

An Early Student/Colleague

Betty Kutter called to say that she was sending over a new student who appeared to share some of my interests. She was right. I had been studying and thinking about oral traditional ballads, tales, and music. Except for playing jazz, my concerns were mainly theoretical and historical. Barry Roderick, however, was already an experienced performer as well as an advanced student of oral traditions of Scotland, Ireland, the Canadian Maritime Provinces, and upper New England. As an instrumentalist, on several occasions when we played our different kinds of music at variety-show benefits, he billed himself as “The Mad Bagpiper.”

He had come down from Alaska to work with Betty in acquiring some more scientific grounding for his interest in oral-traditional medicine. His first night amounted to an unusual introduction to the campus. Not knowing about the prohibition of camping out on one’s own, he had scouted around and decided to put up his tent on the landward edge of the College beach. He had pitched it so that the door gave him a view over Eld Inlet to the opposite shore, and had turned in soon after dark. As he recalled the episode for me, after he had been in a deep sleep for a while, he was awakened by a crunching of gravel in front of his tent. There was enough light coming from the houses on the opposite shore of the inlet to cast a large shadow on the door of the tent. What he was seeing and hearing in coming to consciousness was in fact a loving couple taking a late stroll along the beach, crunching the gravel and making the single large shadow. But imagining himself at the moment to be still in Alaska, Barry immediately thought, “Bear!” and instinctively sought to escape through the back of the tent. He had his knife by him. He grabbed it, slashed a hole in the back of the tent, and scuttled to safety. In the meantime, the couple had moved further along the beach. Barry, now fully awake, found himself standing with the knife in his hand behind his ruined tent and looking at the peaceful scene of beach, inlet, and twinkling lights on the far shore. Welcome to Evergreen.

He occasionally came over to my office for conversations – not nearly enough, but always stimulating. In one of our early conversations, he told me about some of his folkloristic exploits in Alaska. He was eager to learn more of the Inuit and Aleut languages, and especially to collect some of the traditional tales. He heard that a doctor was looking for an assistant to help with inoculating native people against disease. The project involved being flown around by a bush pilot to a number of settlements over a period of several weeks and staying overnight at the settlements before moving on.. Barry was eager to go along and to trade his services for the opportunity to talk with the native people in the evenings.

At the first settlement, he discovered – or re-discovered – one of the main principles of collecting traditional lore from informants. If you want Grandfather to tell you some of his best stories, you have to tell him some of your own first. So Barry had told several of the Celtic stories he knew, adjusting the details to suit the experiences and environment of his auditors. He then got to hear some of their stories. As the team moved on, he followed this procedure at other settlements. At the end of the loop which the team had been making, he was about thirty miles from the first settlement they had visited. As part of the story-telling, he heard an elder giving a variant version of what was

obviously one of the Celtic stories which Barry had told on the first night – and introducing it as “one of our oldest traditional tales.”

“Barry,” I said, “do you realize what you’ve done? You’ve planted a Celtic story in Alaskan native tradition. Some strait-laced folklorist who knows the story is going to hear it in Alaska and write a scholarly article about hearing it so far away from the British Isles.” Depending upon the theoretical bias of the scholar, the article will talk either of “archetypes” or of “transmission by early, hitherto-unknown trade routes.” Barry was not much worried about this possibility. Good stories are good stories.

At some point I must have passed on to Barry a comment made by my colleague since 1962 – at Oberlin and at Evergreen – Mark Papworth, a scholar, yet anything like strait-laced. He believes that native people exposed to Western European culture would say something like: “We could deal with the coming of the explorers. When the traders and missionaries came, things weren’t too bad. We didn’t especially like it when the sailors and soldiers came with their flags. But when these strange countries sent in the anthropologists, we knew we were done for.”

Barry was very much concerned about doing studies in folklore right – honestly, humanely, and in the spirit of honoring the native traditions he wished to learn about. He was especially concerned about the Disneyfication of such traditions – the exploiting of them and treatment of them as “primitive” in the sense of “quaint, backward, fit only for children’s books.” He showed me a U.S. comic book for children which reduced the story of Raven to cuteness. Though he wanted to do further research in Alaska, he wanted to do it sensitively and respectfully. Wrenching the stories out of the traditional cultures for facile displays out of context was as bad as removing Alaskan artifacts for lower-48 museum collections. He wanted to keep on with his research, but to do it right. He wanted, in collaboration with like-minded friends, to write position papers about how to do things right.

I encouraged Barry to try for a Youthgrant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Evergreen students had already been successful in being awarded Youthgrants – the purpose of which was to foster research by advanced undergraduate students or beginning graduate students. NEH had a problem, however, in dealing with students at more conventional institutions. The Endowment wanted to make sure that the projects were devised and carried out by the students and weren’t just used as assignments by their teachers, or even opportunities for the teachers to have some of their own research projects supported by being delegated to their students. And yet the student researchers could not be completely on their own. The Endowment needed to have some academic institution overseeing the activities and serving as a responsible fiscal agent. Our system of individual learning contracts fitted all of the criteria. And Barry, with my sponsorship and Evergreen’s fiscal accounting, was successful. He was awarded something between five and ten thousand dollars to support his work.

During his year back in Alaska on the Youthgrant, I did not hear much from him. The proposal was solid, Barry was fully committed to the project, and so no news was good news. In January, however, some news came from an unexpected source. The President’s secretary called me to come upstairs. Some FBI men were there and had some questions. I seemed to have been involved, because my name was on file with

the National Endowment of the Humanities as a student's sponsor. It was Barry, and the FBI men gave me a letter of his to read. It was addressed to the Soviet ambassador in Washington, D. C. and began, "Dear Mr. Ambassador, Merry Christmas!"

Two islands lie right smack in the middle of the Bering Strait. Little Diomedé Island is part of Alaska and the U.S. Big Diomedé Island belonged, at the time, to the U.S.S.R. (and now to Russia). The same Aleutian people live on both islands, but in the middle of the Cold War, they were separated by a boundary-line drawn down through the Strait on all the maps. In midwinter, when the Bering Sea freezes up at this point, the people of both Diomedés set up a little community between the two islands. Barry wanted to visit (1) Little Diomedé, (2) the temporary settlement on the ice, and (3) Big Diomedé. He wanted to bring along his camera and his tape-recorder for research on how things were going in this situation. Now I don't know, and you don't know, and the F.B.I. men didn't know what kinds of surveillance equipment and installations the Soviets had on Big Diomedé, but the U.S.S.R. was not at all supportive of the idea that an American should show up there with a camera and a tape-recorder. Barry had requested that the Soviet ambassador in Washington, D.C. give him permission to do just that. He had signed his letter, "Barry Roderick, researcher, the National Endowment for the Humanities and The Evergreen State College."

You and I can both imagine what must have gone on. The Soviet Embassy would have sent a rocket to the U.S. State Department: "What the hell is going on here?" The State Department, not knowing anything about anything, would have sent a rocket to the National Endowment. "What's going on here?" The officer at the Endowment who received the blast must have looked at the file and said, "We give someone a few thousand dollars for folklore research, and look what happens," But the D.C. authorities had also caught the reference to Evergreen and had sent the F.B.I. people from the Seattle office to us. I wish I could tell you exactly what I said to them, but I can't. Time has a way of growing scar-tissue over stab-wounds. After establishing that, no, he wasn't really acting in an official capacity for the College or for NEH, I hope that I asked them to think about how much of a certain kind of sense his request made.

Sweet reason and soft soap. But when I got Barry on the phone, I must have shouted, "BARRY! What on earth were you thinking?" He answered that it was an unusual but logical opportunity to study how native people were making do in an irrational situation. He had introduced himself as a researcher for the Endowment and for Evergreen to give some weight to his request but also because that was who he was during the run of the grant. One can't quarrel too much with such reasoning, and Barry was able to finish his work for the year – though we both had to do some footwork to justify why his materials were staying in Alaska rather than being handed out indiscriminately. And that was our last official collaboration.

There were, however, three more instances to come. Several years later, Barry came back down to Evergreen. He had hitched a ride on the AlCan Highway with a semi-trailer. On the way, the truck had inadvertently hit a moose – or the moose had hit the truck – with predictable results. The driver and Barry had stopped to butcher the moose. There was no refrigeration available. When Barry arrived days later at Evergreen and visited me, he presented me with a package of moose meat, which I took home and put in my refrigerator. I like properly aged venison, and twice friends have given me

some elk steaks, which turn out to be even milder and tastier. The moose meat, however, by reason of the green color and the odor which emanated from it, did not get a fair trial.

Much later, when I was trying to raise some money to purchase for our archives the NBC program featuring our planning-faculty retreat in 1970, here came a letter in response to the plea published in our alumni newsletter. It contained a contribution from Barry, only a few dollars but certainly welcome and meaningful.

The most welcome gift and remembrance from Barry, however, had come in 1981. A package arrived which contained three Folkways Records – FES 34031, 34032, and 34033. The set bore the title *The Southeast Alaska Folk Tradition*. The three albums were titled: “Exploration and Discovery, 1786-1897,” “Stampede and Settlement, 1898-1941,” and “Too Late for the Gold Too Early for the Oil, 1942-1981.” I have always treasured Folkways Records and had asked in 1970 that the whole catalogue be purchased for the Evergreen library. I had witnessed how proud one of our early faculty members, Robert Gottlieb, was when Folkways issued a recording of Indian tabla playing which he had recorded and produced. This set of three recordings bears the legend, “Compiled and Annotated by: John Ingalls and Barry Roderick.” They can serve as a model for how detailed, accurate, humane, and even touching research in oral-traditional songs can be done. If Barry could have been said to be, at times, a bit mad, yet there was method – and commitment, and integrity – in his madness.