

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lee Winniford. *Following Old Fencelines: Tales From Rural Texas*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998. viii + 280 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-802-4.

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## Folklore from the Family Circle

*Following Old Fencelines*, a folklore study designed primarily for scholars of literature, is also useful to historians interested in rural East Texas culture and raises points of discussion for all historians who use personal narratives to uncover and explain the past. Well-written, descriptive, imaginative, the narrative is concentric: a story about a woman who a few years ago began weaving a story around and about stories told within her family circle forty to fifty years ago. When possible, the author tried to close the circle between family stories and real events and persons, but met with mixed success. She eventually concluded, with an example of the embarrassing success of her own invented family legend, that it is not the truth of a story that is most significant but the storyteller's negotiation of the truth to achieve the desired effects of its telling upon the hearer's. In essence, a story, its telling affected by the gender and worldview of the storyteller, returns full circle to the teller, and the stories of the old folks return to the child who remembers them in her own middle age and realizes that she has a responsibility, in turn, to expand the boundaries of the circle to include the next generation.

The author, Lee Winniford, is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Houston, where she completed her Ph.D. in folklore. Inspired by her first graduate-level folklore course, taught by Carl Lindahl (whose foreword to the book compares the author to Zora Neale Hurston), Winniford found in her own roots abundant resources for studying folklore, which she defines as the "the integral, unofficial, and deeply interpersonal fabric of stories and traditions through which

communities express their ideas on their environment, identities, and values" (p. 4). An insider, studying her own family roots in the northeastern Texas community of Cumby in Hopkins County, Winniford is nonetheless an outsider, a "prodigal daughter" (p. 5) who chose the greener grass beyond the fencelines of Cumby for a life apart from her roots.

With the help of her younger brother, who stayed in the community and successfully pursued the long-time paternal family goal of "gentleman farmer" (p. 245), Winniford confronts the contradictions of her family history: the wild and reckless Great-uncle Fate versus the steadfast and strong Great-aunt Becky; the "place permanent," Scottish stock of her paternal side versus the "place portable," Cherokee stock of her maternal side; the detail-rich, emotional, even supernatural, lore of her maternal grandmother versus the humorous and violent tales of her paternal grandfather and uncles. She recalls the occasions on which certain stories were told year after year during family gatherings, not only during holidays, but while working in the cotton patch and at hog killings, while hiding from storms down in the cellar, and during annual cemetery work days. She digs deep to discover for herself—and her readers—why men and women told the stories they did where and when they told them, to whom they told them, and how they told them. One's perceived status within the group might influence whether one was the storyteller, the audience, or the story's subject.

For folklorists, Winniford's very personal account of her work, her application of scholarly literature on the

subject, and her lavish descriptions of her method will prove instructive. Among other topics, she covers the folklore of work, play, church, and school; the rituals of birth and death; and the traditions of people who value place and those who value mobility.

For Texas historians, Winniford provides a glimpse of time in flux. As a child, she chopped and picked cotton; witnessed hog killings; participated in protracted revivals; attended home wakes and cemetery workings, where burial sites were scraped and mounded; wrote her name on the Cumby water tower—all less than fifty years ago in a place now changed forever by the decline of agriculture and by the close intrusion of Interstate 30. Change has been swift in her lifetime, so her recollections are important testimony to the recent past.

For historians who use personal narratives—letters, diaries, autobiographies, and oral history—to recreate past lives, events, or ideas, Winniford’s work raises some hard questions. First, what intellectual, emotional, or social baggage does the researcher carry when reading/listening to a personal story and how does that influence the interpretation? Winniford dissects her own motives and those of her brother and other family storytellers so that one can readily visualize opposing views of the same topic. There are different interpretations of historical materials and there are discernible reasons for varying interpretations. Likewise, what has motivated the teller/author of a personal narrative? If it all comes back to the teller, a researcher must learn as much as possible about the teller before knowing anything about the telling. Often, a mere grain of truth re-

mains after the researcher delves deep into the personality of the teller and the circumstances of the narrative, but perhaps the truth is that the story is a lie. Winniford demonstrates how gender, heredity, environment—and even self-esteem—impact one’s negotiation of the truth. Finally, if historians are all mainly “outsiders” looking at times and places beyond their own experience, what can we claim to learn from personal narratives in which people create their own pasts to suit what is useful in the present? Whether the source is public record or oral tradition, historians must be on guard against claiming the “truth” based upon the testimony of a few. The psychology of memory teaches us that premise, and in Winniford’s work, so does folklore. Perhaps a good exercise for every historian would be to begin with one’s own family history. If it is difficult to research, interpret, and write one’s own story, what must we learn before writing the story of a stranger?

This enjoyable work is recommended for folklorists as well as historians. Because it is concentric—stories within stories—*Following Old Fencelines* does not have to be read as seriously as the above review suggests. The whole book will be enjoyed just for the folk stories, which are funny, charming, instructive, and sometimes outrageous. Or, it can be read at its outer perimeter, the story of a wanderer trying to return home again.

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