

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 579

CS 201 872

AUTHOR Sackett, Marjorie
TITLE The Folklorist and the Community.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society (Oct. 31-Nov. 3, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.76 HC-\$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Colleges; Community Attitudes; *Community Relations; Cultural Interrelationships; *Ethnic Relations; *Folk Culture; *Research
IDENTIFIERS *Folklorists

ABSTRACT

Evidence indicates that the results of folklorists' studies have had a positive effect on the relationship among ethnic groups as well as on college-community relationships in Hays, Kansas. Research based on 64 interviews of members of the community and the college shows that members of the German-Russian ethnic group have a notably increased pride in their heritage, while other members of the community now share in many of the German-Russian group's customs and enjoy their food. In addition, members of other ethnic groups who are new in Hays feel ready acceptance by both the community and the college. (JM)

Marjorie Sackett

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The Folklorist and the Community

Marjorie Sackett

My intention was to discover whether the collectors of folklore have had any affect on the community in which they collect material and whether there has been any improvement in college-community relationships as a result. I am aware that I am speaking only for my area, but I feel also that this type of study might be applicable to other areas as well.

My husband and I have been associated with the local college at Hays as folklorists for twenty years, and I spent my girlhood there as a faculty daughter. Hays, the largest town between Salina and Denver, is a community of 15,000 people, and the college has about 4800 students. We have collected material among the ethnic groups, mainly the German-Russians, in our area. We have evidence to indicate that the college-community relationships are improved and that many factors contributed to this. Among these were specific things the folklorists had done to cause an increased sense of pride among the German-Russians as they saw that their culture was of positive interest to an outsider; especially was this true among those people who had had little formal education, for they seemed flattered that the education society was interested in their cultural heritage. Nearly all

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people seemed to feel that all concerned--college or townspeople--should work even harder to erase any prejudices that still might be held.

My research is based on sixty-four interviews of members of the community and the college. The community informants form a cross-section, in sociological, ethnological, and economic groups, in political and religious affiliation, in educational background (sixth grade to graduate degrees), in age (sixteen to eighty-four), and in occupation. The college informants also form a cross-section, in both ethnic and non-ethnic membership, in age, and in status (both students and teachers of all academic rank and interests). I also considered variance in the length of time the people had lived in the community or had been associated with the college--some had had family associations with the college and community for three generations and some for only a short time.

The feeling was almost unanimous that members of the German-Russian ethnic group had an increased pride in their background, so much so that younger informants seemed even to have little awareness that there had been a problem, and that the college-community relationships had improved over the years.

There were reasons given for these improvements in addition to folklorists activities--better educational opportunities, broader religious views, and freer political membership. All of these areas had previously made a double reinforcement to the barrier between the ethnic group and the rest of the community on the

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one hand, and between the community and the college on the other hand, for the ethnic-group membership seemed to be the determining factor on the other memberships.

One dominant factor--education--was given by informants of nearly all ages. Foremost mentioned was the G. I. Bill after W.W. II which permitted people to attend college, particularly the members of the German-Russian minority ethnic group which had not previously attended in large numbers, and generally better economic conditions. This caused a major lessening of antagonisms, both for the minority group and for the community generally, toward people of another group either ethnic or educational. However, one older person indicated that this had had origins even earlier, for during the depression of the 30's people were brought together to face their common problems; one solution was through the Civilian Conservation Corps, which set up classes at the college in farm problems, mechanical skills, and cooking for area men.

Another double reinforcement of the antagonisms was religion, for the German Russians were nearly always Catholic. There has been a breakdown of the strong religious barrier on both the Catholic and Protestant sides. One specific example mentioned time after time was the German-Russian wedding customs at the marriage--the dinner, the dance, etc. Originally these were closed to the Protestant people of days; now, however, they are open to invited people, both Catholic

and Protestant, and are enjoyed by all. Both Catholics and Protestants have worked hard at developing an open mind to people of other faiths. My husband was mentioned specifically in this connection for his program on the German Russian steel crosses in the cemeteries as folk art. They had all enjoyed this--Historical Society, Knights of Columbus, Women's Clubs, etc.

This program was also presented at the American Folklore Society meeting held in Washington, D. C., two years ago.

Another clashing aspect which earlier had also had double reinforcement was political affiliation. Originally nearly all German-Russians were Democrats. This was so strong a boundary that some professors at the college simply abandoned their political affiliation rather than try to break the barrier. Now this is not the case.

As a result of these factors, specific changes are in evidence in the community. Many clubs are now attended by members of all ethnic, educational, religious, and political groups--for instance, the Historical Society, the Cultural Arts organization, and the American Association of Retired People. Most feel that this would not have been the case twenty or even ten years ago.

On many occasions the folklorists have had a part in these activities by presenting programs. As a by-product specific mention was made of the traditional cuisine brought by the German-Russians to pot-luck suppers. In recent years the local restaurants and the college union have frequently served galuskies (cabbage stuffed with ground meat and rice) and bierocks

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(bread dough filled with ground meat, onions, and spices). The first time German-Russian food was ever served in the college union was at a banquet of the Kansas Folklore Society in 1958; now it is served regularly in the ordinary cafeteria line. Indeed the local branch of a widely known hamburger chain, the Drummer Boy, serves bierocks as well as the usual hamburger.

There were interesting criss-crossing of the folklorists in nearly all mentioned areas in their contributions to community and religious organizations. Teachers and students at the college mentioned the increase in research on ethnic heritage not only in local groups but other groups as well--Czechoslovakian and Swedish. Now the German-Russians proudly present their heritage to the college both in the classrooms and at college activities; specifically mentioned were the German Club and the Mexican Club. The college would now like to have an annual Oktober Fest theme for its homecoming in which the college and community would work together in presenting the college-community heritage; the merchants would then develop ethnic motifs in the stores to carry out the traditional theme. The folklorists along with many other people would be intermediaries between the college and community.

There are many conclusions to draw from this research. Some informants suggested that folklorists should do even more research and that they should

publish their articles not only in national journals but in the local newspaper as well so that area people can enjoy them. Another suggestion was that they should be encouraged to develop new classes at the college, such as the Folk Recipes and Customs class, set at times when townspeople as well as regularly enrolled students can attend. One interesting comment by college people was that the new professors who moved in from other areas and who were members of other ethnic minorities now feel better acceptance of their ethnic uniquenesses in Hays because of the positive climate.

Thus the answer to my original question, whether the collectors of folklore have had an impact on their communities, seems to be positive; they along with other factors have contributed to an improvement in college-community relations.

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