Visions of the Past—Visions of the Future
Deaf Folklore: Identification, Collection, and Preservation
A “How To” Session

Susan D. Rutherford
University of California, Berkeley

Workshop Summary
Collecting and preserving today’s stories, legends, customs and traditions provide for future visions of the past. This workshop/presentation will focus on the identification, collection, preservation, and analysis of Deaf folklore.

Some vocabulary and/or terms from the field of folklore that possibly need clarification:

FOLKLORISTICS—the study of folklore
INFORMANT—consultant, performer, maker
ACTIVE BEARER—tradition bearer, noted keeper of people’s traditions
ORAL LITERATURE—unwritten literature, traditional narrative
FOLKSPÉECH—naming practices, specialized in-group vocabulary, etc.

Introduction
Folklore continues to exist through time because it satisfies human needs of artistic expression, of identity formation, and of passing the culture from one generation to the next. Our folk traditions are at the core of the formation and establishment of our identity as individuals and as a community.

Like Deaf people whose principal language is unwritten, many Native American tribes realize that to document their folk traditions and archive them is the only way they have to preserve and maintain their identity as a people and prove they continue to exist. In fact, it is in folklore archives (whether hidden under the bed or catalogued in several buildings) that the most telling evidence of the vitality of American cultural tradition exists in our country (Toelkin, p. 307).

The documentation and preservation of Deaf folklore not only proves that Deaf people continue to exist but preserves and maintains the Deaf identity for future generations. For Deaf children to understand their future they need to know their past.
This Workshop Will Address Questions Such As:
- WHY COLLECT FOLKLORE?
- WHAT IS LORE?
- WHO ARE THE FOLK?
- WHERE DO WE FIND IT?
- WHAT IS DEAF FOLKLORE?
- HOW DO WE COLLECT AND SAVE IT?
- WHAT DOES IT MEAN?
- WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM IT?

Why Collect Folklore?

The folklore of a people presents a mirror of culture—an unselfconscious expression of a people’s image of themselves, their identity, and world view. Collected and documented with care over time, it provides a rich illustration of the past.

THERE ARE TWO BROAD REASONS FOR COLLECTING FOLKLORE:

1. PRESERVATION
   For some collectors, the objective is preservation only. Often there is a desire to record and preserve it before it “dies out.” For many Native American cultures, the recording and documentation of their folk traditions are the only evidence that they have existed.

2. STUDY
   For the student of folkloristics, the pursuit is not only the preservation of the item but the study of the folklore itself, its analysis and inquiry into its meaning. Whether we collect for preservation or for study, the objective is understanding—understanding of where we come from, who we are, and, for many, documenting the existence of a people.

   It is good to examine your intention before you begin collecting. Is it just to preserve a record? To analyze data? If it is simply a desire to preserve, try also to gather as much contextual and background information for future use. You may later want to analyze the material, or it may be the next generation who will wish to do so.
What Is Lore?
Lore is more than just stories. Wilson suggests three broad categories:

Things you make with your:

- words/signs = verbal lore
  (narratives, stories, sign play, ABCstories, jokes, legends, games, jokes, anecdotes)

- hands = material lore
  (cannonball door knocker, Pah! button)

- actions = customary lore
  (name signs, group initiations for new members, e.g., rat funeral)

Lore is often classified in genres—categories. Genres are good for understanding and cataloging, but many overlap.

e.g., Birthday celebrations.

The making/decorating of the cake is custom.
The cake itself is material lore.
Sing/signing “Happy Birthday” is verbal lore.

Who Are the Folk?
We are all members of many different folk groups. In general our membership is based on two criteria:

1. Our identification with the group, and
2. The group identifying us as a member.

Some possible group determiners are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>Playground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorm</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>Region</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the Deaf world there are also substantial folk group differences based in language and/or family circumstance. Some of these groups determiners are:

Deaf of Deaf
Deaf of Hearing
Deaf of Hearing with Deaf Siblings
Hearing of Deaf
Oral Deaf of Oral Deaf
Oral Deaf of Hearing

Where Do We Find It?

1. Loci of Transmission
   Some principle loci of transmission:
   Family
   Residential Schools
   Clubs
   Social Groups
   Events

2. Active Bearers
   These are the tradition bearers. They are fairly easy to identify.
   Look for the storytellers, the club organizers, the keepers of
   traditions.

   While these are the richest source for material, it is important to
   recognize that folklore is transmitted by everyone. Do not overlook
   yourself as an informant.

What Is Deaf Folklore?

   We will look at video samples—all video examples have voice-over
   translation.

   Examples from American Culture: The Deaf Perspective, series
   tape #2, Deaf Folklore:

   Byron Benton Burnes     Deaf Alarm Clock (Material lore)
   Deaf Miner (Tall Tale-Verbal lore)
   Olin Fortney             Deaf Zen Game (Anecdote/Tall Tale)
   Ken Norton               Father’s Stories of Building the Bay
   Bridge (Narrative)
   Ben Bahan                Haunted House, (ABC Story )
   Howie Seago             The Train (Number Story)
   Alan Barwiolek          G-O-L-F (Fingerspelling Mime)
   Liz Baird               Imitation of the Cooking Teacher
   (Custom)
   Ken Mikos               Rat Funeral (Ritual-Custom)
   Ann Marie Baer          Deaf In The Year 2000 (Fable)
How Do We Collect and Save It?

Folklore should always be collected in the language in which it is found. Therefore, collecting Deaf folklore that is signed requires a visual means of recording, i.e., video, film, photographs.

Ideally it is best to record it as it is happening in its natural context. The ideal is not always possible. Often you can observe the item as it is happening, and record people’s response to it, your response to it, and the contextual information. Ask the narrator to repeat it for the camera, either then or at some other time.

*Note: It is important to recognize the influence of a video camera and acknowledge the possible impact the collector may have on the collection process.*

Most collecting is done by “direct interviewing.” You set up interviews and record. It is good to have an idea of what you are looking for if at all possible. Sometimes a really active bearer will just pour forth and you will have a tape full of treasures. Other times you might have an active bearer who does not see why you want to record that old silly story.

Use yourself as an informant. Record your experiences, customs, stories, jokes, etc.

The Collection Process

Using the format of a collection sheet as a structure, we will discuss and demonstrate the process of collecting folklore.