Stories, in their natural setting, are vitally important to human understanding because they are the tools of wisdom. They are metaphorical because the situation in hand subconsciously triggers off a story reflecting a
parallel understanding from deep within the brain that in its delivered expression provides a measurement stemming from and relating to judgement learned from accumulated past experience. While these stories could be told mainly for entertainment, their subconscious purpose is expression of truth through wisdom which, drawn from the past, is still paramount. Stories have been individually collected (or absorbed) for many years by orally minded people and stored in the subconscious brain. Being ‘collected’, as far as we are concerned here, is not the same at all as the process usually described, through which these stories have been taken from their natural setting in the oral society that produced and nurtured them, (and in which they were used for their intended purpose), to be transcribed into ‘visible’ alphabetic code for relaying in written society for a different purpose than the original reason for which they were told. This paper proposes not to look at the visible items - the written stories, but, take a holistic view of the invisibles – the intangible understandings of the people and their society that go to produce the stories as well as the language and mindset of the teller and the inherited technique in delivery. Personal recordings of natural storytellers from East Anglia will be cited as typical examples.


According to the late Sean O’Sullivan, Archivist and Registrar of the Irish Folklore Commission

Folklore is a link with the past in a deeper sense than are old records and archaeological remains. It leads us, Christiansen says, not to the bare skeletons of what was once alive but to the innermost mind of mankind. ‘It must be regarded … as a continuation and survival of a very ancient way of thinking’
‘A need to tell stories is essential to the species Homo sapiens’ wrote the American novelist Reynolds Price in 1978. Joan Gideon reminds us that we tell ourselves stories in order to live and that the vernacular has special capacities to make stories into transforming happenings in a form that can be understood in a conversational setting. Enid Porter, who collected from the oral tradition and edited books of tales from the Cambridgeshire and Norfolk Fens, recognised that the fenland storyteller was ‘both entertainer and educator.’ The storytellers were this, and much more. Stories are educational in a very many ways for they pass on history in all of its many seen and unseen facets. George Ewart Evans, who wrote ten books on the spoken word of Suffolk farm workers, spent his lifetime battling against the lack of appreciation of the (non-visible) spoken history. We have no mental picture for history but in a book we have something visible and this can breed an attitude that ‘history comes out of books’. Nothing ever comes from books themselves, for everything that goes into a book has of course firstly come from people. As extremely valuable as they are for many reasons, books can only ever be a vehicle of conveyance to bring forward those things that the mind does not deem necessary hold for permanent mental recall or has not previously encountered. The non-visible component of history, (probably the most important part), which lies beyond the visible history book, generally goes unrecognised for there is no visual image to get hold of. Furthermore, we all carry our non-visible personal history deep within ourselves, for it represents who we are, in all that has influenced and subconsciously formed our mindset, and it comes to the fore in our language. It is individual and personal, and collectively represents our regional character, and, even more widely, our shared sense of identity. The history that is passed on in story, furthermore, carries many aspects that written history never can do; for example, it reveals human feelings in capturing what the vernacular people of natural mindset thought. Furthermore, it can look at events and
situations from the point of view of those living and experiencing these at a time when they actually happened as opposed to a later after-view from someone who usually was not there, and who will have a different mindset, vision and incentive for transcribing the oral account.  

One of the best wholelife understandings is that of the American folklorist and writer Vance Randolph. For the majority of his life Randolph lived with, collected and wrote about the stories, language and songs of the Ozark Mountain people, in the context of an appreciation of the people themselves. He said of the outside view: 'These scholarly fellows become so engrossed in popular tradition that they disregard the populace. They concern themselves with balladry rather than ballad singers and are interested in folk tales to the exclusion of the folk who tell them. The Ozark stories that I like best are not saleable because urban audiences cannot understand them.' Recognising the invisibles is now acknowledged by UNESCO, for in 2003 it held a Convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Labelling both immovable and moveable artefacts as 'tangible' heritage, then expanding to 'natural' heritage, they then came to the word 'intangible'. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett informs us that this intangible cultural heritage was 'previously, and sometimes still, called folklore' and explains the 'shift from artefacts (tales, songs and customs) to people (performers, artisans, healers), their knowledge and skills'. What had gone on before this watershed of 2003 we should ask ourselves, for this statement points us to the many places where there was an apparent lack of respect for, and understanding of the people themselves. The word intangible, now representing that for which we have no mental picture, can be used as a major stepping stone in pointing understanding towards the very thing that in the past has been ignored. It would appear that outsiders calling themselves 'collectors' have taken away with them that which was apparent and 'visible' - the mere text of stories and songs which they then put to their own use - regardless of
understanding their purpose and meaning for the people from whose culture they were taken.

I use here the term ‘more-ororal’, as opposed to ‘oral’, for the 1870 Education Act made it law that all people should be taught reading and writing, but these new tools, although most were keen to acquire them, had little effect on the oral tradition. This continued to be transmitted virtually unchanged in the more remote parts of the countryside as it had done since the middle ages and was to continue, in a slow cross-over decline, for most of the twentieth century.

Alan Lomax, the much experienced folksong collector, said ‘the study of musical style should embrace the total human situation that produces the music’. Sigurd Erixon, Seamus Delargy, George Ewart Evans, and other eminent folklife historians have begged that we, the collectors and participators, record and understand the whole of the folk life before taking anything away. Yet most who have come to the more-ororal society from a literate background in pursuit of the natural storyteller, (and the same again could be said of folksong), have taken back to their written society little more than the bare bones of stories and songs – the visible marks that their transcription made upon their pages, whilst the whole folk life that produced the songs and stories has been ignored by almost all. It seems more than an extraordinary coincidence that, in the past, only those things that are visible have been noted by the literate story ‘collectors’, and the remainder, for which we have no visible representation, has gone unrecognised. George Ewart Evans expressed this, ‘If (the ordinary countryman) could be brought to speak – or perhaps whisper – his own views on the situation, he would be likely to say: This what you see is theirs; this what is not seen is ours’. To be aware of these invisible elements we need metaphor; this was Hannah Arendt’s message in The Life of the mind. She gives the example ‘a mighty fortress is our God’ which ‘renders it capable of being experienced’. Ernest Fenollosa, talking of the importance of metaphor in Chinese written characters, said that without metaphor
'there would have been no bridge to cross from the minor truth of the seen to the major truth of the unseen.' And it is metaphor that goes to the crux of the matter, for it was metaphor that the mind of the more-oral people was saturated with and, as Walter Ong and others inform us, it is the basis of all human understanding and something being lost in modernity.

Knowing how we personally think was very much part of the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, and ‘know thyself’ was the inscription at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi where one went to ask questions of The Oracle. Marcel Jousse (fig. 1), who strongly advocated the ‘insider’ (or ‘emic’ as opposed to ‘etic’) view, said that we should all have our own ‘laboratory of awareness’ so that we can know ourselves and how we think. He remarked that the self is the only person that we can know thoroughly. Jousse, a Frenchman of simple rural background, was a pioneer in the understanding of oral culture and said ‘We must lead a new line of stepping stones to the knowing paysan (peasant). They live life in close contact with soil, sap, wind and sky.’ It is important therefore, before we discuss the natural mindset of the less lettered, that we understand that our modern minds have largely been altered away from the natural into falsely privileging the printed word, and this has lead us to think, as Jousse said, that everything not written does not exist, or is of some lower value, or only applies to another culture and not ours.
The natural mind, unaffected by literacy, has been evolving as long as humanity itself, and events making up history all around it have finely honed it and pointed it in a natural direction, to provide the most important tool for man himself – his mindset. It is this mindset that forms his personal character and language, according to all the influences brought to bear on him since birth, and also that passed on by his ancestors. He carries the collective wisdom of ages. If, for example, one collects one of the more popular English folk stories and researches its background, one finds that, not the content, but the principle of understanding in the story will undoubtedly have been found in similar stories collected from many cultures throughout the world.\textsuperscript{xvii} This spread will have taken a great many years and gives us some idea of the length of time that, not just the story, but the metaphorical principle of story, has been passed on. The importance of metaphor was well understood by
Aristotle, who remarked ‘the greatest thing by far is to be master of metaphor’. (Poetics 1459a)

It should not be surprising therefore that the culmination of the inherited more-oral mindset was fundamentally the pursuit of truth, for man can only live by understanding that which he knows to be concrete, and which can be conceived to be as reliable as the ground upon which he stands. Truth is, therefore, the fundamental aim behind everything and always at the forefront of the mind. In pursuit of truth the mind seeks constant reassurance through measurement – measurement upon which it can make judgement of validity which in turn is expressed through metaphor, which is why it is so fundamentally important to mankind’s understanding.

But this judgement through metaphor is only a part of the mindset, for the more-oral mind primarily seeks principles of understanding and it seeks them in everything experienced, seen or heard. It does not accept things literally or materially as they appear, as gradually became the case, it is here argued, following the extensive availability of print from the eighteenth century onwards. This more-oral mind is always questioning in the double vision – the one in hand and the one that is triggered off by the subconscious brain – to make comparison and measurement and form nuggets of proverbial understandings to be stored in the subconscious brain awaiting opportune recall. The way that the natural brain may hoard (undisturbed for many years, if need be) and then subconsciously brings forward these parallels to make measured understanding of the present is, I believe one of the most wonderful phenomena of life. It holds the key to our understanding but the way in which it works is extremely complex. We are told there are over a hundred billion neuron cells in the brain, they excite and are fired several times a second and each has several thousand connections to other neurons. Everytnig is connected and everything thus counts in the big picture of considered and filed personal recalls from memory. That is why Lomax, Erixson, Evans, and others of deep experience
strongly emphasised that observing and recording the whole life is essential if understanding is our aim.

In seeking this measurement from experience the more-oral mind is extremely observational and manifests in perfect recall, producing feats of memory that might pose a challenge for a more modern, literary/literate mindset. Such a mindset, however, was not vested in equal strength in everyone within their more-oral society – it was stronger in some individuals than in others. It was, nevertheless, fairly commonplace, whereas this metaphoric (poetic) mind, in modern academic and general society, has been described as now being extremely rare.²²
Measurement does not necessarily mean arithmetical calculation. There are metaphoric statements for example that manifest themselves in proverbs, quotes, sayings, formulaic imagery etc., and, most particularly, stories of past experiences that provide a framework for judgement of the present and which thereby also produce truisms for filing away in the memory/mind. That stories convey more than their content is demonstrated by Linda-May Ballard who, in discussing fairy and other stories reminds us that ‘stories convey more than their content ...(this) does validate the idea that tales are told because they express an inherent truth (and) ... implies a way of seeing the world entirely different from that used by ‘modern’ technological thinkers’. She also suggests ‘Respect for the previous holders of a belief may, in itself, be a sufficient reason for sharing that belief’. The tentacles of measurement spread far and wide, and the more-oral mind will understand that figures do not cease to exist because they are not counted, and knowledge, likewise, does not cease to exist because it is not written down. In their measure-seeking, the oral-minded people collect rules of thumb from experience, not just for pacing a yard but for example telling by the number of sizeable potatoes per root how many tons the crop will yield per acre, or telling the height of a tree by use of eye and stick. In East Anglia, for instance, horsemen, some of whom could not read or write, when ploughing in seed beans by use of a seed barrow attached to a single furrow horse plough, knew the exact quantity of beans needed to go across a field, from the knowledge of the width that their ten inch by ten furrow stretch (a width of ploughed land) had in relation to a chain, and with this knowledge they were able to mentally calculate the area measurement in rods, poles or perches of the seedbed. Numeracy is measurement, a truism, and as such, far more important to the oral-mind than literacy. These less-lettered people had a numerical dexterity that would be difficult to find in the mind of the modern calculator user. At the time of writing this paper, a senior local historian, who is touring local history groups and record offices in East Anglia with his talk on local folk stories, states
that there are few folk stories in our county. This for him is true, for there are few from a perspective which seems limited only to written sources, but in the real world - the fuller world beyond the written word, which is not restricted by the artificial parameters that come with the over reliance on print, there are hundreds of traditional folk stories and they are still a living part of local tradition. In fact I was told a traditional English folktale the same morning as I read his statement.\textsuperscript{xxii}

There is, of course, a crossover, but to understand the oral mindset we must consider that printed books are not the be all and end all, and that as G E Evans and Walter Ong explained, the spoken word came first and should be put first now. Books and written records are an irreplaceable assist for ready access to information but they can never represent the complete picture.

As the alphabet is the tool of the literate mind of the academic, so metaphor is the tool of the traditional oral mind of the storyteller. But the word ‘metaphor’, as defined in literacy, is inadequate to define the whole of the oral mindset, for metaphor is only a by-product and one of the tools of measurement. ‘Logic’ would seem to be a more encompassing word, for it sees all it surveys in terms of logical relationships, and this has many spin-offs. I argue that the principle of understanding behind the basic information is of prime importance, and not vice versa as the modern mind is inclined towards. The more-oral mind does not simply accept information alone but looks for reason through the double vision of metaphor. The more-oral mind is always suspicious of what has not been experienced, and seeks to constantly define the new by reference to understanding from measured memory, filing this away as truisms, as wisdom appropriate to the moment in turn recalled when needed. Replays of the day’s events may also come in sleep patterns which are likewise filed away in the subconscious mind. This subconscious mind becomes instinctive in recognising, through parallels, opportunity and risk and therefore assists in the speed process of making decisions. Walter Benjamin in 1936,
lamenting that the mass-media had taken over from, if not eclipsed, storytelling, said that it was the storyteller’s task to communicate wisdom, that everyone now only wants information and entertainment and that nobody has a sense of history or memory or the time to relax and listen. Information can now be found at the press of a button, but not wisdom, which can only be acquired with experience. Einstein made reference to the importance of experience in deciding truth, and his remark ‘the only source of knowledge is experience’ is widely quoted. The more-oral, reason-seeking mind causes the subconscious collection of, not just proverbs, but stock sayings, imagery, riddles etc. and quotations which are themselves metaphors. It also makes its own ‘proverbial quotations’ to form golden rules of understanding and file a mental ‘stake in the ground’, securing these for opportune recall.

The naturally formed mindset is acutely observational, it sees metaphoric story in almost every happening, and has the language to form and relate it. Such strong observational focus and perfect recall can produce extraordinary feats of memory. For example, singers such as Cyril Poacher (fig. 2), an East Suffolk traditional singer, by having perfect recall and mimicking (acting as if they are the person that they had heard sing), may boast that they could repeat that person’s song or story after one hearing. The strength of memory, as a proof of the accuracy of history as encapsulated in oral tradition is confirmed by the professional storyteller Hugh Lupton when he reminds us

A ... story is told about the excavation at Sutton Hoo. No one was surprised locally at the discovery of the ship’s burial under the ‘Kings Hill’; it was common knowledge that had been held in local folk memory for 1,500 years. Those who doubt the accuracy of history in oral stories are restricted by the inabilities of the modern mind to interpret the information contained in oral tradition and, like most external perceptions, such judgements should be considered very carefully. Lupton goes on to remark that
‘Storytelling is a language of pictures. Visualisation is a vital ingredient of the art’.xxvi Yet the language that the more-oral mindset produces is more than just imagery. It is locally formed and locally representative, formed from peculiar play of history, geography, climate and occupation. It lives in the performance and delivery is all. It makes an art form of all of one’s life that has melody and pulse, tone and variety. It is aggressive and deflationary. Generations of artful talk have fostered an agility of response and invention that is prized. It recreates the scene to be recognised in a pungent narrative that makes for a play out of the little oral movie in the mind’s ear. It makes and uses its own and acquired vast personal store of proverbial sayings, nick-names, idioms, implied riddles, welcomes and farewells and artful catches that demand knowing response.

George Ewart Evans (fig. 3) demonstrated by recordings that the vernacular indigenous Suffolk people ‘spoke a language rich, virile, and full of concrete imagery which makes for communication at a higher level than the average academically educated speaker.’xxvii This is the natural, picture-forming language of the storyteller. Evans also found that these people were using the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare.xxviii He was not alone, for both Richard Chase and Vance Randolph,xxix working independently in the early to middle part of the twentieth century in the more remote parts of the USA, found the same, as have most who have sufficiently absorbed the whole of the folk life before attempting to take anything away and who have held the recorded people and their account in high regard and complete sympathy. The people of Suffolk that Evans refers to, however, were not using Shakespeare’s language. Shakespeare, being a man of the people, who had no greater literary indoctrination than that of a grammar school boy, was using his language – the natural language of the vernacular people of his day. He may have made it more sophisticated on occasion, even made a feature of it, but Shakespeare, the greatest of storytellers, was basically using the naturally metaphoric storytelling technique, the same
as the vernacular people of less-written culture everywhere. Homer, another great oral storyteller, thousands of years before, may have been different in style, but he adopted the same metaphoric principle by using the language of the vernacular people of his day. It was from the natural mindset, and had been so from the beginning, and it was to live on, in its slowly changing form, into the twentieth century in the minds of the more oral rural people in such remote parts as the Ozark and the Appalachian mountains of USA, and many other areas, including rural Suffolk as evidenced here. The fact that this fundamental tool of life went unrecognised, and has only surfaced in writing in so few places over such a long period, should not be surprising for it was in essence vernacular and low-life and as such, was looked down upon by those who had the insight of written values only. The works of Homer and Shakespeare exemplified the very few occasions that this oral-based language has been committed to writing. This language however, was championed among the more oral, and the greater one’s fluency and creativeness in it, the higher one was held in esteem. It was the English language, in all its beauty, prior to its erosion by the standardising parameters demanded by literate society. Many literate people now look back at this phenomenon of Shakespeare in some sort of wonderment and disbelief. It was, however, something, if they but knew, that was commonplace amongst their own forbears. They now consider it as though it were some sort of special literate poetic device. In principle, the use of metaphor of course survives to this day, but it is now extremely diluted, mostly media led and cliché formed, and nothing like its all-encompassing former self.

Adrian Bell, whose book Corduroy was voted by the Sunday Times readers as ‘the best on the countryside’, in 1933 said ‘...the poet (in the widest sense of the word), is nearer the illiterate labourer than all the grades that go between.’ He also referred to a horseman telling him ‘Lead you that horse as slow as ever foot can fall’ and later was to find the wording
he went on to explain how he went with
farm-men to single young seedlings.

To them I was an incompetent lad, quite uneducated in their
sense ... but I listened to them and I was amazed. Here they were
speaking in a language that I knew of but had not heard, or
ever imagined could still be heard. I’d just come from four
years in a public school; but no one there had told me that the
language that was the real glory of English literature was
still being used by unlettered men like these... I could say
that I didn’t begin my true education until I had this
privilege of listening to the powers of expression of farm-men
who had left school when they were twelve years old. xxxi

Old English poetry is likewise full of idiom, calling things by another
name. For instance, in the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf the sea is referred to
as the ‘whale’s road’ and the river the ‘swan’s road’. When in the 1930s
Milman Parry went to the Balkans to collect oral stories, he demonstrated
that the Homeric epics were, like Beowulf, relayed orally for several
hundreds of years before being written down. He and his protégé Albert Lord
were to assist the literate understanding of orality considerably, and in
The Making of Homeric Verse, Parry says of metaphor

many moderns, following the romantics, still feel great scorn for
such a way of writing which would rather call the sea a ‘glass’,
‘way’, ‘main’, ‘desert’, ‘wave’ ... than give it its own name. We must
judge not the device in itself, but, the state of mind that found
pleasure in the device and more largely the society that set up such
a mind as the most desirable one. xxxii

Parry continues, quoting Ernest Renan

How can we seize the physiognomy and the originality of
early literatures if we do not enter the moral and
intimate life of the people, if we do not place
ourselves at the very point of humanity which it
occupied, in order to see and to feel with it, if we do
not watch it live, or rather if we do not live for a
while with it? xxxii

The mind does not visualise words, it envisages pictures, which have to be
decoded from words in the mind by the receiver, according to the
appropriate language put there by the teller. I consider it relevant here
that I have heard illusionists and others, who perform great feats of
memory and arithmetical prowess on the stage, explaining that they do so by
carrying preformed pictures in their head that are closely associated with
what needs memorising. An example of imagery, taken from the more oral
mind, is of a Suffolk farmer who was describing the ineptness of his neighbour. 'Him a farmer, what, him a farmer? blast' he said 'he’s got thistles there that I could lean my bike up against'. This is a statement made unconsciously, firstly for the image that it produces, but it also puts a measurement on his neighbour’s ability to farm. Drawing an example from my own experience, I recall my Uncle Tickles (fig. 4) telling me to be ready in the morning to go with him to buy a horse:

layfarrard for the morning, boy and get yer best Sunday go meeting on. These old hoss dealers are as artful as a wagonload of monkeys and as sharp as a bag of chisels. You marn’t ever accuse ‘em of cheating, boy, you have to be one jump ahead of ‘em so just you do as I tell yer.

and

‘when I go dealing I always take my trump card in my back pocket and I never lay it until they lay their ace, then I plant my trump firmly on top. That way you can extract their back teeth – gums and all’.

Fig 4 The author (right) with his Uncle Tickles, harvest, 1952.

This is all metaphorical speech, full of images for the mind to appreciate and absorb. These sayings have little meaning unless brought out in
context, at the time that the mind needs parallel understandings for the purpose of demonstration and judgement, and that is why the more-oral mind is a wonderful thing. They are almost impossible to recall on demand unless triggered by a situation that brings forward a parallel understanding. When my mother (fig. 4) was telling me about the hardships suffered in the agricultural depression of the 1930’s, when no one had any money, she said ‘we had a dog tied up everywhere.’ I knew what she meant and she knew that I would know, or should know, but if I ever tell the story now, without fail I have to explain to modern audiences that she meant that they had unpaid bills everywhere. ‘We were in everybody’s ribs’ she said ‘and we couldn’t raise the wind to pay ‘em’. Another personal acquaintance, Stephen Bayfield, remarked that if he got underneath his grandmothers feet in the kitchen she would say ‘go you nannywiggle, boy, due I’ll put my purse in your pocket.’, meaning that if he did not get out of her way he would receive her foot close to his backside.

In relating tales of experience my mother would unknowingly use words that while obsolete in modern parlance reflected a much older way of speaking, for instance, ‘enow’, and expressions like ‘that’s how that was’ rather than using the word ‘it’. When she told the story of a local woman whose two daughters got pregnant at the same time she said ‘They gals have been silly boys’. Here, ‘boys’ is used to designate young and old of either sex. Although she could write a good letter and was business like in her dealings, there is no doubt that most of her language was learned from neither dictionary nor schoolroom.

Another example of metaphoric language comes from the North Essex storyteller Dick Ruggles (fig. 5) who spoke about an old timer who came into his pub. Before going home, he would ask for a ‘Drop out the further buttery.’ In a traditional Suffolk farmhouse the first buttery was usually the dairy where the milk, eggs and butter were kept and the second buttery was often a smaller half cellar where the game, meat for hanging, beer and spirits would be kept. As whiskey then was bought by the keg, ‘a drop
out the further buttery’ was the old timer’s way of saying that he’d like a whiskey. But then metaphor was naturally applied to anything and everything, so everything had another name and everyone had a nickname.

In Uncle Tickle’s village of Boxford, in Suffolk, there was Porky who got his name not from being thin or fat but from the way that he sang in church. It seems he could not read so sang ‘pork pork’ to everything. He must have sung a good ‘pork’ for he was in the choir for forty years. Then there was Vinegar who got his name because he would drink anything. A drink would be ‘a drop of ‘Oh be Joyful”’, a thistle in the corn was a ‘Scotchman’, a clever person a ‘long-headed man’. Tickles referred to his shotgun as a ‘spout’, a hare as an ‘aunt sally’, and the sun as ‘Phoebe’.

He would be constantly testing your alertness with little riddles that were also educational. ‘If a herring and a half cost a penny and a half how many do you get for a shilling’ he would say, and many similar. Tickles would also come out with little catches. These are a form of riddle but not deliberately asked as a riddle – just put in the conversation to catch you out. An example would be ‘Stinging nettles don’t sting this month’ if you had been stung by a nettle – because they do not sting the month. He also used expressions with two meanings like the exclamation ‘winter draws on’ (punning on drawers). After a good rain in the spring he’d say ‘this will spoil the little potatoes’ (because it would make them into big ones). These traditional sayings were there to prod and test who you were by whether you knew or not, and had the reply. They might stand alone or were just as likely to come up in a story, and they were abundant. Whilst telling a story Tickles had his own little devices that he sub-consciously introduced. He would emphasise things by repeating them, sometimes several times. ‘No how, No HOW’ he would say, almost shouting the short second ‘how’. Similarly, my Mother would punctuate her stories with ‘Now I’ll tell you why that was’, which focused your mind on the reason that she was going to bring forward.
Tickles would make up his own words in the interests of greater communication and whilst driving his tractor, for most of the day, would compose rhymes and songs of happenings in his life. The ‘Artomic Drillmen’, ‘Pig-feed Calypso’ (which he composed at the time that the West Indian cricketers toured immediately after World War II and brought with them their own calypsos) ‘Three dows (wood pigeons) flew from the creach (local word for a particular type of watercourse)’. He often did so with a hint of bawdiness such as in his song ‘When you are awfully light on the trigger’ occasioned by a dose of ‘the backyard trots’ in the blackberry season. Was this self-composing of song a hangover from a bygone age where it had historic importance? I believe that it was, in the same way that the Hebridian song maker would compose news in song for the Saturday night meet or that long earlier ballads were composed orally to aid memory in the long term passing on of history. But in the 1940s and ‘50s when Tickles took me under his wing, it was still a time when everyone went around with a song or a tune in his head, there was no ‘canned’ music, people whistled, and the horseman sang all day to let his horse know where he was and that he was happy. Adrian Bell comments ‘There are a thousand chances a day for jest and simile’ and this sums up the contentment in the simple way of life then experienced.

Proverbs, having been more the subject of written record, are perhaps more universally known than these rather individual turns of phrase. Proverbs of course bear close relationship to metaphors. They each pass little pearls of wisdom that are codes to live by. ‘I was born too close to a wood to be frightened by the hoot of an owl’ said Tickles to the bespectacled man on the door when he was refused entry at the village hop. ‘I went to my wheat in May and came away not very gay, I went to my wheat in June and came away whistling a tune’ was a proverb that he used in his work. It passed not information, but wisdom, in its two conditions set against one another, and gave guidance about what to do as in ‘It is a lazy man who overloads himself’. As Marcel Jousse remarked ‘they brought the
past into the present and the present into the future’. Many of these pieces of transferred wisdom related to the weather and many sayings were centred round the horse and the plough. ‘Never have it said, boy, yer mother bred a jibber’ Tickles would come out with if it was your turn to do something and you were not forthcoming (a jibber is a faint-hearted horse). Or he would refer to you as being ‘Caste in yer box’ if you were late getting up in the morning. They were used all the time and everywhere. There is not sufficient space for many examples here, but it is hoped that they will become the subject of a fuller collection from the oral tradition, along with a more detailed study of the ways of the natural mindset.

Fig 5, The author’s mother, Ruby, with Blossom (author)

In 1964 I experienced what was to be a watershed in my understanding of the importance of story. I was quietly recording traditional singers,
entertaining their own company in an East Suffolk inn, and there were only
the locals present, when the chairman asked Bob Scarce (fig. 7) ‘to oblige
with a small ditty’. Bob began his performance with the word ‘Come’
followed by a long pregnant pause where in the modern musical world there
would be no pause, then ‘all you young fellows whiresimiver you may be and
pray list while I tell you a story.’ He would sing unbelievably flat in
places, then nip the note in others and quicken the rhythm or drop it all
together in places. Performing a particular murder ballad he changed his
singing from a major key to a minor key and then back again. I came to
realise that to him story was paramount and that melody, as we have come to
see it through modern literate notation, was nothing more than an
instrument to be used, along with his personal control of rhythm, in the
delivery of the all important story. Accompaniment would have been an
insult to him - a totally unnecessary clutter that would simply get in the
way of the delivery of his message. The beauty of his rendition lay in the
fact that it was unaffected by conformity to western civilised written
musical parameters and conventions. He had acquired, of his own natural
inherited making, as much stage presence in his environment as Max Miller
had done in his. xxxix We have become so attuned to recorded music on radio,
television and other media that it has become difficult to stand aside and
see that appreciation and ability.

My aim when I started out was to collect folksongs but I soon realised
that I was collecting people, not in the physical sense, but in terms of
the invisibles - their idiom, their ways, their feelings, their
observations, their understandings and beliefs, and how extraordinarily
important to them were things that could seem inconsequential to modern
thinking. Having been brought up in this culture, I realised that I had a
foot in both camps and I found that I was observing that which was
different from the view held by the written society in the school to which
I had been sent. I found myself leaning not towards the new and modern, but towards the proven and older. When later I was to retell the stories that had been told by both my Uncle Tickles and my mother, I found a very different language coming from my subconscious brain, the extent of which I did not know I had. I questioned the motives of those who arrived from urban culture ‘to collect the words and music’ and nothing else, and realised that it was usually for a completely different reason - their own self-interest in writing the material down usually to be sung in a different manner, in a different place and in the context of a different culture. Romanticism, revival and nostalgic recreation, however entertaining and fun it may be to take part in, has no place in history, for it is artificial and can never represent the wisdom and truth that is the tradition. The revival connotations of the word ‘folk’ caused serious
historians like George Ewart Evans (who wanted to use the word *folklife* to represent the bigger picture of people’s true history and idiom), to have strong doubts about it, for it was not being taken seriously by many academic historians.\footnote{\textsuperscript{xli}}

‘Man learns by mimicking’ said Marcel Jousse, adding that he expresses himself though *geste* - gesticulation of the whole body and language. Memory is a databank of mimemes that are available to be voluntarily or involuntarily called up and replayed\footnote{\textsuperscript{xlii}}. Part of miming and learning is play and it is woven into our culture. Johan Huizinga said in 1949 in *Homo Narrans - man at play,* no other language known to me has the exact equivalent of the English word ‘fun’, and added ‘the purely physiological act of laughing is exclusive to man.’\footnote{\textsuperscript{xliii}} It has been observed that most of the carriers of the tradition of storytelling seem to radiate fun in their many pranks: pranks played for the purpose of later relaying them in story wherever they are likely to find an appreciative audience.

Rodney Bullock, a Suffolk poacher whom I have recorded, centred his life around his local pub and his nocturnal meanderings in pursuit of ‘long tailed uns’. It is here in the pub that he would recount, and embroider as necessary, his encounters of the night before as he avoided the squire’s gamekeeper. When apprehended by the law, sentenced in court and asked if he had anything that he wished to say, he replied: ‘Why yes your honour. You know how you made us swear on the good book to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Well, that also say in that book that thou shalt share thy brother’s burden so if I pass my hat round will you all, together, put a pound in.’ Clearly the only gain in antagonising his Worship and risking further sentence was the prospect of a story to be told, and this just goes to show how important the concept of the story and the activity of storytelling was to them.
Dick Ruggles had many similar tales of pranks made 'For the telling of it in story'. On one occasion, whilst loading shotguns in the field for his governor, and in the company of royalty, when his governor missed a pheasant and turned to take his second gun he was too late, for Dick, his loader, had stolen the opportunity and shot it. Dick somehow had enough guile to keep the job that he loved. Whilst initially furious, his governor told Reg Wootton (the cartoonist who drew Sporting Sam for the Daily Express), about the incident and after the end of season shoot he presented Dick with the original artwork depicting the event that the artist had sent him. Retelling the story of this incident, Dick always made an epic of at least twenty minutes out of passing on the experience of how he avoided dismissal.

Vernacular stories invariably have a beginning, middle and an end. For example, Rodney Bullock tells how he heard that the squire’s eldest son was
getting married in London and all of the estate workers had been invited to go. He starts the tale by, as I term it, ‘framing it from afar’. He commences from the point when he first heard the news. ‘I was having me sandwiches when Billy went past on his tractor. Wur-up Billy, hold you hard a minute. I said I want a jaw longa you’ and he then unwinds in much dialogue what Billy says. ‘...and the keeper’s going an’ all is he. Is he!’ That is the end of the beginning of the story. In the middle he describes, all in dialogue, how he then got fourteen of his mates and openly shot over the whole of the estate. The end features the coup de grâce – the juxtaposition – the jest when the following morning the squire arrives at Rodney’s house, for Rodney is also the village organist, to tell him; ‘I don’t know what you’ve been up to, Bullock, while we were away but when my next son gets married I’ll make sure you play the b.... organ, then at least I shall know where you are’. This was a tale retold many times to an appreciative audience in the local pub!

In days gone by the public house featured highly in the lives of farm workers. They lived a hard life and had a struggle to make ends meet at home. Beer was inexpensive then, and the pub was their relief, the centre for their news and business, and story and song were both their self-entertainment and way of life, so he who had the eye to a story-making incident for the retelling would always be popular and invariably called a ‘character’. Up until the 1950s you could tell the unspoilt pubs by the noon-day bicycles of the ‘old uns’, which stood outside. Sadly those times have gone and with them that type of community meeting place. But the opportunity for stories is still everywhere, just waiting for those who have the natural eye to observe the jest and the gift of metaphoric language and formulas that help to structure composition during performance. Such a storyteller is defined by Jack Zipes. In his booklet ‘Revisiting the Storyteller’ commenting on the essay The Storyteller by Walter Benjamin, Jack Zipes said that Benjamin incorporates in his writing all the best quality of a storyteller, adding
less and less one meets people who can truly tell stories. He (Benjamin) describes the archetypical storyteller as the farmer or craftsman who stayed at home and told of their experiences and the seafarers who collected experience on their voyages and in new and distant places. The storytellers had a practical interest when they told their tales and their stories were filled with counsel and wisdom. Counsel woven into the stuff of lived lives is wisdom’ he said. ‘The art of storytelling is moving to its end because the narrative side of truth, which is wisdom, is perishing. Shared experience is not the basis of story anymore and genuine stories cannot be related if they do not come from the experiences of people. Even in amusement, the storyteller never diverts but converts experience into hilarious wisdom, relates and diffuses a comic anecdote with so much wisdom that it makes us burst with wise and knowing laughter.\textsuperscript{xlv}

Dick Ruggles fits this mould for he was both artisan and sailor. Although the type of stories has changed over the years, I do believe that the position of the storyteller, as the newscaster and keeper of unwritten tradition in his community, has often remained, as has the technique of and skill in delivery. Sean O’Sullivan in \textit{Irish Folk custom and belief} says:

> Even when our native culture was at its strongest the number of singers and storytellers in any rural community was relatively small... The tradition was kept alive by a small inner core of persons\textsuperscript{xliv}.

I have found this to be true and have been fortunate enough to encounter a few of the unwitting custodians of the tradition in my lifetime. Dick Ruggles, born in the village of Stamborne on the second of February 1923, moved with his parents back to their home village of Toppesfield on the Essex/Suffolk border when very young. At fourteen he became an apprenticed carpenter at Whitlocks, who were makers of agricultural machinery, and at eighteen became a gunner on Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships to go on the Atlantic convoys dodging the U-boats. He tells of stories of playing the piano in bars from Karachi to Buenos Aires. These stories he continuously told to the people back home. When he returned to ‘civie street’ his former governor asked him to become his gamekeeper as he wished to entertain business clients. Although as a consequence Dick now moved in the company of (amongst others) royalty and had to act accordingly, to know his place and mind his ‘Ps and Qs’, he never lost his dialect or the eye...
for a good story in the making. His mother, he said, had an excellent memory and he carried many of her tales. At one time he kept the village pub, the Chestnuts, and he had the choir practice in the bar. He would bring out his accordion to accompany community singing and would encourage others to perform, for example old Fred Garwood to bring forward his party piece ‘The huntsman and his men went out to hunt the fox’. After he left the pub Dick and his wife Dolly moved to Dick’s grandfather’s thatched cottage in the centre of the village. Here, as he explained, ‘Mother was born in that bedroom up there and died in that one up there 82 years later’. He was at the centre of most organisations in the village from the football team to the Village Hall Committee. Dick treated everyone the same, which undoubtedly was one of the reasons why Lord Sainsbury gave him a job as his gardener for the last eight years of Dick’s working life. It is the governor’s garden (for he puts his money into it), yet it is also the gardener’s garden for he puts his heart into it. This could cause little conflicts. By Dick’s accounts, Lord Sainsbury was always intending to be one jump ahead of Dick but he never was. Dick had the ability to convert everyday happenings into hilarious stories full of wisdom yet he also, without knowing their academic label, would tell traditional English folk stories such as ‘the mare’s egg’ and ‘the disappearance of the squire’s ham’ and others he acquired in the oral tradition but nothing in his repertoire was ever learned from a book. He did not tell the stories of magic, fairies and dragons that fill latter day children’s books. Most of Dick’s stories are ‘personal experiences’ and although they may not necessarily fall into the category of folktales, I believe that they are more important as they each have to be skilfully composed by the individual from an experience to become the major tool in the passing of wisdom. They take all of the skill of the teller in first visualising the event as a story and then applying the technique of freshly composing it during the telling. This then follows an established pattern which becomes interspaced with dialogue. This
dialogue provides the basis on which he makes the story his own. For example, Dick tells us of how the vicar was cutting his grass in the nude. (I will here use square brackets in which to describe his technique as the story proceeds). Firstly, he frames it from afar by not starting at the vicarage. [Instead, the starting point is usually more indirect, an announcement of the place where the storyteller first heard the news, giving him time to scan his mind for direction and to get his all important rhythm going. Note also the dialogue, for dialogue is one of the most important tools of oral narrative, and in my opinion the first indication that an individual is a storyteller is the use of dialogue. Dialogue gives the teller the opportunity of bringing forward the story’s characters in this play of life. It brings them alive, and the discourse and its repetition emphasise how important the event related is going to be. Its direct nature has the storyteller’s audience sitting on the edge of their seats in anticipation. It is said that every man is his brother’s keeper and dialogue sparks the listener’s ego in giving them a type of character that they will know and can identify with].

‘Now when I kept the Chestnuts [which is the pub in the village] my old uncle would come in and I would give him a bit of bread to toast over the fire. [This information is not necessary but it moves the mind gently forward through good use of imagery] When who should come in but Jimmy Gant. ‘I hear the vicar is cutting his grass in the nude’ he said ‘Go you on’ said Uncle. ‘Ho! that he aint he wun’t do that.’ ‘He is I tell yer.’ ‘No he aint.’ ‘Yes he is.’ ‘Well is he really’ [This toing and froing with voices getting stronger prepares the listener for the big event. With it, the first part of the story draws to an end, for he now takes us to the setting of the incident itself]. ‘Now old Mrs Read, who live opposite the vicarage, was cleaning her bedroom windows [at this point he sprays from an imaginary spray can and makes as if to clean the window] PssssssstPssssssst [mental imagery again] when she thinks she sees something pink moving across the other side of the road through the trees’ ‘What’s that, that can’t be. No that ain’t. That ain’t the vicar a-cutting his grass in the nude is it?’ [Important dialogue with herself] Well she soon popped her hat and coat on [partially demonstrates to add imagery] and hurried down to the shop to tell ‘em. Well, the next Thursday, which is the day that the vicar usually cuts his grass, there she is in her front bedroom and there’s seven or eight old gals a-waiting for the vicar to start and she’s a-serving of
'em tea and biscuits. And the vicar he didn’t let ‘em down. No, no, no he strutted between the trees with his mower. ‘Well’ says Mrs Brett as she was a-sippen her tea and dunking a garibaldi ‘I’ve got to go and see him sometime to ask him if he’ll read my daughter’s banns of marriage. I think I’ll go now’. ‘Yes, yes now’s a good time to go, dear. You go now’ said the others. So she tripped across the road and banged on the vicarage side gate and to her surprise, after a few minutes, the gate opened and there stood the vicar in the nude. He just stood there a-holding the grass collection box in front of him’ [great imagery].

And thus the story continued with Mrs Brett pretending not to take any notice but endeavouring to trick him into lowering his guard!

Dick Ruggles died on the 18th July 2010 and having gone to ‘mole country’ in Toppesfield Churchyard lies next to Lord Sainsbury where, as Dick had forewarned him with one of his many catches, ‘one of these days. Sir, I shall have just as much land as you’. And so he did and still does.

The understanding of the mindset of the natural storyteller of the more-oral world is important for us to-day, not least because, in absorbing the whole life experience we can stand in their naturally evolved position and take measurement on the changes in the modern mind of today. I leave the final words to George Ewart Evans and David Thompson, who in The Leaping Hare discuss the mythology of the hare, lamenting the loss of metaphor in the modern mind in that modern man has become so materially minded that he has allowed

the object to invade and take possession of his consciousness ... becoming so literal that we insist on taking obvious symbolism at its face value, and not its implied or concealed value; and having once taken it this way dismissing it as trivial.

Evans and Thompson continue, suggesting that through

an insight into the consciousness and thoughts of people who have gone before us ... we may possibly become aware of the limitations of our own sterilized and dehydrated way of thinking. ...This may even induce a new insight which will prompt us to ask ourselves: if we believe thinking has progressed from the primitives, should we not ask which way it is going to progress from us.”

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Notes

The fourteen hours of Dick Ruggles’ recordings have been archived as part of The World Oral Literature Project and can be heard on

http://www.oralliterature.org/collections/nlanham001.html
1. O, Sullivan, S. Irish Folk Custom and Belief, Dublin, Cultural relations committee of Ireland, n.d, pp 8, 9


5. This distinction is often referred to in terms of 'emic' and 'etic'. For a succinct definition of these terms see srmo.sagepub.com/view/thesage-encyclopedia-of.../n275.xml (consulted 22/1/13). Throughout this article, the emic perspective of 'intrinsic cultural distinctions' is the prevailing model.


H. Lupton. The Dreaming of Place. Reading: Daylight Express, 2001


Evans, Where Beards Wag All, Chapter15.


Evans Where Beards Wag All, pp.170-171.


Lanham, N. There’s a story that my mother told. HelionsBumpstead Gramophone Co., 2007, pp.72.

I believe that this is because a hare is said always to cry out 'aunt' when caught. 'Phoebe' probably originates from the classical Phoebus. A storm furthermore was always referred to as a tempest. He knew that these sayings were out of date but I believe that he persisted in using them to preserve the tradition, refusing to be modern simply for the sake of it. His use of the word dow for a wood pigeon sounded most archaic and in the same way he would call the Vicar ‘Wicar’, reminiscent of the speech of Dickens’ Sam Weller. I also believe that my interest in these peculiarities and apparent desire to absorb it all may have encouraged this in my presence, for he saw me as his ‘apprentice’ to whom he could relay this past that he lived and glorified.


Peter Kennedy in a private discussion later told me that Bob Scarce was also the favourite of his father Douglas, the former president of The English Folk Dance and Song Society, for similar reasons.

I always knew him by this name, which was gained in early infancy.

EdgardSienaert Levelling the oral-literate playing fields 2006/5.

http://www.MarcelJousse/Sienaert/toronto 060208


O’Sullivan, Irish Folk Custom and Belief,n.d., p.10.

I also recorded this song from the shepherd Albert Bromley of Shotley, Suffolk and his version can be heard on www.oraltreadditions.co.uk CD05 Songs from the Singing Tradition of the people of the Stour Valley


**Notes on contributor**

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