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STUDYING COMMUNITY FESTIVALS

In the early 1980s, I began to study town festivals in Wyoming, eventually publishing several articles about them (see especially Shalinsky, 1986). Festivals are generally considered to be types of cultural performances and as such are studied by folklorists as well as anthropologists (Stoeltje, 1992). Cultural performances may be found in all societies around the world today and in the past. There are diverse examples ranging from those associated with major religious traditions or with localized ritual entertainments (Turner, ed., 1982; MacAloon, 1984).

Even professors who teach literature may be interested in studying clowning and ritual reversals of power, for there are relevant examples in Shakespeare's works. Plays and films are also examples of cultural performances. There are now many specific studies about various types of festivals in other societies as well as in the United States, including carnival and rodeo (Kinser, 1990; Lawrence, 1982). Faculty and students at the University of Wyoming have studied cultural performances like those put on by the Society for Creative Anachronism, which reenacts tournaments and cultural events from the European Middle Ages and Renaissance; mountain men rendezvous; and local historical theme parks, which feature versions of explorers, bank robbers and settlers of the AOld West.@

Anthropologists have compared town festivals to traditional society=s public rituals, which reflect and justify contemporary values and social situations, and which offer a vision of the future. In Wyoming, many towns have celebrations like the famous "Frontier Days" in Cheyenne. Parades, rodeos, carnivals, bazaars, livestock shows, and musical performances highlight these festivals. Most community residents believe the festivals are organized to bring in tourist dollars, but anthropologists argue that these celebrations have other important functions: preserving heritage, fostering social cohesion, releasing tensions accumulating from daily life, and inculcating pride and loyalty.

In other regions, community festivals may revolve around national holidays such as July 4th, Thanksgiving or Memorial Day; a religious holiday such as Easter; or an ethnic celebration such as the Chinese New Year. Sporting events (the Olympics or the Rose Bowl) provide another theme. Throughout the United States, community festivals provide an easily accessible resource for student "field" involvement. Festivals offer a unified focus for learning about history, government, community, social interaction, traditional values, and social change. Furthermore, numerous skills (observation, note-taking, analysis, and written description) are involved in the study of community festivals.

This teaching activity first offers a general approach for studying community festivals. A study guide is next provided to help teachers conduct a field study with their students. Finally, one celebration is described illustrating the type of analysis possible for such a study.

General Approach

Students carry a notebook to make brief notes on the spot, but at regular intervals (every 30-45 minutes) they stop and record more details from memory. They write an "objective" account of what they saw and heard (i.e., sequence and time of events, actors, spectators reaction); then they can add their personal reactions. Later they hypothesize about the functions of the festival event for participants and spectators.

Students interested in photography can take pictures to check the accuracy of their observations and to search for greater detail. Tape recorders can record sound level and crowd response as well as conduct interviews. Library research and newspaper archives are important resources for historical perspectives on the festival. Students may compare these accounts with oral history reports from informant interviews.

If students collaborate when they write up their notes, they will see firsthand that observation has a subjective component and that the interpretation of human behavior is very difficult. The students' differing reactions to observation should generate interesting classroom discussion. It is particularly fascinating for students to think about how the perspectives of different people might influence their interpretations of the festival. For example, how might a person new to the area interpret the history of the town or the major occupations of its people from observing the festival? Is a rancher's view of a county fair different from a town shopkeeper's or a tourist's? How does a man's view differ from a woman's or a child's?

Before a study is begun, it may be necessary for permission to be obtained from an organizing group, participants, or perhaps the Chamber of Commerce. Requests to avoid being photographed, recorded, or observed should be honored. Most people readily consent as I experienced in my study in Thermopolis, Wyoming.

Study Guide

The following guide can help students gather data and analyze a local community festival (see especially Hatcher, 1978):

1. General Description of the Festival
 - A. Number of events in the festival (parade, carnival)
 - B. Number of units in events (floats, booths, rides).
 - C. What is the duration of the festival and of each event?
 - D. How long has the festival been conducted? How has it changed in content?
2. Festival Setting
 - A. Downtown park, auditorium. How is the area changed from its ordinary function and appearance?
 - B. Layout. (Make a map.)

- C. How do people get from place to place? What is the movement pattern? (linear, circular, randomly scattered). How does this foster social interaction?
 - D. Do many things go on simultaneously or do all people attend the same events? How does this affect social behavior and the expression of emotions?
3. Type of Festival
 - A. Calendrical (every year at the same time), seasonal (harvest, county fair), religious, ethnic.
 - B. Does each event have the same focus? (A parade may celebrate town history while a carnival in the same festival does not.)
 - C. What message is given about the past, present, and future?
 - D. When has each event become a part of the festival?
 - E. What values are fostered by each event?
4. Participation in the festival
 - A. Who plans the festival?
 - B. Who participates and how?
 - C. What groups of people are attracted to what events and why?
 - D. What is the spectator/participant ratio? (a few watching with many participating as with a square dance, or few participating with many watching as with a parade)
5. Mood of the Crowd
 - A. Camaraderie, partisanship, agitation.
 - B. How consistent is the mood? When does it change and why?
6. Types of Objects Used in the Festival
 - A. Arts and crafts, manufactured merchandise, and floats.
 - B. How are the objects presented to the public? What are the functions of the objects?
 - C. Which objects attract the most attention and why?
7. Symbolism
 - A. What kind of message is given about the past?
 - B. What kinds of national symbols are used? (flags, soldiers in uniform, colors) What responses are evoked during the festival?
 - C. What kinds of local symbols are used? (farm machinery, cowboys, new technology)
 - D. What kind of ethnic symbols are used?
8. Costs/Rewards for Participants and Spectators
 - A. What does it cost in terms of time, money, or donated goods?
 - B. What do the participants gain?
 - C. What do the spectators gain?
9. Functions of the Festival
 - A. What do people say is the purpose of the festival?

- B. In what ways is the festival period distinguished from the regular life of the participants?
- C. Do people attend the festival year after year? Why?
- D. To what extent is a sense of community fostered by the festival?

Thermopolis Pageant Days

Thermopolis' town celebration, like many in the West, contains several events including parades, sidewalk sales, a carnival of rides and games, a demolition derby, a horse show, and outdoor plays. Since 1950, however, a unique event, the "Gift of the Waters Pageant," has played a central role in the festival. This pageant commemorates the Shoshoni Indians' 1896 cession of the hot springs near Thermopolis from their reservation lands. The Indians received \$60,000 in cash and cattle for the ten square acres. Many townspeople point to the hot springs as the primary reason for the founding and continued growth of the town. The "Gift of the Waters Pageant" develops various themes usually associated with traditional rituals: the importance of the past, the values of good will and harmony, and the feeling of reverence and respect. Though a few Indian dancers do participate, in return for payment, the festival is decidedly a non-Indian view of Thermopolis' past.

The one hour pageant performed at dusk on a grassy knoll near the Thermopolis hot springs, is organized with narration and silent symbolic scenes alternating with traditional Indian dances performed by Shoshonis from the nearby Wind River Reservation. The poetic narration, originally composed in 1925, describes in symbolic form the townspeople's view of the history and purpose of the springs. Basically, the narration develops three interwoven themes: that the Shoshonis made a beneficent gift of their hot springs; that the springs have healing qualities; and that all peoples are brothers who share in God's bounty. The themes are interwoven through the role of Chief Washakie, leader of the Shoshonis when the treaty cession of the hot springs was made. The Chief is portrayed as a wise, generous man who willingly gave up the springs to his white brothers and also specified in the treaty that some of the waters should be reserved for free public use.

The notion that the water is sacred and healing is portrayed by the pageant's major silent activity. An Indian "princess" helped by two attendants dips a bowl into the springs. She offers the bowl of water to a medicine man who drinks and passes the bowl to the other Shoshoni men who drink. Then "Chief Washakie" makes his gift. It is precisely the power of the water that recompense the Shoshonis for their sacrificial gift, since the people who come from around the world to be healed will bless the Shoshonis.

A strong religious component ties in the themes of universal brotherhood and healing. One of the highlights of the performance is the rendition of the Lord's Prayer in sign language by a Shoshoni girl. While she works through the gestures, a member of the women's chorus, who has moved to a hidden spot overlooking the setting, sings the prayer. This sequence develops the theme of universal brotherhood which culminates in the closing dance of the pageant in which all the Shoshonis and the women in the chorus intermingle in the Shoshoni dance circle. The performance is slow-paced, solemn, and dignified, lightened only by the exuberance of the Shoshoni dances.

Studying such a pageant and community festival, students can ask questions such as: What is the relationship of this festival to local and national history? How does this pageant portray Native

American-White relations? What elements of this festival promote social cohesion, local pride, and the preservation of the tradition?

Epilogue

Every summer, Thermopolis has its town celebration, and the “Gift of the Waters” pageant is still part of it. Some of the townspeople think that it is not really an important part of the celebration anymore, and attendance has dropped from the hundreds who enjoyed the performances in the 1950s.

However, a core of townspeople has maintained the performance annually since 1950, and tourists who happen to be in the area may enjoy seeing the pageant. Although the costumes are quite different, tourists cannot always distinguish townspeople who are dressed as Indians from the small group of Indians who come to dance, who are actually from the Wind River Reservation. In 1995, I discussed the pageant with a group of students taking a course on Native American/White Relations in Wyoming, including Native Americans and Anglo students from Thermopolis and the surrounding areas. The students had much to say about the significance of cultural performances. The Native Americans were critical of the way their history was depicted. Other students thought such pageants represented the values and solidarity of only a small group of local people, and should be made more relevant to the present.

For further reading:

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