

Storytellers, Once Upon a Time

By Dennis Knight

There may be several things that we think distinguish humans from the animals, but one has to be the ability to tell stories. It is how we, as families and societies, pass on history, knowledge and lore, and it must have begun right along with the development of words.

Storytelling blossomed in the millennia before the invention of letters and literacy. It is how some of our great works came to us, epics like *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights* which collected the ancient stories of Persia and Arabia. The old English story of *Beowulf* is merely the writing down of an old heroic poem set in Scandinavia. The use of poetry, rhythm and song allow storytellers the world over to commit to memory and pass their heroic tales down, word for word, to the next generations of storytellers.

Homer fully brought the Iliad and the Odyssey, those graceful epics of ancient Greece, but he drew from the deep well of tales handed down by storytellers in the centuries before him.

In pre-Christian Ireland, the seanchai (“senashee”) spoke wondrously of banshee, fairies, leprechauns, and the dreaded, shape changing pooka. If their fancies now seem pure blarney, recall the Sirens and Cyclops of the Odyssey before you raise your protest. Modern bards continue to ply the Emerald Isle, competing for awards at events like the Mummerys' Festival in Galway.

The written word expanded our ability to memorialize and explain history and ideas, but it hasn't stopped the rich tradition of oral storytelling. In Africa, the least literate continent of the Earth, the art of the elders continues to thrive in profound ways. The Swahili people on the coast of Kenya pass down moving poetry, some of which has been influenced by Islam with stories of genies. Other ethnic groups have stores of riddles, proverbs and sayings that are an important aspect of every day speech.

The Kikuyu, also in Kenya, sing elaborate poems and riddles learned by heart, rhythmically accompanied by a decorated gourd. Many pieces are very long and one “gicandi” consists of 127 stanzas. Oral literature is taught and preserved in the modern education system in Kenya, and it includes a requirement for students to collect folklore from their parents and grandparents. They believe it to be an important part of their heritage and are taking steps to preserve it.

The Native American culture is known for preserving its memories over centuries, without written languages. All of the tribes had revered storytellers, men and women, to teach their history, customs, rituals, and legends through vivid narratives. As in other parts of the world, Indian storytellers are still actively engaged in preserving their cultures.

But before I close this piece, I want to mention the importance of storytellers in the collection of family lore and histories. The Knight kids learned to watch for the shine in Dad's Irish eyes as he was about to embark on a story or two of our forebears. We would listen to wondrous tales like that of how our family name lost its “Mc” when a great or great-great grandfather, then named McKnight, caught rustling cattle, was given the choice of giving up his Mc or hanging. His choice preserved the family line and I thank the heavens for that, because along with it Dad inherited his twinkle and passed it on to me. I hope you have some twinkling eyes in your family, too.