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# Lagniappe\* / North Caroliniana

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compiled by Plummer Alston Jones, Jr.

*Editor's Note:* "Lagniappe/North Caroliniana," the newest feature column of *North Carolina Libraries*, is envisioned as a complement to "North Carolina Books." As such, "Lagniappe/North Caroliniana" will feature reviews of materials in various non-book formats presenting fictional or nonfictional accounts on North Carolina or the Southern regions which include North Carolina (e.g., the Appalachians, the Southeast, the Old South, the New South, etc.). Publishers and creators of nonbook materials which meet these criteria should forward materials for possible review. Reviews of up to 250 words are welcomed and will be considered for publication. Send materials and reviews to Plummer Alston Jones, Jr., c/o Iris Holt McEwen Library/LaRose Resources Center, Elon College, P.O. Box 187, Elon College, NC 27244-0187.

## Tell-A-Communication: Storytelling in North Carolina

by Pat Ryckman

**B**efore fiber optics, before modems, before faxing, radio, and the Morse code, there was storytelling, the oldest form of telecommunication. The prefix *tele*, meaning "transmission over a distance," aptly describes storytelling. Traditional North Carolina stories have traveled great physical distances — the Jack tales from Europe and Brer Rabbit from Africa — as well as temporal ones. For centuries the tales have been passed down father to son, mother to daughter, generation to generation. These stories have proven to be an enduring means of communicating values and our cultural heritage; oral communication is immune to censorship, war, and mildew.

The power of storytelling lies in the unique relationship between the teller and the listener. In storytelling there is no artifact created — no book, drawing, or video. The story depends on at least two people, the teller and the listener, and the experiences each brings to the meeting. The story is never told or heard in exactly the same manner twice; it evolves from telling to telling and from generation to generation.

The best way to experience storytelling is to bring a storyteller and a group of listeners together. Many North Carolina libraries have access to a wealth of talent — excellent storytellers on their staffs or a storyteller in the community to call upon. Or one may consult the annual *National Directory of Storytelling* (National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling, P. O. Box 309, Jonesborough, TN 37659; \$7.95 plus \$3.50 shipping) for names and addresses of over a dozen storytellers from this state. Second best exposure to stories is via sound recordings. Although the telling loses some of the intimacy and interaction of a face-to-face delivery, the nuances of speech are preserved and the flavor of the original story comes through in a way that no story in print can match.

The following is a selection of sound recordings of tales by North Carolina tellers recommended to complement live storytelling in the library. These recordings are recommended for all North Caroliniana collections; most of the recordings are also appropriate for children's collections (exceptions noted below).

Chase, Richard. *Richard Chase Tells Three Jack Tales*. (197?, Folk-Legacy Records, P. O. Box 1148, Sharon, CT 06069; telephone: (203) 364-5661; LP [cassette available Fall 1992]; \$9.98 plus \$2.00 shipping).

Richard Chase's publication of *The Jack Tales* in 1943 and *Grandfather Tales* in 1948 helped set in motion the current interest in and revival of storytelling in this country. In this recording he recounts versions of "Jack and the King's Girl," "Jack and the Robbers," and "Jack and the Three Sillies," which he adapted from the stories collected from Roby

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\*La•gniappe (lăn-yăp', lă'n' yăp') n. An extra or unexpected gift or benefit. [Louisiana French]

Monroe Ward of Beech Creek in the late 1930s. The stories were passed down to Ward from his maternal grandfather, Council Harmon, who, according to family history, learned them from the early settlers of this country. This recording was made in a two-room schoolhouse in the Tennessee mountains with the students serving as a very appreciative audience.

Hicks, Ray. *Ray Hicks of Beech Mountain, North Carolina, Telling Four Traditional Jack Tales*. (1964; Folk-Legacy Records, P. O. Box 1148, Sharon, CT 06069; telephone: (203) 364-5661; LP [cassette available Fall 1992]; \$9.98 plus \$2.00 shipping).

Ray Hicks is a national treasure. Born on Beech Mountain in 1922, he is another member of the storytelling family first documented by Richard Chase, having learned the stories from his grandfather, John Benjamin, another grandson of Council Harmon. These four tales, "Jack and the Three Steers," "Big Man Jack, Killed Seven at a Whack," "Jack and Old Fire Dragon," and "Whickety-Whack, into My Sack," all have European roots but are thoroughly Americanized in Hicks's versions. Jack, a mountain farm boy, relies on his wits and a good bit of luck to overcome a giant, outfox the king, and even capture Death in a sack. The recording requires repeated careful listening to catch all the wonderful turns of phrase and mountain dialect. Ray Hicks has also been recorded by June Appal Recordings (306 Madison St., Whitesburg, KY 41858; telephone: 1-800-545-7467). *Jack Alive!* (compact disc or cassette, \$8.98 plus \$1.75 shipping) is a collection of personal anecdotes, stories, and mountain lore. A video, *Fixin' to Tell About Jack* (June Appal Recordings, \$29.95 plus \$1.75 shipping) shows Hicks in his home and fields, sharing his philosophy of life and one Jack tale, "Whickety-Whack, into My Sack." (Younger children may have difficulty understanding Hicks's speech.)

Torrence, Jackie. *Legends From the Black Tradition*. (1982; Weston Woods Studios, 389 Newton Turnpike, Weston, CT 06883; telephone: 1-800-243-5020; cassette; \$9.00).

The story of "How Brer Rabbit Outsmarted the Frogs" begins with a magical lead-in: "Back in the days when the animals could talk . . ." In Jackie Torrence's stories, the animals talk once more. Her voice can bring a frog, glistening and throbbing in the moonlight, to life for any listener. Torrence, a former High Point Public Library staffer, has achieved a national reputation in storytelling. This ALA Notable recording offers a sampling of her wide repertoire—an animal tale, some nature lore in "High John the Conqueror," stories based on historical figures, and her version of the classic John Henry tale. Other cassette recordings of her stories available from Weston Woods include *Country Characters*, offering three mountain tales and two ghost stories, and *The Story Lady*, which includes stories from Torrence's childhood.

Davis, Donald. *Listening for the Crack of Dawn*. (1991; August House, P. O. Box 3223, Little Rock, AR 72203; telephone: 1-800-284-8784; double cassette; \$16.95).

Donald Davis's two recent books, *Listening for the Crack of Dawn* and *Barking at a Fox-Fur Coat*, are truly delightful, but these stories must be listened to rather than read silently to do them full justice. *Listening for the Crack of Dawn* is now available on cassette, complete with Davis's gentle mountain inflections and warmth. These stories about growing up in fictional Nantahala County, North Carolina, in the 1950s and 1960s, have universal appeal and an uncanny ability to unlock memories from one's own childhood—memories of a favorite aunt, an inspired teacher, or a ten-year-old partner in devilment. The tale of a special teacher, Miss Daisy, is a story about the power of storytelling. Miss Daisy's imagination not only tames a roomful of restless fourth graders, but also has the power to overcome the near-death of a crippling stroke. Davis has many other excellent recordings in print, including *Live and Learn*, with more family stories, and *More Than a Beanstalk*, featuring traditional Jack tales, both available from Weston Woods Studios.

Smith, Kathi. *Cherokee Legends I*. (1990; Cherokee Publications, P. O. Box 256, Cherokee, NC 28719; telephone: (704) 488-2988; cassette; \$9.00 plus \$2.90 shipping).

Kathi Smith's opening for this recording acknowledges the power of direct communication: "We are a fortunate people in that we have never had to rely on pen and paper but rather word and deed." The Cherokee's closeness to nature is evident in these traditional myths. The stories explain phenomena in the natural world such as "How the Rabbit Lost His Tail," "How the Crow Turned Black," and "How the Milky Way Came to Be." The recording uses Native American music to set the mood and help transport the listener to a time when the world was young.

The Folk Tellers. *Tales to Grow On*. (1981; Weston Woods Studios, 389 Newton Turnpike, Weston, CT 06883; telephone: 1-800-243-5020; cassette; \$9.00).

Cousins Barbara Freeman and Connie Regan-Blake left their library jobs in 1975 to tell stories full-time. Their repertoire includes songs, chants, contemporary tales, a two-act play, and creative retellings of traditional Appalachian stories. This ALA Notable recording includes two mountain stories collected by Richard Chase in the 1940s and published in *Grandfather Tales* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1948). "Sody Sallyraytus" is a tale about a difficult trip to the store for some baking soda, with sound effects provided by an autoharp. The long tale, "Wicked John and the Devil," (22:30 minutes) is a hilarious encounter between a blacksmith, who was "mean, and ornery, and uppity, and bigotty, and lyin' and thievin' and carryin' on," and the Old Boy Himself—the Devil. This tale illustrates the unique power of storytelling to transmit ideas over space and time. Its roots can be traced to Hessia where it was collected by the Grimm brothers and first published in 1812 as "The Blacksmith and the Devil" (*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, translated and with an introduction by Jack Zipes, Bantam, 1987).

Roberts, Nancy. *Six North Carolina Ghost Stories*. (n.d.; Broadfoot's of Wendell, 6624 Robertson Pond Rd., Wendell, NC 27591; telephone: 1-800-444-6963; cassette; \$9.95).

Although Roberts reads rather than tells the stories on this recording, the six supernatural tales offered here represent an important part of the American oral tradition. Ghost stories, the offspring of European fairy stories and the forerunners of our urban myths, attempt to explain the unknown and instruct the listener on how to deal with the supernatural. Ghost stories are always closely associated with a particular place, including, for example, Maco Station, Salem Tavern, and Big Lick, some of the settings for Roberts's stories. The six legends presented here are enhanced by Roberts's somewhat breathless delivery and appropriately creepy sound effects.

Holt, David. *Hairyman*. (1987; High Windy Audio, P. O. Box 553, Fairview, NC 28730; telephone: (704) 254-3133; cassette; \$9.98).

David Holt's music is an integral feature of his storytelling. His banjo is a blasting shotgun, his guitar a creaking door, and his harmonica a pack of running hounds. In the best storytelling tradition, Holt takes a classic tale and makes it all his own with the addition of sound effects and dialogue. "Barney McCabe," the story of a brother and sister who, with the help of their dogs, outsmart a witch, is from the black tradition of St. John's Island, South Carolina. "The Magic Fiddle" is built around a standard folktale theme—a young man's act of kindness wins him a magic instrument which saves his life at the moment of crisis. One of Holt's contemporary tales, "The Hogaphone," describes his Uncle Ike's unique method of communication, and how it saved him from a rampaging bear.

Storytelling, the most ancient form of telecommunication, is flourishing in North Carolina today. Talented professional and amateur tellers are collecting, embellishing, and transmitting traditional stories to audiences around the state, thus assuring their preservation for future generations. North Carolina storytellers also offer a wide repertoire of contemporary tales, some of which are sure to become classics. By developing a collection of recordings, North Carolina libraries can help extend this rich oral tradition to a wider audience.



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