

## From a Potato Hole

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In the autumn of 1980, I drove through whirling leaves to Herbster, Wisconsin, a run-down fishing and logging village settled by Finns on Lake Superior's shore. I had just started working on an NEA-funded project to document traditional music and I had heard about an old accordion player. "He lives just behind the abandoned Co-op Store, you'll probably find him home." I did. But before I could introduce myself, Bill Hendrickson told me, "I've been waiting for you. Come along."

Hendrickson led me from his front porch around the side of the house to the cellar door. We descended, bending our necks to avoid suspended cabbage heads, dodging crates of potatoes. In near darkness I glimpsed a weathered piano accordion, a cheap tape recorder, and a dusty box of tapes. Hendrickson showed me his hands, twisted by arthritis, and explained that his hearing was fading. "I have to play loud, and my fingers don't work so good anymore. Down here I don't bother my wife."

Down in the cellar Bill Hendrickson was taping all the tunes he knew before they slipped from his memory or through his gnarled fingers. When he could no longer play them, he could hear them. And when he could no longer hear them, others could.

Driving home that day, I pondered Hendrickson's commitment. I thought about his unexpected greeting: "I've been waiting for you." Over the next few months I recorded his biography and many of his tunes on high-quality equipment provided by the Library of Congress. I photographed him and copied his old photographs. Near the end of the grant period, I welcomed Hendrickson to a local archives where his collection had been deposited, and I organized a concert where he "played out" for the first time in forty years. Eventually I produced a recording that included one of his tunes.

Ever since, I have had the good fortune to encounter others who have been "waiting." Some wait for help finding markets, others for venues to enlighten outsiders, or for opportunities to inspire their own people. Nearly all seek some recognition that their art is worthy of practicing and preserving.

Public folklorists have the power to foster that recognition. We possess the wherewithal to be true public servants and, hence, whole folklorists. By combining our academic training as scholars and fieldworkers with our grasp of grants, bureaucracies, and the nuances of cultural productions, we are able not only to inform the general public regarding cultural traditions but also to serve as documentarians, archivists, consultants, mediators, producers, and advocates for those who practice traditions. And we do this best collaboratively, when we

simply add our expertise and energy to extant desires and activities. Put another way, we can find a better recorder than Bill Hendrickson's noisy model, a better archives than a dusty cassette box, a better stage than a potato hole.

By serving those who wait, we also enhance our emotional, intellectual, political, and occupational survival. Whether based in the academy, in a state agency, in a private non-profit organization, or in the ranks of the self-employed, public folklorists are as potentially disenfranchised and endangered as the cultures and people with whom we work. In our often paradoxical and Sisyphean efforts to conjure centers out of edges, to make margins meet mainstream, we are best sustained by the support, understanding, and critical appraisal of people like Bill Hendrickson. They are not concerned with the shifting hierarchies of disciplines or with which theories currently comprise the cutting edge. They are not convinced by arguments that "fine art" is any more fine or universal than their own. Nor do they buy the notion that a folklorist's work is trivial or always "fun." Because they are serious about what they do, they are serious about what we do. And by helping them, we help ourselves.

## **For Lack of a Prayer: A Call for Consultant Collaboration**

*Glenn Hinson, University of North Carolina*

I smiled when the Heavenly Angels approached me at the concert's close. Their singing, as expected, had soared, filling the sanctuary with impassioned harmonies. And the congregation had certainly registered their approval. So I was puzzled when I saw the frowns on the singers' faces. Something was clearly amiss.

"Brother Hinson," Sister Johnson began, "we thank you for inviting us to sing on this program, but we'd be obliged if you didn't invite us to another program like this." Her tone conveyed a sense of gentle finality. I must have looked surprised because she added, "It's no reflection on you. It's just that this isn't right. At least not for us."

Before I could ask what hadn't been right, we were interrupted by other singers. When I turned back to the Heavenly Angels, they had gone.

I spent that evening mentally reviewing every detail of the program, wondering what had prompted the Heavenly Angels' reaction. The concert, sponsored by Philadelphia's International House, was part of a series celebrating local African-American artistry. We had programmed all the concerts in the performers' communities; this program—emceed by a Baptist deacon—had taken place at Philly's oldest African-American sanctuary. The more I thought about the evening, the less I understood Sister Johnson's words.

The next morning I called Sister Johnson. Her response to my question was tellingly succinct. "You didn't open the service with a prayer," she said. "So it