

As you and your students learn more about the traditions shared in Iowa, the need to organize the information we obtain becomes greater. The following information has not been formalized as lesson plans but you may want to experiment with some of the activities and develop your own lesson plans. The most common way to organize information about traditions is by categorizing it according to shared features.

There are six basic *genres*, or kinds of folklife. They are: verbal, materials, custom, belief, motion, and music and song.

*Verbal or oral* traditions rely on the spoken word: jokes, riddles, stories, legends, rhymes, proverbs, language, and naming.

*Material* traditions embody crafts, objects, and other art involving the use of physical materials including architecture, landscape, and cemeteries

*Customs* are the ingredient of even larger traditions for they are the actual activities that make up traditions. For example, Thanksgiving dinner is a traditional celebration celebrated with the custom of eating turkey.

*Beliefs* are expressions of what we believe to be true and real: crossing one's fingers for good luck, and carrying a good luck charm are examples of this.

*Motion* is physical activity involved in a tradition, such as funny faces, noises with hands or arms, imitations, visual jokes, handshakes and hand signs, dances, and secret signs.

*Music and Song* consists of traditions which are sung or played on musical instruments: rap, gospel, fiddle tunes, hand clap songs, and parodies.

Introduce students to the kinds of folklife by writing the words "verbal," "material," "custom," "belief," "motion," "music and song" on the board. Ask students for examples of traditions that they think are: spoken (verbal), made from something (material) done as a part of a yearly tradition (customary), believed (belief) done with the body (motion), and sung or played on a musical instrument (music and song).

### Oral Traditions:

Verbal lore is perhaps the most pervasive of the traditional arts, which makes it both very accessible (everyone knows jokes and tells stories) and also very likely to be taken for granted. Students can be encouraged to become aware of aspects of oral tradition in their own

lives and to become attuned to elements of tradition in what they hear around them in their family and community.

*Folk speech* includes regional accents, local terms, specialized language, and other elements that make up the distinctive speech patterns of a region or occupation. Ethnic and occupational groups of course have their own specialized language, some of which has been added to the vocabularies of other Iowans. Local communities also have their own shorthand for referring to land marks and giving directions; it might be fun to have students think of local terms that could be confusing to outsiders, and to discuss how they came to know about them.

*Jokes and riddles* are obvious examples of traditional oral forms. They are learned from other people, and change form slightly with each retelling. While a joke about a recent event may not have the depth in time usually associated with folk traditions, the fact that it has spread so rapidly indicates that it is widely shared and that it addresses something important in the culture. Jokes can be a way of dealing with sometimes uncomfortable situations. People make jokes about things they care about and that affect their lives.

*Proverbs* are short, usually fixed, phrases that encapsulate some bit of wisdom to be passed on at appropriate moments. Students can no doubt come up with dozens once they are prompted with a few suggestions. Perhaps students could give a situation when each proverb might be used, putting it in context. Another interesting exercise is to come up with pairs of proverbs that seem to give opposing advice, for example, "Too many cooks spoil the broth" versus "Many hands make light work;" or "Look before you leap" versus "He who hesitates is lost." If your classroom has students from different ethnic groups, ask them for proverbs from their culture and an explanation of what they mean; then see or there is an equivalent Anglo American proverb.

*Legends* are stories, usually connected with a specific place or person, and generally told as if they were true. The teller may not admit to personal belief in a legend, but it is still told and passed on. Ghost stories, haunted places, local heroes and tragic events all serve as the basis for legends.

*Urban legends* are a more recent variant of the typical legend form, and are found all over the country. Details are changed to fit the local community (they are always set in a recognizable nearby location) and they are alleged to have happened to a 'friend of a friend.' Everyone has heard about the rat in the Kentucky Fried Chicken, the woman who tried to dry her dog in the microwave. the babysitter who gets scary phone calls, or the horrible things that happen to teenagers

parked in the local lovers lane. Jane Brunvand's four books on urban legends—*The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, *The Choking Doberman*, *The Mexican Pet*, and *Curses! Broiled Again!*—are good collections of these stories with explanations about what they mean and why people tell them. Your students will doubtless have examples of these kinds of stories, although they probably do not realize that they are told all over the country, and may even protest vehemently that they are true and really happened to 'a guy my cousin met.' Some of these tales undoubtedly do have a factual foundation, but they certainly haven't occurred in as many places as their telling suggests.

**Oral Tradition Activities:** Stress that verbal traditions rely on the spoken word, and give an example. Have students share a verbal tradition with the class. Ask them what the tradition is (a joke, riddle, story) and where they learned it. Record examples with a tape recorder and save the tape as a class record of its folklife.

Ask students to help you arrange the classroom so that they can tell scary stories. You may want to bring in a flashlight for effect. Set up a tape recorder in the middle of the arranged area and record students' scary stories. As each storyteller to give the name of the story he or she is about to tell and where he or she learned the story.

Have students complete the "Do You Know This One?" worksheet

## Material Traditions:

Material traditions consist of the tangible objects we make and use in our folk groups. Examples of material traditions in Iowa. These crafts were learned by observation and imitation: watching more experienced makers and practicing their actions to perfect the skills.

Material traditions often beautify solutions to our basic needs. The quilt keeps us warm, while the patterns delight the eye with Log Cabins, Double Wedding Rings, and Drunkard's Paths. The curve in the chair made of Florida cypress perfectly fits the back of the person sitting at the table for dinner. The study of our material traditions offers insights into the way people live. Exploring the material traditions in Iowa is especially interesting because so many of us have brought with us traditions from other states.

Often the most distinguishing feature of a community is how it looks; how it is laid out on the land, the types of houses, barns, fences, yard decorations and landscaping that are typical of the area. The rural farmstead and differs from a flat, square streetplan or a railroad town stretched along the tracks. In a city, neighborhoods are often distinguishable by the styles of houses and yard; decorations, religious shrines, paint colors, and gardens are unique to particular groups. Geography, climate, economics, transportation and ethnic heritage all contribute to a region's appearance. Proximity to sources of outside supplies, via roads or rails, can determine a town's size and layout. Ethnic makeup can also affect a community's appearance. To understand why a particular area looks the way it does, then, you have to know something of its history.

Because buildings and landscapes are more permanent than other elements of traditional culture, that can be used to understand local history in a new way, and to make it come alive. History is not dead, it lives on all around us in our houses and our daily environment. and it is traditional culture that makes the connections between the past and the present. Specific elements of the countryside to look for include houses, barns, and outbuildings such as sheds, blacksmith shops, granaries, cellars, animal houses (how are they used? has their use changed over the years? why are they arranged the way

they are?); fences, gates and corrals (how are they built and used? are they decorated?); hay derricks and sackers; yards and yard decorations (plants, old machinery, antlers, collections of "stuff"); and mailboxes.

Another fascinating aspect of the environment to study is cemeteries. Changes in markers over time can tell a lot about changing attitudes toward death, and shifts in ethnic populations, religious groups and occupations. Old Victorian stones often featured sentimental symbolism popular at the time—the weeping willow, broken rose, parting hands, lambs for children, etc. Epitaphs are frequently written in the language of the old country of the deceased, and the place of birth is listed on the stone; this indicates how important the person's heritage was, and that he or she wanted it remembered by future generations.

More recent stones frequently have some indication of the interests or personality for the deceased. Often a representation of the person's occupation or hobby will be carved on the stone—a horse or a brand for a rancher, a train engine for a railroad worker, a fish or deer for an avid sportsman, motor-cycles, airplanes, pets; just when you think you seen every-thing, something new will pop up.

This trend illustrates the growing need for individual identity even in death, a result of our increasingly regulated and homogenized society. Religious symbols are on the wane on tombstones, and secular interests are taking their place. Grave decoration can also indicate a lot about the deceased, since family members often place favorite objects on a grave, especially for a child. Any graveyard will have its share of homemade markers as well as commercially made ones. These range from simple wooden crosses to large cement obelisks inlaid with local rocks. In many cemeteries, there is a separate section for Native American burials. These graves are often mounded and have a row of flowers along the pile of dirt.

The overall landscaping and layout of cemeteries can be interesting to study as well. No one is formally taught how to arrange a cemetery or decorate a grave or choose a marker. This knowledge is part of the community; people see what others around them are doing, or observe religious, ethnic or family traditions connected with death and burial, and base their actions on what has gone before. Changes are slow and subtle, but a graveyard that has been used for 100 years can be used to learn a great deal about the history and culture of a place.

Material traditions also include folk crafts which are those skills learned informally, from family and community members in face-to-face interactions. Practitioners of folk crafts and arts are good choices for classroom visitors. Students can some-times try their own hands at the skill if enough materials can be found, which helps them understand the complexity of folk arts and the time needed to master them.

Examples of traditional craftspeople to look for in your community are quilters, embroiderers, woodworkers, tatting, paper art, rug-braiders and other needleworkers from many ethnic groups; Indian basketmakers, beadworkers and buckskin tanners; hitched horsehair gear; blacksmiths and farriers; and woodcarvers. Old-timers may have collections of local crafts and tools accumulated over the years that they would be willing to share with students in a classroom visit or field trip.

## Material Folklife Activities:

Begin a discussion of material traditions by explaining that just as there are traditions that rely on the spoken word, there are also traditions that require physical materials. Describe these traditions as material.

Ask students to talk about their material traditions. Have them describe the tradition, the material used, and how they learned to make the object. Emphasize how the tradition is passed on informally by observation and imitation. Talk about the many kinds of material traditions in Iowa because of the many different kinds of people who live here.

Have students make toys from paper, rubber bands, etc. Use a small card to identify the object and its maker. Place the finished toys on display. Have them describe the process in making the toys.

Have students make paper airplanes (an old student tradition), to be judged in three classes: a) best looking, b) fastest flying, and c) furthest flying. Have students describe the process in making paper airplanes

Have students complete and then discuss the "It's Something That Was Passed Down in Our Family" worksheet or the "Family Treasures" worksheet.

Plan a walking tour of your town to identify buildings and objects that make your town special. Make available to students worksheets that describe architectural features and examples of architectural styles. Encourage students to make drawings or maps as they tour their town. If you can't walk the town use photographs, slides, videos to give the students a visual tour of the material culture that exists in your town.

Tour a local cemetery and have students look for cemetery art, markers, symbols, epitaphs, clues to who the person was (age, occupation, cause of death, religious beliefs, etc.), landscaping, ethnicity, landscaping and changes over time.

Visit a local or nearby artisan. If that is not possible invite an artisan to class and have that person demonstrate his or her craft. Provide materials so that students can try their hand at doing what the craftsman has demonstrated.

## Traditional Customs:

Customs refer to those regular practices that make up our traditions. For example, a tradition on the 14th of February is the celebration of Valentine's Day. It is the custom on Valentine's Day to give cards and candy to loved ones. A tradition associated with the birthday is the birthday party. At a birthday party, a number of customs are practiced, from the way to decorate the party room to the kinds of foods that are eaten. Customs are action-oriented. Their orientation may be verbal, material, or related to belief. Customs are the ingredients of traditions. and because there are so many kinds of traditions in Iowa, there are many different customs, too.

**Traditional Customs Activities:** Initiate a discussion of custom by writing the word "custom" on the board. Explain that our traditions are made up of customs. Ask for a definition of custom, and follow with examples. Point out that the people who live in Iowa have a lot of different customs because they have many traditions.

Plan a birthday party by selecting a student from the class who has a birthday coming up, and have him or her join you at the

chalkboard. With contributions from the class, plan that student's birthday party with customs from all six kinds of folklife.

Have the class vote on their favorite holiday. Make a list of all of the customs that go into the celebration of the holiday. Organize the list with such headings as "foods," "activities," and "participants." Next draw a circle on the board and divide the circle into "slices." In each slice write in the customs you have listed under the headings. Point out how you may have different pieces in your celebration, but that the event is a tradition that you all share.

Have students complete the "Traditional Mealtimes" worksheet.

## Beliefs:

Beliefs are expressions of what people feel is true, real, and possible. Beliefs are transmitted by word of mouth as well as by example. A belief may be a verbal statement of cause and effect ("Step on a crack; break your mother's back.") or a material expression of belief (a good luck charm). A gesture may express a belief too, like knocking on wood or crossing one's fingers.

Folk beliefs include such things as good and bad luck signs, traditional weather predictions, omens and signs that predict the future, and planting lore. Students will no doubt have dozens of examples to contribute, from beliefs involving Friday the thirteenth, to finding lucky pennies, to the tooth fairy, to beliefs about lucky items of clothing (worn during tests or important athletic games), to games for predicting the names of one's future spouse. More examples can be gathered from family members, for example weather and planting lore in a farming or ranching community which depends on the weather. Dowsing or water witching is also a common practice in agricultural communities and where wells need to be dug. Beliefs and superstitions tend to cluster around events and situations that are unpredictable and to an extent uncontrollable, like the weather or future events.

Certain *life* cycle events seem to call forth traditional beliefs as well, especially transitional times such as birth, marriage and death. These events are called "rites of passage" and are important but stressful moments in a person's life. Marriage, for examples, has the traditions of the bride wearing "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue," the belief that the woman who catches the bouquet will be the next to get married, the practice of saving a piece of the wedding cake to be eaten on the couple's first anniversary, and in some communities the "shivaree," a loud late night visit to the couple's house to play tricks on them.

**Belief Activities:** Introduce the unit on traditional beliefs by writing the words "belief" and "superstition" on the board. Ask students for a definition of each term and follow with examples. Explain that we learn about beliefs by word of mouth as well as by example. Describe beliefs as a way of expressing how one feels good and bad luck happen, and what one thinks is true. Have students give verbal and material examples of beliefs about good luck and bad luck. Point out that while some people may believe one thing, others may not. This is because beliefs are a part of our traditions, and we have many kinds of traditions in Iowa.

Ask students to collect a belief from a family member. Use the attached form. Have students share their collections when they are done.

Ask students to complete the "Good Luck" worksheet.

## Music and Song:

Traditional music and song are forms of expression which are also passed on by word of mouth and by example. There are many kinds of traditional music and songs in Iowa. We have: Afro-American (rap, gospel, and blues), Anglo-American (bluegrass), Finnish, German, Greek, Hispanic, Scottish, Norwegian, Swedish, Italian, Jewish, and Amish music and song in Iowa.

Traditional music and song can be found in almost all folk groups. Hand clap and jump rope songs are common on the school grounds in the students' folk groups. Parodies like "On Top of Spaghetti" are also an example of a kind of traditional homemade music of this group. Camp songs are another example from the children's folk group.

Folk music includes both vocal and instrumental traditions, everything from a child singing a parody of a television commercial, to a Basque dance band. Folk songs are learned informally and shared within family or community groups; what is popularly called folk music is often the creation of an individual songwriter, perhaps in the style of traditional music but not truly a traditional song or performance. "Happy Birthday" is a good example of a folk song, as are all the parodies it has spawned, and which your students doubtless know and would be glad to sing. Students know lots of parodies, many of them about school and teachers. They also parody popular songs and commercials.

Other traditional songs include such favorites as "On Top of Spaghetti," songs sung on long trips such as "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer," sports cheers and songs, congratulatory songs like "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," cowboy songs, Native American chants and songs, and songs from different ethnic cultures.

*Instrumental music* covers a broad range, from a guitar played to accompany a cowboy song, to old-time fiddle traditions to the drum groups of Native American culture.

Closely related to music is dance, which is a form of expression found in every culture. Native American round dances, polkas, square-dancing, Hawaiian hula, Western two-steps, and break dancing are just a few examples of traditional dances. Wherever there is traditional music, there is likely to be dancing as well.

**Music and Song Folklife Activities:** Describing traditional music and song as an activity that is learned just like all of the other traditions you have been discussing. Ask students for examples of music and song that they like to listen to and that they like to sing. Talk about the topics of those songs, pointing out that they can be about anything. Explain that music and song do not require musical accompaniment, but if there is musical accompaniment, learning how to play a musical instrument may also be a tradition.

Complete the "First Song" worksheet.

Invite the music teacher in to play tapes of traditional folk music. Listen to the tapes and discuss:

- a) how the songs and instrumental were learned (imitation and observation, word of mouth).
- b) the musical instruments used in each piece.
- c) the topics of the songs.
- d) the rhythm and sound of each piece.

**Student Parodies:** Ask the students to share examples of their traditional music, the parody. Describe the parody with an example such as "Glory, glory hallelujah /Teacher hit me with a ruler..." Have each volunteer name the parody and who he or she learned it from. Ask him or her to recite or sing the song. Have students write their own parody. Record the session.

Contact the Iowa Arts Council to invite a musician in to the classroom to spend a few days talking about folk music and teaching the students how to listen to and play/sing folk music. Identify historical events and encourage students to write a song about those events.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Do You Know This One?

Ask a friend to tell you a joke or a funny story. Then answer these questions to describe what happened.

What is your friend's name? \_\_\_\_\_

How old is he or she? \_\_\_\_\_

Why is the joke or story funny? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Write the joke or funny story here:

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\_\_\_\_\_

# Storytelling

*LET ME TELL you the one about. . . . Did you ever hear the story about how I walked to school seven miles in the snow? Stories. You hear them from your parents, teachers, and friends. For centuries stories have been passed from generation to generation. Through stories you can learn about your family's history. Or you see how others have different experiences and values.*

*One Iowa woman told this story about her family in Iowa in the 1870s. Catherine Ann McCollum was a small girl when her family lived on a farm seven miles from Clarinda, Iowa. The stories she remembered present a picture of how evenings were spent in Iowa and capture the warmth her family shared.*



*We led the simple life; there was no other. . . . A lumber wagon was our only [way to travel], there was nothing to go to, and little money for any attraction there might have been. So we had to make our own entertainment. . . .*

*[Iowa winters were very cold]. . . . We were certainly comfortable while in bed, for we slept with a feather bed under us and another over us, with plenty of comforters, some of which were woolen throughout. One of three very large quilts covered the bed, piled high with the big feather*

Illustrations by Cynthia Moore

*ticks. There was the Queen's Fancy quilt, the Grape, and the Rose-in-the-Pattypan, all of which were very pretty and had been beautifully quilted by mother. . . .*

*Refreshments of some sort were always provided in the evening. . . . While eating apples, we sometimes told our fortunes from the seeds, using rhyme:*

*One, he loves,  
Two, she loves,  
Three, they both love,  
Four, he tarries,  
Five, he courts,  
Six, they marry.*



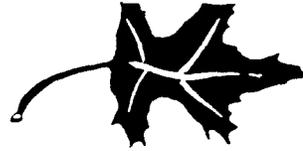
*Sewing carpet rags was the children's usual occupation. . . . I made a good many balls. . . . My two brothers earned many a nickel at this job. The woolen mittens and long woolen stockings for the entire family were knitted by my mother largely during those winter evenings, and then, too, there was the never ending patching of trousers and darning of hose. . . . While carpet rags were being sewed and other work went on, we might ask riddles, and no matter how old they were or how often we heard them, they never lost their interest for us.*

*We always began with: "What makes a cow look over the hill?" "Because she can't see through it."*

*Then would follow: "What walks in the water with its head down?" "The nails in a horse's shoe when he walks through the water."*

*"What goes 'round the house and 'round the house, and peeps in at every little hole?" "The sun."*

*"What's of no use to you and yet you can't go*



## Family Treasures

What are family treasures?

- Keepsakes—anything people keep or give to someone else to keep
- Heirlooms (air-looms)—possessions passed from one generation to the next
- Souvenirs—something kept/given for remembrance

These treasures may have historical value—like diaries. Or they may be valuable in terms of money or sentiment. Family treasures all evoke memories. Many family stories are taught through objects such as quilts, jewelry, or photographs.

Fill out the questions below to find out more about your family treasures:

1. If my family and I were going away for one year, what objects would I miss most?

2. If I could take five items to prevent homesickness, what would I take?

3. Why would I take these five items?



4. What are my parents and/or grandparents favorite family treasures?



5. What is my favorite story about one of my family treasures?



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Your Beliefs

What is one of your beliefs? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

From whom did you get this belief? \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your belief and how it affects your life:

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Your First Song

What is the first song you remember that a member of your family sang to you?  
Answer these questions about the song:

What was the title of the song? \_\_\_\_\_

Who sang the song to you? \_\_\_\_\_

Did they play a musical instrument? \_\_\_\_\_

If they did, what kind? \_\_\_\_\_

Write down one verse of the song:

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