



D.L. Ashliman holding an 8-pound trout caught by his father, August 1942.

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My Favourite Rhymes and Stories when I was Young: Idaho Folklore in the 1940s

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The town of Rexburg, Idaho (USA), was only fifty to sixty years old when I grew up there in the 1940s. Most of its then 5,000 inhabitants still had strong personal ties to ranching and agriculture. My parents (as well as those of most of my friends) were born and raised on farms, but now lived in town. Because of Rexburg's recent settlement, most of its older residents had come there from elsewhere. My own grandparents and great-grandparents were immigrants from Switzerland, England, and Denmark. Although Rexburg prided itself on being 'all American', Europe-based values and customs influenced many aspects of everyday life. The town's geographic isolation (250 miles from the nearest large city, Salt Lake City) provided a cultural climate conducive to the preservation and circulation of oral traditions. Most important in this regard was the total absence of television, which did not come to the area until the mid-1950s, and then with only a single (and often very weak) channel.

The following essay catalogues a few fragments of oral tradition that I still recall after more than a half-century of separation. These are not the results of rigorous folkloric field research, but rather personal recollections, subject to the frailties of human memory.

Taunts and jeers are part of every child's defence system, and often uttered with the seriousness of a medieval sorcerer's incantation. One that was deemed especially effective:

I'm rubber, you're glue,
Everything I say sticks to you;
Everything you say bounces off me
And sticks to you.

Another chant commonly used to undo someone's malevolent words:

Stick and stones
Will break my bones,
But names will never hurt me.

Various forms of misbehaviour were countered with rhymed formulas. For example, a schoolgirl who was too active on the playground, letting her underpants show, was reprimanded with:

I see London, I see France;
I see someone's underpants.

A person accused of lying was accosted with:

Liar, liar, pants on fire,
Nose as long as a telephone wire.

This verse, seen decades later through more experienced eyes, seems to be a combination of the lie-detecting nose from Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) plus the ignited trousers from William Blake's 'The Liar' (1810):

Deceiver, dissembler
Your trousers are alight
From what pole or gallows
Shall they dangle in the night?

My childhood friends all knew about Pinocchio's lie-plagued adventures and his elongated nose, but it is unlikely that any of my contemporaries associated the 'pants on fire' phrase from our chant with Blake's poem.

Children from all cultures seem to take delight in body-function jokes. A parody of a traditional Valentine's Day rhyme comes to mind:

Roses are red;
Violets are blue;
I smell a skunk,
And I think that it's you.

This challenge could be deflected with the claim:

Fartsy finder – His own hinder.

In theory, this incantation would cause a person to think twice before accusing another of making a bad smell, but in practice it usually did not work out that way.

I do not recall having any obese friends or schoolmates, but I fear that, had there been any, we would not have let their physical size go unnoticed. With or without such targets, this verse was known by everyone:

Fatty, fatty, two-by-four;
Couldn't get through the bathroom door;
So he did it on the floor.

Losing one's temper or – worse still – breaking into tears was deemed a critical character flaw, especially for boys. Such an outbreak was often met with this slur:

Crybaby titty-mouse,
Laid an egg in our house;
Egg was rotten, good for nothing,
Throw it out the window.

Rope-jumping or skipping was an activity practised almost exclusively by girls but, having three younger sisters, I was exposed to the rhymes and rules associated with this sport. Ideally, at least three players participated: two turning the rope and one jumping, although a single individual could turn her own rope. A chanted rhyme set the cadence, and it often had a built-in acceleration feature, increasing the pace and ultimately forcing a missed step and a change of jumpers. The rhymes, always transmitted orally from older girls to younger ones, often contained a cautious hint of sexuality, for example:

Down in the meadow
Where the green grass grows
Sits little Mary as pretty as a rose,
Along comes Johnny and kisses her on the nose.
How many kisses does she receive?
One, two, three ...

Johnny and Mary sitting in a tree
K-I-S-S-I-N-G.
First comes love and then comes marriage,
Then comes Mary with a baby carriage,
How many babies will she receive?
One, two, three ...

Some years after my own childhood exposure to these rhymes, the following chant found its way into the pre-pubescent girls' repertoire, now with a strong warning about careless male-female relations:

Cin-der-ella
Dressed in yella
Went upstairs
To kiss her fella.
Made a mistake
And kissed a snake.
How many doctors did it take?
One, two, three.....

Many other games and activities were accompanied by rhymes or chants, and again these were always learned in true folkloric fashion from slightly older members of one's own group. For example, on a summer's evening, a group of neighbourhood children could spontaneously decide to play 'No Bears Are Out Tonight', a variant of 'Hide-and-Seek'. The rules were straightforward. The person chosen to be 'it' covered his or her eyes while everyone else hid. Then the 'it' player skipped about while chanting:

No bears are out tonight;
Daddy shot them all last night.

The 'bears' suddenly emerged from their hiding places, roaring and squealing, and chased the intended victim back to a safe haven. If touched before reaching safety, he or she became a bear, and the play continued. The game could be interrupted without penalty if anyone called out 'King's X' (or possibly 'Kings' X'), which I now theorise may be a survival from antiquity when warring sides called for a temporary truce in order to exchange captured kings. If, by general agreement, or – more likely – because of a parent's call, an outdoor game had to be concluded, all players could reveal themselves without penalty, as soon as someone called out 'Olly olly oxen, all in free!' I have no explanation for the origin of this formulaic phrase.

A favourite wintertime game, especially for boys, was 'I'm the Boss of Bunker Hill'. The rules were simple: one player installed himself atop a large pile of snow (Idaho, a Rocky-Mountain state, never lacked snow in wintertime), then chanted:

I'm the boss of Bunker Hill.
I can fight and I can kill.

One by one other players attempted to push him from the snow pile, and whoever succeeded then became the new boss of Bunker Hill.

Walking along a paved sidewalk could be turned into a game, of sorts, by avoiding all cracks, while chanting:

Step on a crack
Break your mother's back.

A curious variant emerged in my neighborhood in about 1944, the year I started school. Instead of avoiding cracks, we vigorously stomped on every crack, while repeating:

Step on a crack
Break Hitler's back.

Thus, even six-year-olds could feel that they were contributing to the war effort.

The oral traditions discussed thus far belong to children's folklore, that is, lore transmitted directly to younger children by their somewhat older peers. I turn next to folklore transmitted to children by adults, folklore that with time would engage me professionally: nursery rhymes and bedtime stories.

Like most native English speakers of my generation, I can still quote verbatim a dozen or more traditional nursery rhymes such as 'Humpty Dumpty', 'Mary Had a Little Lamb', 'The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe', 'A Dillar a Dollar', 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', and 'London Bridge is Falling Down'. I do not remember having learned them or having seen them in a book; it seems that I have always known them, but I – like countless others – undoubtedly learned them from my mother.

Bedtime stories were an important part of my childhood, and I was blessed with a mother who was a skilled storyteller. Yes, she did read stories from printed books, adding her own dramatic touches as the context suggested, but her real gift was in retelling stories from memory. Traditional fairy tales were an important part of her repertoire, especially those with an English background, for example: 'The Three Bears', 'The Three Little Pigs', and 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. These, if my memory serves me correctly, were told in essentially the same form as recorded by Joseph Jacobs in his *English Fairy Tales* (1890), although I do not recall having seen this book as a child. She also told a few stories from the Grimm Brothers' collection, especially 'Hansel and Gretel' and 'Little Red Riding Hood' (the latter tale with the Grimms' happy ending, not the tragic conclusion of Charles Perrault). Her telling of the 'all-the-better-to-eat-you-with' scene was – of course – always accompanied by menacing gestures and hyper-dramatic vocal effects, much to the delight of us children.

Rhymed verses were also a part of the bedtime ritual. These two come to mind:

One dark night in the middle of the day,
Two dead boys came out to play;
Back to back they faced each other,
Drew their swords and shot each other.
A deaf policeman heard the noise;
Came inside and shot the two dead boys.

Ask your mother for twenty-five cents,
To see an elephant jump the fence;
He jumped so high, he skinned his
Assssk your mother for twenty-five cents,

– repeated numerous times, concluding finally with the lines:

He jumped so high, he touched the sky,
And didn't get back 'til the Fourth of July.

Children will use any excuse to delay turning off the lights at bedtime, and my sisters and I always pleaded for 'just one more story'. These pleas were sometimes acceded to. However, there was one nursery-rhyme-like signal that meant, without equivocation, that tonight's story time is finished:

I'll tell you a story
About Jack Anory;
And now my story's begun.
I'll tell you another
About Jack and his brother;
And now my story is done.

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D.L. Ashliman



Ashliman in his first-grade class at Washington School, Rexburg, May 1945 (second row from the top, fifth boy from viewer's left). Patricia, his wife, is second row from the bottom, the second girl from the viewer's left.