GEORGE MILBURN: OZARK FOLKLORE IN OKLAHOMA FICTION

*By Alexis Downs**

George Milburn's first collection of short stories was *Oklahoma Town*, published in 1931. Critics of *Oklahoma Town* have generally focused their attention on the collection as anti-rural literature or as literature which recreates folklore. The *New York Times Book Review*, aware of the anti-rural elements in *Oklahoma Town*, stated that Milburn's tales illustrated the prejudices of the Midwest and the South.[1] Harvey Ferguson, in the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, called Milburn's fictional Oklahoma town a relic of "pioneer America with all of its brutality and bigotry."[2] And H. L. Mencken, who viewed the South as a "Sahara of the Bozart," thought the Oklahoma stories were "really something;" and published nineteen of the thirty-six *Oklahoma Town* tales in the *American Mercury*.[3]

But the stories of *Oklahoma Town* proved of interest to an entirely different school of criticism. This school, interested in the use of folklore in literature and composed of collectors of oral lore, looked at tales like "Muncy Morgan," in which a would-be wrestler breaks his own leg and at "Banker Brigham," in which the truculent banker is "injured" by a blast from a shotgun loaded with pokeberries. Folklore collectors saw in these stories the reworking of two familiar folk motifs: a fool's deception which leads to self injury and a fool's inducement to believe he is dead. One Oklahoma folklore collector, Stanley Vestal, in *Saturday Review of Literature*, said of Milburn: "He is no Babbitt turned satirist, like Sinclair Lewis. . . . George Milburn grew up in a small town, and he knows its folklore so well that the book [*Oklahoma Town*] itself is folklore."[4] Vance Randolph, a collector of Ozark lore, recognized Milburn's use of the oral tradition and praised the tales as "the finest short stories . . . that have ever been written about the Ozark

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[1] " 'Oklahoma Town' and Other Recent Works of Fiction," *New York Times Book Review* (New York, New York), February 9, 1931, p. 9.

[2] Harvey Ferguson, "Small Town Sketches," *New York Herald Tribune Books* (New York, New York, March 1, 1931, p. 6.

[3] Charles Angoff, *H. L. Mencken: A Portrait from Memory* (New York: Thomas Yoseoff, 1956), pp. 110–111.

[4] Stanley Vestal, "Life in a Small Town," *Saturday Review of Literature* (New York, New York), March 7, 1931, p. 643.

region."[5] An Oklahoma University professor and American folklore collector, Benjamin A. Botkin published three of Milburn's stories in *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*. Botkin was interested in them "as culture literature which, brooding over folk materials and motifs, rehandles and recreates them."[6]

Although Milburn's use of folklore in fiction has received the passing recognition of these folklorists, no attempt has been made to study the folk elements in *Oklahoma Town*. The appearance of Ozark lore in Milburn's fiction is natural, however, because Milburn was an Ozarker, born in Coweta, Oklahoma, and immersed in oral lore. Coweta, which became the small unnamed Ozark community of *Oklahoma Town*, is located on the edge of the Ozarks in northeastern Oklahoma. In "Some Kind of Color: Notes on Being a Son," Milburn wrote about his childhood in Coweta. He recalled Sunday afternoons when "my father would take my brother and me for long walks into the country. . . . He would sing ballads, such as . . . 'It's a Shame to Take the Money Said the Bird on Nellie's Hat' and he would tell us stories."[7] Downey Milburn also read stories to his son George. After Downey read *Robinson Crusoe* to his son, George tried to write his own story; however, as he later said, "That was before I'd learned the alphabet."[8] The younger Milburn's fascination with storytelling was mixed with an interest in the circus and in the railroad. At age fourteen, he rode the caboose of a cattle train to Kansas City, Missouri. Cowpunchers on the train vowed to teach him the "facts of life" at a Kansas City bawdy house; however, Milburn eluded the lesson and returned to Coweta.

Milburn's first train ride unnerved him, but his love for the railroad did not die and in 1927, at age twenty-one, Milburn "took to the road" as a railroad hobo. The product of his wanderings was *Hobo's Hornbook*, his first collection of folklore. That compilation of hobo and tramp ballads was recorded, Milburn said, because hoboes are "anachronisms bound for extinction."[9] The *Hobo's Hornbook* included a vocabulary from the hobo dialect. The interest in dialects, "linguistic lore" in a definition by the philologist

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[5] Vance Randolph, *Ozark Folklore: A Bibliography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Research Center for the Language Sciences, 1972), pp. 383–384.

[6] Benjamin A. Botkin, "The Folk in Literature: An Introduction to New Regionalism," *Folk-Say I: A Regional Miscellany*, Benjamin A. Botkin, ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1929), p. 10.

[7] George Milburn, "Some Kind of Color: Notes on Being a Son," *Folk-Say IV: The Land is Ours*, Benjamin A. Botkin, ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), p. 32.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[9] George Milburn, ed. *The Hobo's Hornbook: A Repertory of Gutter Jongleur* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1930), p. xviii.

and folklorist Louise Pound, and Milburn's earlier interest in the circus led to "Circus Words," an article published in the *American Mercury*.[10] Milburn also published "Convict's Jargon" in *American Speech* and "Taxi Talk" in *Folk-Say*. Information for the former was garnered from Daniel Conway, an inmate at Auburn Prison in New York State, and information for the latter was gathered in Chicago's Huron Street taxicab garage.[11]

In 1929, after Milburn's return to Oklahoma, he became a contributor to *Folk-Say*, an Oklahoma University publication initiated by Ben Botkin. *Folk-Say* signalled a relatively new concern for American folklore; that concern was generated by folklore collectors like Botkin, Vance Randolph, Stanley Vestal and J. Frank Dobie. All contributed to *Folk-Say*, and Botkin remained Milburn's "dear and loyal friend."[12] While Milburn was attending the University of Oklahoma, he was also writing the *Oklahoma Town* tales.

Those tales appeared in part in *Folk-Say*, *Vanity Fair* and the *American Mercury*. They were also translated into German and published as *Die Stadt Oklahoma*; included in the German edition were seven tales which had been censored in America.[13] Students of literature can study Milburn as a part of the literary tradition which imitates and borrows from folklore. Milburn, as writer, and Botkin, as editor, attempted to pave the way for such study by including in *Folk-Say* sophisticated cultural literature which relied upon folk literature. Archer Taylor, an American folklorist from the University of California at Berkeley, maintains that Shakespeare, Samuel Butler and other literary greats incorporated many folk elements in their work, but he adds that the study of folklore in literature has been neglected. He has said that "little has been done in the history and description of traditional patterns and designs."[14] Taylor also claims that "folklore is, in many cultures, indistinguishable from literature," and that the neglect of folk studies has limited the critic's understanding of literature.[15] More specifically, Americans interested in American literary tradition and in American English, as opposed to the "genteel tradition" described by George Santayana, can look to folklore as an expression of the "American Will." A

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[10] Louise Pound, "Folklore and Dialect," *Selected Writings Of Louise Pound* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1949), p. 206.

[11] George Milburn, "Circus Words," *American Mercury* (November, 1931), pp. 351–354; George Milburn, "Convict's Jargon," *American Speech* (August, 1931), pp. 436–442; George Milburn, "Taxi Talk," *Folk-Say I*, Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., pp. 108–112.

[12] Mary S. Milburn to Alexis Downs, February 21, 1976, author's personal collection.

[13] George Milburn, *Die Stadt Oklahoma* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1932).

[14] Archer Taylor, "Folklore and the Student of Literature," *The Study of Folklore*, Alan Dundes, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 35.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

national literary tradition would depend upon folklore, if, as Gene Bluestein suggests in *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory*, folklore of "the lower layers of society" is "the major source of materials which sophisticated society uses to fashion its literary expression."[16] Folklore is, Bluestein emphasizes, the foundation for national culture.

When folklore is seen as a major source for literary expression, it becomes important to understand how George Milburn used folklore in *Oklahoma Town*, and it becomes important to understand Milburn's attitude toward the "lower layers of society." Milburn recreated Ozark storytelling scenes by imitating, consciously or unconsciously, the storyteller's free and discontinuous train of thought and by relying for humor upon the ignorance of the stories' characters. But the tales of *Oklahoma Town* are not only consistent with Ozark lore, they are also part of an oral anecdote tradition which transcends Ozark boundaries. In Milburn's particularization of the oral anecdote tradition to a northeastern Oklahoma scene, he created what critics have seen as the anti-rural elements of *Oklahoma Town*.

Milburn's manipulation of specific Ozark tales is apparent in several of the *Oklahoma Town* tales, which have close parallels in Ozark lore. Milburn's "A Young Man's Chance" is the story of Julian Reynolds who is invited to a possum hunt at Old Man Barker's.[17] That night, after the hunt, Barker, Julian and Barker's granddaughter shared the cabin's one bed. During the night, while the moon is shining, coyotes attack Barker's chicken coop. Barker runs out to the coop. In his absence, Julian does not seduce the granddaughter, but rather, he jumps up to eat the beans left over from dinner. Julian is one of many folk characters who find strange bedfellows, but yet remain chaste.[18]

The Ozarks contributed several tales about a couple's chaste sleeping together. "A Young Man's Chance" is a close copy of this folk hillbilly anecdote recorded by Vance Randolph in *Funny Stories from Arkansas*:[19]

> A traveller spent the night in a backwoods cabin. They had green beans for supper, but the stranger did not get as many as he wanted. He watched regretfully as the half-emptied platter was put back in the cupboard. There was only one bed . . . [which they shared], the host occupying the middle

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[16] Gene Bluestein, *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), p. iii.

[17] George Milburn, *Oklahoma Town* (Freeport, New Jersey: Book for Libraries Press, 1959), pp. 158–162.

[18] Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Studies, 1935), p. 292.

[19] Vance Randolph, *Funny Stories from Arkansas* (Girard, Kansas: E. Haldeman-Julius, 1943), pp. 23–24.

George Milburn, author of *Oklahoma Town*

. . . . Late in the night, all three were awakened by a commotion among the poultry. The hillman sprang out of bed, snatched his shotgun, and rushed out, shouting something about chicken thieves. The wife whispered, "Stranger, now's your chance!" So the traveller got up, went out into the kitchen, and ate the rest of the beans!

Milburn's familiarity with Ozark lore is obvious in two other tales from *Oklahoma Town*. In "Imogene Caraway," a revivalist preacher warns his flock about the evils of pretending to be the Lord's sheep when they actually behave more like the Lord's goats. In response to his words, Mrs. Sweasy, a preacher's wife, points to Imogene Caraway's Bar-None brand flour

sack skirt and says, "O Lord God my witness, looky there! . . . It's the mark of the goat!"[20] In an Ozark tale recorded by the folklore collector James Masterson, another preacher faces a literal interpretation of his words. Masterson's preacher says to an Ozark family: "I'm looking for the lost sheep of Israel." To that, one of the daughters replies: "I'll bet that is that old ram that was here yesterday."[21] Stories and jokes about preachers are common in folklore; Americans, in particular, like to laugh about misunderstandings between illiterates and preachers, deaf persons and preachers, sinners and preachers.[22]

The difficulties of parsons become the subject of humorous tales, but if this seems blasphemous, it is no more sacrilegious than the black humor of stories about strange, inexplicable deaths.[23] "Banker Brigham," an *Oklahoma Town* tale, concerns the strange death of a truculent banker "injured" by a blast from a shotgun loaded with pokeberries. Brigham dies from a cerebral hemorrhage brought about by his refusal to admit he was injured. In *The Talking Turtle*, Vance Randolph recorded "The Silent Rifle," an Ozark folktale about another inexplicable death attributed to a mysterious gunshot. The Ozark town in Randolph's tale has been frightened by sniper fire from a silent Yankee rifle, which is actually a slingshot loaded with Yankee bullets. When Tom Hopper, suffering from real wounds received during the Civil War, dies in the street, the citizens assume he was shot by the silent rifle.[24]

These tales, "A Young Man's Chance," "Imogene Caraway" and "Banker Brigham," and their models in oral tradition indicate that Milburn was familiar with Ozark lore and often incorporated folktales, with variations, in *Oklahoma Town*. This use of folktales disguised as regional fiction has been overlooked by most critics and in that overlooking, critics have missed the richness and humor of the tales, just as a reader unaware of Jewish traditions and customs would miss the significance of Bernard Malamud's stories, such as "The Magic Barrel." By themselves, without a reader's knowledge of a group's tradition, "A Young Man's Chance" and "The Magic Barrel" are interesting and enjoyable reading. But with the added perception gained by a knowledge of tradition, in Milburn's stories,

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[20] Milburn, *Oklahoma Town*, p. 26.

[21] James Masterson, *Tall Tales of Arkansas* (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1942), p. 337.

[22] Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague, Netherlands: Moulton and Company, 1966), p. 400–402.

[23] Vance Randolph, *The Devil's Pretty Daughter and Other Ozark Folk Tales* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), pp. 24, 111.

[24] Vance Randolph, *The Talking Turtle and Other Ozark Folk Tales* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 52–55.

the knowledge of a folk tradition which relies upon black humor, the stories can be read with greater appreciation.

In *Oklahoma Town,* Milburn manipulates specific tales from oral lore and reinforces the impression of an oral tradition by using natural, traditional storytelling scenes. In the Ozarks, raconteurs and gossipmongers congregate around the barrel of free crackers in the country store or around stoves and porches of other local establishments. Milburn consistently uses a first person narrator who tells the story as he observed it being told, at such gatherings of story tellers, or as he observed the actual events, events which most often are set at the local store or barber shop. This narrator is a member of "our town" but he does not appear in the story itself.[25]

"A Young Man's Chance" is told by Abe Herzog in his store, Herzog's Bargain Depot. The story begins with this explanation from the narrator: "Abe Herzog used to tell this story on Julian Reynolds, one of his grocery clerks. It may not be true, but Abe told it on him for a long time." Included in the narrator's retelling of Abe's story are Abe's gestures; for example, the narrator reports, parenthetically, that Barker's granddaughter is a pretty girl, whose beauty is pictured by Abe's "slicing a buxom female form out of the air with his hands." In "A Young Man's Chance," Milburn carefully preserved the original storytelling scene by creating a vivid picture of a group of hillmen listening to Abe Herzog tell the story.[26]

The dominant scene of "Captain Choate" is the De Luxe Barber Shop, although Captain Choate also visits Abe Herzog at the Bargain Depot. The narrator begins by saying: "It didn't take much to get Captain A. J. Choate started . . . for a long time he hadn't done anything except sit around the De Luxe Barber Shop and wheeze and tell tall tales." Choate, an incorrigible liar, is deceived into saying that he knew Leon Trotski. After Choate remembers many intimate details about Trotski, he discovers that Trotski never lived in Oklahoma. But the Captain does not reform; he "went around telling every one, 'Well, it might not of been the same Trozitski, but I knowed a Trozitski here all right!"[27]

Throughout *Oklahoma Town,* men can be seen gathered together, gossiping and telling tales. August Kunkel's Wear-U-Well shoe repair shop is the scene of pleasant chats and of vociferous arguments about religion. In "Soda Water Green," Green is sitting in the lobby of the Kentucky Colonel Hotel, talking to Old Man Cobb, when Bud Merrick rushes in to tell him that the pop factory is on fire. Floyd Evans, in "The Nude Wait-

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[25] Milburn, *Oklahoma Town,* p. 3.
[26] *Ibid.,* pp. 158, 160.
[27] *Ibid.,* pp. 124, 130.

ress," sees his wife's photo being handed around by the patrons of the De Luxe Barber Shop. David, the aspiring journalist, watches the sky, in "Hail and Farewell," instead of listening to the dirty story being told in Fraunhoffer's Purity Bakery. The effect of Milburn's detailing of storytelling scenes is, for the reader, a perception of place and time, when men gathered to tell old stories and new stories, which were often combined and embellished for more interest. Milburn, like the Ozark raconteurs, also weaves old stories with new events, refining and embellishing folklore and fact, in order to create fiction.

In *The Bodacious Ozarks*, Charles Morrow Wilson wrote that he once spent an afternoon with a group of storytellers at Kennicott's Arkansas Store in northwestern Arkansas. Wilson's Arkansas gathering would appear to be similar to Herzog's audience at the Bargain Depot. The tales told that afternoon at Kennicott's, said Wilson, were marked by an intriguing absence of continuity of discussion or correlation of episodes."[28] Subsequently, he also "reflected that the backhills merriment was and, from all appearances, is destined to remain dependent on ignorance and the hopes and quandries [sic] which arise from ignorance."[29] Milburn's *Oklahoma Town* is also marked by these two characteristics: absence of continuity and dependence upon the ignorance of the main characters.

Initially a reader would expect from *Oklahoma Town* what he finds in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.[30] *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Oklahoma Town*, though Milburn's town remains unnamed, include stories about the people and events of a single small community. In both collections, the same characters walk in and out of stories, although individual stories focus on specific characters. The hotel in *Winesburg* is the New Willard House; in *Oklahoma Town*, it is the Kentucky Colonel Hotel. Hearn's Grocery and Cowley and Sons in *Winesburg* are equivalent to Herzog's Bargain Depot and Farnum's Old Ironclad merchandise store in *Oklahoma Town*. George Willard, in *Winesburg*, wants to be a journalist and gets a job on a big city newspaper. *Oklahoma Town*'s David wants to be a journalist and gets a job on the *Globe Telegram* in Tulsa, Oklahoma. However, a reader of *Winesburg* is prepared for George's emigration because he has watched him come of age in his interactions with the other characters in the collection of short stories. The reader of *Oklahoma Town* has not been introduced to David in previous stories; he has not watched David outgrow the small town. What lends

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[28] Charles Morrow Wilson, *The Bodacious Ozarks* (New York: Hastings House, 1959), p. 38.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[30] Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919).

continuity to *Winesburg, Ohio* is George Willard's maturation and the author's initial theme of the grotesques. Milburn offers no study of David's character; all characters walk on and off stage at the author's convenience and remain static, undeveloped types, not as complex as Anderson's grotesques. The *Oklahoma Town* tales could be re-arranged; their order of presentation could be altered without damage to the themes of the collection. *Winesburg* could not be so easily rearranged. The lack of continuity or correlation of episodes in *Oklahoma Town* could be the result of a lack of sophistication and control in Milburn, a sophistication and control possessed by Anderson; however, these defects in *Oklahoma Town* may more logically be inherent in the storytelling scenes which Milburn was imitating. Milburn, consciously or unconsciously, followed folk tradition in the *Oklahoma Town* tales, and, therefore, his stories evidence the "lack of continuity" perceived by Wilson at Kennicott's Arkansas Store.

Wilson remarked upon the discontinuity of the tales he heard at Kennicott's and upon the dependence of blackhills merriment on "the hopes and quandries [sic] which rise from ignorance." The humor of *Oklahoma Town* depends upon the ignorance of the characters involved; that humor is usually at the expense of the characters. Mrs. Sweasy, who saw the brand of the goat in Imogene's flour sack skirt, cannot think metaphorically and is ignorant of the preacher's message. Her inability to think metaphorically and her willingness to point out those who are not, in her opinion, the Lord's sheep identify Mrs. Sweasy, not Imogene, as one of those goats marked by God. Captain Choate, in the story "Captain Choate," can be deceived into thinking he knew Trotski because he can read only the headline of a newspaper article which Buford Scammon shows him; Buford says the paper reports that Trotski lived in Oklahoma. Later, after the townsmen have amused themselves with Choate's boasts, Choate learns that Scammon's report of Trotski's Oklahoma residence was a hoax. In all three stories, "Imogene Caraway," "The Nude Waitress" and "Captain Choate," the humor arises from ignorance, ignorance of a sermon's message, of a blemish's significance, of the contents of a newspaper article.

The humor and irony inherent in the ignorance of pretentious individuals is played upon in Milburn's stories. This dependence upon ignorance for humorous and ironic effects is embedded in the backhills tradition, as Wilson noted. Fools, like Mrs. Sweasy and Captain Choate, and would-be clever men, like Orville Burke, with their ignorance, inexperience and sometimes insensitivity, are stock Ozark characters. But these men and women, who are often pitted against and contrasted to clever persons, are not only Ozark favorites, they also have a traditional folk life which transcends Ozark boundaries.

Stanley Vestal, or Walter S. Campbell, who contributed to George Milburn's *Folk-Say*

These characters are part of a "schwank" tradition, with its jokes and anecdotes about numskulls, about the trials and tribulations of married life, about liars. "Schwank," according to the Hungarian-American folklorist Linda Dégh, are short and simple folktales which aim to provoke laughter and to satirize human folly. As Dégh said, they "try to reform people of bad habits by magnifying those habits or to express disapproval by scoffing at persons of bad conduct."[31] Milburn magnifies the habit of lying in "Captain Choate" and provokes laughter in doing so, but he also points to the tendency for lies to become unmanageable. For Captain Choate's lies reach the Tulsa *Globe Telegram*, which glorifies but does not research Choate's claims, and the lies become the substance of a full page article in the newspaper's magazine section. The *Globe*'s lazy, careless journalists eventually are forced to print a retraction. In "Choate," Milburn comments on the implications of lying and on unprofessional journalism. Mrs. Sweasy, in "Imogene Caraway," is a funny character, but her literal interpretation of a sermon indicates that her faith is not founded on the ability to understand any religious concepts. In addition, the narrator implies that Mrs. Sweasy attends the revival in order to hear Imogene's public confession of sins. Milburn expresses disapproval of her action, because it points to unexamined, unintellectual religious beliefs and to religious hypocrisy.

[31] Linda Dégh, "Folk Narrative," *Folklore and Folklife*, Richard Dorson, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 70.

Dégh defined the humorous and didactic intent of "schwank;" the types and narrative motifs of schwank also have been categorized by Antti Aarne in *Types of the Folktale* and by Stith Thompson in the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*.[32] Ernest Baughman enlarged both volumes in the *Type and Motif-Index of Folktales of England and North America*.[33] A folktale type is a complete, independent tale, which may have one or more motifs. A motif is a single narrative element so unusual and striking that it has the power to persist in oral tradition. "Schwank," by definition not complex, have a single motif. The types and motifs of many *Oklahoma Town* tales follow those of traditional "schwank." For example, one popular type of anecdote is the tale of a "numskull" like Muncy Morgan, in the story "Muncy Morgan," who is a would-be wrestler.[34] Muncy breaks his own leg during the match. The basis of this tale is Motif K1000, deception which leads to self injury.[35] Another type of tale is the tale of a liar, like Captain Choate.[36] "Choate" handles Motif X909.1, the incorrigible liar.[37] "Myrtle Birchett," the story of a "loose woman" who is teased by Speedy Scoggins and answers him with the suggestion that his wife is also "loose," and "The Nude Waitress" are types of schwank about married couples.[38] "Myrtle" uses Motif H582, the enigmatic statement or riddle[39] While "Waitress" uses Motif K1550, the husband outwits the infidel and her paramour.[40]

The identification of Milburn's *Oklahoma Town* tales with the "schwank" tradition has significance for students of literature and for students of folklore. These students are interested in what the folklorist Richard Dorson calls "the flowing streams of folk tradition," or the diffusion of folktale types and motifs throughout the world.[41] Milburn's use of traditional schwank types and motifs is evidence of the universality of the "schwank" tradition. Also, an American folklorist is interested in Milburn's use of folk anecdotes rather than long complex tales because that use supports the theory that Americans, and other English speaking people prefer short tales.[42]

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[32] Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale, a classification and bibliography*, Stith Thompson, trans. (Helsinki, Finland: Folklore Fellows Communications, 1928); Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*.

[33] Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[35] Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, p. 375.

[36] Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, p. 51.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 408.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[39] Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, p. 330.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 421.

[41] Richard Dorson, *American Folklore and the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 199.

[42] Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, p. xvi.

Initially it seems that folklore could not, should not, be used in literature which is anti-rural, in literature which ridicules the people at the heart of that tradition. Nevertheless, Milburn's *Oklahoma Town* has been labelled as "an echo of the noise of the fight against the small twon."[43] One reason for Milburn's association with that fight is the popularity of anti-rural literature in the 1920s and early 1930s. The leading figure in the attack upon American small towns was H. L. Mencken, who published so many of the *Oklahoma Town* tales in the *American Mercury*. Perhaps if the tales had been published in another magazine at another time, they would not have been so readily construed as anti-rural literature. In addition, Milburn has manipulated folktale anecdotes or schwank which, by definition, attack human frailty and intend to characterize persons and places through representative episodes.[44] For readers unfamiliar with the schwank tradition, stories about small town ignorance and hypocrisy appear to be merely satirical sketches of small town life, nothing more. Anti-rural elements are, of course, visible in *Oklahoma Town*, but importantly folk elements are present also, elements which I have attempted to explain.

A reader wonders, certainly, if Milburn consciously used folklore and if he consciously particularized schwank in order to criticize Coweta. Milburn died in 1966, and his intentions will remain unknown: However, he could have used folklore without being aware that he did so. Guy Owen, the author of *The Ballad of the Flim Flam Man* and other regional fiction, said he, Owen, was like Jean Baptiste Poquelin Molière's bourgeois gentleman who spoke prose without realizing it; that is, Owen claimed he used folk materials unconsciously. Folklore is embedded in Owen's mythical Cape Fear county because, for Owen, folklore was "an inextricable part of my childhood and youth."[45] Owen also said that he was aware of "the change."[46] For him, the world of his childhood began to disappear when the automobiles and tractors arrived, when the rural post office was closed in the thirties. He wanted to preserve that pre-industrial world.

Milburn may have, without realizing it, recorded an oral tradition that he believed would disappear along with mules and wagons. The Ozarks were undergoing the same changes as the Tar-Heel country of North Carolina in the 1920s, as Wilson noted in his recollections of the Ozarks.[47] The *Hobo's*

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[43] Ima Homaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1939), p. 427.

[44] Dégh, "Folk Narrative," *Folklore and Folklife*, Dorson, ed., p. 70.

[45] Guy Owen, "Using Folklore in Fiction," *Folklore Studies in Honor of Arthur Palmer Hudson*, Daniel W. Patterson, ed. (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Folklore Society, 1965), p. 150.

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[47] Wilson, *The Bodacious Ozarks*, pp. 166–179.

Hornbook, said Milburn, was published because hoboes were "anachronisms bound for extinction"; therefore, Milburn may have recorded Ozark lore because he thought that it, too, was bound for extinction.

Certain problems, though, arise in an interpretation which attributes *Oklahoma Town* to a desire to record a dying oral tradition. That interpretation would not explain why the record took the form of literature which satirized provincial America. Milburn's use of "schwank," rather than other folktales, particularized to fashion stories which seem critical of Oklahoma, may indicate his ambiguous feelings toward Oklahoma, which he left permanently in 1932. Glenway Wescott said of his hero in *The Grandmothers*: "He did not like their [pioneers'] sufferings, their illiterate mysticism, their air of failure; but he understood them, or fancied that he did. It did not matter whether he liked them or not—he was their son."[48] Wescott was one of the many writers, described by Frederick Hoffman in *The Twenties*, who moved to other places but whose imaginations remained in the Midwest, "there being no other place in their experiences or their minds."[49]

Sherwood Anderson was another displaced Midwesterner. In an introduction to *Return to Winesburg*, a collection of Anderson's writings for a country newspaper, Ray Lewis White declared that "the pattern of Sherwood Anderson's own life demonstrates his recognition of both the agony and the beauty of small town life."[50] Some of that agony concerned the change undergone by Anderson's hometown, Clyde, Ohio, a change from a rural to a partly urbanized way of life. The beauty lay in the hope of recapturing the small town of his boyhood. The conflict Milburn may have believed also concerned that change from a rural community to an urbanized town; folklore may have been associated with his boyhood, with a time before the "thoughted change-over" described by Wilson.[51] Anderson made periodic returns to small town life, in 1925 to the village of Troutdale in southeast Virginia. Later, he bought a farm near Troutdale arnd then bought two small newspapers in Marion, Virginia. Milburn also tried to return to the small town. He did not move back to Coweta, but in 1935 he bought a farm near Pineville, Missouri, another Ozark community.

Milburn wrote a short story about his stay in Pineville. That story, "The Road to Calamity," published in 1936, concerns Ernest Forepaugh, a writer

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48 Glenway Wescott, *The Grandmothers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), p. 18.

49 Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (New York: Viking Press, 1949), p. 30.

50 Sherwood Anderson, *Return to Winesburg: Selections from Four Years of Writing for a Country Newspaper*, Ray Lewis White, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 4.

51 Wilson, *The Bodacious Ozarks*, p. 166.

who has begun to drink more as he sells fewer and fewer stories.[52] As Vance Randolph, who also lived in Pineville, stated "this is the tale of Milburn's life near Pineville, Missouri. It is authentic stuff, and I recognize nearly all of the characters. In this story, Milburn sets forth his real opinion of Pineville and the Ozark region."[53] The story begins as Mr. and Mrs. Forepaugh travel through Missouri to visit a friend in the fictionalized Pineville. While driving through the Ozarks, Forepaugh says, "Gold in them hills, podner, pyore gold," and he sarcastically comments on "The book of the Month Club selection while back, all in Ozark dialect." The Forepaughs eat breakfast at a local hotel and find that though, "the eggs were too fresh to taste right, they both ate with more relish than they ever had for their wonted roll and coffee." Mr. and Mrs. Forepaugh wait until they leave the hotel to snicker about the lady choristers in "cheesecloth robes" and the men in "gilt-braided lodge uniforms." Ernest Forepaugh, George Milburn himself, considers hillfolks ignorant, but he objects to literature which capitalizes on scorning those folks and on imitating their speech. In addition, Forepaugh cannot reconcile his feeling of superiority toward the Ozark country people with his knowledge that, in a sense, those people are more honest than he. Although the Forepaughs decide to settle in the Ozark town, they remain outsiders. Once they were New Yorkers; they cannot now be hillfolks.[54]

If in "The Road to Calamity," Milburn reveals "his real opinion about Pineville and the Ozark region," it is decidedly ambiguous. That story and Milburn's combination of folklore and anti-rural fiction mark him as a son of the Ozarks, a place both loved and hated. However, if Milburn were only the Glenway Wescott of Oklahoma, *Oklahoma Town* would not be particularly significant. Milburn's use of folklore accomplished something much more positive. *Oklahoma Town* does record Ozark folktales, dialect and customs as found in the early twentieth century. The folklore in *Oklahoma Town* also gives to the tales a sense of place and of people living in time. Much twentieth century fiction seems rootless; characters spring from authors' minds, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter. As Owen said, "People who have accumulated a body of folksayings, superstitions, songs, and the like have lived *in time*."[55] Flannery O'Connor, William Carlos

[52] George Milburn's "The Road to Calamity," *Southern Review*, Vol. II, No. 1 (1936), pp. 63–84.

[53] Randolph, *Ozark Folklore: A Bibliography*, p. 385.

[54] Milburn, "The Road to Calamity," *Southern Review*, Vol. II, pp. 64–66; for a lexicon of the Ozark dialect found in *Oklahoma Town*, see Julia Rackleff, "Folk Speech in the Short Stories and Novels of George Milburn," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1949. Milburn's stories, according to Rackleff, transcribe accurately the Ozark dialect.

[55] Owen, "Using Folklore in Fiction," *Folklore Studies in Honor of Arthur Palmer Hudson*, p. 154.

Williams, and the critic Frederick Hoffman have all emphasized that the writer must have a sense of place.[56] O'Connor, for instance, was "startled" after reading stories submitted to the Southern Writer's Conference, because the stories contained "no distinctive sense of Southern life."[57] For O'Connor, a writer's aim was communication, "and communication suggests talking inside a community. . . . The best American fiction has always been regional."[58] Milburn's use of folklore, specifically Ozark folklore, and the accompanying use of dialect give his tales a sense of place and at least fulfill one of O'Connor's requirements that fiction deal with the manners of a people. In "The Saga of George Milburn," Botkin wrote that he feared in Milburn's "cutting himself off from Oklahoma he [Milburn] might cut himself off from his sources." [59] That observation may have been accurate; it may explain why George Milburn never became a great talent.

The *Oklahoma Town* tales do use specific Ozark tales, and they are part of the international schwank tradition. The identification of folk elements in *Oklahoma Town* serves as a balm on stories which have a stinging antirural impact. But more importantly, that identification elucidates the author's creative process and offers some insight into a source for a national literary tradition. Botkin declared that Milburn's "use of folk and popular materials constitutes his real importance as a short story writer."[60] George Milburn's use of folklore constitutes not only his importance, though; it also contributes to the sheer pleasure found in reading *Oklahoma Town*.

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[56] See: William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925) and Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*, pp. 120–162.

[57] Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," *Mystery and Manners*, Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald, eds. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), p. 103.

[58] Flannery O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," *ibid.*, pp. 53, 58.

[59] Benjamin A. Botkin, "The Saga of George Milburn," unpublished manuscript, April, 1938.

[60] *Ibid.*