INTRODUCTION

Do you remember the Beatles' song "A Day in the Life" from their Sgt. Pepper album? It began with the line "I read the news today, oh boy!" Here's the sort of thing that makes me say "Oh Boy" and reach for the scissors when I peruse the daily papers and spot a bit of folklore in the news.

November 8, 1960, the day John F. Kennedy was elected president, the "Dear Abby" column included a letter from a teenager telling the urban legend about The Hookman on Lovers' Lane and commenting "I don't know whether it's true or not, but it doesn't matter to me."

April 22, 1964, following the great Easter Weekend Alaskan earthquake, a news report about children in Kodiak playing "amid wreckage on a wave--devastated beach," a new game they had invented called "Earthquake and Tidal Wave."

Fast forward to 1978 during one round of stalled talks between the United States and the Soviet Union for the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (dubbed SALT by the press). A Bill Mauldin cartoon showed Presidents Carter and Brezhnev sitting across the table from each other with a giant spilled salt shaker between them. Each man was throwing a handful of salt over his left shoulder and exclaiming "YOU spilled it!" May 26, 1980, following the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, a Lewis County, Washington, sheriff's deputy was quoted in the paper as saying "It's blacker [here] than the inside of a cow."

November 6, 1987: a photograph in the University of Utah student newspaper, The Daily Utah Chronicle, showed the topping-off of the steelwork for the new Primary Children's Hospital. A small pine tree was attached to the topmost beam, and the caption identified this as a "centuries-old tradition...to bring good luck and safety to construction workers and those who later use the building." April 5, 1995: a letter to the editor of the Deseret News commenting on the use of a recorded cuckoo-bird call at some Salt Lake City intersections to signal that the pedestrian-crossing light was on. She wrote:

It reminds me of my mother singing [this] to me as a child, "The cuckoo is a pretty bird. She singeth as she flies. She bringeth us good tidings. She telleth us no lies... . . ."

Versions of that old folk lyric are still sung in the southern mountains of the United States.

My most recent clipping. Back to "Dear Abby": I found this at the end of her column for April 13, 2000:
DEAR ABBY The letter from "Outraged," whose stepmother wanted to be buried between the woman's father and her birth mother, reminded me of the story about the man who remarried after his first wife died. He said when he died that he wanted to be buried between the two wives, "but tilt me toward Tillie."-Louise in Largo, Florida.

That story should ring a bell for students of Utah folklore. Down in Sanpete county this is one of the favorite "Brother Peterson Yarns" (as folklorist/racconteur Hector Lee used to call them), told in dialect about a Danish immigrant who is a polygamist. There the punchline was "Yoost tilt me a little towards Tillie."

FOLKLORE IN THE NEWS

The examples I have quoted all resulted from my long habit of reading daily papers closely and clipping examples of folklore, and my essay here was directly suggested by a comment that Alta Fife once made to a reporter. More of that in a moment; first I want to say something about the Fifes.

I first met the Fifes in the summer of 1958 when I was a graduate student at Indiana University; they had come through Bloomington for a few days to speak to us at the Folklore Institute. Their landmark book on Mormon folklore, Saints of Sage and Saddle, had been published two years earlier by the Indiana University Press, and the Fifes were listed on the Institute program as specialists in Mormon folklore and cowboy songs, two topics that I had little interest in. But I was impressed by Professor Richard Dorson, my advisor, and his enthusiasm for the Fife's work, and I especially noted Dorson's generous use of excerpts and summaries from the Fife's book in his own textbook which I was helping to proofread and index at about the same time. The Fifes (like Dorson) were genuine working folklorists with extensive field collecting experience; hearing their presentation that summer, I became eager to emulate their example somewhere, someday. Who would have guessed that eventually I would end up spending most of my career in Utah! Or that I would study, among other things, such rather Fife-like topics as Utah jokes, an Idaho tall-tale teller, Norwegian immigrants in western Canada, and carvings done on aspen trees in the Wasatch mountains?

Shortly after my family moved to Salt Lake City, Austin and Alta invited us to their home in Logan for lunch. Our new baby was placid and easy-going, but we cautioned our three other rambunctious children to behave themselves at the home of these famous people. We needn't have worried, because as soon as we arrived Austin took the children for rides on his horse in the pasture behind the house, and Alta gave them bread crumbs to feed the ducks on the nearby irrigation canal. The kids were convinced that this was the place to live, and we hadn't even gone skiing yet!

Once I shared a hotel room with Austin at an American Folklore Society annual meeting in Boston, and I was startled when he told me "I may have a girl up here in the room later." "That old rascal really has a sense of humor," I thought. But, sure enough, when I came up to the room late one afternoon I felt a little like Goldilocks: someone-in fact, a beautiful young woman-was sleeping in my bed! It was, of course, one of the Fife daughters who lived in New England and had come down for the afternoon to visit her dad. She was taking a nap before starting back home, and she happened to pick my bed.

On another occasion, after doing some fieldwork and study in Romania, I had a colleague from that country lecturing at the University of Utah. He was a specialist in what the Romanians called
peasant ethnography-traditional village costumes, houses, folk art, pottery, weaving, wood carving, and the like. I told him we had to make a trip to Logan so he could meet Austin Fife and visit his archive. My friend, Paul Petrescu, who had worked in many European and American folklife museums, probably did not expect much from the trip, although he was fascinated by the Utah landscape and the small towns as we drove up. But when we got to the USU campus, he immediately took to Austin Fife and they discovered many mutual interests in the details of rural vernacular folklife in both Romania and the U.S. Whenever Paul had a language problem during the conversation, Austin would switch to French, since Paul Petrescu spoke French quite fluently himself. As we drove home, Petrescu marveled at the experience; "Who would think," he commented, "that we could meet a bilingual scholar with such wide and diverse interests and find such a rich collection of field data in a smalltown college like that?" And I said, "Hey, just wait until we get to BYU and you meet Bert Wilson; he has a big folklore archive too, and he speaks Finnish!"

My topic in this essay was suggested by a remark that Alta Fife made to Deseret News feature writer Jerry Johnston in autumn 1986 when he interviewed her on the occasion of Alta receiving the first "Governor's Service to Folk Art Award." Austin had died in February that same year. One of the questions that Jerry Johnston asked Alta was this: "Some of the old guard folklorists feel at odds with the new crop of folklorists. Why is that?" (Interview of 29 September, published on October 2, 1986.)

I don't know where Jerry got that idea, but Alta replied thus: "Young folklorists are different in many ways. They don't do as much field collecting as the older generation did. A lot of young folklorists get their information from newspapers and other published material. Some teachers have their students collect items for them, and that's good for the student." Then Alta added, "Wayland Hand, a folklorist at UCLA, feels too, that the new folklorists seem to work only on present materials, that they don't dig into things in a historical sense.''

You have to understand that at this point in my life I had published three books about modern urban legends, and these were stories which I often collected from newspapers and other published sources or with the help of my students. And, of course, for this sort of material, there is not a great deal of older historical data to compare. So naturally, I wondered if Alta had me in mind as an example of a younger folklorist's flawed approach-collecting from newspapers, having students do fieldwork, and lacking a historical sense. I decided right then and there that if I ever got an invitation to give the Fife Honor Lecture I would do it on the subject of "Folklore in the News."

Lest you fear that I am now going to stand here and contradict Alta Fife, I hasten to point out three things: first, it was Jerry Johnston, not Alta, who had used the expression "at odds with." Alta had only said that younger folklorists were "different." (Besides, I wasn't that young in 1986.) Second, the Fifes themselves (like Richard Dorson) had cited many newspaper sources, often from the 19th century, to back up their field-collected material. These citations were valuable dated corroboration of the memory lore they had recorded in the field. And third, there actually used to be a section called "Folklore in the News" in the journal Western Folklore which Wayland Hand had helped to found and long edited at UCLA.

But, still, I do have a different approach to the subject than Dorson, Hand, and the Fifes did. My way of collecting "Folklore in the News" is not searching through old regional newspaper files in libraries for examples of pioneer stories, songs, and customs that happened to get lodged in print. Neither am I looking primarily for news or feature accounts of local festivals and celebrations, or holiday customs, or immigrant arts and crafts, or stories about water witches or psychics, or
interviews with folklorists, for that matter, as interesting as all these things may be. (These were the sorts of things often found in the "Folklore in the News" column of Western Folklore.)

What I collect from newspapers and what I will focus on here are the examples of living folklore that find their way into contemporary newsprint, especially in quotations from news sources, in letters to the editor, in advice columns, and sometimes in cartoons and comic strips. None of these items is identified as "folklore" in the newspapers, but folklore it surely is, whether vernacular speech, proverbial lore, superstitions, anecdotes, jokes, fables, or whatever. What interests me about all this is that a reader really needs the "folk" background-usually a regional or a specific social/cultural background-to fully understand such material. All of this kind of folklore in the news adds a definite local, familiar, vivid, vernacular-yes even a "folksy"-personality to the often somewhat dry pages of the daily paper. It's here where the ordinary citizen speaks his or her own mind in the language of the local lore. I'll quote mostly Utah material, but newspapers everywhere contain similar folklore echoes, and some of my examples are national news stories that appeared in our regional papers.

For example, let's take the expression used in Utah referring to what I always called "skipping school" or "playing hooky". In an article on truancy and drug problems in local schools, the Salt Lake Tribune reported (Nov. 19, 1980), "One Salt Lake City high school senior said he had a habit in previous years of smoking a bowl and blowing off a class." By way of explanation in the article, "smoking a bowl" was followed by the words "of pot" in parentheses while "blowing off" was glossed with the word "stuffing." To "duff" a class was a new term to me, but not to my children who brought me their official East High School handbook of student behavior standards where the policy on "stuffing" classes was clearly spelled out. Confirming that this is the accepted local term for playing hooky was a later article in the Deseret News about school attendance problems (January 30, 1994). The headline declared that "Sluffers are learning the hard way that Murray won't tolerate truancy," and the words "sluff" and "sluffing" appeared five times in the article without a word of explanation. Among other local usages I've spotted in Utah newspapers from time to time are "the parking" (for that grass strip between the sidewalk and the street), "jockey box" (for a car's glove compartment), and also the non-standard forms "Zion's Park" and "season's pass."

The simplest, yet one of the most telling, examples of Utah folk speech captured in a newspaper that I've seen came on January 15, 1992, after governor Norm Bangerter had just given his last state of the state address. A Pat Bagley political cartoon in the Salt Lake Tribune showed a scene reminiscent of the TV sitcom "Cheers" with a group of Utah legislators at the bar toasting the little man at the end of the bar with root beer. The man they toasted was Norm, not the Norm of "Cheers," of course, but our own Norm Bangerter. And the name as the legislators were saying it in chorus was "NARM!" (If you don't get it, you have either not lived in Utah very long or you have not noticed how people here talk about "horses," the "farth ward," or about "Darathy's gorgeous argandy arnge farmal.")

Sometimes we find some rather earthy language quoted in news stories, although in conservative Utah it tends to be toned down by the paper (as when they quote excited sports stars and coaches by printing only an initial letter and a row of dashes). Or the news source himself may tone it down. I especially liked the quoted reaction in the Tribune of one sporting goods salesman when asked by a reporter for his opinion on a proposal to reduce the stocking of fish in some Utah lakes: "Bull pucky," was his response (June 11, 1993). Even better was an article about the dismissal of a slander suit brought by a hunter against a Division of Wildlife Resources officer who had called him a "horse's patoot" when he caught him hunting without a license. The DWR officer told the judge that he had said to the hunter that "he was acting like a horse's patoot." (Salt
Lake Tribune, May 19, 1993, "Hunter Loses Suit Against Officer Who Called Him a 'Horse's Patoot'.") The hunter testified that the officer was "a bishop of the Third Ward and knows better than to call people bad names." But the judge asked "Do you sue everyone who calls you a horse's patoot?" and he dismissed the case. Perhaps journalistic standards are slipping lately, even here, since I have seen the expression "piss off" (or "pee off") printed several times, as well as "BS," both as the mere initials and also completely spelled out.

A health term that we are uncomfortable with (not to mention the discomfort of the condition itself) is "traveler's diarrhea" as an Associated Press news item (undated in my file) about a promising new medication termed it. The syndicated story also referred to "Delhi Belly" and "Montezuma's Revenge"; the local headline writer then added "Quick Step" ("Some Relief for 'Quick Step'"). I asked my students what other euphemisms they knew for this ailment and they came up with "Rocky Mountain Two-step," "The GI Trots," "Big D," and (brace yourselves) "The Hershey's" and "The Squirts." We have many other substitute terms for talking about things like when a woman's slip is showing, a man's zipper is open, or talking about pregnancy, menstruation, and so forth. Abigail Van Buren ("Dear Abby") asked her readers in 1986 to supply their family code terms to warn someone that his fly was unzipped and she collected not only the well-known "XYZ" (for "examine your zipper"), but in one family the saying "Oh woe is me" (which was supposed to remind the unzipped person of the rest of the quotation, "for I am undone.") In another family the code word was "Einstein," an allusion to the supposed forgetfulness and sloppy dressing habits of the great scientist. And this contributor added an anecdote:

One day at a family wedding, I noticed my husband's zipper was open. He was about 20 feet away so I said "Einstein" in a rather loud stage whisper. At least 10 men in his vicinity automatically looked down to check their zippers. Apparently our "code word" had spread. (Column of May 30, 1986.)

More likely, using the term "Einstein" was a wider folk tradition that the family had adopted, rather than being something they had invented themselves.

Now let's look at a bit of picturesque folk speech from another part of the country that happened to get mentioned in Utah newspapers. Actually, I first heard this expression on a National Public Radio broadcast on University of Utah FM radio station KUER (October 11, 1985). In a news item about proposed protective trade measures on textiles, a senator was heard saying something like this, "You will not be surprised to learn that I am in favor of this legislation, since I come from North Carolina, the textile capitol of the United States. After all, you do dance with them what brung you." Years later I read in Harold Schindler's television column in the Tribune (April 27, 1993) that Ken Burns, producer of The Civil War documentary series, had commented, after signing an agreement to continue broadcasting the series on PBS by saying, "I am honored to leave the dance with them that brung me." A year later in her syndicated column, carried also in the Tribune, Texas writer Molly Ivins wrote, "Our elected representatives are just real sensitive to money. They got to dance with them what brung 'em" (March 31, 1994). What each of these sophisticated, educated southerners was doing was quoting in all of its traditional ungrammatical glory a proverbial truism about human nature. They would never, of course, have used a phrase like "them what brung you" except in the context of citing folk wisdom.

A modern proverb with an equally folksy sound, is apparently well known among economists. I first spotted it in a USA Today story (reprinted in the Salt Lake Tribune on November 27, 1995). A leading economist, discussing the possibility of a federal balanced budget said:
I have to believe a rising tide does raise all boats. And no matter what the public may believe, the vast majority of Americans do have boats to sit in when it comes to the economy.

I call this a modern proverb because I have not found its counterpart in any of the standard dictionaries and collections of English or American proverbs.

Looking at it from another angle, a Michigan state senator was quoted in the New York Times (April 10, 2000) saying "There is a percentage of our citizenry that is not having its boat floated by this economy." Also in the Times a few days later (April 12, 2000) under the headline "All Boats Rise. Now What?" a Harvard University economist wrote on the Op-Ed page and described the healthy economy before 1970 as exhibiting "a pattern in which a rising tide did indeed lift all boats." The only reference I have found so far to this expression used outside of economics was in the comic strip "Shoe" on April 10, 2000. A worker at a desk overflowing with unfinished business comments "I hate working late." Then he adds in the last panel, "But then working early doesn't float my boat either."

There are times when a person in politics may strive for this sort of folksy touch but make some unfortunate choice of expression. The media then will rush to cover the story and get reactions from readers and listeners. Utahns probably all remember the flap caused some years ago when then senator Jake Garn made his infamous "call a spade a spade" comment with reference to Jesse Jackson. Garn claimed not to have had any idea that the word "spade" was sometimes used as a derogatory racial term.

A more recent example occurred in 1996, when the chairman of the Utah Centennial Commission was quoted in the newspapers (Salt Lake Tribune, January 11, 1996) responding to a concern that ethnic and religious minorities were not sufficiently involved in his planning; the chairman's comment was "If you hung some people with a new rope, they'd complain." Many readers were offended by the expression, especially in the context in which it was used, saying that it evoked images of the lynchings of African-Americans and the mistreatment of Native Americans. For several days controversy raged in the letters columns of local papers, some writers remembering the saying as "Some people would kick if they were hung with a new rope," which seemed to be even more explicit, conjuring an image of a hanged person kicking at the end of a rope. Defenders of the chairman, however, wrote that the saying was only metaphorical, that "kick" meant merely "complain," that the whole issue was a "hyperbolic misunderstanding," and that those offended should "lighten up" and not "wear their feelings on their sleeves." I believe the chairman did apologize, and surely he vowed to be more careful of the folksy expressions he used in the future.

I sometimes wonder if anyone notices some of the more esoteric terms that get mentioned in the news. How about this: in the newspaper caption to a photograph of actors appearing in a new children's play, the cast list included the name "George Spelvin" (Salt Lake Tribune, April 6, 1975). In a 1980s University of Utah Pioneer Theater production of "The Music Man" the bit part of the railroad conductor in scene one was listed in the program as "George Spelvin." All right, so maybe this local actor gets around, but what about this: in a Time magazine story on pornographic films, the "energetic heroine of The Devil in Miss Jones," an X-rated film, was named as "Georgina Spelvin" (November 4, 1974). Does the Utah actor have a namesake daughter in the porn flick business? Not at all. Ask any insider in the theater world and you will learn that when a bit part is played by an unidentified actor, the name "George Spelvin" is traditionally used. (The night I saw "The Music Man," for example, the conductor's part was played by since deceased Professor of Theater Keith Engar, then director of the Pioneer Theater, and on another night, I read in a newspaper review, the part was played by the then mayor of the
Just as I was preparing this essay I read in a local paper (Salt Lake Tribune, May 7, 2000) about a theater producer who, while he was studying at the University of Utah, both acted in plays and served as the student newspaper's drama critic. He wrote all his reviews under the pseudonym George Spelvin.

Back to earthy insults, a rancher from Oakley, Utah, was once quoted in the paper criticizing a government plan to drastically reduce grazing on the western slope of the Uinta Mountains. The rancher said of the Forest Service authorities, "Why they couldn't pour pee out of a boot with the instructions written on the sole" (Salt Lake Tribune, May 16, 1992). That's one of my favorite folk putdowns, and I once did a little historical study of its background as a prank played on new soldiers, telling them that if they urinated in their stiff new army boots and let them stand overnight the leather would soften. Some men, however, were just too stupid to later pour piss out of their boots.

Many modern putdowns are less earthy, more along the lines of "He was a few pickles short of a barrel," quoted by the Associated Press (December 31, 1993) from a New York State district attorney who was referring to a hapless would-be con-man. Or "a few sandwiches short of a picnic" applied by Ann Landers (April 12, 1994) as she got out the wet noodle to punish herself for a bad answer to a reader's question. I've also seen "a couple of bricks shy of a load," "one French fry short of a happy meal," "two beers short of a sixpack," and "not pulling with both oars" quoted in newspapers. These, I believe, are updateings of such expressions as "not playing with a full deck." The next level of updating, with reference to computers, is something like "He's got a bad spot on his disk" or "He's got a loose chip on his microprocessor."

A couple of other examples of picturesque speech-i.e. proverbial usage-from newspapers are, from a 1971 Marie Callender pie shop ad, "Apple Pie without some cheese is like a kiss without the squeeze," and Ann Landers's complete response to a reader who complained about a rather tasteless Christmas letter she had received (in a clipping undated in my file) using the traditional Wellerism, "'To each his own,' said the lady as she kissed the baboon."

One reason I take both Salt Lake City papers of course is to get both Ann Landers's and Abigail Van Buren's advice columns. I find that Dear Abby is often just a tad better than her sister is at collecting folklore from her readers (I've already cited Abby's survey of open-zipper warnings.) On another occasion Abby asked readers to describe family codes used during World War II in letters home from the front to inform the family where the service person was stationed. One husband changed his wife's middle initial in each letter, writing to Betty G. Smith, then Betty U., then Betty A., and finally Betty M.-obviously the man was in the Pacific Zone on the island of Guam. Another man wrote home that he could not say where he was, but that "Nick would love it here." Nick was the family's pet Lab, so they guessed correctly that he was in Labrador. Still another family had a code based on having identical world maps at both ends of the correspondence and superimposing the letter over the map, then noting a pinhole that marked the spot. (Did he really get this past the censors, I wonder?) My favorite ploy reported in Dear Abby's column involved mentioning a favorite recording by Eddy Duchin on the flip side of which was "April in Paris." But how many cities would this work with? (All examples from her October 14, 1986, column.)

Well, actually Ann Landers sometimes does pretty well herself in the folklore collecting line. In her February 11, 1985, column she summed up many of the home remedies her readers had supplied as cures for cold sores. These ranged from eating yogurt, dabbing the sores with a mixture of honey and vinegar, applying a salve made from ground walnuts and cocoa butter twice a day, dousing the sores with a mix of bourbon, white flour and cayenne pepper, and even
standing on one's head and taking cold showers (not at the same time). Ann commented, "At times my work is a headache, but it's never a bore." In another column a woman wrote to describe her good luck in influencing the gender of her unborn children by becoming pregnant and then sleeping on her right side for a girl and her left side for a boy. Ann sensibly replied, "The sex of a child is determined at the moment of conception. Once a woman is pregnant she can sleep on her head and it won't affect the sex of her unborn child" (June 11, 1969). And again, when a man wrote to describe all of his girlfriend's superstitious patterns of behavior and inquired, proverbially, "Does this girl have all her marbles?" and asked whether he should try to talk her out of these actions, Ann replied, concluding with a different proverbial expression: "Superstition is based on emotion and has nothing to do with logic or intellect. She might make a wonderful wife. So bite your tongue" (September 11, 1971).

An allusion to an old folk custom with possible superstitious overtones occurred in the comic strip "B.C." on November 7, 1979. I wonder how many readers caught the meaning. Three panels: the first shows a person walking along with his shadow cast beside him. The second panel shows the man passing on one side of a large rock while his shadow passes on the other side. In the last panel, as the man-now reunited with his shadow-walks off into the distance he says "Bread and Butter," alluding to the teenage custom used by friends who walk around opposite sides of a pole.

Turning from words, quips, codes, and folk beliefs to jokes, during the period of Glasnost and reform in the Soviet Union many newspaper stories included examples of humor then circulating in Eastern Europe. One Associated Press story (November 29, 1990) quoted a joke that Mikhail Gorbachev himself had told in the Russian parliament. It was in the familiar threefold-comparison form:

They say that President Mitterand of France has 100 lovers. One has AIDS, but he doesn't know which one. President Bush has 100 bodyguards, and one is a terrorist, but he doesn't know which one. But I, Gorbachev, have 100 economic advisers, and one is smart, but I don't know which one.

The news item said that "the joke was warmly received by the members of Parliament"; maybe it lost something in translation.

Also in Eastern Europe, following the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident, newspapers reported on the black humor circulating in Poland which was downwind from the radioactive fallout. One joke quoted from the Los Angeles Times by the Deseret News on May 3, 1986, said the Soviets had finally achieved their long-sought goal of a nuclear-free zone in Europe-"as free as the wind." Another said the new patriotic slogan was "Long live our radiant friendship with the Soviet Union." Then there was the riddle joke, "What flies and glows in the dark?-Chicken Kiev." Such examples helped readers to understand how the long-suffering Eastern Europeans were coping with yet another unspeakable disaster. Utahns might have particularly appreciated the joke that the Polish government had devised a curative drink for adults based on protective doses of "jod" or iodine. The "v" supposedly contained four drops of iodine to half a liter of vodka." (Surely Utahns remember the local joke referring to the master forger and sometime bomber Mark Hoffman, he who passed off the infamous "White Salamander letter" as a genuine early Mormon document. The joke-as mentioned in the newspapers-was that there was a new cocktail being served in Salt Lake City, The White Salamander: "One drink and you're bombed." I don't mean to make light of these crimes but want to point out how the folk sometimes respond to situations of unrest and crisis with a dark brand of humor circulating person-to-person. And occasionally these jokes get into the newspapers.
A few times I've read newspaper stories revealing the inside folklore of the journalistic profession itself. For example, James E. Shelledy, editor of the Salt Lake Tribune, did a column (March 5, 2000) about his own profession being (as he put it) "chock full of loonies and legends." The editor mentioned the supposed last words typed by Bat Masterson who had "ended his life as a [newspaper] sportswriter"; supposedly, when Masterson was found slumped over his typewriter, the two sentences typed on the paper were these: "I have discovered that in this life we all get the same amount of ice. The rich get it in the summer and the poor in the winter." Another journalistic anecdote he told was about the newspaper librarian who maintained the clipping files in what was then called the paper's "morgue." She had among her many other categories two crammed folders under the letter N marked simply "News of Interest," one for local stories and one for national. The editor even claimed to have been in the newspaper's composing room when an obituary appeared for a local woman who had died while participating in a church missionary program in Africa. The obit began, he wrote, by referring to the woman "dying of a heart attack immediately after assuming a missionary position in Africa." (I'm sure I've read or heard that story told elsewhere.)

Sometimes what we might call the "folk process" of text variation may be accidentally revealed in a newspaper item. For example, I puzzled one day many years ago over the radio-program listing of a "You and Day Concert" on KUER featuring the great cellist Pablo Casals. "You and Day"; what could it mean? Then I tuned in and learned it was "UN Day" [i.e. United Nations Day] and I guessed that the information had been supplied orally with the resulting misunderstanding.

A front-page article about overdue and missing library books preserved a similar example. A University of Utah librarian was quoted in the Salt Lake Tribune (December 17, 1999) telling about the historian who had checked out "the U.'s entire collection of works on gerbils-- only to have them stolen from his truck after he left the tomes there overnight." Gerbils? That didn't make sense to me, so I asked my daughter Amy who is a librarian at the U. and she said, no, it was a World War II historian and he had checked out all the books on the Nazi politician Joseph Goebbels. Again, the story was based on an oral interview, possibly given over the telephone, and the reporter misunderstood. In both instances an oral tradition produced text variations.

The age-old employment of stories-particularly fables and parables-- for teaching was illustrated in two versions of an old tale that happened to find their way, again, into the Salt Lake Tribune. Back in 1967 (February 27) a regular local column discussing family life included this touching yarn. Here's the story:

One grandpa, after Grandma died, came to live at his son's home. He had a slight hand tremor and, as he sat at the dining room table, would occasionally spill soup on the tablecloth. The tremor got worse and finally the son thought the best thing would be for Grandpa to eat in the kitchen.

This was arranged. But the tremor got still worse and Grandpa occasionally dropped and broke a piece of china. Then the son got him some wooden plates and a wooden cup to use at mealtimes. One day the son came home and found his own little boy, age 7, working at the tool bench in the basement. The boy was chiseling at a chunk of wood.

"What are you making, son?" he asked.
"I'm making a wooden plate and a wooden cup," the little boy replied. "They're for you, Dad, so when you're old you can eat in my kitchen." Digging into this story a little in a historical sense, it's clearly an example of the folklore motif numbered J121 in Stith Thompson's index. "Ungrateful son reproved by naive action of his own son." In fact, it's a perfect example of the sub-motif J121.1 "Preparing for old age-- the wooden drinking cup or bowl." The Motif-Index lists Spanish and East Indian references, and I suspect that the writer of the modern newspaper version had learned the story from a printed source.

Coincidentally, the writer of a letter to the editor of the same newspaper on February 19, 1996, re-told another version calling it "an Asian fable." This writer's point was that young people should not object to paying Social Security taxes, nor should they criticize senior citizens drawing their monthly payments. Then he repeated the story of the Asian father buying a large wicker basket in which he intended to place his aged father who was too old to contribute to the family's income and carry him to the river where he would throw him in. The writer concluded:

Because grandfather told stories to the children and spent time with them, the children loved him. They began pleading and crying, but one of the older children ended the discussion by telling his father, "When you dispose of grandfather, bring back the basket, because we will need to use it for you someday."

If I were to touch on all of the other urban legends I've found in newspapers since then, this essay would never end, so I'll just mention a few. One of the best examples of how an oral story can retain its power to convince, even when reduced to cold hard newsprint, is the following version of a well-known urban legend published by Ann Landers on July 31, 1982:

Dear Ann:

I tell this story to everyone I meet, and I hope that by telling you, others will get the message.

A lady friend of mine got into her car to do some errands. She was in a hurry but had to stop for gas.

The young attendant asked her to step inside his office because something was wrong with her credit.

Reluctantly, she got out and followed him. Once inside he asked her if she was aware that a man was crouched down in the back seat of her car. My friend nearly fainted.

Moral: Check your back seat before you get into your car. These days it is easy for an experienced rapist or mugger to open a locked car and hide in the back seat. Spread the word, Ann.

—I live in California.

Dear California:

Consider it spread—and thanks for the tip.
Not surprisingly, perhaps, it's urban legends that I seem to have found most often as examples of folk narratives appearing in the daily newspaper. Urban legends are those bizarre, funny, and sometimes horrible stories that are told as true but are really "too good to be true." In fact, the very first story of this kind that I can document that I found in newsprint was a version of "The Dead Cat in the Package" legend which appeared in the Bloomington, Indiana, Herald-Telephone on May 28, 1959, during the very week when I was helping Professor Dorson index his new textbook American Folklore. Dorson had written in his last chapter about the legend concerning the city woman trying to dispose of the body of her dead cat by carrying it in a wrapped package to a downtown department store where a friend from the suburbs would meet her and take the package home for burial in the backyard. The package is shoplifted with comic results-I'll leave it at that. So here I was reading in the proofs of the forthcoming book, about this widespread urban legend as an example of contemporary folklore, and a variation of that same story attributed to a friend-of-a-friend in Indianapolis showed up in the local newspaper.

Typical of urban legends, here, the writer says she "tells" this story to others and urges Ann Landers to "spread the word." Her source is the classic "friend of a friend," and the story ends with a stated moral. This is the urban legend we know as "The Killer in the Back Seat," and it continues to circulate widely in several variations, including some found on the Internet. It was also the first horror story enacted in the 1998 campus slasher film titled "Urban Legend."

Just four days earlier than this, on July 27, 1982, the other local newspaper, The Deseret News, published a version of the classic "Elevator Incident" legend, attributing it to 'Three prominent Salt Lake doctors, accompanied by their wives, [who] went to Philadelphia for a convention."

The wives went on to New York City to attend a play, and while there they supposedly encountered a black man on an elevator leading a Doberman pinscher on a leash. When the man said "Sit!" the Salt Lake ladies sat down, believing him to be a mugger. He turned out to be Reggie Jackson out walking his dog. If you believe that one, have I got a book for you!

To the credit of the DN columnist, Maxine Martz, who passed on the elevator story, she headed her column "True Story?" and said only that "The storyteller, a friend of a friend of a friend of one of the doctors, insists the women have the note." Sure.

But the DN did not do quite so well on December 5, 1999, in reprinting an Associated Press story datelined Chisnau, Moldova. You may recall the story and may have seen my comment published in a letter to the editor. The story's headline was "Thieves take rug-and grandma's corpse" and it went like this:

Thieves who made off with a rug reportedly got more than they bargained for: They also ended up with the body of a Moldovan woman.

The incident happened after two impoverished Moldovan cousins bundled up their grandmother's corpse in a rug because they couldn't afford a coffin, the daily Observator reported.

The men strapped the body to the top of their car and headed south from the Ukraine to bury her in northern Moldova, the paper reported. En route, they stopped to eat in the Ukrainian town of Spikovo, 190 miles northwest of Kiev.

When they left the restaurant, they discovered that the rug and the grandmother's body were missing, the newspaper said.
The two men notified Ukrainian police and returned to Moldova, performing a burial service without the body.

Here's part of my letter to the editor published on January 2, 2000:

Oh, come on, editor!

Surely you didn't believe that AP story about the missing Moldovan granny. This is nothing but the old "Runaway Grandmother" urban legend that has been told worldwide for decades.

The article mentions that a local daily named the Observator reported the story, but that doesn't make it true. Probably an AP writer picked it up and sent it on its merry way without checking, and I suppose many newspapers should not be faulted for printing what the AP sent them. But, please, not the Deseret News.

Let's take a brief sideways glance from the legitimate press to the murky world of the supermarket tabloids. People often ask me if the more sensational tabloid stories (aren't they all sensational?) are based on, or are the sources of, urban legends. It's a reasonable question.

Because urban legends are often bizarre in subject matter, yet at the same time plausible, and also because the basic plots are not copyrighted or otherwise "owned," tabloids often rewrite these traditional stories as pseudo news items for publication. But since libraries and archives seldom (if ever) save and index tabloids-the lowest of the lowbrow level of yellow journalism-the urban legends that appear in these melodramatic sources are seldom noted and even less often preserved. Here are two examples I've collected from tabloids of urban legends turned into supposed news stories:

"My Neighbor's Dog Fingered Intruder," Globe, November 10, 1981. Published as this issue's "Liveliest Letter," the item purported to be a first-hand account of "The Choking Doberman" legend experienced by a woman in Lansing, Michigan. The neighbor's dog "Tiger" was found to be choking on two fingers bitten off an intruder who was discovered by the police "cowering in the closet" minus two fingers. A Lansing journalist later learned that the woman's name had been changed for publication of her letter and that she had actually heard the story in a beauty parlor, not from her neighbor.

"Our New Puppy is a Killer Rat!" Weekly World News, October 4, 1988. In a revision of "The Mexican Pet" legend, Henri and Catherine Fritz, aged 84 and 82 respectively, of Innsbruck, Austria, were reported to have adopted a Chihuahua-size creature found on their doorstep. It turned out to be a rat rather than a small dog, and it attacked and killed their cat "Missy." A composite picture of a large rat looming over a cute cat wearing a collar appeared with this dubious story.

Such tabloid stories share with legitimate folklore the fact that many of them came to the tabloids from readers who submitted their own versions of stories they had heard. These legends, however, are invariably processed by the tabloid writers who invent names, ages, places, dialogue and other details typical of authentic news stories.

I've given you only selected examples from this vast topic, folklore in the news, but I hope I managed to suggest the scope of the subject. I touched on media, from the New York Times to supermarket tabloids; sources, from actual news stories to signed columns and letters; and
folklore genres, from regional speech and folk proverbs to fables and urban legends. Judging from these examples, just what do we learn from a collection of folklore from the news?

First, as I indicated earlier, we learn that the stereotyped style of much daily journalism benefits from a seasoning of traditional folk material, which adds some freshness and audacity to the news. Second, we see that the folk processes of person-to-person transmission and constant variation continue, even in an age of mass media, and, in fact, sometimes even aided by the media. And third, we are reminded that when there's a point to be made, we folk—and all of us are folk—often still turn to traditional modes of expression as having an immediate and telling effect.

Just think how much more appealing and memorable a quoted news source is if he or she speaks those sound bites using a witty vernacular expression. And consider how much wiser an advice columnist or letterwriter sounds if he or she sums up the point using a picturesque proverb or a moving little story.

Which leads me to a final point—one that the Fifes understood so well—that is, the power of traditional stories in particular to argue, to teach, to convince, or simply to illustrate our ideas and feelings. The folklore we find in the news, along with all the stories we continue to tell one another, prove beyond a doubt that folklore is not dying out as we enter the new millennium. Instead, folklore is always adapting to new media and new situations and subjects. Robert Fulford, who is regarded as "the foremost cultural journalist in Canada," a columnist for the Toronto newspaper the Globe and Mail, argued the point most ably in his 1999 book The Triumph of Narrative. "This has been the century of mass storytelling," Fulford wrote:

We live under a Niagara of stories: print, television, movies, radio and the Internet deliver to us far more stories than our ancestors could have imagined, and the number of stories available to us seems to grow larger every year (p. 149).

I like the way Fulford goes from the natural image of a Niagara of stories to a mention of the Internet, which is surely the latest great conduit for the transmission of folklore: consider some of the old and new folklore forms now proliferating on the net and being forwarded daily as e-mail, such as:

Cyber proverbs:

There's no place like www.home.com.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single click.

The geek shall inherit the earth.

Updated putdowns:

He's a few bits shy of a word.

Her CPU is not connected to the bus.

Mangled foreign quotations and translations:

Harlez-vous Francais? (Can you drive a French motorcycle?)
Felix Navidad (Our cat has a boat.)

One liners:

Do Lipton employees take coffee breaks?

If you're sending someone some Styrofoam, what do you pack it in?

Plus all kinds of jokes, anecdotes, urban legends, parodies, fake memoes, forms, questionnaires, rumors, pranks, hoaxes, bogus warnings, virus alerts, supposed free offers and product recalls, conspiracy theories, chain letters, games, rhymes, recipes, cartoons, greeting cards—truly a virtual Niagara of lore flowing over the electronic grapevine, to mix a couple of metaphors. It's a wonder anyone gets any work done nowadays. We used to fear that Xeroxlore might take over our offices, but the Internet's capacity to fill time with chit chat and lore is much, much greater. And the Internet itself becomes the subject of some of this lore, as illustrated by the bogus warnings flying around lately about the government's supposed plan to tax e-mail in order to support the sagging fortunes of the Post Office. Other examples of this self-referential lore are the e-mailed texts that combine every urban legend you've ever heard into one grand story, or the text of "The Gullibility Virus" that supposedly causes you to believe every damn fool thing that comes in on the Net, from Bill Gates giving away money to bananas imported from Costa Rica containing flesh-eating bacteria.

I have at times disparaged such Internet lore as too static and stereotyped to be interesting to a folklorist; after all, many people simply forward the material that they find amusing, delivering it simultaneously to everyone on their address list without variation or commentary. But in collecting some of this cyberlore I've found that people still do interact in the good old folk manner in whatever way the medium allows.

So here's one last example: A couple of months ago I got an e-mail raising the question "Where do all our e-mailed jokes, cute sayings, etc. go when they take on a life of their own?" In order to track them, the letter asked me to cut and paste the message and send it to everyone on my e-mail address list, adding my own name and location to the bottom of the included list. This electronic chain letter had begun in June 1998 with a man in England and was up to #446 dated just the night before I got it from someone in Pennsylvania. Every single other recipient was listed, and most of them had added comments about how "cute," "cool," or "awesome" this little game was. People commented things like "Great idea," "God Bless," "Hello world," and "At last, a fun chain letter." Others added holiday greetings, mentioned their birthday, cheered on a favorite athletic team, or crowed, "I am the first in Israel, or Indonesia, or Iowa." Someone else noted when the message became one year old, and another remarked "It's a modern version of the note in the bottle." I would guess that most people who forwarded the list did not know more than one or two others on it, and would likely never meet any of the others. Two comments around the 300th or so message especially caught my eye and may serve as a conclusion for this modest survey of folklore in the news and on the net. One person added the note, "The peoples of earth are finally connected!" And another typed, "Around and around it goes, and where it stops nobody knows." That's as good a place as any to end this survey of Folklore in the News (and Incidentally, on the Net).

This essay was delivered as the Fife Honor Lecture at the June, 2000, Fife Conference, "Folklore at the Millenium" at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. In the oral presentation specific dates of sources were omitted.
FOOTNOTES

1. In fact, when newspapers use the words "folklore" or "myth" they often misuse the terms, applying them only in the sense of "falsity."

WORKS CITED


Incidentally. 41 likes. Michael's digressions in convenient journal form! Contact Incidentally on Messenger. journal.michaelahlers.org. Personal Blog. Do you have cause to get excited about what you see in the news? Media Consumption is Motion | Incidentally One way we practice motion (and avoid action) is through impulsive media consumption. journal.michaelahlers.org.