

Travels with Jane



A Day
in the Life
of a
Folklorist

by Jane Roy Brown
Photograph by Bill Regan

Somewhere near Mud City, Jane Beck barrels down a mountain road in a snow squall, her Jeep Cherokee rounding curves at speeds that might raise the hair on a flatlander's neck. But Beck seems not to notice, because she is telling a story—for a folklorist, a transporting act.

This one is the tale of the late Daisy Turner, the daughter of an African-American slave. After Beck courted her persistently, Turner, then 100 years old, agreed to be interviewed. What unfolded over the next four years was an astonishing multigenerational saga stretching back almost two centuries, from a Grafton farm to a Virginia plantation to a village “somewhere near” Ghana. “It was all passed down orally,” says Beck, her voice still touched with awe. Turner died in 1988 at age 104.

Twenty years ago, Beck, now 63, founded the Vermont Folklife Center in Middlebury, with the mission “to document and preserve the heritage and traditions of Vermont and its neighbors.” The center, a nonprofit membership organization, gathers personal stories through field research and oral interviews. Though it started in 1982 under the Vermont Arts

Council, the center gained independent footing two years later under Beck's leadership, becoming one of the country's first private nonprofit folklife institutions. Since then, Beck and a growing staff—now four in addition to her—have amassed more than 4,000 oral histories.

Beck calls them “the extraordinary stories of ordinary people”: farmers and loggers; stone cutters and wood carvers; makers of baskets, rugs, and quilts. People from Russia, Laos, Italy, and Poland. Native Americans and back-to-the-landers. The stories reside, on audiotape, videotape, and paper, along with thousands of photographs, in the center's archives in the former Masonic Hall in Middlebury.

Folklife is traditional culture, Beck says, handed down through the generations, shaped by custom. “It's all the little things you do every day but probably don't notice, the things you learn informally, like a boy building something with his father or a girl cooking with her mother,” she elaborates. And what binds worker to trade, artist to object, generation to generation, are stories....