have liked to go there. She answered, "My dad travel? You have to ask? Of course, and he would have taken great photos, tried weird and wonderful foods, and made friends for life."

Of course, Birgit was right. Bill made countless friends around the world and had a heartfelt appreciation of folk culture in every place he visited. We are all richer for having known him. In New York State

and beyond, he will always be cherished as a leading folklorist who has given us important knowledge, deep insight, and welcome laughter. ▼

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For more information about Bill Nicolaisen, see

"Former professor remembered for passion for teaching, distinguished career" in the Binghamton

University's student newspaper, *Pipe Dream*:

www.bupipedream.com/news/66220/obit-2/

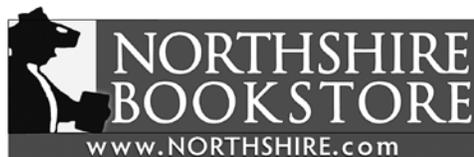
Simon Bronner's post on February 14, 2016, on the American Folklore Society, History & Folklore Section Facebook site:

www.facebook.com/groups/1550062601904433/permalink/1687382918172400/

Libby Tucker, Distinguished Service Professor of English at Binghamton University, is the author of *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). Her most recent book, co-edited with Ellen McHale, is *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013). Currently she is working on a book about legend trips.



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