

## FOLKLORE AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN A MALE GROUP

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Contemporary folklorists have occasionally grappled with the complex relationships between their subject matter and modern technology.<sup>1</sup> Generally, such investigations have been limited to the scrutiny of the adaptation and mass dissemination of folklore by monolithic institutions: publishing houses, radio and television networks, film studios, record companies, and so on. But there is another media channel worthy of study. Today the proliferation of Xerox machines, tape recorders, and especially cameras has allowed everyman to create mechanically and share the stuff of folklore within his chosen esoteric circle.

During the past few years I have been investigating the periodic reunions of a group of old college friends. Picture-taking and reminiscences over past events captured through photography occurred at nearly all of these gatherings. However, before exploring such phenomena, a brief background description will be useful.

From 1969-1973 a group of young men lived in a dormitory on a mid-western, Catholic, all-male campus. As a counterforce to weekdays spent in competitive study, excessive weekend drinking and outrageous behavior have long been traditional at this institution. And the group in question adapted itself to its milieu. Of course, participation in crazed weekend events was not instantaneous. While some arrived on the scene with their rambunctious inclinations well-developed, others experienced more gradual transformations:

Drew: "You shoulda seen the Chez when he first came here. Short-hair, white shirt, 800 SAT's in math--a real idiot savant. Quiet. Didn't smoke, drink, nothin'. And Mike was just the same. But bit by bit you could see 'em crossing over. Every year they got a little more hurt. Look at them now."

By sophomore year most students had become accustomed to abandoning respectable workaday academic behavior and embracing its opposite on Friday and Saturday nights.

Dubbing themselves the "Fartley /Farley/ Hall Dirtballs," members concocted nicknames--"Slime," "Young Al the Hog," "Weasel," "The Old Man," "The Chez," "Pablo," "Hawk"--as well as derisive formularized greetings and responses:

A: "Hey, eat it."

B: "Eat it raw." (or) "Eat a Big one." (or) "Eat my shorts."

Standards of excellence were applied through esoteric terminology to weekend drinking parties. Status attended those who could "pump many B's" (drink much beer) without "passing" (passing out). Any man unable to "gig" (party) all night was scornfully deemed a "big woman" or a "pussy."

Throughout, insults were frequently traded:

Chez: "Slime, if you're too big a woman to pump that B, why don't you give it to someone who can handle it?"

Slime: "Thaat's right. Why don't you just take a big bite of my ass. Who was it that passed in the middle of the floor last night?"

However, it is important to note here that the surface hostility exhibited in this passage was emitted and received in a humorous fashion. Jibes were rarely transmitted with serious aggression in mind, but rather as a form of affectionate verbal play inviting like response.<sup>2</sup>

Under these ground rules special accolades were given for "hurt" (outrageous, unconventional) behavior: "streaking the quad" (running naked across campus), making obscene phone calls to professors, throwing a hambone through a dormitory window, urinating in a neighbor's wastebasket, bringing in beer from off-campus by illegally motoring to the dorm on sidewalks, writing extended raunchy toasts ("Eskimo Nell," "The Good Ship Venus") on bathroom walls, engaging in theatrical semi-improvised routines, etc.

It was during a later phase of their existence that I encountered the ex-Farleyites. Although graduation in 1973 jettisoned members from the old environment, established ties were sufficiently powerful to inspire frequent get-togethers centering around birthdays, weddings, and ball games. These gatherings largely recapitulated previous campus weekends: enormous amounts of food and beer were consumed while intentionally outrageous or "hurt" behavior was indulged in. Several group members possessed Instamatic or Polaroid cameras which were utilized at appropriate moments in the taking of posed or candid shots. Photographs were subsequently lodged in albums which were invariably brought to group gatherings. I quickly discovered that photography and photo-albums figured in reunions as components of more complex festival events.

No matter who happened to be taking or appearing in photographs, both posed and candid shots were thematically congruent with the overall verbal and physical behavior of the group. In other words, when conscious of the camera's presence, group members sought to act in accordance with their esoterically constructed public image: beer glasses were held up, faces twisted into bizarre expressions--sometimes masks and headgear (sombrosos, Micky Mouse ears, hard hats, derbies, space helmets) were donned, middle fingers were upthrust, etc. Less formally, photographers sought to catch comrades in the midst of chugging beer, vomiting, or performing. Here are brief descriptions of some posed and candid pictures:

Posed shots: (1) The Old Man, stripped to the waist, balances a beer can on his distended belly. (2) Sytes and Rob crouch like gargoyles at the head of a couch upon which fever-stricken Clovis, his eyes ludicrously bugged-out, reclines. Although ill, he had propped himself up in the midst of the party. (3) Slime, Young Al the Hog, Chez, Mike, Rob and Drew stand proudly at dawn before a pile of refuse and broken furniture which they have dumped from a second story dorm window.

Candid shots: (1) An easy chair upon which Mike has passed out is tipped over backwards. He remains upon it, sleeping blissfully, with his legs upraised in the air. (2) The Chez's distorted countenance is captured immediately after he has vomited a great mass of beer and pretzels. (3) Positioned behind a stair-railing Sytes plays the part of prisoner and Bob acts as warden in a routine frequently enacted at parties.

Of course, this thematic synchronicity between events and their photographic records is not particularly remarkable since the purpose of posed and candid picture-taking was to commemorate significant components of festival events. Nonetheless, herein lie interesting implications.

All groups interacting over time undergo unique experiences deemed worthy of communal preservation. Accordingly, such experiences are cast into narratives and constitute folk history and legendry. Each narrative is associated with a person, a place, and a time. Furthermore, it is given a name. When groups gather, the utterance of such names immediately conjures in the minds of members the significant human, spacial, and temporal components of certain past events. Sometimes these events are then communally re-experienced through the interchange of well-known narrative accounts. At other times, the naming of the event merely triggers responses indicating recognition. In either case, names attached to events function as an esoteric code corresponding to past experiences and their narratives. Photographs are a visual counterpart of this verbal code. The taking of pictures at specific, communally-determined moments constitutes a visual "naming" of events.

Beyond this, it is through photographs that group members are given an opportunity to stand outside themselves and observe their own behavior. Consequently, both photographs and remarks accompanying their perusal during group gatherings constitute a meta-commentary on the folkloric behavior rife during festive reunions.<sup>4</sup> In other words, photographs not only demonstrate that group members engage in recurrently recognizable actions, but that the members also consciously realize what constitutes these actions. This may be illustrated for the ex-Farleyites by the following excerpts from a tape-recorded photo-album session recorded at a birthday party in Parma, Ohio on March 8, 1975:

#### CONVERSATION

Slime: "It was a black tie affair that night . . ."  
 Drew: ". . . Isn't that great . . ."  
 Jim: ". . . Lookit how hurt they are."  
 Slime: "The best two costumes got to drink free. Mr. Sytes won first place."  
 /General Laughter/

Slime: "Lookit this picture with If; this is just like If. That's the way If always looks . . . Here's The Old Man again. On the floor as usual. This is St. Paddy's morning, 7:00, up drinking. /Laughter/ 7:00 in the morning. We drank until we passed."

#### PHOTOGRAPHS

Waist-up picture of Sytes at a dormitory costume party. A tuxedo is drawn in black magic marker on his naked body.

(1) Red-faced, glassy-eyed shot of Iflander smiling like a satyr in the midst of an extended drunk. (2) The Old Man is passed out on a tile dorm floor. His arms around his head while drinkers surround him.

CONVERSATION

Drew: "That was below our room. That was the rubbish we threw out. Oh, God, we threw everything out . . . That's Jon's wedding . . ."

Slime: ". . . Right. Do you remember what was happening in this picture? This is the better picture, even though it doesn't look it, because our tires are flat in the front of the van where Rob let the air out and Rob's puking. [Laughter] And there's this little puddle below his mouth."

Drew: "That's our beer cans, that's our beer cans out there . . ."

Rob: ". . . At that time I was teaching the young how to be moral."

Slime: "This is the favorite picture, right here."

Drew: "Here's the most famous picture of them all. Mr. Sytes graduating." [Laughter]

Slime: Johnny "Sytes" Lightning [Pause]. Boy, he's so hurt."

Drew: "That's The Chez on the right." [Laughter]

Slime: "The one with the teeth."

Jim: "Lookit Maskarinec there. He looks like a fire hydrant." [Laughter]

Slime: "Fire Hydrant?"

Jim: "He looks like one a those painted fire hydrants in the Bend."

Slime: "Thaat's right."

PHOTOGRAPHS

(1) Six people standing in the dawn outside a dorm room and in front of a pile of broken chairs, desks, and assorted junk. (2) A night shot on a suburban street. One man vomits against a car fender, while others sit in front of the car in lawnchairs drinking beer. Empty cans form a tiny wall across the road.

Drew, Mike, and The Chez garbed in graduation gowns, stand grinning foolishly on the steps of the Administration building. With them is Sytes, then a freshman, wearing his mock graduation costume: a scarlet "Johnny Lightning" space helmet with matching tie-dyed cape.

From the above it is clear that participants in the photo-album session naturally identified, evaluated, celebrated, and vowed to propagate their unique group existence. Their visual code was immediately correlated with their verbal code ("Jon's Wedding," "Mr. Sytes Graduating," "St. Paddy's Day," etc.) and its corresponding narrative complex (snatches of which were uttered: "It was a black tie affair that night," and "our tires are flat in the front of the van and Rob's puking," etc.). Approval of depicted actions was recurrently expressed through enthusiastic comments ("Isn't that great;" "Boy, he's so hurt," etc.) and shared laughter. The pleasure derived from this communal recollection of past events doubtless served to reinforce familiar patterns of behavior and photography which occurred later in the evening.

Apart from aiding the identification, enjoyment, and sustenance of an esoteric identity, the use of photography by the ex-Farleyites simultaneously set them off from outsiders. Just as group members' weekend antics were temporary and symbolic reversals of normal behavior, their utilization of the camera and its products were also contrary.

Mainstream Americans conventionally preserve significant events--birthdays, holidays, graduations, weddings--in photographs which are intended to be beautiful and sentimental. Subjects cooperate, with smiles and fine clothes, in the attempt toward achieving this end. Typically, successful pictures are collected in treasured photo-albums. It is this mode of behavior that the ex-Farleyites have twisted about.

Consequently, when Slime or Sytes or Rob take or pose in pictures, they are not conforming to normal behavior; rather they are reversing it. Their photographic eye homes in on the ugly and the obscene; their bodies assume corresponding poses. Thus, they act, as artists, in opposition to the conventional. They are men who, in the company of friends, have stepped beyond their workaday existence into a realm of play and masquerade. Within this bounded world contradictions underlying the rules and symbols of normal life are exposed and lampooned with comic savagery. Sanity is abandoned for absurdity, moderation is exchanged for excess, friends are mocked as foes, destruction replaces creativity. But it is all a kind of ritual--a brief and special ceremony--and the ex-Farleyites know it. When all is over they put aside their masks, speak different words, and return to being graduate students, chemists, geologists, computer programmers, accountants, and lawyers. Only their memories and some photographs remain, to be brought out and used again another time.

## NOTES

1. Tom Burns, "Folklore in the Mass Media: Television," Folklore Forum II (1969): 113-25; Priscilla Denby, "Folklore in the Mass Media," Folklore Forum IV (1971): 113-25; for a general statement on the matter, see Richard M. Dorson, Folklore in the Modern World (Bloomington: Folklore Students Association, 1974), Folklore Preprint Series, vol. I, no. 8), part 4.
2. This general form of behavior is not unlike that detailed by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in Structure and Function in Primitive Society (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1965), chs. 4-5.
3. Although some folklorists may rankle at my labelling the drunken carousing of ex-collegiates as a "festival," just such an argument has been intelligently advanced by Robert Jerome Smith, "Folk Festivals," in Richard M. Dorson, ed., Folklore and Folklife (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
4. For a parallel approach, see Alan Dundes, "Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism," The Monist (1966); 505-16.