Smith, Abraham ("Oregon") (1796-1893)

Legendary raconteur and folk doctor, born in Tennessee, Smith migrated first to the Midwest (Illinois and Indiana) in 1821, then to Oregon in 1852; in 1859 he returned to Indiana, and finally moved to Chrisman, Illinois, where he died at age 97, having established a legendary reputation as a folk doctor (earning him on nickname Sassafras Smith”) and a storyteller. His fame lasted for more than a century, and may still exist in oral tradition.

Smith was the subject of one of the first exhaustive scholarly folklore studies of an American hero William Hugh Jansen in his 1949 doctoral dissertation researched Smith's life to analyse the process by which a folk hero generates legends and the extent to which the legendary details correlate with historical fact. Smith's acclaim derived largely from his story-telling abilities, and his known repertoire of more than seventy tales included legends, tall tales, jokes, and lengthy traditional folktales. His stories about Oregon earned his better-known nickname.

Jansen also analysed Smith's storytelling and repertoire; Jansen's delineation of Smith's performer-audience relationships and how these were intertwined with performance style, genre, and context marked a seminal analytic approach now commonly employed in folkloristics.

Although “Oregon” Smith's reputation was limited to a confined area in the Midwest, that it lasted so long is testimony to the tenacity of folk-historical data, no matter how distorted they may become. Smith’s legendary existence is an excellent example of the Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm Von Sydow’s notion of the “oikotype,” a distinctive geographically limited and persistent form of oral narrative.

Gerald Alvey

Some notable North American tall-tale heroes include Abraham “Oregon” Smith (1796-1893) from Indiana, whose exploits were first noted by Herbert Halpert in 1942 and then treated at length by William Hugh Jansen: Gib Morgan (1842-1909), who told his yarns in the context of the oil fields and was given a literary treatment in 1945 by Mody Boatright (1896-1970); and Jim Bridger (1804-1881) Western explorer and the man who was instrumental in opening up Yellowstone National Park. He was one of the earliest liars to come to more than local fame, since his tall tales, which he used to spin to greenhorn tourists, were included in early publication concerning Yellowstone.

An Anthology of American Folktales and Legends. By Frank de Caro

Abraham “Oregon” Smith (1796-1893) was a narrator whom no folklorist ever met, let alone collected from, but he made such an impact on the Indiana and Illinois communities where he lived that the man and his stories were remembered for many years after his demise. Although not a wanderer in the same sense as J>D> Suggs or Joe Woods, who worked as itinerant labourers, Smith lived in several places, including Bloomington, Indiana. Because Bloomington was later the home of the Indiana University folklore program, Smith became known to folklorists, and William Hugh Jansen who had heard local stories about the man, wrote a dissertation about him. A sojourn in
Oregon in the 1850’s and the fact that some of Smith’s stories were about Oregon, provided the origin of his nickname (though he was also known as Sassafras Smith, because of his tall tales). In his latter years, he would hold court at various locations in the town where he lived, telling his stories, in particular tall tales. And although his stories that came down to latter generations (stories96, “The Peach Tree Deer,” and 106, “Turnip and Kettle,” for example) are told as third person accounts, Smith clearly was, like many other tall tale raconteurs, a Munchhausen, someone who cast himself as the hero of the fantastic adventures in the stories (a term taken from the famous German Baron Munchhausen, who did the same thing in his own stories) and told the stories as first-person events. That his stories were taken up by younger narrators and passed down for years testifies to his impact as a raconteur, and Smith is representative of the storytelling local character who could entrance with “lies” local audiences of “loafers” around the stove or cracker barrel of the general store. If he had not lived in a place where folklorists later came to be very active, he might have been forgotten, and no doubt many other folk narrators have been largely forgotten. We therefore have all the more reason to celebrate those whom we do know something about – Ray Hicks, Maud Long, Marshall Ward, Samuel and Alberta Harmon, John Darling, Mary Richardson, Sara Cleveland, Wilson “Ben Gine” Mitchell, Enola Mathews, Bel Abbey, Clementina Todesco, Joshua Alley, and many others – whose artistry has been recorded and whose contributions to America’s cultural heritage should be more widely recognized than it has been. The editor of this volume hopes that readers will use the stories printed here to discover or reacquaint themselves with these American tale tellers and the American traditions of oral narration. Those traditions constitute a form of vernacular expression that talks about – through story – a great variety of subjects, and ideas and events and personalities integral to America’s past and present.