

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress

presents

the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

WAKING UP THE PEOPLE: STORYTELLING AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY

**LINDA GOSS, PROFESSIONAL STORYTELLER
AND ONE OF THE 2006 RECIPIENTS OF THE
GERALD E. AND CORINNE L. PARSONS FUND
FOR ETHNOGRAPHY AWARD
AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS**

**LINDA GOSS WILL DISCUSS FAMILY
STORYTELLING TRADITIONS,
AND DESCRIBE HER ONGOING RESEARCH IN
AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY STORIES AND HISTORIES.**



**Thursday
June 29, 2006**

12 NOON - 1:00 PM

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WAKING UP THE PEOPLE: STORYTELLING AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY

Linda Goss has always been fascinated with stories. She is currently researching African-American family stories on a Gerald E. and Corinne L. Parsons Fund award from the American Folklife Center. In her Botkin lecture, she will discuss family storytelling traditions, and describe her ongoing research.

In the following excerpt from her article "Waking up the people," Ms. Goss explains the connections between storytelling and her family:

I have an uncle who is living now, Uncle Buster. And he is such a character. He is funny! And he is always telling stories. And he is really, like an oral historian. And it hasn't been until recently that we even think of him as an historian, but that's what he is. That's what he is. He's in his 80s and people will come to him and they'll just call out a name. They may say, "The Dean family" and he takes you all the way back. Really, like the griots, back in Africa. You know. So whenever he sees me now, he just hugs me and we'll get to talking about different things. And he really kind of inspires me.

When I was younger, I was influenced by my grandfather. You know, by granddaddy Murphy, and my parents. And Uncle Buster, I would hear about him. He was always the one who would call on the phone and he would call collect, you know, to my mom. He would call with a different name. He would say, "It's James calling." And he would trick her. Because if she knew it was Buster, she wouldn't accept the call. So he would say, "It's Tyler on the phone." Or "It's Lyle on the phone." And he has all of these names. His name is James Lyle Tyler Martin. And he's known as Buster. So whenever he would call, it was always a story, just behind him. And at the same time, as funny as he is, there's also a sadness about him. And it wasn't until as I got older that I discovered what that sadness was.

Because, it's almost like people let Uncle Buster be himself. And come to find out, he was in World War Two. I think he was stationed in Alaska or somewhere. And my grandmother passed away. And for some reason, when he got the word about it, by the time he got back to Tennessee, everything was over. Her funeral and everything. And he never - well, to this day, he has never gotten over it. So even when he starts telling stories, he'll start laughing. And he may start out on a very high note. He may end just sobbing and crying, telling you about my grandmother, telling you about some of the sad things that have happened in the town too.

So from him, I guess, I developed just the whole idea of just how powerful a story can be. How it can just lift you up and at the same time, it can kind of purge you. It can kind of heal you. And even to this day, I kind of lean on Uncle Buster when I see him. I kind of lean on him for a little strength to just keep me going, and making me realize that you do have to pull out some of those stories that can kind of heal you, and some of those stories that are painful. But it's important to get them out. It's important to express yourself. And I guess I'm thinking about him even more right now, because we are in a war situation. And that's how my storytelling is. Depending on what's going on in the world, depending on what's going on in my life, what's going on in my family, kind of steers me into a way of how my stories come across.

So the things that I know of my grandmothers are stories that have been passed on to me from my father and my mother. And what I noticed that happens within the black family

is that there are stories that we share to the public, there are stories we share with the world, but then there are very personal stories - I think Zora Neale Hurston talked about that - that we just keep inside, that we don't share with anyone, that we don't share even share within our families.

And once I started sharing with people that I was a storyteller, that's when the family members started coming to me, sharing with me some of these stories, some of the stories I had never heard before.

Now, you know, my grandfather, he always got to tell a story. And again, you didn't know what was true and what wasn't. But he claimed that the rooster would crow first, early in the morning. The rooster would crow. And when the rooster would crow, this would wake up Shep, the dog. Then the dog - now again, the way he would tell it, it would sound like the truth! - the dog would come and like lick his hand. And that would wake him up, and then he would get the bugle and then he would blow - mmmmm - and that would start waking up everybody. Now I believe it, because that's what he said. And so he says, "I had to wake up the people to get them to start working." He said, "And that's what you're doing. You're waking up the people."

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Linda Goss was born near the Smoky Mountains in an aluminum factory town, Alcoa, Tennessee. She grew up listening to the storytelling of her grandfather Murphy and other family members who shared stories of life under slavery as well as a heritage of folk tales, oral history and legend. Stories about ethical values, the civil rights struggle in Tennessee, and stories from personal experience are among many hundreds of stories that she has gathered over decades of serious study and performance. The "Official Storyteller" of Philadelphia, and a pioneer of the contemporary storytelling movement, Ms. Goss was co-founder of "In the tradition..." the National Black Storytelling Festival and Conference and The National Association of Black Storytellers, a founding member of Keepers of the Culture, and of Patchwork: a Storytelling Guild. She is the author of numerous books, and a contributor to many collections on African American storytelling.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site www.loc.gov/folklife

