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EDWARD D. IVES

MAINE FOLKLORE AND THE FOLKLORE OF MAINE
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MAINE
CHARACTER AND DOWN-EAST HUMOR*

When I moved to Maine twenty-nine years ago, I did not come unprepared. Back in the early thirties, my sister Ruth attended Concord Academy and fell in love with her roommate's brother. Since that family had a summer compound in Maine, it followed naturally that my sister spent parts of several summers there. What did not follow naturally was that twice Ruth took her little brother along, but that's the kind of wonderful sister Ruth was. I sailed and hiked and rock-climbed and swam and walked on the beach for two wonderful weeks each time, returning home with a suitcase overladen with shells and striped stones and a head spinning with love and enthusiasm for a place I hardly knew. Years later I was a counselor at a Maine camp and came to love the Maine woods as much if not more than I loved the coast. And back home or away at school in Massachusetts there were always people who had places in Maine or who had visited there, and we would talk and remember — each of us sure we loved Maine the most, each of us finding the other's love a little suspect, true lovers all. But, speaking for myself, what I loved was a place — rocky coast, white pine, blue water, and all they imply. I had hardly met or spoken with anyone who lived in Maine.

**This paper was delivered as a public lecture, first at Bowdoin College, October 27, 1980, and subsequently to the Islesboro Historical Society (July 29, 1981), the Deer Isle Historical Society (August 21, 1981), and as part of the Sweetser Lecture Series, York-Dyer Institute, Saco (September 28, 1982). Since it is presented here as it was conceived — as a public lecture — I have kept footnotes to a minimum, citing for the most part only those things that as a folklorist I feel might otherwise not be entirely clear to the readers of this journal.*

Not that there were no people in this land I loved. They were there all right. I knew that because I had seen them, hauling traps, mending gear down on the wharf – and especially one old farmer whom I and my campers helped get his hay in and another man we'd bought lobsters from. I'd even met a Maine guide briefly. Not only had I seen Maine natives, but I had heard them talk, and I knew that they were just right on all counts, because back home I'd heard stories about them and had them described to me for years and years. Some of my family's friends, in fact, were accomplished storytellers and were frequently called on to tell us a story about old Will or whoever it was. I remember Charlie Hester for one, who used to tell stories about a man named Jake. He'd tell them in dialect, and it got so that we could ask for particular stories by name. "Oh Charlie," my mother would say, "tell us that one about Jake and his daughter," and Charlie would oblige with something like the following:

Well, you know Jake had this daughter that was rather fat and homely, and I never thought she was very intelligent. But for some reason she had to go up to Bangor. Well sometime after that, I asked Jake how his daughter's trip had gone and this is what he said:

"Oh good, real good. I'd warned her, you know, about talkin' to strangers in the city and to be careful and all like a that, and she said she would. And you know, she was waiting for the train there in the depot in Bangor and this fella come up and sit down next to her and she says he said 'Good day, miss,' and she said good day. Well he says 'Is this your first trip to Bangor?' and she said it was. 'Well,' he says, 'would you like to see the sights a little?' and she said no. 'Well then,' he says, 'Could I buy you a soda maybe over at the lunch counter?' and she said no she didn't want no soda. 'Well then,' he said, 'I guess maybe you'd just as soon I'd go away,' and she said yes she'd just as soon. And he got up and went away and didn't bother her no more.

"Now wa'n't that quick wit of her?"

And then we'd all laugh and shake our heads and tell Charlie he really had that accent down, and for just a moment we were all back in that place we loved called Maine. Even my mother, who had never been to Maine at all. All of these impressions were reinforced by my reading, too. There were frequent stories in *Field and Stream*, which I read religiously, and I remember I had to read Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Courting of Sister Wisby" in high school, which surprised me, because I enjoyed it in spite of my deep-seated prejudice against anything I was told was literature. It was Maine again, and I loved it. Rocky coast, white pine, and blue water — yes, that was the place all right, and it was a place denized by a crusty race of quaints who, if you added all the stories up, were independent, conservative, delightfully behind the times (*our* times), and simply brimming with wry native smarts.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? I moved to Maine in 1955, and it's been downhill ever since. That's not quite right, though. Weekends I could still travel down to the coast or visit a lake to see the Maine I remembered, and while Orono is not exactly the scenic center of the state, I still found it far better than New York's Riverside Park, which was my immediate comparison. Occasionally I would see and even meet people who seemed "typically Maine," and that was nice, but the longer I lived here the more I saw that by and large Maine people were not much different from New Yorkers or (my next most immediate comparison) people from Jacksonville, Illinois. They told the same stories, laughed at the same cracks (both dry and not-so-dry), sang most of the same songs (when they sang at all), used many of the same figures of speech, wore the same clothes, were equally talkative and taciturn, were just about as up with and behind the times, and had even elected and were to reelect a Democratic governor. As a folklorist, I at first thought that I had to get by all I'd learned as a youngster. I saw it as false, as a caricature that obscured the reality of Maine. However, as I went along, I saw that that view was as narrow as the other, and equally false. The truth is that there were two realities and two traditions,

each of them rich and worthy of study in its own right, and neither of them making entire sense without a knowledge of the other. Call one of them the folklore *of* Maine, the other Maine folklore. It doesn't really matter which is which, but the one I want to discuss here is the one I grew up with, the one represented by Charlie Hester's story, because of the two traditions it is both the better known and the less well understood.

Simply as an exercise, I always ask the students in my Maine folklore course to shout out adjectives that seem to them to best describe the Maine character, and almost inevitably the first shout will be "independent," followed by some or all of the following: taciturn, understated, old-fashioned, quaint, rural, conservative, versatile, self-sufficient, crusty, outspoken, wry, thrifty, droll, witty, sharp, old, and (though properly speaking it is not an adjective) distrusting of strangers. In addition there is an emphasis often not only on a lack of formal education but a certain practical contempt for too much of it, and there is the general recognition that the Maine character "talks funny" or "has an accent." I then ask those who were born in Maine to raise their hands if they feel that these words accurately describe them and, as you may imagine, no hands go up. "Well, then, do they describe your parents?" Again, no hands. "How about your grandparents?" Now I begin to get a few hands, but even here only a few, and it is not unusual for the mood to get a little tense at this point, as though I were attacking something they should be ready to defend. Then I ask how many of them have *known* real characters to whom these adjectives *would* apply, and the tension disappears as hands go up all over the place. Often students will stop up after class to tell me about things these characters have said or done, and, if I am feeling feisty, I will ask them if they witnessed the particular event they have just told me about. The answer is almost always no, that they heard about it from their father or a friend, and a bit of the tension will come back sometimes.

Obviously, then, there is a clear Maine stereotype – just as clear to Mainers as to non-Mainers, and it is subscribed to by both with a certain devotion, to the extent that people don't like to have it challenged (although the same could be said, I suppose, about any stereotype). It always seems to apply to someone at a remove – someone of a different social class or from another town or both – and almost always to someone of an older generation. Finally, it has a great deal to do with dialect, a special accent, and, as we all know, an accent is something that *other* people have.

It is my contention that the Maine stereotype, like any stereotype, is exoteric¹ in origin; it did not grow as a self-image – how a particular group saw itself – though, as I will point out later on, it has to some extent become that. Rather it developed out of an “others” view; it is how an outside group saw native Mainers, and it should be quite obvious by now that the outside group I have in mind as historically responsible for this stereotype is “summer people.”

A little history will help us define the two groups involved and their relationships with each other. During the nineteenth century, the makeup of Maine's population – especially that of coastal Maine – remained relatively stable, there being very little immigration either from Canada or from the rest of New England. Even the Canadian influx of both Québec French and Maritimers during the last quarter of the century had very little if any effect on the coastal area that is central to our discussion, excepting of course manufacturing towns like Saco and Biddeford. These residents were basically from English Protestant stock that had settled the area during the foregoing century and a half, the earliest settlers coming directly from England, the later ones mainly from eastern Massachusetts, Connecticut, and southern New Hampshire. Except in such centers as Portland, Maine was not then, as it is not now, thickly settled. Communities were scattered and separate, and, in spite of a certain cosmopolitan quality in some of the seaport towns, Maine's culture can be said to have developed along its own lines through this combi-

nation of isolation and stability. One of the clearest symptoms of this independent evolution is the fact that Maine developed a dialect – more properly a series of related dialects – of its own.

After the Civil War, for a number of reasons we don't have to go into here, wealthy people from cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia began buying up land in Maine in order to establish summer homes, especially along the coast in places like Mount Desert Island, the Boothbays, the Kennebunks, Camden, and Castine. In fact, much of the most beautiful land along the coast fell into out-of-state hands during the last half of the century in this way. Call them rusticators, call them summer people, the fact is they formed a distinct social group, visiting among themselves, attending each other's parties, and by the very nature of things, not really associating very much with the local people, their contacts with them being limited mainly to tradesmen – grocers, carpenters, plumbers – and those whom they hired on as servants (cooks, gardeners, maids, etc.).² Nothing really changed as the years went on and the summer colony became less elitist and more middle-class people began buying summer homes in Maine, nor did it essentially change as the tourists began pouring in by boat, by train, and later on by air and by car. Even today as more and more summer people become permanent residents, the line remains reasonably clear, with the regular Mainers on one side, the summer people on the other.

But let's go back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These summer people were in general not only wealthy but well educated and, in a word, cultivated. Among the things that implies is that they were up on their reading, and they could hardly help but be exposed to the regionalist writings of people like Joel Chandler Harris, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Edward Eggleston, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and others, all of whom emphasized local color, regional differences, and – extremely important – dialect. Then too there was the stereotypical "stage Yankee," the verdant and sharp-

ing Brother Jonathan that had been portrayed in many guises by such actors as George H. Hill and Dan Marble, a character whose antecedents can be found as far back as the late eighteenth century, and while the tradition had pretty well died out by the late 1800s, there is no doubt that the stereotype still lingered.³ Maine, of course, had its own tradition of regionalism going back to Seba Smith's Jack Downing and coming up through Sarah Orne Jewett and George Savory Wasson to Robert P. Tristram Coffin, Holman Day, and beyond. There was, in other words, no lack of literature available to sensitize these summer visitors, who already loved the Maine land- and seascape, to the fact that in this beautiful place there lived a race of people interestingly different from themselves, who moved to a different drummer (a slower beat, perhaps), who espoused certain "old-fashioned" values and lifeways, and – again I say "extremely important" – who had an accent that was all their own or, to put the emphasis where it belongs, an accent that the summer people found both distinctive and enjoyable – and that made almost any utterance seem special and significant. Out of all this there developed the strong Maine stereotype we are talking about.

It may be objected at this point that where there's smoke there's fire, that even a stereotype has to be based on something and that what this one was based on *was* (or *is*) the Maine character. It would be counterproductive at this point to deny that there may be some truth to it, just as it would be counterproductive to deny that some Blacks enjoy watermelon or that some Frenchmen are great lovers. Surely the stereotype grows out of *some* reality, but once it begins to get established it frequently creates its own reality – sometimes at an exponential rate. We would tend, that is, to see a man's act of self-reliance as "typical Maine" because we know that self-reliance is "typical Maine," and we might never notice that this same man cashes his Social Security check regularly and seldom fails to collect his unemployment insurance when it is due him. It is true that the stereotype may *grow* from stories, but it is just as true that a stereotype *breeds* stories, and it is time now

to examine the stories bred by the stereotype of the Maine character that have in turn reinforced and kept that stereotype alive, creating that repertoire known as Down-East humor.

From here on in, I am going to limit the discussion to that particular perceived entity: *Down-East Humor*. The term gets used often enough – and discussion of it seems to be getting a fair amount of press and air time lately – to make it perfectly clear that people consider it something distinctive, something different from other kinds of humor.⁴ What, then, is that difference? I can suggest two ways of trying to find it. First, we can look hard at any individual story to try to demonstrate either that the story is unique to Maine or that while it is also found elsewhere the Maine version of it has qualities *not* found elsewhere. Second, we can look at the repertoire as a whole. It may be, for example, that the style, the manner of delivery, is distinctive. Having isolated these differences, whatever they may turn out to be, we would be on solid ground to use them first to define Down-East humor and, further, to draw inferences about the Maine character from them.

But before we can even begin to study an individual story – and certainly individual stories have to be studied before we can talk about a whole repertoire – we of course have to assure ourselves of the story's pedigree. That is to say, was it actually collected in Maine? To establish that solidly, we need at least such basic information as where, when, and from whom the story was obtained, but we should have a good deal more than that. We should also know the context of its telling – not only who told it but who was the audience, how it was received, where people laughed, etc. Ideally we should also know how it was collected and how accurately the version we have before us represents the version as it was told (was it tape-recorded, written down from memory after the event, or what?).

If, for example, a story was collected from a lobster fisherman at a time and place where he usually tells stories and

in the presence of his usual audience (whatever that may be), and if the collector can be sure that his presence in no way altered the telling, which almost has to mean that he or she was *part* of that usual audience, we could certainly use such a story as data in the study of Maine repertoire, storytelling style, or storytelling occasions, and there is no reason why we couldn't view such stories as somehow expressive of the Maine character, so long as we can be equally sure that it has been accurately recorded and reproduced and that all contextual and controlling data has been fully supplied us. Anything less than that must be used with caution born of the understanding that it is almost certainly in some way skewed (the context was an artificial one, the presence of the collector with his tape recorder changed things, it was not recorded and therefore we cannot insure complete textual accuracy, etc.). In no way am I preaching a gospel of despair, merely an adaptation of what is popularly known as "the Heisenberg principle" that the presence of an observer is bound to have some effect on what is being observed.

On the other hand, if I have a story that is told *as if* it were told by a lobster fisherman by someone who is not a lobster fisherman, I can go after this narrator to find out exactly who he heard it from, where, when, and all the tedious rest of the catechism. Then, if I can establish that he did in fact hear it from a *real* lobster fisherman, I can then use the story as data at one remove, so to speak. But I also can – and should – look at it for what it is in itself. If, that is, it is told by this person (let's say a "summer person") to a group of his peers (let's say "other summer people" or perhaps friends back home) at a time and place that is natural and familiar for the telling of such stories (say as an exchange at a party or as delivered by an after-dinner entertainer at a banquet), then I have the context I say I need, but I have to recognize that I am dealing with an entirely different tradition. It is not Maine folklore but folklore *about* Maine. Such stories and information about their context can tell us a great deal about the repertoire of summer people and about how they view Maine lobster fishermen.

The stories are frequently told with great artistry and affection, and, as I have already suggested, they can be tremendous fun. The “Bert and I” records of Robert Bryan and the late Marshall Dodge are sterling exemplars of this tradition, and I count myself among Dodge’s most devoted fans, but he must be seen for exactly what he was – a summer person telling stories to other summer people or to outsiders – and the kindest thing that can be said about people who draw conclusions about either the Maine character or Down-East humor on the basis of the repertoire Dodge represented so well is that they are simply being fatuous.⁵

Let’s analyze the “Bert and I” repertoire as it is represented by that first record, *Bert and I*, and I choose that record partly because it is perfectly typical of Dodge and Bryan’s repertoire and partly because I think it is still the best of the series. If we define a Maine story broadly as a story that has been told in Maine by someone who lives here (seasonally or permanently), we can then probably accept the fact that most of these stories *are* Maine stories, although as a folklorist I have to admit to an act of faith here, since Dodge and Bryan were at no pains to document their sources completely. That’s not meant as complaint, by the way. They are entertainers, not folklorists. *As* a folklorist, *I* am the one who should be fussy, but for the sake of the argument I’m willing to concede that all of the stories on the album in question are by my definition Maine stories. At the same time I can easily demonstrate that half of them are not unique to Maine but are found elsewhere in similar – often almost identical – form. “Kenneth Fowler’s Lucky Shot” is a case in point:

Kenneth Fowler had had an awful season. Everything he’d planted had been eaten by blackbirds just as soon as he scattered the seed. Fire had destroyed his blueberry ground at rakin’ time and termites had ate up his icehouse. On top of that a stray cat had drowned in his well. By October he decided he’d better go out and stock up food for the winter. Loadin’ up his gun, the one with the side-by-side barrels, he started into the woods to find

some game. All day long he walked without firin' a shot. 'Fact he was all set to head in just about sundown when he spied a fox behind a rock about two rods distance. Takin' careful aim he almost squeezed the trigger when he sighted another fox about twenty feet away from the first. Well, he aimed somewhere in between. The shot hit a rock, splintered in two and killed both foxes. The kick from the gun knocked him into the stream behind him and when he came to his right hand was on a beaver's tail, his left hand on an otter's head and his trouser pockets were so full of trout that a button popped off his fly and killed a partridge.

That story is listed in the Aarne-Thompson *Types of the Folktale* as Type 1890, with versions listed from Sweden, Finland, Russia, Ireland, and elsewhere, and it is so well known in America that Ernest Baughmann had to index it under half-a-dozen sub-rubrics in his *Type and Motif Index of Folktales of England and North America*.⁶ Were I to consult the network of folklore archives all over the United States and Canada, and if in addition I were to show a list of the stories on that record to scholar-friends engaged in folklore studies, I am sure I would find that my "half" figure would turn out to be low indeed and that the true figure would be 80 percent or above. No problems here, though; that is to say, there is nothing "wrong" with that. A storyteller can go ahead and tell any stories he wants to. Granted. But if we are going to try to show how these stories are somehow expressive of the Maine character or are examples of Down-East humor as distinct from some other character or humor, we have to say that 50 to 80 percent of the stories on the record don't in themselves make the point because they are so similar to, often all but identical with, stories easily found elsewhere.

Very well then, can we show that in certain specific ways Maine has significantly altered the content of these widely known tales, making them distinctively its own, or do they show something we can call a distinctive Maine style in the way they are told? All I can say is that so far I have not been able to answer either of those questions with a firm and resounding

“Yes.” To be sure, the stories are set in Maine, refer to local industries like clamming and lobster fishing, and are told in a Maine dialect, and if that is all we mean by Down-East humor well and good. But I for one am not ready to accept such superficial matters as evidence of a distinctive Maine storytelling style, nor do I see them as revealing anything more significant about Maine people than that some of them clam and fish lobsters and have a specific accent.

Yet since the record speaks of these stories as “from Down East,” presumably Dodge and Bryan see something special about them, and presumably so do the many people who buy and listen to this record and the many others like it. For many of them, I am sure the accent and the setting are pleasure enough, but there *is* a further distinctiveness, as I see it, that *does* go beyond these superficial aspects. It is a matter of source on the one hand, stance on the other: source being who Dodge and Bryan heard these stories from, stance being what posture they and their audience assume in relation to the characters in the stories. To take the question of source first, “The Body in the Kelp” can give us the clue:

We were clammin' along the beach one Sunday when we come upon a body in the kelp. We didn't recognize the face, but thought it might've been old John who tended the lighthouse on the point. We went directly out and knocked on John's door [*Knock, knock, knock*].

“You there, John?”

“Damn right I'm here. What can I do for you?”

“We found a body down in the kelp. Thought it mighta been you.”

“Wearin' a red shirt?”

“Yes sir, red shirt.”

“Blue trousers?”

“They were blue trousers.”

“Rubber boots?”

“Ayuh, rubber boots.”

“Was they high or low?”

“They was low boots.”

“You sure?”

"Well, come to think of it, they were high boots turned down low."

"Oh. Well then, 'tweren't me."

I don't know just where they learned that story, but I first heard it from my old friend Charlie Hester, New York stock-broker, quondam summer resident of Maine, the same man who told me the story about Jake's daughter, and Charlie's version of thirty-five years ago even had the bit about the high boots turned down to look like low boots. Dodge and Bryan included Charlie in their general credits on the first issue of this record, but since they don't say which stories were his we can't be dead sure Charlie *was* the source of this one, but if he wasn't it makes the case just that much stronger that stories like this one, stories *about* Mainers, were in circulation among summer people. As a matter of fact, most of the people Dodge and Bryan credit as sources are summer people (even if they're year-round summer people), and several of them have solid reputations as storytellers themselves.⁷

So much for source. Turning now to stance, let us listen to Marshall telling "The Fezzle":

My wife Clara died five o'clock this mornin'. It took me half the day to fix a box for her. I ran out of nails twice, bruised my thumb with the hammer, and split three covers before I got the fourth one nailed down tight. I pulled my back lifting Clara to the wagon and the halter broke as we come out of the barn. So we had to drive into town with Bessie pullin' crooked. Down the last hill we got out of control like, and Clara just slid off the back and shot straight through the post office window. I ran into the post office to see that no one was hurt and found Tut Tuttle the postman perrin' at me through the stamp window.

"Lucky I had the gratin' down," he said.

"Sure was," I replied.

"Did you pass the preacher and the undertaker on the road?" he asked.

"Comin' or goin'?" I queried.

"Goin'," he replied. "They started for your place about

an hour ago.”

“Guess I missed ‘em,” I said.

“Yup, I guess you did,” said Tut.

“I tell you, Tut,” I said, “my day’s been one long fezzle from beginnin’ to end.”

Notice, if you will, that the speaker (who is not Marshall Dodge but the persona *created* by him) is making no attempt at all to be funny. He is simply telling someone in a most factual and down-to-earth way about his unsuccessful day. Only an outsider to the situation would see this as funny, largely by relating it to the Maine stereotype: practical, laconic, independent, and rural. The same can be said for the title story, the classic “Bert and I” piece. Again, “I” is simply telling what happened, but of course in this case the factual narrative becomes a vehicle for Marshall’s marvelous sound effects. And then how about Charlie Hester’s “Jake story”? Charlie said he asked Jake about his daughter’s trip to Bangor and Jake told him about it. Jake was not trying to be funny. In fact, we can assume he told the story because he really was proud of his daughter, but Charlie, the New York sophisticate, not only found it amusing but, even more important, knew that his friends would find it amusing too, again because it fit so well the Maine stereotype, so he shaped it into a story for his repertoire.

Bruce McGorrill is another raconteur in the same tradition as Dodge, Bryan, and Charlie Hester. Although he is a native of Maine, he clearly casts himself as an outsider in his introductory remarks, and he is just as clearly working with the stereotype: the taciturn independent in the first story, the native bumpkin in the second (and notice how both of them contrast in their language with his own polished tone, polysyllabic and polite – a little trick well used by Mark Twain and Joel Chandler Harris, by the way):

Tonight our little discussion is based upon the experiences traveling the state and meeting with people we call friends and people we call relatives. And it struck me that the humor, the insight, the individuality of what we term

the Downeast Yankee is something that may pass into oblivion unless perhaps we make note of it.

Being a native of the state, I don't think that what we're going to discuss here tonight is something that could be termed out of place in looking at our own brethren and describing them in the light which quite frankly I'm proud of. It's rugged individualism, something that perhaps is fast passing from view.

Perhaps these people live by a code which I like to paraphrase as doing unto others that which they ask you to do only. For example:

There were two farmers by the name of Eben and Sam who had adjoining farms for about twenty years. Their paths used to cross every morning at the crest of the hill as they went to the fields. For twenty years the conversation had always been the same.

"Mornin', Eben."

"Mornin', Sam."

Occasionally they'd meet coming home at night and the conversation was, "Evenin', Eben."

"Evenin', Sam."

One day after twenty years of such discussions, they had what you might call an elongated conversation. It went like this:

"Mornin', Eben."

"Mornin', Sam."

"Say, Eben, what you say you fed your horse when he had the glonders?"

"I fed him kerosene, Sam. Mornin' "

"Mornin'."

The second day, two days in a row, they had another one of these extended conversations.

"Mornin', Eben."

"Mornin', Sam. Say, Eben, what you say you fed your horse when he had the glonders?"

"I fed him kerosene, Sam."

"So'd I. My horse died."

"So'd mine." [*Laughter*]

"Mornin'."

"Mornin'."

Traveling the state, as I described to you, a few years back, there was an occurrence that happened one Sunday. Might I say that one thing I enjoyed about traveling the State of Maine was the opportunity to purchase produce at the side of the road during the various seasons. Sweet corn, peas, cider in the fall, and so forth. This particular Sunday a group of us were coming back from Caribou and we happened to stop at what you could term a local crossroad community store where they had a particularly inviting display of goods. And as we went in to pay for our purchase, there sitting around the potbelly stove in the proverbial scene, were two local swains that were discussing the previous Saturday night. The conversation we overheard went something like this:

"Eben, what'd you do last Saturday night?"

"I went to the country dance."

He says, "You didn't."

"Yes I did. Swear I did. Yes I did."

"What'd you do there?"

He says, "Well," he said, "I danced with the Peabody gal."

He said, "You didn't."

"Yes, I did. Yes I did. Yes I did."

"Well, what you do when the dance was over?"

Says, "Well, I hitched up the rig and took her home."

He said, "You didn't."

Said, "Yes I did. Yes I did. Yeah, yeah."

"What'd you do then?"

He said, "Well," he says "I got out the blanket and put over our knees."

He says, "You didn't."

He says, "Yes I did. Swear I did. Swear I did. Yes."

"Well what'd you do after that?"

He says, "Well, I put my arm around her a mite."

He says, "You didn't."

Says, "Yes I did. Yes I did. Yeah, yeah."

He says, "Well what'd you do then?"

He says, "Well, he says, "I kinda held her hand a spell."

He says, "You didn't."
 He says, "Yes I did. Yes I did."
 "Well what you do then?"
 He says, "Well," he says, "I put my hand down on her
 knee."
 He says, "You didn't."
 He says, "Yes I did, Yes I did."
 "What'd you do then?"
 He said, "Well," he said, "I put it up a mite further."
 He said, "You didn't."
 Said, "Yes I did. Yes I did."
 "Well, What'd it feel like?"
 Said, "I don't know. I had my mittens on."
 [Laughter]⁸

What all of this creates is a Toonerville world, a rural landscape full of grotesques with wonderful names like Tut Tuttle and Eben Fowler, all of whom are satisfyingly stereotypical. They have horses called Bessie and they are wry and, we can be sure, wondrously wrinkled. But most of all, they have an accent, a way of speaking, that, as I have already said, makes everything sound humorously significant. It is a world that never quite existed anywhere, not even in Maine, excepting as a projection from the minds of summer people. But let there be no question about it: it is very real there, kept alive by hundreds of stories and actively shaping what people see around them.

Let me emphasize that nothing I have said should be construed as criticism, as a putting down either of summer people (of which I am only too obviously one!) or of this particular storytelling tradition, in which I was raised and of which I see Marshall Dodge as having been a leading exponent. I simply want to see it as a tradition in its own right, and as such it is far more expressive of the world view of those telling the stories than of the world view of the people the stories are told about. To get insight into that latter world view, we should ask ourselves what stories do these lobster fishermen, woodsmen, farmers, and tradesmen tell each other? What are *their* stereotypes? What do *they* think is funny? My own experience

suggests that in this respect Maine is much like the rest of English-speaking North America not only in its repertoire but also in the style and context of its telling. Most of the traits that from time to time I have heard cited as definitive – laconism, the ironic twist, self-depreciation, the “Maine pause” – can too easily be matched with examples from Vermont, Upstate New York, Nebraska, the Ozarks, or any number of other places to allow them to serve as true differentiae. However, if it *can* be shown that there are real differences, be those differences great or small, we would be on very safe ground if we said that those differences were expressive of the Maine character. And who knows, it might even turn out that in some ways the stereotype was on the money.

In one way, the Maine stereotype *is* on the money in that it is to some extent shared by many native Mainers. The first time I ever heard “Bert and I” was at the Alpha Gamma Rho house at UMO. Most of the members knew I was interested in folklore and a couple of them put the record on in a kind of “You-gotta-hear-this” mood. I *did* enjoy the record, but no more than they did, and I was fascinated by the contrast between the Maine accent on the record and the Maine accents I was hearing around me that made the record sound like a travesty. I couldn’t imagine why these guys weren’t really insulted. Here they were, the real article – real Mainers – being spoofed by these prep-school Yalies and loving it. “Boy he’s really got that down,” said one young man from Machias about Dodge. “He sounds just like those old guys down around Cutler.” Others agreed, naming places like Bailey Island, Westport, and Friendship – always, that is, someplace *else*, always *those* guys, never *us*. And then I realized that none of the young men in that room spoke with an accent, excepting possibly me, and that was of course unthinkable, and if they were identifying with anybody it was not with “Bert” or “I” or Harry Whitmore or any of the other characters in the stories but with Marshall Dodge himself.

After that time I often heard Marshall tell stories to sold-out houses at UMO. Many of the people in those audiences were,

to be sure, “from away,” but I am sure that at least half of them were native Mainers, and you couldn’t tell them from the “furriners” by any differential enthusiasm for what they were hearing. Take it that this enthusiasm was simply appreciation for an artist, a master storyteller at work, and I will concede that that was clearly an element. But the one time that audience was anything less than enthusiastic was the time Marshall spent three-quarters of the program on non-Maine material; then at the last of it when he said, “Now how’d you like to hear about Bert and I?” Everyone cheered and stomped and clapped. *That* was what they had really come to hear. True enough, they liked the storytelling, but even more they like what the stories were about, and, for both the Mainers and the outsiders, these stories were about “others” from someplace else.

But for the Mainers there was a difference. They may not have identified with the *characters* and they may have felt these characters came from the next town, but they could share with them being from Maine, a beautiful place full of crusty independents, a place whose people *had* an identity that, for all its being a stereotype, could help any Mainer define himself in relation to all those others out there. It was not something to be ashamed of; it was something to be proud of. In this sense, then, the stereotype functions as a myth.

Two final points. First, since the stereotype exists and those who are stereotyped know it well, it should not be surprising to find them occasionally using it to their own advantage by playing the part they know outsiders expect them to play. There’s an old Whitney Darrow, Jr., cartoon that shows a “typical” lighthouse keeper with a copy of *The Reader’s Digest* in one hand taking his pipe out of his mouth with the other and saying (as I remember it) to his “typical” wife, “Say, Martha, here’s a good one to use on the tourists next year.” It is all but impossible to cite clear examples of this behavior, because the act is almost never that straight-out brazen. More often it is a blend of the listener’s perceptions and the narrator’s almost unconscious response to those perceptions – not the Maine

man playing the clown for the outsider but the Maine man playing the Maine man, assuming the myth for mutual satisfactions, because we can be sure that both narrator and audience enjoy the result. Perhaps it's an example of what James McNeil Whistler meant when a lady told him a landscape scene she knew reminded her of his work. "Yes madam," he said modestly, "Nature is creeping up."⁹

Second, and finally, it is not only for Mainers that the stereotype has a mythic dimension. Summer people share it too, especially those for whom Maine is a second home and even more especially those for whom Maine is now their first and only home and who don't always like to think of themselves as summer people at all. These people have thrown in their lot with Maine, and insofar as they identify with it they assume its virtues (that is, the virtues they conceive of it as representing). They may know with their minds that the stereotype is just that, a stereotype, but in their hearts they are believers, and something — some Maine — "osmotes" through their L.L. Bean shirts. For them, to tell a story about Maine is to ritualize the myth, to make it part of themselves, to assume its values as part of their identity, and to accept the identity is to assume the stereotype. I need only cite myself as a case in point. How often when I'm out of Maine have I told Maine stories, and how often have I had some action of mine interpreted as "typical Maine" or had someone say jokingly, "Aw, what can you expect from a downeaster like you anyhow!" And I am usually too pleased to do anything but respond in what passes for a Maine accent, "Damn right, you unjeezily old Christer!"

The following anecdote is too good not to tell at this point. I was in Philadelphia for a visit one winter, and it was cold, very cold. In fact, it was the time of the '62 blizzard, but in Philadelphia it was clear and blowing a frigid wind like you wouldn't believe. I walked into a drugstore to pick up some aspirin, and the salesperson inevitably remarked about the cold. "But I don't imagine you feel it too bad with *that* coat on," he said,

gesturing with his head at the one I was wearing. "Well, " I said, "it's a pretty good coat." "Where you from?" the clerk asked. I said I was from Maine. "Oh well," he said, "I don't suppose this is really cold for *you*. But that sure explains that coat!"

I couldn't tell him that I had bought that coat at B. Altman's in White Plains, N.Y. You can just bet I couldn't. Once again, I was too pleased.

What it all comes to is this: While the stories most people in Maine tell each other are very much like the stories people elsewhere in America tell each other, there *is* a special body of what we can call "Down-East stories." It is essentially an exoteric tradition that originated among educated out-of-staters who began coming to Maine on a regular basis in the late nineteenth century, and this tradition was in large part inspired by and an outgrowth of the regional writing of that period. It is a tradition with its own special repertoire and style, dialect being an extremely important part of that style. The Maine it creates bears minimal relationship to the Maine those of us who live here encounter every day, but at the same time that created Maine functions powerfully as a myth, giving a special sense of identity to both natives and summer people alike. So long as we see these stories for what they are, no problem. One of the things they are is fun, and so long as they *are* fun, perhaps we shouldn't take it all too seriously.

NOTES

¹For more on how folklorists use this term see William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," *Fabula* 2 (1959): 205-11, and reprinted in Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore* (Englewoods Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 43-51.

²For a wonderful example see Mildred Cummings, "The Golden Turrets of Norumbega," *Down East* 21 (August 1974): 56-59, 88, 92.

³See Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953), especially pp. 15-36; Richard M. Dorson, *America in Legend* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), pp. 108-21.

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⁴I know of no extended consideration of Down-East humor, but pronouncements on it are scattered through all sorts of writings on Maine. All I can do here is name a few I have come across, while making no pretense at completeness: Marshall Dodge, "Some Hunches about Humor: The American Coast and Understatement," in Gary Lawless, ed., *The Gulf of Maine* (Brunswick, Me.: Blackberry Reader One, 1977); Kendall Morse, *Stories Told in the Kitchen* (Thorndike, Me.: Thorndike Press, 1981); Lew Dietz, "The Character of Maine," *Down East* 21 (August 1974): 78-80, 85, 93-94; "They Mine Down East Humor Lode," *Portland Sunday Telegram*, November 19, 1975, p. 1; "Maine Storytellers Don't Spare Salt," *Bangor Daily News*, April 24-25, 1982, p. WE1; Charles E. Clark, *Maine: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), *passim*, but especially pp. 149-84.

⁵The "Bert and I" records I know about are as follows: *Bert and I and Other Stories from Down East* (1958), BI-1; *More Bert and I* (1961), BI-5; *The Return of Bert and I* (1961), BI-9; *Bert and I Stem Inflation, and Other Stories* (1961), BI-11; *Bert and I On Stage* (1961), BI-12. Except for the last, which was performed by Dodge alone, all were performed by Marshall Dodge and Robert Bryan. All are published by Bert and I Inc., Ipswich, Mass.

⁶Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, trans. and enlarged by Stith Thompson, 2nd rev. ed. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1964); Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Moulton, 1966).

⁷For a good recorded sampling of some of these storytellers, see the record *A Maine Pot-Hellion* (Ipswich, Mass.: Bert and I Inc. BI-2, 1960). For another recorded example of Alan Bemis and Peter Kilham, see "Caused by Rum" and "The Casket Sinkers" (Providence, R.I.: Droll Yankees, 1960).

⁸*Saturday Night in Dover-Foxcroft* as told by Bruce Courtney McGorrill (Portland, Me.: Melanie Records M-4715, 1964).

⁹Don C. Seitz, comp. *Whistler Stories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1913), p. 13.

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