Introducing New Regional Literature

Folk-Say to Preserve Southwest's Folklore

By George Milburn, '30

While Oklahoma has been getting on so stridingly this last decade or so, a number of disquieting questions have been fiddling, midge-like, in the ears of those inevitable mavericks to be found dallying by the wayside. What of the Oklahoma heritage? Cows and cotton, calomel and oil, to be sure. But mightn't we be leaving behind a more valuable birthright, preoccupied as we were with this fourth-dimensional dash?

An attempt to formulate an answer to this question is underway, and the result will appear in the form of an annual volume early in June. Its inauguration will mark an event in the publishing history of Oklahoma.

More than one person, in probing the surface of Oklahoma's raw communal life, has discovered the accumulated wealth of its folklore and traditions. But it remained for one man, imbued with the idea of preserving such material, to bend his unremitting efforts toward the founding of an Oklahoma folk periodical.

Folk-Say, the first Oklahoma folklore collection, began in the brain of B. A. Botkin, an English instructor at the University of Oklahoma. Botkin, a Bostonian and a Harvard graduate, came to the university in 1921. With a perception strange to members of his profession, he was quick to touch on the autochthonous lore of the Southwest—the balladry and the tales old men tell.

Meantime the Oklahoma Folk-Lore Society (originally founded at Norman in 1915 by Dr. E. E. Dale, with Doctor Dale and later Prof. W. S. Campbell as president) was revived and put on a permanent footing at Stillwater in 1923. Its moving spirit, J. Frank Dobie, at that time head of the English department at Oklahoma A. and M. college and for some time secretary of the Texas Folk-Lore Society, contributed to Chronicles of Oklahoma for September, 1924, an article outlining the glorious possibilities of Oklahoma lore. The following year Dobie returned to his native state of Texas and, as associate professor of English, to the University of Texas, continuing with renewed vigor his activities as secretary and editor of the Texas Folk-Lore Society. Since then Dobie has achieved national prominence for his collections of Texas and Southwestern lore.

Having lost Dobie, the Oklahoma Folk-Lore Society continued under the guidance of one of his former pupils, Walter R. Smith, of Suply, until the election in 1928 of Botkin, to whom—enthusiastic young Easterner—it was left to carry on. With the first issue of Folk-Say, the initial publication of the Oklahoma Folk-Lore Society, Botkin, as editor, will put into execution his own conception of what a collection of the type should be.

"The lore of yesterday is the literature of tomorrow," says Botkin, in explaining the purpose of Folk-Say. "The name, Folk-Say, is the result of a telescoping of two words—folk-songs and folktales, hence Folk-Say."

No person could be more admirably fitted for the position of editing a folklore periodical. B. A. Botkin is a name well-known in literary circles. He is a poet whose work has appeared in such publications as The American Mercury, The Southwest Review, Opportunity, and other magazines of national importance. He is regarded as an authority on Oklahoma lore and literature.

He first became interested in Oklahoma folk-lore through themes and reports assigned to university students in his English classes. Later he fostered a group of poets on the campus, a relationship which culminated in his collecting the most representative work of Oklahoma poets for The American Mercury.

OLK-LORE is our last frontier," says Botkin, the editor. "Oklahoma is especially rich in lore, representing successive waves of western migration and varied racial strains and picturesque occupations. As indicated by the recent flood of literature of the Old West, this tradition is creating a genuine American myth and saga."

Contributions to Folk-Say will not be limited to traditional material, however. Botkin expects to print original manuscripts from the pens of Oklahomans. These he will select as he finds them to be exemplifications of the so-called Oklahoma manner in writing.

Many famous contributors will be included in the first issue of Folk-Say. Among these are: J. Frank Dobie, author of "Legends of Texas" and other collections; Stanley Vestal, author of "Fandango" and "Kit Carson"; Lynn Riggs, famed Oklahoma playwright; and Elizabeth W. DeHuff, author of "Taytoy's Tales" and "Taytoy's Memories." Some thirty contributors from ten states (including many new writers) will appear.

"Folk-lore is not dead, but an active, living tradition," says Botkin. "Such a publication as Folk-Say, lending permanence as it does to folk-songs, legends, customs, superstitions, slang, dialect, offering a medium of expression as well as a source of native material, should have the support of Oklahoma's spiritual and artistic resources."

The first issue of the book will be limited to 250 copies. These are being sold by subscription before publication by the University of Oklahoma Press.

Oklahoma, a land of pioneers, has had to wait until this year for this new form of pioneering, the first organized attempt to collect, preserve and interpret Oklahoma traditions, which promises to grow into a venture of national scope and importance.