

ORAL FOLKLORE PROVIDES IMPORTANT insights into Pennsylvania mountain culture because it opens a window for us on the inner personality of mountain people. For the most part, the people in the northern mountains of Pennsylvania live in an “oral society.” The really important information that comes to them and that they pass on each day is conveyed by word of mouth. Of course, people watch television and read the newspapers, but the things they consider vital to their day-to-day existence they learn directly from other people. They just have to “visit” with everyone they meet because this is their primary means of finding out what’s going on. It makes for a wonderfully tight-knit, if not gossipy, world. Most of the jokes, anecdotes, folktales, and news are deeply imbued with cultural values. Oral folklore is vital to people in this kind of culture: it entertains them, it informs them, and it serves as a glue that keeps the society together.

A good example of how a deep-rooted cultural value is maintained and spread through oral folklore can be seen in the cycle of flatlander tales told by the mountain people of Pennsylvania. A flatlander tale is a numskull story about an arrogant outsider who meets his comeuppance at the hands of a canny ridgerunner. Tales about outsiders and numskulls are thousands of years old, and most flatlander tales follow ancient tale types.

Anxiety is at the root of these tales. People living in isolated rural regions of the hill country

can feel threatened by urban values, ultra-modern culture, and slick outsiders. They know their world is outdated, poor, and even sometimes laughable when placed beside the wealth and power of mainstream American society. They tell flatlander stories because they are good defense mechanisms, anxiety relievers, and psychological equalizers. The ridgerunner always come out on top.

These flatlander tales developed over the last fifty years as a response to pressure on the culture from outsiders. Mobile and affluent city dwellers poured into the Pennsylvania mountains to hunt, fish, vacation, and often to buy up inexpensive land. Competition between local people and outsiders for land deals, hunting spots, and even for spouses took on a keen edge. When in 1973 the power companies talked about building nuclear power plants in the mountains to supply the eastern cities with electricity, the local people threatened to get nasty. When the Army Corps of Engineers took prime farmland in the 1970s for federal dam projects, the already frustrated people grew enraged. Flatlander tales were one way of getting even. They sprung up everywhere almost overnight.

Local wits began spinning yarns about outsiders. In the bars and barbershops a cartoon character of the flatlander began to take shape: he was a rich, uppity, know-it-all who couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. A counter-picture of the ridgerunner also began to take shape: he was quiet and modest, he was honest but cunning, and above all, he was a mountain man who was at home in the wilds. In

these caricatures, it is the ridgerunner who invariably comes out on top, while the flatlander, at first so cocksure of himself, is reduced to idiocy.

It is important to note that locals tell these tales to each other and not to outsiders. The tales are more than a defensive reaction to outside pressure; they are an attempt to maintain cultural balance within the community by taking something threatening and turning it into something harmless and silly.

1 The Fish Warden and the Dynamite

MY grandfather used to take dynamite and get trout for some of the restaurants. As this was illegal, they tried to catch him a lot. They never succeeded because Gramps knew all the game wardens and their friends. Well, they brought up this flatlander game warden, and he approached Gramps as though he was a restaurant owner. Well, Gramps told him sure he'd help him out. They thought they had him this time for sure. Well, as they went to the stream, Gramps pulled a quarter stick of dynamite from his pocket, rigged it up, and then asked this warden to hold it while he lit it. The warden held it, Gramps lit it, and then he just walked away with the warden hanging on to that lit dynamite. Well, the only place he could throw it was into the stream right there. It went off and Gramps walked back. There was probably a hundred trout come floatin' up, and Gramps says,

“There’s your fish, you kilt them and you might as well net ’em out, Mr. Smarty-pants Warden.”

I never did find out how Gramps knew he was a game warden.

2 Skinning the Mink

ONE of the first flatlanders brought his wife with him. Since then, they have stopped this practice, as they have learned the area is abundant with women who are available and enjoy having a good time. At the time of his arrival, there was an old mink farm around Tioga. His wife wanted to go see the farm, so her husband talked to the owner, and he agreed to show them how they raise mink.

As they were walking through the farm, Mrs. Flatlander interrupted the proprietor with a question: “How many times a year do you skin the mink?”

The proprietor look rather astounded and then calmly replied, “Just once, ma’am; any more than that and they get meaner than hell.”

3 Doe Season

THEN there was the day I was huntin’ up back. It was in doe season so I just went behind the barn. A big doe came out of the woods on a run, and I dropped her just as she was crossin’ the

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fence. She fell with her front legs on one side and her back legs on the other. Well, as I started up, this flatlander came running out of the woods, looked around, and not seeing me by the barn, hauled the deer off the fence and started dressing her. Well, I just set down and lit my pipe and watched. When I saw he was about done, I just walked up, put my rope around her neck, said, "Thank ye," and pulled her down to the barn. Never did find out if the flatlander ever did get his doe.

4 Bearskin up a Tree

THEN there was the flatlander who came up bear huntin'. Crawled up in a tree and put a bearskin rug over him so the bears wouldn't recognize him. Well, he got shot right out of that tree by another flatlander.

5 Flatlander Shoots Buddy

TWO flatlanders went huntin'. They were definitely not woodsmen. They went out a few miles and started huntin'. Pretty soon one shot the other one. He got all panicked and dragged his wounded buddy out to the road and waved down a car. Pretty soon the ambulance and the troopers got there. "Is he goin' to live?" the flatlander said.

The trooper just looked at him and said, "He might of lived if you hadn't of gutted him out."

6 Flatlander Shoots a Goat

A FLATLANDER came into Galeton. He had lots of money to spend and he was goin' huntin'. But he didn't know what he was doin'. So he goes into the sporting goods store and buys a .306 for about five hundred dollars. Then he asks the salesman to load the gun for him 'cause he doesn't even know how. So the salesman loads it and the flatlander goes out huntin'. A few hours later, a big crowd gathers on Main Street. The flatlander's back with a big brown animal with horns tied to his car and he's all smilin' and wavin'. The people are just laughin' and holdin' their sides. The salesman comes out and looks at the animal and then at the flatlander.

"That ain't no deer you shot. That there is a goat," the salesman says.

"Oh, really?" says the flatlander, "What the hell—it's got a good rack. I think I'll have it mounted."

7 Farmer Dumps Manure on Flatlander's Car

THIS flatlander hunter kept parking his car where the farmer drove his tractor into the field when he went to spread manure. This made the farmer mad, so he came with a load of manure and instead of putting it on the field, he just dumped it all over the flatlander's car.

8 The Stranger

YEARS ago Thad Cohick started up a general store down Salladasburg way and the family still runs it today. They sell everything from beaver traps to borax. In the old days, lots of us would sit around the store spitting at the stove, eating Moon Pies and drinking ginger beer. Thad drove a hard bargain. Why, folks said he could get a flatlander's last nickel. But he never took in anybody that didn't deserve it.

Back then the big revival meetings used to come through in the summer. Folks would come from Steam Valley, Trout Run, and Antes Fort just to hear some good old hellfire preaching. It was mostly social. Well, one of them preachers really got to old Thad one summer. He came down with a bad case of religion. Said he was living his life at the foot of the cross.

When people said Thad was a changed man, a bunch of us lit out for the store to watch him in action. We was sitting around jawing when little Mary English came into the store. Thad fetched her a stick of horehound, took her penny, and waved goodbye. Then he went behind the counter, put his fingers on the keys of the cash register, looked up to heaven and said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, Lord."

We was sure impressed. Later on, Mother Olabelle Reeve came into the store. She was mother to half a dozen wayward younguns in the

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neighborhood. Olabelle wanted some flour, so Thad gave her a sack, took her money, and helped her out the door. Then he walked behind the counter, put his fingers on the keys of the register again and said, "Honor thy father and thy mother."

About an hour later, we heard brakes squealing and tires kicking up pebbles outside the store. We looked out the window and saw a big new pickup hauling a fancy horse trailer stop in front of the store. Then out stepped a rich-looking dude and walked into the store. He wore a ten-gallon hat, them high-heeled roach-killer boots, and a silver belt buckle. Walked right on up to Thad and said, "I got a fifty-thousand-dollar racehorse out in that van, and I need a blanket for him. Give me the best one you got."

Thad went on back into the storeroom and came back with a green blanket.

"That the best one you got?" asked the gent.

"Yep," says Thad.

"How much?" says the dude.

"Nineteen-ninety-five," says Thad.

"What?" says the dude. "You expect me to put a twenty-dollar blanket on a fifty-thousand-dollar horse? Ain't you got anything better?"

So Thad went back to the storeroom. Now, we all knowed he only had one kind of blanket. The colors was different, but they all cost the same. We was dying to see what he was going to do next.

Thad came out with a brown blanket and put it on the counter.

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"How much is that one?" asked the man.

"Why, this one here costs forty-nine ninety-five," says Thad.

"You expect me to put a fifty-dollar blanket on my fifty-thousand-dollar racehorse? You gotta have something better than that."

So Thad went back again and this time he came out with a red blanket and said, "This one's the very best I got. Costs ninety-nine ninety-five."

"I'll take it," said the stranger, and he paid Thad the hundred dollars, picked up the blanket and left the store.

Thad put the money in the cash register and put his fingers on the keys. Then he looked up to heaven and said, "Lord, he was a stranger and I took him in."

9 Flatlander Foiled

A FLATLANDER came up here hunting ducks and he had no luck, but on his way home he passed a farm pond full of ducks and suddenly had a bright idea. He pulled the car over, got out, and walked up to a farmer working in his field. Then the flatlander said, "Mr. Farmer, will you let me take one shot at those ducks for a ten-dollar bill?"

The farmer agreed, so the flatlander got out his gun. Now, he thought he'd fool the farmer and kill most of the ducks with one shot. He waited till they were all together, then: BOOM! He must have killed a dozen ducks.