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There is no such thing as a group without its folklore. Students have their folklore, farmers have theirs, factory workers have theirs, lawyers have theirs.

— Roger Welsch
Nebraska folklorist

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Writing what was never written

Nebraska folklore: It's been told for years and years and years. . .

By Alan Phelps

Behind signs reading "Absolutely No Visitors" and "Beware of Dogs" lives a man known to many as Captain Nebraska.

Roger Welsch, famous around the country for his "Postcards from Nebraska" segment on CBS's "Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt" program, lives and breathes folklore. And what he calls the "ugly signs" that keep mobs of fans from the front yard of his small Dannebrog farm attest to the national popularity of the Nebraska stories he tells.

"There's always an almost embarrassed effort to say, oh yeah, well, we're just as good as New York — look at the art we've piled up along the Interstate," he said, dressed in his trademark bib overalls. "The fact of the matter is, there's also very rich culture going on all the time."

Welsch is one of a growing number of people who have taken interest in what they call the folklore of Nebraska: stories, songs, memories and traditions not communicated by the printed page, but passed on first hand from one person to another and one generation to the next.

Welsch calls folklore the part of culture that is transmitted informally, primarily by word of mouth.

"It can be written on the back of an envelope, like a recipe for peanut butter cookies," he said. "It can be done by example, so that if you learn how to make peanut butter cookies from your mother, she doesn't tell you to put the fork crossways across the top, you'll see her do that and know it's part of peanut butter cookies, to cross the top with your fork — that's just part of what you do."

To many Nebraskans who have watched his show, read his books or laughed at his tall tales or "Plains lies," Welsch defines folklore in this state. And through his national exposure, Welsch has helped to make these stories popular throughout America.

Welsch said that as a language major at the University of Nebraska in the 1950s, he was fascinated by the literature

of the Romantic period of the 1800s, when writers first became interested in the folklore.

The European interest in folk tales, songs and the like was spurred during that era by the publication of the Grimm Brothers' collections of fairy tales in Germany between 1815 and 1835. The word "folklore" itself was coined in 1846.

Welsch said that although researchers of the time didn't realize that folklore existed in every part of a society, they recognized the vast library of folklore in the lower, illiterate classes.

"Whatever they (the lower classes) knew, they had acquired by informal means — by watching other people, by hearing the stories, by learning the songs, by going to wedding dances."

Welsch said that because he was from German-Russian stock, he identified with the folklore of the lower class.

"My people had no elite culture — they were migrant laborers," he said. Although his ancestors didn't have the learned poets, classical musicians and trained philosophers of the upper class, Welsch said he knew they had culture.

"It just wasn't the elitist culture that was being dealt with at the university," he said. "So you can imagine how attractive folklore was for me, from my background."

"I was just intoxicated with it. I went crazy with it, loved it."

Welsch was not the first person to be affected by the desire to learn more about Nebraskan folklore.

Louise Pound, an English professor at the University of Nebraska, is most often credited with beginning the process of gathering the songs and stories of Nebraska legends. Before her death in 1958, Pound taught at the university for 50 years and is recognized as one of the state's greatest writers.

Pound was involved with the American Folklore Society and first became interested in collecting Nebraskan folk-

lore at the suggestion of one of her colleagues at the University of Missouri.

In about 1905, she started collecting folk songs from around the state, such as "In the Summer of '60" and "I Want to be a Cowboy." Pound's first book on the subject, "Folk songs of Nebraska and the Central West: A Syllabus," was published in 1915.

A year after her death, a book of her folklore essays and speeches was published by the University of Nebraska Press. Aptly titled "Nebraska Folklore," the book has become a text on the subject.

Pound's chief test for inclusion of an item was "that it has lived in the folk-mouth and has persisted for a fair number of years." Thus, a song or tale published in a book could still be folklore if it had existed for some time in the oral tradition before publication.

"Chiefly," Pound said of the stories she collected, "they were learned in childhood or youth in the East, the South, the North, or in the Old World, and were then brought by immigration to the Middle West."

The most intensive effort to collect the folklore of Nebraska was the Federal Writers' Project in the latter part of the 1930s. The FWP was a division of the Works Progress Administration, established in 1935 under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act to create jobs for victims of the Great Depression.

Tales, songs, memories and traditional practices were all included in the collections. Between May of 1937 and December of 1940 the FWP distributed a series of 30 pamphlets, collected and edited by FWP workers, in mimeographed form to schools across Nebraska.

The pamphlets were meant to be chapters in a future book, but the World War intervened and the book was never published.

FWP officials justified their efforts to collect stories and songs by saying Nebraska's pioneers were dying off and

history had to be preserved, but Welsch said those claims were more of an excuse than a reason. He said that during the '30s, Americans fell back on their "romantic nationalism."

"What happens very often, when a country is in trouble, there's almost an inevitable movement called romantic nationalism," he said. "You try to justify who it is you are with some kind of national pride — we're Americans, because this is what America's about, by God — and here we were in desperate trouble in the '30s."

America was able to gain inspiration during the Depression by looking back on its proud pioneer past, Welsch said.

He said the government could "say to people who have been struggling in the '30s, we've been struggling a long time, and pioneers struggled too, and here's what they did — they sang and they told stories, they made apple pies out of graham crackers," he said. "It sort of makes you feel better."

Welsch said the same reasons folklore was popular in the '30s make it Nebraska's brand of folklore popular today.

"This country's in trouble," he said. "What I've been saying and believe to be true, is there's a new romanticism growing in America, too."

The people of the East like to listen to Midwestern folklore, Welsch said, because of its inherent purity that nowadays seems to be slipping away from the rest of the country.

Welsch said that, for instance, there was a time when a character in a play or book could be demonstrated to be innocent and dumb simply by being from the Midwest, but those times were changing.

"To some extent that still exists, but that's fading fast," he said. In some ways, he said, such characters were not simply dumb, but also the heroes, because they were seen to bring to the degenerate East the purity of Nebraska.

"Garrison Keillor is successful because he talks about the small town good life,