Ethnologies

The Real Live Type: Research Technique in an Industrial Folklore Project

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Résumé de l'article

Cette note de recherche se rapporte à l'usage de la notion de "savoir technique" qui est faite dans les travaux d'ethnologie industrielle. La discussion porte sur deux récits relatifs à des histoires de "poux d'imprimerie" et révèle que la connaissance de ces savoirs techniques est essentielle pour bien comprendre les descriptions elles-mêmes, surtout s'il s'agit d'occupations qui impliquent davantage de gestes. Les changements dans le travail des typographes apportés par l'introduction des micro-ordinateurs diminuera très probablement aussi l'intérêt de telles études pour cette catégorie de travailleurs.

Note/Note de recherche

The Real Live Type: Research Technique in an Industrial Folklore Project*

ALAN O'CONNOR

Industrial folklore is a promising new area of research. It has attracted a number of folklorists in Canada and North America and several full-length studies have now been published. In the summer of 1981 when I started my own study of the oral narratives of members of the printing trade in Toronto, my model was Betty Messenger's study of the traditions of the Northern Ireland linen industry in the years 1900-1930.[1] However, my main interest, unlike Messenger's, was to be in present-day oral traditions rather than accounts of "the good old days." Since then, Richard Dorson's study of the folklore of the steel industry in the Calumet Region of Indiana has been published.[2] Dorson deals with industrial folklore as it exists today, but I would argue that the main values of his approach are rather more methodological than material, being its profound humanism, its innovative use of a large research team, and its understanding of the role of recording equipment in the research process.[3]

Every researcher in the field of industrial folklore has argued that it is not enough to open a new "area" for the established methods of folk studies. Some of the most interesting new research strategies have developed out of the Working Americans project at the Smithsonian Institute from 1972-76.[4] The group of folklorists who were associated

[1] Betty Messenger, Picking Up the Linen Threads: A Study in Industrial Folklore. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.

[2] Richard M. Dorson, Land of the Millrats. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

[3] I argue this at more length in "Industrial Folklore: A Critical Introduction," Labour/Le Travailleur, 10(Fall 1982)

[4] See the special issue of Western Folklore, 37(July 1978), on "Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife," edited by Robert H. Byington.

with this project have developed an approach to occupational folklife by which work technique, gesture, oral narrative, and custom are understood to constitute an informal network of symbolic action, with work technique as the nucleus of the other forms. McCarl describes technique as a matter of a constantly changing relation to materials, tools, the work environment, and other workers. It is the *shaping principle* of an occupation. For example, "The primary technique of glass work in a molding factory is the smooth coordination and movement of raw glass into the kiln, out again, into the mold and then into the lehr."[5] The purpose of this note is to present some material from my research project and then to comment on the value of the notion of work technique for a study of the folklife of the printing trade.

There are many different occupations in the work of printing; my study concentrates on compositors. The cooperation of the trade union in such research is essential and members of the Toronto Typographical Union have been extremely helpful. Typographical workers well deserve their reputation as a varied and well spoken group of people. Respondents tell narratives of their apprenticeship days, of characters they knew, of the everyday work experience, and of technical changes in the work. As well as these kinds of occupational narratives, most typographical workers will tell stories (with a special twinkle in their eyes) about such things as type-lice. I present two such stories, the first one from a retired "floorman" who worked on page assembly and the second from a monotype machine operator who now teaches typography at George Brown College.

Emil Rosenthal: But we also had a penchant for playing games with the editors. It was also done to apprentices too, but we'd usually reserve that one for the editorial types: many of whom were academics, as a matter of record. We'd give them an exhibition of type-lice.

A.O'C.:   What's that?

Emil Rosenthal: Type-lice? Lice. You know what lice are? Type-lice. Of course there's no such thing. It was an ingenius method they had. You know what a galley looks like?

A.O'C.:   Yes, roughly.

Emil Rosenthal: It's a metal tray, tilted on its side like this [demonstrates with newspaper folded in quarter]. And they have one closed end and one open end. And they'd put a little ink in there and they'd pour some gasoline in with that and it would dissolve the ink of course. And the explanation was that without that you could never see them. And then they'd have a piece of stick on the one end, on the

[5]*Ibid.*

> open end. And the person would be told to get down
> closer to have a look at them becouse they were very
> small. And the stick went right into that mucky goo, the
> ink [domonstrates making sharp clap on the newspaper]
> and they'd be covered from head to foot. They never,
> ever forgot that there was no such thing as type-lice for
> the rest of their life [laughter].[6]

This account of the custom of showing type-lice to new apprentices and editors at a large university press includes many aspects of work technique. It involves a description of a metal galley tray and a performance (using a newspaper to demonstrate) of the way the galley is handled. It also incorporates a description of the properties of printer's ink. Further, the narrative involves an understanding of the social relations in the workplace between experienced workers, editors, and apprentices. The next account of type-lice is somewhat different.

> Aubrey Barron: You know, when monotype has been set, although it is all
> single characters, it appears in a block if it is well set. And
> if accidently you knock monotype at the end it's going to
> fall over and then you will see that it is single pieces of
> type. And you will then put it together. Or if you are the
> apprentice over six months or say a year, the journeyman
> will get you to do that, correct that. And what we found
> was that if you throw a little, if you dampen it, if you
> throw a little bit of water on it, it sticks: lead will stick and
> then you can get it done easily. So what the old
> journeymen would do is they would separate the lines of
> type and fill a little water in there and then they would
> call the apprentice and say, have you ever seen type-lice?
> Well, you've never seen type-lice and you say, where?
> And he would say, there: can you see it? And as your
> head was quite close, looking for the type-lice they'd
> push the type together and of course the water would
> splash into your face [claps hands] and that's type-lice.
>
> And everybody knows that, all the other journeymen
> know that he's going to do this and they all pretend to be
> very, very busy, watching from the corner. And when this
> happens everybody's on the floor laughing. It's the same
> old joke.[7]

This account of type-lice also involves an understanding of the relationship between journeyman and apprentice. An apprentice of six months or a year would put together type that had fallen over, whereas an apprentice of three months might not be trusted with this. Even more than Rosenthal's narrative, this story involves an appreciation of work

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[6]Taped interview, 3 July 1981, Toronto.

[7]Taped interview, 16 April 1982, Toronto.

technique. If type is well set it appears in a block. The technique of moistening lead type to make it easier to handle is important to the way Barron saw the trick performed. The variations between the two descriptions of type-lice can also be explained in terms of different work techniques. Rosenthal worked on hand composition and page assembly. There would be empty galley trays lying around. Barron worked for many years on monotype machines and his version of the trick uses lines of monotype in a galley.

I have asked several respondents about the value of the whole notion of work technique and the flow of material through the workplace. In an old-fashioned printing works one could understand the work as the flow of type: stored in a case, then assembled on a composing stick, locked into a frame, and then after the page has been printed, washed, unlocked, broken up and distributed back into the case. Several respondents have said that this does, indeed, describe the shaping principle of the work flow. They point out that this work process involved much movement back and forth, much physical work. Assembled type is heavy. Respondents then point out that computerized phototypesetting does not involve this kind of physical movement. Typographical workers operating at a visual display terminal leave their chair only to get a coffee or the like.

The occupations which the Working Americans group of industrial folklorists take as their prime examples involve physical actions to a great degree. Trainmen, fire-fighters, steel workers, and car assembly workers all carry out work that is physical and more or less observable. Because of microelectronic technology, typography is becoming less and less this kind of a job. It may be that a research method that understands work technique as the foundation of gesture, narrative, and custom will be of less use as the automation of typographical work takes over more and more of the industry. Computers may develop their own bugs, but type-lice may finally be exterminated.

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Résumé

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