FLAT-LANDERS AND RIDGE-RUNNERS

Folktales from the Mountains of Northern Pennsylvania

JAMES YORK GLIMM

FLAT-LANDERS AND RIDGE-RUNNERS

FLAT-LANDERS AND RIDGE-RUNNERS

Folktales from the Mountains of Northern Pennsylvania

JAMES YORK GLIMM

University of Pittsburgh Press

Published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15260
Copyright © 1983, University of Pittsburgh Press
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America
Printed on acid-free paper

Fifth paperback printing, 1994

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Glimm, James York.
Flatlanders and ridgerunners

1. Tales—Pennsylvania. 2. Folklore—Pennsylvania. 3. Pennsylvania— Social life and customs. I. Title.
GR110.P4G58 1983 390'.009748 82-10895
ISBN 0-8229-3471-X
ISBN 0-8229-5345-5 (pbk.)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Eurospan, London

CONTENTS

Preface xi

Collecting Folklore in North-Central Pennsylvania xvii

Settlement and Development of North-Central Pennsylvania xxiii

Flatlanders and Ridgerunners 1

1. The Fish Warden and the Dynamite 4
2. Skinning the Mink 5
3. Doe Season 5
4. Bearskin up a Tree 6
5. Flatlander Shoots Buddy 6
6. Flatlander Shoots a Goat 7
7. Farmer Dumps Manure on Flatlander's Car 7
8. The Stranger 8
9. Flatlander Foiled 10
10. Flatlanders 11
11. Flatlander on a Backwards Train 12
12. Snipe Hunting 12
13. Bigger and Bigger Deer 13
14. A Drag for Flatlanders 14
15. Out-Riddling the Judge 15
16. Locals Fool a Game Warden 16

Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions 17

Tall Tales and Humorous Tales 27

1. From Rags to Riches 29
2. Making It Stick 30
3. Dr. Bates's Sticking Salve 31
4. Fog Fishin' 31
5. Wellsboro and the Peepers 32
6. Sidehill Gouger 33
7. Sidehill Mooties 33
8. The Weeping Squonk 34
9. Every Place Is What You Make It 35
10. Amish Business 36
11. Ninety-Nine Pigeons 36
12. Why the Irish Have Red Noses 37
13. Outhouse Explosion 38
14. Missing Outhouse 39
15. The Coldest Morning Ever 39
16. The Kittle and the Mosquitoes 40
17. Revenuers 40
18. A Vanderpool 41
19. How a Lady Stopped a Train 41
20. Grammar Lesson 42
21. Death Notice 42
22. Swede in a Knothole 43
23. Walked out on a Moonbeam 44
24. Log Rolling 44
25. Big Buck 45
26. Hoopsnakes 45
27. Courage 47
28. Trout Too Big 48
29. Smart Duck Dog 48
30. Smart Dog 49
31. The Right Kind of Worms 50
32. Catfish Story 51
33. The Sabbath 52
34. Best Coon Dog Ever 53

35. Buying a Mule 53
36. Popcorn Snowstorm 54
37. Eel Dog 54
38. The Irishman and the Lady 55
39. Dead Mule Auction 56
40. Trout Swallow Each Other 57
41. The Frozen Flame 58
42. Dr. Bates 58
43. More Animals 59

The Running Gears of Hard Times: Personal Anecdotes 61

1. Cooley's Curve 64
2. The Bones of Joshua Jones 67
3. Death in a Splash Dam 69
4. An Experience with Lightning 70
5. Revenge 72
6. Midwife 72
7. A Life on the Pine Creek Gorge 74
8. Country Girl 77
9. Death in the Rapids 81

Customs 87

1. Horning Bee 88
2. The Horning Bee 88
3. Shooting the Anvil 91
4. Quiltin' Bee 92
5. Apple Butter Festival 93
6. Shucking Bee 93
7. Cakewalks 94

Tales of the Supernatural 95

1. The Buckskin Ghost 99
2. The Phantom Panther 102

3. The Wet Quilt 104
4. A Meeting with the Devil 104
5. The Ghosts on Rattler Mountain 107
6. Exorcising a Household Ghost 107
7. The Great White Buck 109
8. The Witchie Folk 110
9. The Hobyahs 113
10. The Bewitched Horse 115
11. Woman Swears at Ghost 117
12. The Vanishing Hitchhiker 118
13. The Vanishing Guest 119
14. The Ghost of North Hall 120
15. Blood on the Tombstone 123
16. Hair Growing on a Tombstone 124

Hog Wild: More Personal Anecdotes 125

1. Fake Prof 126
2. Tannery Life 130
3. Bucket a' Blood 134
4. Chatham Barnburners 137
5. Beauty and the Beast 137
6. How Bungy Got Its Name 142
7. Bungy 143
8. Dingdang 143
9. Thumptown 144
10. Cherry Flats 144
11. Grundigut Hollow 145
12. Appendix Operation 145

Beliefs, Cures, and Preventions 147

1. Life Signs 149
2. Weather Beliefs 151
3. Cures and Preventions 154

Animal and Fish Stories 159

1. Lovel Short's Ride 162
2. Panthers 163
3. Charlie Peterson and the Bear 164
4. Whistle Pigs 166
5. How the Deer Came Back 166
6. Big Boy 169
7. Albino Deer 170
8. The Hide-Behind and the High-Behind 171
9. Phantom Deer 172
10. Step'n'half Razy 173
11. Fish Warden 174
12. Skunkin' Nights 174
13. Drivin' Rattlesnakes 176
14. Rattlesnake Bounty 177
15. The Boy and the Fish Warden 180
16. Poachers 181
17. Eel Fishing on the Susquehanna 182

Notes 185

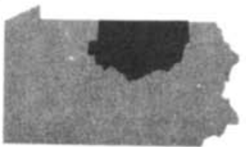
PREFACE

I GREW UP ON LONG ISLAND, WHERE THE closest thing to nature was the local golf course. Then I spent four years in college and another four years in graduate school living in cities. So when I took a job as an English teacher at Mansfield State College in the mountains of northern Pennsylvania, I was not prepared for life in the country. When I came to Mansfield in 1968, I rented a country farmhouse. It seemed as though the animals were waiting for me, because within a few days I had coons in my garbage, possums on my porch, bears in my berries, and rattlesnakes in my rock pile. Naturally, I ran screaming to my neighbors. They laughed at me, shaking their heads. When winter came, I put on my loafers and my trenchcoat and tried to battle a blizzard with a broom. I was snowed in for three days. This time I was the ignorant one, a local joke, an outsider—in short, a flatlander.

Although I was slow to catch on, the mountain people gradually began to teach me the right way to do things. Within a few months, I had fallen under the spell of the region. I wanted to learn everything about the land and the people. The history books, articles, and photographs from the past fascinated me, but I soon realized that if I

wanted to learn more about the people, I would have to go to them and talk with them. The region I decided to investigate begins north of the West Branch of the Susquehanna and Williamsport and extends as far north as the New York State border. The area includes towns like Trout Run, Liberty, English Center, and Forksville toward the south, and Genesee, Westfield, and Lawrenceville in the north. To the east the region begins at Athens and Towanda along the Susquehanna, and stretches westward to the headwaters of the Allegheny River at Port Allegany. This highland region—between the main branches of the Susquehanna—includes Sullivan, Bradford, Tioga, Lycoming, Potter, and Clinton counties. The region west of Scranton and east of Lake Erie has no real cities: the bigger towns like Coudersport, Wellsboro, Mansfield, Towanda, Athens, and Renovo each contain about five thousand people and one blinking traffic light, while hamlets like Trout Run, Shunk, Cedar Run, Holiday, Little Marsh, Oleona, and Cross Fork are made up of a few homes clustered around a general store.

The more I learned about the region, the more I became convinced that something truly important needed to be said about the people and their culture. In fact, I was beginning to realize that northern Pennsylvania—the mountain part—had a culture and a life style all its own. I was trying to understand what exactly made it different, but I couldn't put it into words. So I traveled around, talked to a lot of people, hunted and fished and canoed. Grumman even loaned me one of their



NEW YORK

PA.

POTTER

TIOGA

BRADFORD

CAMERON

CLINTON

LYCOMING

SULLIVAN

Allegheny R.

Coudersport

Galeton

Elkland

Cowanesque R.

Westfield

Tioga Junction

Tioga R.

Mansfield

Blossburg

Wellsboro

Pine Creek

Leetonia

Athens

Susquehanna R.

Troy

Towanda

Towanda Creek

Lycoming Creek

Williamsport

Jersey Shore

Susquehanna R.

W. Br.

RIDGERUNNER COUNTRY, PA.

indestructible canoes for my river excursions. Finally, I wrote an article for a popular magazine about Pine Creek and the Black Forest. It was circulated nationally and received some local attention. But I knew I had missed the essential point, the personality of the people.

Still tracking my elusive quarry, I directed a federal project studying the impact of the dam projects and new highways on the life style of people in Tioga County. Dr. Paul O'Rourke and I interviewed hundreds of people and met with dozens of groups. The project and the book we wrote brought me closer to understanding the culture, but I was still a long way off.

By 1975 I knew that the formal study of folklore would give me the tools I needed to penetrate the culture of this region. In 1976 I spent my sabbatical year studying folklore at the School for Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. There I learned the latest methods of collecting ballads, proverbs, folktales, and folkways. I returned to the United States prepared to begin a systematic collection of oral folklore in north-central Pennsylvania.

In 1978, two years later, a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled me to study under Richard M. Dorson, head of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University at Bloomington. My work with Dorson, who is himself a legend in the field of American folklore, provided me with all the skills and motivation I needed to complete my fieldwork. Encouraged by Dorson, I began thinking about a book on the oral

folklore of northern Pennsylvania, and in two years I had enough material to begin putting it together.

In 1980 I received another grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to complete my work. By then my folklore students were beginning to bring in some remarkable folktales from the region. I found myself delivering papers on northern Pennsylvania folktales at American Folklore Society meetings in Los Angeles and Pittsburgh.

Flatlanders and Ridgerunners is a book with many voices: a few are rich and many are poor; some voices are old, some are middle-aged, and some are young. All the voices come from the hills of this area, and together they say something that I believe has never quite been said before. If I have found the key I was looking for, then these voices will open a door on a special culture in American society. For in these tales the voices of Appalachia, Pennsylvania, New England, the frontier, the farm, the factory, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all blend in an unique way.

Getting to know the region, collecting folklore, and exploring various life styles within the culture brought me great enjoyment, but was a lot of work too. I had some experiences I didn't plan on. I got lost in the woods at night; I was hounded by game wardens who were convinced I was a poacher (I am a dreadful shot); I was almost beaten up by locals who thought I was some kind of federal agent asking too many questions; I revived an old man who fell off his roof while painting; I hunted coons

all night and rattlesnakes all day, spent cold nights in cabins along Pine Creek, saw an ice jam, and helped people dig out after the great flood of 1972. And I traveled all over central Pennsylvania playing my banjo and telling folktales to anyone who would listen.

I am especially grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities whose generosity freed me both to collect and to write. To Richard M. Dorson I owe a great debt of gratitude. He taught me about American folklore and encouraged me to complete my project. My special thanks to Arlene Welch, Priscilla Jackson, and Marlene Christman who typed and often edited the manuscript. And, finally, to my students and informants who made the project a wonderful journey into the human mind and heart.

COLLECTING FOLKLORE IN NORTH-CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

WHEN I FIRST CAME TO NORTHERN Pennsylvania I was a complete flatlander. I did not know the mountains, and I did not know the ways of the mountain people. I had never tasted leeks or fiddlehead ferns; I had never dragged in a deer, and I did not stop to "jaw" with the locals when I met them on the street. Although I am still a flatlander by birth, I have learned much since then from the ridgerunners of north-central Pennsylvania. They have taught me how to hunt and fish and how to listen and how to tell stories. Most of all, they have taught me to find the good, the funny, and the profound which every culture carries within itself.

My interest in the early pioneers and the days of logging and mining put me in touch with old-timers in the region. I was hungry for their yarns about log rafting, "Algerines," splash dams, and hunting. The published histories of logging and local color books about north-central Pennsylvania did not seem to capture the true spirit of the people. So I began to collect the stories, the personal

reminiscences, the proverbs, and the folk history of the region. Pretty soon, folks began to say to me, "You sure know a lot about us, for a flatlander."

Robert and Francis Gross told me about the logging camps and the railroads. Ed McCarthy taught me all he knew about Pine Creek and the forest. Alice Dunham, Louise Thompson, and Elizabeth Campbell filled me with proverbs, cures, and other folk beliefs.

Sometimes I would find an informant who was a goldmine, like Becky Mingos on Mt. Pisgah near Troy. I first visited Becky and Max Mingos, both in their eighties, on a cold spring morning. I could see Becky was in pain much of the time, but I could also see that she liked visitors. Soon she asked me if I wanted to hear her do one of her poems. I said yes, and helped the large woman from her chair. Standing up, she looked younger and stronger; her voice grew loud and rich. Then she began her half-memorized, half-improvised poem about her appendix operation in the Troy hospital. When she saw how much I enjoyed her hilarious satire on doctors, she launched immediately into her "Long-Haired Hippie" poem. I realized that Becky Mingos was a marvelous folk poet.

I made several more trips to Mt. Pisgah, taping Becky each time. She told me about her childhood on the mountain and how one of her ancestors, Thomas McKain, had signed the Declaration of Independence. I wanted my folklore students at Mansfield State College to see and hear this fount of local folklore, so I asked Becky's daughter

Rowena if it was possible to bring Becky to the college. Becky jumped at the chance.

When I helped the large, stooped lady into the classroom, my students looked skeptical. Yet the minute Becky began to talk, the class was hers. Students in the hall heard roars of laughter coming from my classroom and began to sneak into the back rows to hear Becky. After dazzling the students with her poems, proverbs, tall tales, and jokes, Becky invited them all out to her farmhouse the following week for pie and coffee. But they never went. A few days after Becky visited us in class, she died in her sleep.

Another treasure trove of folklore was Spencer's Barber Shop in Wellsboro. For nearly half a century men have gathered in this spartan, old-fashioned room to trade news, tell tales, and debate local issues. Spencer's is a delightful slice of small-town America which has changed but little since Robert "Gabby" Spencer took it over from his father, Stacy Spencer. Gabby knows everything about the Wellsboro area: he can instantly recall and artfully relate every crime, every election, every local farce, the story of every family. He and the old-timers who daily gather there do not gossip; instead, they tell highly stylized anecdotes full of suspense, climaxes, morals, and punch lines about local events and characters. The skill with which a story is told is more important than the actual content. It is the art of the telling which counts.

I always caught my limit of folklore at Spencer's. Some weeks, I would go almost every morning to the barber shop in Wellsboro. They

came to expect me and were mildly upset when I missed a particularly good batch of tales. Once while I was there, a local attorney, Tom Walrath, burst into the shop for a haircut. Taking the barber's chair, he launched into a long story about a famous and funny court case. Gabby just sat down and let him run. Soon Walrath was pacing the floor, acting out the trial. The old-timers became the jury, Gabby became the judge, and I was the recorder taking it all down. Walrath acted out the closing plea made by the legendary local lawyer Mason Owlett. After he finished the scene, to the laughter and applause of everyone in Spencer's, he flew out of the shop, completely forgetting his haircut.

The more local folklore I learned, the more I was able to get. "Is it really true that it's bad luck to kill an albino deer?" I would ask. "Oh, that's just a lot of nonsense that we tell flatlanders," my informant would say. "But I did hear of a man who shot one and died a few years later. I guess when you get right down to it, it is bad luck. I know I wouldn't shoot one."

Not all of the people I interviewed were good informants. I spent many hours casting my line over dead waters. Dozens of the people I talked to thought I wanted history, and they kept referring me to books and newspapers. Why would anyone want to collect "lies"? they would say.

On the other hand, when I did find a real storyteller like Chester Goodwin, he knew immediately what I wanted. People like Chester, Max Brewster, Ed McCarthy, Becky Mingos, and

Ben Tacka could spin yarns by the hour. If I was working with a man in his home and his wife was present, she would usually busy herself in the kitchen. But she would listen to everything we said. Knowing this, the husband would often say, "What was that guy's name, Mary?"

"His name was Jackson and he was born in Gaines, not Westfield," the wife would say from the kitchen.

This positioning interested me. Women would not participate in male story-telling sessions, but they would monitor them. Several times, when the tales got raunchy, the wives would think of a way to end the session. I just couldn't draw the women into the yarn-spinning sessions. However, I soon discovered the women had other folklore.

Alone, the women would tell me about cures, signs, beliefs, customs, proverbs, and terrible crimes. Once I got a good woman informant started, she would often sew me a whole quilt of local folklore. Thelma Goodwin told me about Cooley's Curve; Alice Dunham gave me life signs, cures, and superstitions, while Louise Thompson had proverbs and customs.

Many of the stories in this volume came from my friends and neighbors. Some of the folklore was collected by my students. One of the best stories, "The Hobyahs," was told to Mary Lynn Seymour by her grandfather Stanley Seymour in Mainesburg.

Earlier attempts at presenting the oral folklore of the region have met with limited success. Robert Lyman's two books, *Forbidden Land* (1971) and *Amazing Indeed* (1973), are full of weird legends,

crimes, newspaper articles, and history from Potter County. Although they are highly readable, they do not let the people speak for themselves. Moreover, Lyman felt compelled to include many "psychic" events and personal oddities. He also rewrote almost everything in an archaic literary style. Still, his books contain many authentic folktales. Elfriede Ruppert's *A Historical and Folklore Tour of the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon* (1964), retells some of the well-known legends and tales of the area, but her sources are clearly not oral.

This volume is an attempt to present the oral folklore of the region as it is really spoken. One of my primary aims in making this collection is to play the people of the region back to themselves so they can hear their own voices and laugh and marvel at their own stories. Books are written about people all the time, but it is not every day that people can find themselves and their neighbors really speaking in a book.

My own questions and comments to the storyteller at the time of the interview have been omitted. I have also edited out the teller's interjections that had no bearing on the tale. For example, Joe Borden's story about rattlesnakes contained much irrelevent comment and was twice interrupted by visitors; I have omitted such interruptions. Some might contend that all contextual data should be included in the text; however, in a book such as this, that would be impractical and unnecessary. I hope that most readers will find the method I have used satisfactory.

SETTLEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH-CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

THE WHITE SETTLER CAME LATE TO this region.[1] The area known today as Potter, Tioga, and Bradford Counties was one of the last places settled in the Eastern United States. Much of it was not even explored until the early 1800s, and before the War for Independence only a few white people had ever seen its dark forests. The Iroquois let a few white men pass through—Conrad Weiser, Moravian missionaries, and some French trappers—but other hunters and explorers were turned away, if they were lucky.

Pioneers had settled in the Wyoming Valley along the Susquehanna River and also along the West Branch of the Susquehanna by the 1760s, but frontier wars and Indian uprisings made these settlements uncertain at best. When the War for Independence began in 1776, these settlements became even more vulnerable. In 1778, the Iroquois, joined by their British allies, swept down the Wyoming Valley, killing and plundering. Those who escaped fled east to Stroudsburg on the Delaware River.