

INTRODUCTION

The "Gary Gang," as we christened ourselves, came into being at the Folklore Institute of Indiana University in the summer of 1975. We were, individually, Richard M. Dorson, Project Director; Inta Gale Carpenter, Project Coordinator; and fieldworkers Thomas Adler, Elena Bradunas, Phillip B. George, John Hasse, Elon Kulii, Richard March, and Adrienne Seward. Our mission was to conduct folklore research in the heavily industrialized Calumet Region of northwest Indiana under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.¹ In bi-weekly meetings throughout the two years of our collaboration, we discussed our approaches, concepts, methods, and experiences in tracking down urban folklore and doing urban fieldwork. In this brief introduction, I would like to suggest a few of the topics and questions our urban field experience raised.

As we thought about fieldwork in the Calumet Region, we quickly enough concluded that we could not continue to think of such urban industrial centers as simply locales into which in-migrants poured. If we as researchers once left the city to study the Appalachians in the back hollers, we now had to do more than just look for only them in the city. Who were the people in the urban environment who felt no displacement from a rural past, who had been born and reared in the city? As Adrienne Seward remarked in one of our meetings, she would much rather awaken to the sound of traffic outside an urban apartment than to the crowing of a rooster on a remote farmstead. What were the urban folklore scenes, the "folk topics," the concerns of urban residents? Of people in the Region specifically? How were these distinct from rural concerns? Were they? What were some exclusively urban-specific folklore forms? Was the city indeed impersonal, dangerous, alienating, or was this conception simply the reverse of the romantic stereotype of the countryside, a sociological hypothesis grown into an unexamined given? Were we, to paraphrase Richard G. Fox, seeking out the familiar exotics--the migrants, the ethnics, the blacks--and failing to extend our inquiry to the middle class or to the elite,² or even, as someone suggested at the Urban Folklore Conference we organized in September 1977, to the people who habitually chase fire engines? Answers remained as elusive and controversial for us as they have for the many sociologists and anthropologists who, from Wirth and Redfield on, have continued to tackle these seemingly unanswerable queries.³

When I asked a member of our Gary team, "What is urban about your fieldwork?" he responded, half in jest, half seriously, "Why, the fact that I'm doing it in the city." His response is deceptive, for it seems after all to reduce the impact of the city to that of mere locale. But it also recognizes that the city as locale was fundamental to much of our fieldwork logistics, and at least sometimes influential in our choice of methods. Fieldworkers had to allow time to travel greater distances; had to carry handfuls of dimes, and often the phone book, too, in order to make new appointments when previous schedules went awry; had to face severe problems of housing; had to work harder and longer to meet informants; and in resisting the search for the familiar remnants of rural genres, had to accept prolonged periods of often confusing and seemingly random exploration.

In the tiny rural community, one might say that simply walking into town became fieldwork strategy, and hanging out, the method of participant-observation. To explain our conspicuousness, we merely explained our purpose ("to collect the old stories"); and as we did so, we were told, "Oh, yes, you must go talk to so and so." (Often this visibility works similarly in "urban villages," as various community studies indicate.⁴) But how does one "walk into" the city as a whole? Whom do we choose to talk to once there? How do we know that the loquacious stranger with such ready opinions is not so eccentric as to be totally unrepresentative of any large segment of the urban scene? In the village we found--or assumed we did--an authority on village ways and people, but as Anselm Strauss points out in Images of the American

City, no one individual can personally know more than one small segment of any city.⁵

In the city, then, as we casually move about, no "natives" cast curious glances our way; and consequently, moving about becomes not so much a strategy as an orientation, a time to learn street names and places, to observe the variety of establishments. Or, alternately, these random walks become a refuge, when a fieldworker escapes from the initial culture shock to take photographs. This possibility of anonymity does not exist in the village, where more than one fieldworker has complained of never finding privacy, what with tiny faces staring in windows or adult visitors continually dropping by to chat or seek favors.

Exceptions to this sidewalk anonymity exist, as the "village" intermittently surfaces in the city--in an ethnic restaurant or a black religious candle shop, for example. When Richard March and Tom Adler strapped videotape equipment over their shoulders, they immediately surrendered their invisibility. They stood out from the crowd and passers-by readily identified them, not as folklorists, but as TV men. What is more, people approached them, sought them out with curiosity and with hope of appearing on the evening news. On a smaller scale, when white fieldworker John Hasse first entered the black church, he was instantly identified as a stranger, often by an almost generic greeting, "Hey, brother, come on up to the front. Only backsliders sit in the back!"

But, ultimately, the size of the city places limits on what a lone individual can do. Collectively, the team approach served us well, as Richard Dorson reports in his essay, in the shared leads and contacts, in the exchange of skills, information, and hypotheses, in the assistance with equipment, in the boosting of sagging morales. (Although, as Elon Kulii chronicles, team meetings could sometimes prove debilitating, especially when fellow team members failed to refrain from smoking or when the food was particularly disagreeable.) In our Region project, we would have benefited by shared housing and by overlapping or simultaneous periods in the field. John A. Price, in a study of Reno, Nevada, describes an anthropological team in which twelve graduate students were divided into four mini-teams, each of which was assigned a specific topic for research, a refinement that would, I think, increase field collaboration.⁶

During our Gary Gang meetings, I found myself intrigued and oftentimes distracted from topics at hand by the variety of approaches to fieldwork represented by the team members. I was fascinated by how the different fieldworkers came to terms with the nearly overwhelming license given them to explore, research, define, and interpret an urban field. Their personalities emerged clearly (sometimes, I thought, quite predictably) in their handling of field situations. Some of the members of the Gary Gang appeared supremely organized and on top of things; others were casually free-wheeling in their research design; a few repeatedly expressed a disconcerting pull between themselves as "subjective human beings" and as "objective folklore scholars"; and one seemed determined to work night and day at a relentless, if sometimes exhilarating, pace. The variety of approach and perspective I witnessed among the Gary Gang members was nowhere reflected in folklore field publications.⁷

Consequently, I soon began to lobby for a set of articles in which each fieldworker would describe from a personal perspective, his or her field experience. When Folklore Forum agreed to publish a special issue on urban fieldwork, I asked members of the Gary Gang to seek out from the jumble of their remembered field events the topic they most wanted to record. I was interested in the variety of their choice and focus, and therefore, I resisted any attempt to rigidly systematize the thrust of each article. I wanted personal statements, not a rote response to a preconceived outline of mine. In what follows, the Gary Gang zeros in on the team approach, the throes of field shock, the ethical dilemmas of fieldwork, the need to establish clear role definitions, the idiosyncrasies of field approach, the insider/outsider perspective, and the nitty-gritty details of everyday life in the field. In my article, I argue in favor of the

introspective field essay as a model for folklore field publications and indicate some of the existing fieldwork literature in anthropology and sociology.

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NOTES

1. We wish to express our appreciation to the Division of the National Endowment for the Humanities for Grant No. 22305-25-383, which was awarded to Indiana University in August 1975. For a report of the research goals as well as some of the research results of the Urban Folklore Team Project, see "Land of the Mill Rats: Folklore from the Calumet Region," a special issue of Indiana Folklore 10:2 (1977).
2. Richard G. Fox, "Rationale and Romance in Urban Anthropology," Urban Anthropology 1:2 (1972): 226-227.
3. See bibliography following my article, "Introspective Accounts of the Field Experience: A Bibliographic Essay," for citations of the work of Wirth, Redfield, and others.
4. See, for instance, in anthropology, such studies of American communities as Ulf Hannerz, Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) and W. Lloyd Warner, Yankee City (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963). In sociology, see Elliot Liebow, Tally's Corner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967) and Arthur J. Vidich, Joseph Bensman, and Maurice R. Stein, eds., Reflections on Community Studies for an overview of community studies throughout the world. For folklore, see Roger Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative from the Streets of Philadelphia (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1964; rev. ed., Chicago: Aldine, 1970).
5. Anselm Strauss, Images of the American City (New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Books, 1976), p. 8.
6. John A. Price, "Reno, Nevada: The City as a Unit of Study," Urban Anthropology 1:1 (1972): 14-28.
7. Hans Kurath, in the second edition of the Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England (New York: AMS Press, 1973), discusses the problems engendered by the "subjective" slant of the various team members on the linguistic atlas project, under such headings as "Evaluation of the Field Records," "Instructions for Field Work," "Differences Between Field Workers," and "Ranking of Field Workers." Kurath makes the telling point that even in so seemingly "objective" work as phonetic recording and mapping, the fieldworker's personality, interests, intimacy with informants, hearing and training are reflected in the records made. Another useful publication on team research is Margaret Barron Luszki, Interdisciplinary Team Research: Methods and Problems (New York: New York University Press for National Training Laboratories, 1958).