"If We Don't Joke with Each Other, We Won't Have No Fun, Will We?" Storytelling in the Richard Family of Rangeley, Maine

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Margaret Yocom discusses the storytelling repertoire of members of a family of Maine woodsmen, the Richards. Sample tales of both male and female family members are given and the tales are discussed as an interrelated part of an entire family corpus of tale-telling.

The Richard Family Tales
In the family of western Maine loggers and woodcarvers, homemakers and knitters whom I first met in 1975, storytelling can erupt at just about any time and in just about any place. Stories about work in this mountain region, stories about carving and knitting, and stories about relatives and townspeople—the Richards tell them all. The family is the "social base" of folklore, as Karen Baldwin reminded us in 1975; it is that "first folk group, the group in which important primary folkloric socialization takes place and individual aesthetic preference patterns for folkloric exchange are set."1 Exploring a family as a site of tradition also allows us to see how interwoven stories become, since stories from different workplaces get told at home, and they mix with stories from the town, from the wider family, and from a family member's own personal experiences. Because of this mixture, William Wilson—writing of his mother's tales—counsels us to think of one story in relation to all the other stories in a family: "Really to understand one of these stories, then, one has to have heard them all and has to bring to the telling of a single story the countless associations formed from hearing all the stories."2 Listening in on a family storytelling session also teaches how the intimacy of a home setting influences the way a story gets told. Finally, my presence as a willing listener with—and without—a tape recorder also makes itself felt in these stories. So, all these elements combine—occupation, region, family, outsider story collector—to influence the way a story gets told. We see this rich melding happen in the Richard family.

William and Rodney Richard, like other fathers and sons of the timber woods, exchanged stories with their workmates and then brought the stories—or at least some of them—home to their families. When William (who lived from 1900 to 1993) worked the woods in New Brunswick and Maine, he and others lived in winter-long logging camps. By Rodney's time (1929—), woods work meant daily trips to the stands of spruce and fir—with, sometimes, a week or a weekend away from home.

William remembered clearly the evening after work in the woods at the Gray Farm near Phil-
lips when he first heard Steve Smith of Lewiston
tell about Henry Mayeux, an unusually strong
French logger whose power waxed and waned
with the moon. It was 1921. William had just
come with his cousin Steve to the United States
from their Acadian hometown of Village Ste.
Pierre, New Brunswick. As the years passed,
William would listen to others tell about Henry
who, in the end, was killed by loggers who
feared his uncanny strength. Rodney remembers
first hearing the stories when he and William
worked together in the woods. Rodney’s three
sons can hardly remember a time when they
didn’t know about Henry. I, too, remember
when I first heard this cycle of legends from Wil-
liam. They are not stories that any of us can eas-
ily forget, especially since, like objects of
memory that recall a treasured person now dead,
they remind us of William, who kept the tales
alive for so long.3

In 1984, in the living room of Rodney and
Lucille’s home, I turned on my tape recorder and
asked William to tell us the tales again. All ears
turned his way as he began with one of his favor-
ites, “Henry Mayeux and the fight like to kill
’em all.” We joined in with questions and com-
ments, the way we always did when William told
his tales:

He worked round Rangeley here for years, down to Kennebago,4
over to Oquossoc—
years ago,
as far as I know.
Peggy: Yeah.

The night that he had the big fight like to kill ’em all,
that was, uh, over to Bemis.
Rodney: Oh! Is that right?
Yeah, it was a lumber camp there.

I’m telling you just the way I heard it.
There was an old man5
work up the farm, uh, Gray Farm, with us.
And,
somebody mentioned Henry Mayeux.
He said, “Yes,” he said, “I know that man.”
He said, “I was taking charge
of a certain place there in, uh—

Bemis.
And,” he said, “I had half Irishmen
and half French.
They don’t EAT TOGETHER.
Peggy: Oh!
They fight.”

So,
the Irish—
the cook was Irish.
And, uh, they had half the table,
one end the table
for the Irish and half for
the French.

So Henry come in,
for to work.
He sat on the end of the table,
and there weren't hardly anything to eat on their end of the table and on the other end they had EVERYTHING.
And he done let that go for one meal, you know?
And he asked the fellows why
they was acting THAT way.

"Well, the Irishmen," they said,
"don't want us,
"don't want 'ssociate with us at all. That's all.
"And they want everything their own way."

"Oh, oh, oh," he said. "Now I know," he said, "what the trouble is."
He said, "TONIGHT we're going to have something to EAT or NONE at all."

So,
when he set on the table on the end, 'twas just the same.

He hollered to one them other fellows there,
"Irish, pass me certain thing there."
"If you want it, come and GET IT!"
"OK!" He gets right up and walks on the table, went over there. Of course by the time he

Peggy: [Laughs ^^]

fighting.
And he told the French, he said,
"Hide all the things that they could reach,
so they won't get it.
They won't hit us then."
There was a bench back the camp there, the long window.

Just as soon's he got over there, by jeez, he begin to throw 'em right through that

Peggy: Ummm.

But, uh,

the police come up and got 'em.
Told 'em to Rumford.
Went before the judge.
The judge asked him WHY he had that fight.
Well, he told them the whole work.
they had

"Well," he said, "I don't blame you, but," he said, "you shouldn't have done what you did! You, you almost killed some of 'em."

"Too BAD," he said, "I didn't KILL 'EM ALL!"

Peggy: ^^

^^ So,

the judge told him, he said,

"Don't do that again," he said. "I'm gonna let you go free because—you didn't kill anybody. But,"

he said, "the story you told me,"

he said, "is hard take it."

So that's the way—the old man who was tellin' us that he was shakin' all over, he was so scared.

He wasn't an Irishman, he was an American.

He was the boss!

Peggy: Oh?

Oh, yeah!

And I know it come—straight from that because he was the boss.

He worked with us, oh,

pretty near a month.

He was loadin' cars—

and he was shovelin' a little snow. He was an old man, anyway.

And that's the way I heard it about Henry Mayeux.6

In another story, William told how Henry saved a 400-pound hog—a winter's supply of pork for a logging camp—from death by fire, and how Henry lifted a boulder-sized rock for a road crew in Rumford. As William himself said of Henry at different times, "Oh, he was something! Weren't nothing that he couldn't do." He was a man all right.8

"But," William added, hinting at why the loggers grew wary of Henry, "nobody knew how he done it."9 Some, William explained, thought Henry got his strength from the devil; others said it was the moon. William talked on that afternoon, telling about Henry's murder and then reviving him again, through words, to share with us Henry's other adventures among the loggers of the western Maine mountains.

Chain Saw Dangers

Like other woodsmen,10 William and Rodney also tell stories about their own experiences working in the timber woods, especially stories about the tools they have used—the same tools they have featured in their woodcarvings of tools and of loggers holding tools that stand from five inches to larger-than-life size. Although Rodney values the old-time tools as his heritage, chain saws have enabled him to work better and more comfortably. They have given him a scare or two, but they have not cost him—or any in his family—life or limb. Hearing, yes, but not life or limb. He is also aware of how he identifies, even merges with, his power machines: "Some people have no feel... You know, they don't... have that feel for the machinery, that [you're] a part of the machine and if that breaks, it hurts, you know, that's the way it is." Perhaps because woodsmen literally put their lives in their own hands when they use chain saws, stories about the early ones emphasize danger and survival. These tales also combine admiration for what the tool can do with recognition of the tool's trickster-like nature. One snowy February night in 1985, Rodney told William, Rodney Jr., and me about working with chain saws:

Rodney: And then I bought [that 12A Mall]. We were working up on Day Mountain down in Strong [cutting timber spruce]; and Phil Caron had that 12A Mall before I did, remember?

William (asks, his hearing bad from his many years spent around screeching factory and woods
equipment): Who?
Rodney (speaks noticeably louder and slower): Phil Caron.
The thing kicked,
and it come out,
and it cut him right across both legs.
Almost ruined the family jewels in the process.
And put him in the hospital.
And while he was in the hospital,
I bought the saw because he said he wasn’t ever going to use it again.
Brand new chain saw.
He had it a month.

And I didn’t have that son of a bitch much more than a month,
and it kicked back and it caught—
  William: Took your pants right off! ^^^
  Rodney: ^^^Whooo! Did it ever!
It caught in the clips on my boots—
you know?
Those hooks that you hook your lacings in?
And tore one right out.
And it bent two more,
and it punched a hole the whole length of my leg,
and it got caught in my pant leg,
and it turned end for end
and drove in my groin—
   Peggy: God!
and I was sitting on my ass on the ground, just—
bang—
like that.
So goddamned quick you wouldn’t hardly know which end you was standing on.
And—
I sit there, you know,
and turn the chain backwards until I got my pant leg out of it,
and I got up,
and I sawed the tree up,
and I threw that goddamned saw just as far as I could throw it,
down the mountain—
  William (his voice heavy with disgust for chain saws): Oh, Jesus.
And I had to walk,
Christ, half,
three-quarters of a mile down to camp.
Jesus Christ.
I couldn’t sit in the chair and pick my leg up—

William (easing himself and his son out of the memories of what could have been a fatal accident):
That was close to, that pond there [Day Mountain Pond]?
  Rodney: Well no. We were . . . going the other way. Remember that big clump of timber spruce—
  William: Yeah.
  Rodney: —we had up there—
  William: Yeah.
  Rodney: —that we cut? The steady pile all the way up, just a tassel on the top? And that was the
year I got drafted into the army. That was like the fall of ’50, that happened. 11
Hunting Stories
Like chain saw tales, hunting stories also tell of dangers in the woods. In the Richard family, though, such narratives also tell of peoples’ relationships with one another, their appreciation for the animals around them, and their admiration for the skills that have to be learned if one is to bring home food. Hunting and trapping for William were necessities; he kept food on his family table and brought in some much-needed money during the Great Depression. Rodney and his brothers added to the family larder, but Rodney’s sons have not turned toward hunting. Their animal tales feature traveling the roads, looking for wildlife. Rodney Jr. and Stephen tell of seeing moose or red fox; John delights in remembering the time he locked his brothers outside when they watched the bears at the town dump amble closer and closer to the car.

One evening, William and Rodney told Rodney Jr., Lucille, and me about their hunting adventures, and, as usual, between the two of them with their friendly banter, they hammered the stories together, remembering when Rodney shot his first deer, a rite of passage in a young man’s life. Rodney worked hard in this storytelling session to get the facts down right: he wanted his father to remember this event exactly as he, Rodney, did. They questioned each other, yelled out the same words at the same time, shared the spotlight, and competed for attention—all within about five minutes’ time. These stories are born from the comfortable telling of two people who are used to team-telling their stories to this family audience and an interested newcomer or two.

Rodney: I never did that much trapping, . . . I never got turned on to trapping. I used to hunt quite a lot. Why, I started hunting when I was—(Rodney turns to William, and speaks very loud).

How old was I when I started hunting? I wasn’t more than nine years old, was I, when I took the .22 and went down in the pasture there?

William: Oh, the time you was gonna go get a rabbit—
Rodney: Yeah—^
William: —and [you] come back, and you said, “I got you a rabbit?” ^
And I said, “Yes,” I said, “a rabbit that high?!” ^^^
(William raises his hand four feet off the floor).

He had a deer ^^
He hollered back the house—That was closed season, you know?
He hollered back the house—The weeds was way up.
And he dropped him in there.
And, Mortimer, I guess, went over to get it.
^ [Rodney] had set [the deer] right on a hornets’ nest! ^^
Rodney: +++^
William: Oh, you’re the one they chased?!

Rodney: I don’t remember.
William: [Rodney] was scared of hornets, but, uh—
Rodney and William (together): Mortimer wasn’t!!
Rodney: Yeah, it was amazing.
William: [Mortimer] could sit right side of a nest and tear it all out, you know.
They wouldn’t sting him.

Rodney: Yeah, but before that, when I first hunted—I used to take the .22 and go down the, oh, jeez—
William: Well, that’s the one I mean.
Rodney: Yeah, but—When I first went hunting, I didn’t shoot anything for a year.
^^ I was only about nine years old.
William: Yeah. Well, I guess so.
Rodney: Yeah. . . .

William (to Peggy): You know what? The first deer he ever shot?
Peggy: Huh?
William: He and Mortimer went up in the orchard above the house—
Rodney: Unh, I was alone that time. Mortimer—The time he went with me is the
time he got buck fever and jacked the shells out of the gun.
Remember the first one I shot? I took your .33, and you only give me five shells.

William: Who was with you when you shot your first deer?
Rodney: Nobody, I was alone.
William: He hollered, and I went up to get him—To help him. He was dragging
him by hind feet.^^
Rodney: He gave me five shells and the big rifle—first time I'd ever hunted with the big rifle.
And—
he said, "If you can't hit it with five shots, forget it." ^^
So I went up, and I shot the deer.
And the first shot, I just wounded him.
And then, the next shot,
he started running,
and I shot him in the back
and broke his back so he couldn't go.
And then I run up there and I filled him full of lead.
And then I took, ^^ I took my knife cut him full of holes ^^^ to make sure he was dead.
A great, nice big buck, ^^ you know?
And then I started dragging it down the hill by the hind feet. ^^^
I was so excited! ^^ They could hear me hollering half a mile across to the house, ^^
there. Oh, jeez! ^12

"You've heard of bobcats, huh?" William
asked me, as he went on with several more hunting tales. Not all of the Richards' stories of men
and animals in the wild are laced with danger, however. Some have the soft edges of a man very
much in love with the beauty of the land around him. A month later, in March of 1985, as William
and I sat in his apartment in his son Lewis' home, he told me about the day he held a baby beaver in
his arms:

I used to go over there [to a pond, down the Weld Road] and get a few fish, you know?
Peggy: "You did?"
So one day I went over there—

and—

I see something on the shore.
Course, it was a kind of rainy,
wet day. So—

I was looking for greens.
Fiddleheads.

So—

I got over there, and I see where's a beaver hauled a limb
to use the water;
with leaves on it, you know.
And there was five little beaver,
just about that long,
(William spreads his hands a foot apart)
eatin' on there. When they saw me they never moved, they sat right there.
I went over there and picked one up, and held him in my arm.
He was lookin' at me, you know.
And the others never moved.

So after a while I thought I better put him down or the old woman might come over and chew my heel.
So I,
I put that one down and I,
I took off slow, you know.
And they kept lookin' at me, and when I got far enough, they went for the water.
Peggy: But they can have their swim when they're little, they'll turn on their back and every which way. But, of course, that's natural for them anyway. But they was just about that long. Cunningest damn things you ever saw.

"They look just like that," William told me as he pointed to a beaver that Rodney had chainsawed for him out of a piece of white pine.¹³

Lucille's Stories of Knitting
In the Richard family, live animals and carvings, stories and artwork mesh together easily. Lucille, too, a knitter especially of dolls and children's clothes, used a story to tell me why she favors making knit goods for the small ones, rather than adults. It has to do, she said, with her memories of her mother and sitting by her side, learning to knit as a young girl on a rural Maine farm with her six sisters and two brothers. Lucille's story about the time her family's house burned down and she saved her one big doll emphasizes the importance of dolls in her life:

Because I remember sitting with my mother... She used to knit our mittens and she used to knit sweaters without patterns... She often did make cloth dolls—[the baby-doll type]—and dolls' clothes FOR ME because most of my sisters liked the outdoor work, and they really could care less about dolls... And [my mother] had no patterns or anything. She did everything by newspapers... She would just take newspapers... and make the shape of the doll's head, and the arms, and legs. I think she made them all separate and then sewed the legs on, and the arms on, and the head on. But she would use an old sheet... for the doll.
And I really don't remember what we used for stuffing. It was probably some old cotton, like maybe old pillowcases or sheets, again.
She would embroidery the face, and then she would take yarn for the hair, and she would either make the curls or the pig tails.
They were quite big.
We might have used some small baby clothes because it was—

I remember one in particular.
It was a pretty big one, so it might have even taken, you know, six-months or baby-sized clothes.

'Cause I remember we had a fire at our house, and my mother never got over it—
that was the first thing I grabbed of all ^^ 
the things to grab 
to save, ah!
The doll,
the big doll was the thing that I picked up first. ^^ 
Oh!
And my father either: (in a high, shrill voice) “Of all the things to save, you saved that thing!”
Oh!
But I suppose maybe I hadn’t had it that long either. ^
You know, maybe she hadn’t made it that long ago.
That was quite a number of years ago. 14

The worlds of knitting and logging often intertwine. William took yarn to the logging camps so he could mend mittens, and Rodney learned to knit from his mother. Their friend Elijah “Tiger” White of Carthage—former logger and river driver—swears that knitted mittens saved his life when they stuck fast to the wet edge of an ice shelf the day he fell through Weld Pond. 15 Knitters also raise money for injured woodsmen: in 1988, Lucille told me how she donated a teddy bear with a knit outfit for a raffle to benefit her nephew Randy Brackett, who was almost killed two years earlier in a logging accident:

I had the little teddy bear, and I dressed it.
A little knitted suit.
It seems like it was in the fall,
near a holiday season,
and I made his outfit out of red or green.

[Randy] drove a big truck.
He had parked his truck, 
and it was on a little bit of ice,
and when the sun came down in early afternoon, 
it [melted and] moved the truck.
It was his big logging truck.
And he went to jump down off’n it 
to keep it from rolling, 
and when he did, 
this big piece of wood from the guy loading (a man on the bucket loader was loading wood into the bed of the logging truck) 
struck the back of his head 
and knocked him down.

It was about an hour and a half before the ambulance could get there to get him to the hospital, then another two hours to drive him down.

He was really quite critical.
They didn’t expect him to live at first.
And he still has a hearing problem to this day.
Very bad.
He hears very little.
He mostly reads lips.
But he’s lucky to be alive because it cracked his skull in two places.

Must have been two years ago, 
at least two years ago.
It was real serious.
It was in Bemis, way in the back shore of Bemis, and it would have been harder except that they have radio towers, and so there was somebody right there at the garage that they called right into to get the ambulance started down, otherwise you’d have to wait until somebody could get to a phone or get somewhere to get help, and it would have been many hours later.

It was a serious accident. 16

Story Audiences for the Richards
The Richards, of course, have many more stories. They also tell tales about their woodcarving and about the summer people who come to buy—or just look at—the animals and other objects that they bring out of Maine pine and cedar with their jackknives and chain saws. The woodcarvings themselves tell stories: Rodney’s “Kind Woodsman,” for example, shows a logger gently lifting a fallen baby bird back into its nest. Other stories also celebrate the extended family who gather at the Haley and Calden and Wing reunions as summer draws to a close in the north country.

Living in a town where a good story is savored as much as a tasty venison steak keeps the Richards in good storytelling practice. They tell stories about local characters, miraculous feats, sportsmen from “away” whom locals guide on the region’s lakes and rivers: in Rangeley, stories are a way of life. Before, during, and after work, at church, at the American Legion, at beano and cribbage, or at any number of local gathering places such as Fitzy’s Donut Shop, Pine Tree Frosty, Dockside, and the M&H Logging garage, Rangeley people share the news of the day and the tales of yesterday. One February day in 1985, over lunch at the Wagon Wheel Diner, owned by Lucille’s sister Virginia and her husband, Ralph White, Rodney and his townsmen got to rehearsing the stories of the notorious Eldon Collins. Eldon had left for Alaska several years earlier, but not before leaving behind a whole cycle of stories that are enjoyed over and over again by those who work both in and out of the woods. One of the favorites tells of the time Eldon shot his bulldozer, but in the back-and-forth of one conversation, Rodney’s friend Dick added a new piece of information that changed forever the way the story was told. Rodney set the group remembering:

Rodney: Eldon got over on the south shore there, wasn’t it?
Yeah, up in back of Dill’s somewhere, wasn’t it?
He was yarding wood up there.
I think it was up—
Oh, Jesus!
Yeah, it was up in back of Dill’s there.
He came down off the mountain there.
Eldon got way the hell up in the woods there, and he either lost the track off [his bulldozer], or something.
And it was in the fall of the year.
He had a .45 revolver with him in case he saw a deer.
And he jumped out and wound a hole in the radiator with it, and he had to sack the radiator out and get Perly Philbrick to solder it.
Dick Thompson: Eldon didn’t sack it out.
Rodney: He didn’t?
Dick: Perly Philbrick went right up there and fixed it.
Rodney: Perly went up there?
Dick: When I bought Perly’s garage over there, Perly told me.
I was telling him about Eldon shooting his goddamed radiator with a .45, and Perly says, "That what happened to it? The son of a bitch told me he stuck a stub through it. Yeah," he said, "if I'd 've known that—it was 30 below that morning—I never would of gone up there and fixed it."

Rodney: Jesus!
One day down at Fitz's, just before Eldon went to Alaska, we were in there, and I said, "Eldon, sometime," I said, "I want to sit down with you with my tape recorder, and I'd like to get your version of the day you shot your bulldozer."
And Jesus, I got thrown right out the goddamed door.
Bodily!

"You son of a bitch," he said.
He had a violent, violent temper. 'N, just like that, he was over it, you know?
Stephen Richard: Yeah, he threw Pinky out the door.
Dick: Yeah. And Delbert Green—Rodney: Delbert's the same way!
Dick: —the old tractor wouldn't start, and he took the chain saw and tried to saw the track off.
Rodney: Oh, yeah!
Stephen: And then there was the time Carl Searles... 17

On and on the stories go. It would be wrong, however, to see these tales as just being about logging or hunting or knitting or family. Instead, these narratives that live in one family's repertoire feature the valued confluence of family, friends, work, creativity, and place. They are, above all, stories of connection and relationship, of lives lived in partnership with others and with the land of lakes and mountains in western Maine. 18

Notes
3. For a discussion of objects of memory and the study of folklore, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.
4. In editing the Richards' stories, I've used several ethnopoetic practices. Line breaks indicate that tellers paused in their telling; spaces between lines indicate longer pauses. Italics denote stressed words; CAPITALS, more loudly stressed words. Circumflex marks[^][^] indicate laughter, in varying intensities. I've edited out some false starts and some repetitions of single words.
8. Richard family, interview, WM5.
10. Several articles and books record stories of families who also make their living in the timber woods. Stories often detail the
relationships between fathers and sons—either as work partners or as people who did not get along with one another. They always describe the changing world of work as different technologies entered the woods. Many tales tell of accidents, often fatal ones, and men's stories and women's stories find their way into some of these studies, but often such tales are in the minority. Finally, some narratives show how much work in the woods meant to men who, like John Lamberton of Vermont, chose a sawmill stone as his tombstone. See Beck, Ives, James-Duguid, Meader, Mitchell, Perreault, and Roberts.


18. For longer discussions about storytelling and human relationships, see Narayan. On storytelling and people's relationship to the land, see Hufford.

Further Reading

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