

LOCAL CHARACTERS AND THE COMMUNITY:
A CASE STUDY OF TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL
NONCONFORMITY IN THE MARITIMES

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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LOCAL CHARACTERS AND THE COMMUNITY:
A CASE STUDY OF TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL
NONCONFORMITY IN THE MARITIMES

by

© Diane Tye, B.A., M.A.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Folklore
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ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the local character phenomenon within one Maritime community. Based on the town's cast of past and present characters, the study discusses what the label means and how it is applied. It explores the relationship between character and community from a number of aspects including the designation's value for the character; the nature and functions of local character anecdotes; characters' contributions to community folklore and dynamics; and official culture uses of character performances.

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Staff members of Memorial University Folklore Department, Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive, Memorial University Library, Mount Allison University Library, Pictou County Regional Library, Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Hector Centre Trust, Cumberland

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Friends and family have shared in all aspects of this thesis. There has been a sometimes difficult role and I offer special thanks to these people who did not always understand what I was doing--or perhaps more importantly why I would bother--but offered unconditional support nonetheless. As in everything I do, my father's example and my mother's interest have been especially important. It is difficult to adequately thank my husband Peter for his extensive participation. His patience, confidence, and endless cups of coffee have literally kept me going. Jane Burns who always had time to listen also provided consistent and important emotional support.

Of course, my biggest thanks goes to my informants. I am very aware that in asking them to tell me about local characters, I have also asked them to reflect--and perhaps expose--some uncomfortable aspects of community life. I

know some of them will not enjoy what I have said about the community or its members but I want them to know I have tried to live up to their trust and generosity of spirit.

In closing, I dedicate this study to the memory of Bill Russell. Bill took on an extensive research project when I began my fieldwork. We exchanged references, compared methodologies and shared the frustrations that accompany early drafts. Although he died before he was able to complete his own analysis, his precision and passion continue in the memories of those who knew him and have profoundly influenced all phases of this work.

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I

INTRODUCTION:

"BLANCHE WASN'T FOLKLORE"...OR WAS SHE?

One experience during the fieldwork for this study affected me more profoundly than any other I have had as a folklorist and at the same time reveals a great deal about characters and their enigmatic relationship with other community members. Near the beginning of my collecting period, I contacted Joyce, a woman from a prominent Amherst family who had earlier befriended Blanche, a charwoman and local character. Joyce, knowing of Blanche's interest in history, regularly took her to local historical society meetings, withstanding curious glances and occasional scowls from some of the other members. She and Blanche missed few meetings despite the fact they sometimes had to sit alone and Blanche would frequently embarrass her companion by making inappropriate remarks. A year or so after Blanche's death when I asked Joyce to tell me about Blanche and how she had come to know her, she readily agreed.

When I arrived for the interview, however, the situation had changed drastically from a few days previously. Trying to be helpful, Joyce had contacted a woman who once boarded in the house where Blanche worked and one of Blanche's former employers. These women were

outraged that Blanche would figure in a folklore study. To them, it meant that the indignity and ridicule she had suffered throughout her lifetime had not even ended with her death. They made the collective decision not to cooperate with me, although the former employer assured me that if the thesis had been worthwhile she would have been pleased to help. She flatly stated her refusal: "Blanche was eccentric, Blanche wasn't folklore."

In the ensuing three hours I spent with Joyce and during the phone conversations I had with all three women, I argued and reassured. By the end of our discussions they were a little more accepting of my work and had actually shared a great deal of information concerning Blanche. Their initially strong reaction, however, communicated much about the deeply held feelings local characters often incite. Some of their comments guided my thinking through the following months of fieldwork and analysis as I explored the ambiguous relationship between local characters and their community, reflected on folklorists' responsibilities to their informants and subjects, and--for one more time--contemplated the nature of the discipline.

Of course the informant was right: according to popular views, "Blanche wasn't folklore." Much about her life--how she was treated by family members, several employers, and some town residents--is not pretty. Certainly it does not fit the stereotypical view shared by many Maritime Canadians.

of folklore as consisting of romantic survivals. As Neil Rosenberg aptly remarks, "The mere preservation of folklore as symbol of the proud heritage from the past makes little sense when it is mean and derogatory."¹ Nor, if this informant were familiar with the literature, would she find much folkloristic theory applied to local characters. Jan Harold Brunvand comments, "Folklorists themselves, like their subjects, tend to be tradition-bound."² The local character has not been a common subject of folkloristic analysis and is only now beginning to attract the attention of theorists.

Yet, characters are a part of many, if not all group contexts. Families, friendship circles, occupational groups, neighborhoods, and/or whole communities boast their own unique set of nonconformists. Unlimited by restrictions such as age, sex, or ethnicity, characters are found from the least sophisticated settings to institutions of higher learning. The Public Archives of Nova Scotia, where I often work, has characters among its regular patrons, such as the woman nicknamed "the Bag Lady" by staff members because of the large quantity of plastic bags she always carries. Former students and faculty members of nearby Dalhousie

¹ Neil Rosenberg, "Folklore in Atlantic Canada: the Enigmatic Symbol," Atlantic Provinces Literature Colloquium. Marco Polo Papers Vol. 1 (Saint John, New Brunswick: Atlantic Canada Institute, 1977): 79.

² Jan Harold Brunvand, "The Study of Contemporary Folklore: Jokes," Fabula 13 (1972): 1.

University frequently and unselfconsciously recount traditional narratives about a character named Musty. In a wide range of contexts, characters influence interaction among group members and affect the development and transmission of a group's folklore. While an analysis of the character's role may uncover uncomfortable cultural taboos or societal inequalities, it is a component of small group dynamics and thus a subject for folkloristic study. As Neil Rosenberg comments concerning folkloric expressions of prejudice, however, "...such folklore is not worth collecting unless it is studied in terms of its dynamics."³

This study focuses on the local character's role and interactions within one Maritime community. Based on data collected during fieldwork, and from primary and secondary documents, it explores the character's role within Amherst, Nova Scotia, and within the town's folklore. It builds on the premise advanced by Marion Starkey in her preface to The Devil in Massachusetts, "You discover that if you really know the few, you are on your way to understanding the millions. By grasping the local, the parochial, it is possible to make a beginning at understanding the universal."⁴

The study begins by establishing a firm contextual base

³ Rosenberg 79.

⁴ Marion Starkey, The Devil in Massachusetts (New York: Dolphin, 1949).

5
for the investigation. Chapter one provides an overview of the place of the local character in folkloristics, discussing historical and contemporary, descriptive and analytical treatments. Moving from the literature to the study community, chapter two gives a detailed account of Amherst's historical development, describing the characters who have populated the community's past and present. Chapter three addresses the final contextual concern, that of definition. It probes the meaning of the concept of character.

Chapter four looks at the character as a performance role, asking what individuals become characters and why. While this is undoubtedly an important aspect of the overall phenomenon, personal uses and interpretations of the role are not emphasized in the present study. The full exploration of the role's psychological benefits are outside the confines of folkloristic examination.

The focus switches to the character's interaction with the community. Chapter five looks at the form and function of local character anecdotes, demonstrating the importance of folk narratives in community evaluation and acceptance of characters. Some of the traditional functions of the role are explored in chapter six and the study ends with a survey of ways formal or official culture consciously incorporates characters or elements of characters' performances.

That the community I chose to explore is the one where

I grew up and where my family and many of my friends still live, raises the "insider-outsider" debate. Some argue that strangers to a study community are more successful collectors in that they often elicit information informants would be reluctant to tell another group member.⁵ On the other hand, insiders already share a large resource of communal knowledge with informants that they do not need to be made aware of. In addition, when investigating topics sensitive to some community members, being an insider may prevent unintentionally offending an informant. In the case of the present study, I have found being a native has facilitated, rather than impeded, collecting.

While, as anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker comments, a fieldworker is never completely objective,⁶ I do not feel that my close association with the town and its people has interfered my ability to remain objective. That is, I have never felt hampered or restricted in my observations. On the other hand, the logistics of presenting the research in finished form so as not to embarrass or hurt any informants or characters, has been a concern. In contrast to the

7. ⁵ See: Kenneth S. Goldstein, A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore (Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964) 64. Goldstein describes "stranger value" as an advantage for some types of collecting: "The collector who comes from afar and will disappear again will be able to collect materials and information which might not be divulged to one who has long-term residence in the same area."

⁶ Hortense Powdermaker, Stranger and Friend (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966) 19.

outsider who may never live in, or return to the community after the completion of research there, I, as an insider, am a permanent part of its life. The dilemmas of this reality are not often addressed in folkloristics but as Robert Walls and Guntis Smidchens urge, "...as professionals we have the obligation to seriously consider and reconsider the problems of fieldwork ethics. We have to make the effort to write more about the personal experiences in the field, and openly and honestly discuss the negative and positive consequences of our actions."⁷ Fellow folklorists who generously supplied references, were silent when asked for their views on how to adequately protect the privacy of informants and characters. It is not a topic folklorists often address or know how to solve.

After much thought, I have decided to change the names of all informants and to keep original tapes and fieldnotes in my possession. Each tape is referred to by year and tape number so that the first interview of 1988 would be listed as (T88:1). The date of the interview and pseudonyms of specifically mentioned informants are listed in Appendix A. Fieldnotes have been numbered according to date, for example: (FN5 April 1988). Because of the frequent reference to secondary sources where the characters are named, their identities are almost impossible to disguise. Nonetheless,

⁷ Robert E. Walls and Guntis Smidchens, "Ethics and Fieldwork," Editorial, Folklore Forum 19 (1986): 121.

I have changed the names of all living characters in an attempt to provide a measure of privacy.

In transcribing interviews, I have followed the methodology outlined by Edward D. Ives in The Tape-Recorded Interview. Two dashes and a space (--) indicates the informant breaks off, was interrupted by an outside force, or interrupts the flow of his narrative very briefly to make an unrelated comment; underscored spaces (_) replace indistinguishable sections; and information included for the sake of clarity is placed inside brackets and underscored ([_]). Much biographical data is based on information published in the Amherst Daily News which is referred to as ADN.

Notwithstanding problems associated with presentation, local characters have a place within the contemporary study of folklore. As instigators and transmitters of much of a community's folklore, they play an important role in the maintenance of traditional culture. They are also an important presence for group members. One of the women interviewed about Blanche commented, "My life was enriched by having met Blanche." In considering some of the ways in which characters affect one town's residents and folklore, this study examines the special breed of individuals affectionately and inexplicably referred to within one family as "Amherst's onions" (FN 21 June 1986).

II

THE LOCAL CHARACTER AND FOLKLORISTICS

Characters have been a part of folklore collecting and collections since the first days of the discipline. Only with the development of modern concerns and methodology, however, is the local character's role in folkloristics, and in the community in general, becoming a focus of well rounded analysis. This chapter traces the folkloristic treatment of characters from early descriptive miscellanies to contemporary analytic studies.

As elsewhere, local characters have long been a part of folklore collecting in the Atlantic Provinces. In The Quest of the Ballad, W. Roy Mackenzie, one of the first folksong collectors in North America, refers to one singer as an "old, savage man-eating tiger in the shape of a north-shore fisherman."¹ He calls another "an eccentric person of outworn habits"² and a singer he knew in his youth an "unconscious and serene individualist."³ Mackenzie declares, "This sketch may be narrowed down to the simple statement that I have always been addicted to what is

¹ W. Roy Mackenzie, The Quest of the Ballad (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1919) -21.

² Mackenzie 23.

³ Mackenzie 43.

frequently described as 'low company'.... When I developed, a few years ago, the nobler ambition to form a collection of the Nova Scotia ballads I had the best stock-in-trade obtainable for the purpose, a familiarity with the sort of people who now possess a monopoly of this very humble species of entertainment."⁴ While Mackenzie's meaning in his use of the phrase "low company" continues to be debated,⁵ it is clear he linked the informant and the nonconformist, or character.

Twenty years later Maud Karpeles encounters nonconformists during her folksong collecting expedition in Newfoundland. Some singers like Fred Mercer, a blind man who spent his time nursing a baby and looking after children, were physically impaired.⁶ Others suffered from mental or emotional disabilities as her diary entry for September 18, 1929 attests. Karpeles writes, "Called on Joanie Ryan--a half daft woman of 80 or more who lives with another Joanie in a terrible little shack--the dirtiest and most tumble down place I have ever seen. Got her to sing with utmost difficulty."⁷ While some of Karpeles's

⁴ Mackenzie 33.

⁵ See: Martin Lovelace, "W. Roy MacKenzie as a Collector of Folksong," Canadian Folk Music Journal 5 (1977): 8.

⁶ Maud Karpeles, Correspondence and Field Diaries, ms. 78-0003, 10 Oct 1929 Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive.

⁷ Karpeles 18 September 1929.

informants were undoubtedly regarded as local characters by the rest of their community, it is clear the collector often experienced difficulty in reaching her own assessments.

For some contemporary folklorists the link between character and informant is so pervasive they regard the conformist informant as an exception. In the introduction to her doctoral dissertation, Debora Kodish comments: "This dissertation is not about a stellar performer well-known to a community, nor about a maverick, deviant, or another of the sorts who have often captured folklorist's attentions. Instead, it is about a person often overlooked, about a dutiful daughter, fine mother, loving wife, busy housekeeper, good Christian and friendly neighbor--a kind, personable, ordinary woman who boasts that in seventy years she has never had a cross word with a good friend."⁸ Whether the nonconformist as informant is the norm, or whether those encountered overshadow less colorful informants, for over a century of fieldwork at least some folklorists have made the connection.

If folklorists believe they encounter local characters during the collecting experience, evidence suggests that some informants may feel the same way. It is too late to determine if Roy Mackenzie's informants considered themselves nonconformists but they may have regarded the

⁸ Debora Gail Kodish, "Never Had a Word Between Us": Pattern in the Verbal Art of a Newfoundland Woman," Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1981, 1.

collector as out of the ordinary. An elderly man in Mackenzie's native village describes him as "River John's first hippy." He concludes, "He was a real character" (FN 9 April 1988).

That folklorists and informants may see each other as characters raises the issue of terminology. While folklorists rely on "character" among other terms to describe nonconformists, few offer any explanation as to its meaning. Usual reference works such as Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Mythology and Folklore provide little insight. No entries appear under "character," "local character," or related terms such as "eccentric," "hermit," or "worthy". Headings in Stith Thompson's tale type and motif indexes, and Baughman's supplementary motif analysis, include local character narratives but none of the collections specifically refer to characters.

Typically when folklorists define "character," they do so in passing, often raising more questions than they answer. In an article titled, "The Concept of the 'Character'," Linda Ballard specifies only that the term refers to "local individuals, often unnamed."⁹ In a discussion of narrative sequence and narrative ownership, Michael Taft offers a more detailed explanation: "Most folklorists would agree that people in a community who

⁹ Linda Ballard, "The Concept of the 'Character'," Lore and Language 5:1 (1986): 69.

consistently deviate from the social norm become local characters: the mentally and physically deformed, the very wise and the very foolish, the clever trickster, the raconteur, the eccentric, the miser." Taft introduces ambiguity, however, when he tries to determine if "character" describes a particular degree of nonconformity. He states: "But everyone in a community deviates from the norm at one time or another, and even temporary deviations from an expected role or behaviour pattern usually result in that person becoming the object of discussion in the community. Thus, not only do we have deviants within our culture but we all deviate. We are all potential local characters."¹⁰ While Taft offers clues as to how he and other folklorists interpret "character," he concludes without clearing up any of the confusion--and perhaps creates more--as to who should be considered a local character.

Ballard and Taft are representative of how folklorists have treated the concept of character. When Ballard specifies that characters are local individuals, she echoes Sandra Stahl's definition of local characters as real

¹⁰ Michael Taft, "Characterizing the Local Folk: Narrative Sequence and Narrative Ownership in the Conversational Flow," unpublished paper read to the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 31 May 1979.

people.¹¹ Stahl contrasts local characters with character types such as the miser and regional types such as the New England Yankee. According to Stahl the local character anecdote belongs to a narrative cycle distinct from stereotypical stories associated with character and regional types.

An appreciation of the difference between local characters and character types is reflected in many of the names folklorists use to describe characters. Most emphasize the importance of context: local character, local personality, town eccentric, urban hermit, worthy, legend, folklore figure, folk figure, and folk character. Descriptives such as "local" or "folk" set the individual in a small group or community context. It is a connection B. A. Botkin clearly outlines in A Treasury of New England Folklore under a section titled "Local Characters":

'What is a 'character'?' asks Joseph C. Lincoln, and answers: 'Why, he or she is, apparently, an individual who speaks and acts and, perhaps, thinks in a manner different from that in which you, yourself, speak and act and think. And it is just possible that he, because of that difference, may consider you a character; he has that privilege, of course. It depends on the point of view, doesn't it? And there is another point to be considered, A 'character' may not be a character at all in his own environment and become one when he steps

¹¹ Sandra Stahl, "The Local Character Anecdote," Genre 8 (1975): 287..

outside of it.¹²

Two years later, in a collection of narratives concerning Gassy Thompson and other local characters, Levette Davidson reflects Botkin's concern with context and firmly places the character within the community: "Every small community has its gallery of outstanding personalities, famous locally although unknown to the rest of the world."¹³ Most recently Linda Ballard has emphasized the link between character and context from a functional perspective when she comments that anecdotes about local characters "express themes and ideas highly significant to members of the community."¹⁴

Michael Taft's use of the verb "become" in his definition suggests an awareness of a process by which individuals develop reputations as characters. Taft includes individuals who have earned the label in a variety of ways: "the mentally and physically deformed, the very wise and the very foolish, the clever trickster, the raconteur, the eccentric, the miser." For Taft, "character" does not refer exclusively to mental, physical, or emotional traits. This reflects a general reliance on the term to describe individuals who exhibit both intentional or

¹² Joseph C. Lincoln, Cape Cod Yesterdays (Boston, 1935), 258-259, quoted in B. A. Botkin, ed. A Treasury of New England Folklore, (New York: Crown Pub., 1947) 103.

¹³ Levette Davidson, "'Gassy' Thompson and other Stories of Local Characters," California Folklore Quarterly 5 (1946): 339.

¹⁴ Ballard 69.

unintentional nonconformity. As a Pennsylvania Folklife questionnaire on "Local Characters and Originals" suggests, characters are either strong-minded "originals" or "eccentrics" or become characters "through default," perhaps as a result of weakmindedness.¹⁵ For example, in Stephen Thomas's article on characters of Rochester, New York, the author includes "eccentrics" and "demented persons."¹⁶ Finally, B. A. Botkin articulates the distinction between two categories of characters when he writes: "The typical American fool is a 'character.' A character, as any American knows, is a damn fool who insists on being himself instead of being like everybody else, or a crazy fool who runs around the country poking his nose into every corner and into everybody else's business."¹⁷

Humour represents the last element to emerge from a survey of folklorists' use of the term "character." Not a consideration in all definitions, humour remains a point of debate for some researchers. While Séan O'Suilleabháin mentions wit as only one of many possible ways to "win local

¹⁵ "Local Characters and Originals. Folk-Cultural Questionnaire No. 18," Pennsylvania Folklife 20:2 (1970-71): back cover.

¹⁶ Stephen W. Thomas, "Folklore Figures of Rochester, New York," New York Folklore Quarterly 10 (1954): 9.

¹⁷ B. A. Botkin, ed. A Treasury of American Anecdotes (New York: Random House, 1957) 74.

fame,"¹⁸ others like Levette Davidson consider one of the character's functions is to "provide comic relief."¹⁹ Some folklorists express uncertainty as to the importance of humour as evidenced, by Sandra Stahl, when she asks if the local character anecdote must be humorous.²⁰

Lack of character definitions or development of precise terminology to describe nonconformists reflects the fact that the topic is only now beginning to attract rigorous analysis. The 1970 questionnaire published by Pennsylvania Folklife urged collectors to seek information on various types of nonconformists from "village idiots" to hermits. While the questionnaire opened up several lines of inquiry including common narrative patterns in characters' life stories, the influence of characters on oral tradition, and their function and reception in the community, published literature does not indicate it successfully prompted research on the topic.

Most analytical articles have centered on narrative. As will be discussed more fully in a later chapter, Sandra Stahl's 1975 publication on the local character anecdote offers important insights into definition and classification. Stahl's article has been followed by

¹⁸ Sean O'Suilleabhain, Handbook of Irish Folklore (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1963) 525.

¹⁹ Davidson, "Gassy" 339.

²⁰ Stahl 292.

studies including those by Michael Taft and Linda Ballard already mentioned. In his preliminary discussion of the local character anecdote in context, Taft reveals some of the complexities of the speech events in which the anecdotes are found. Ballard, on the other hand, explores the narratives' meaning for community members.

To date, Elena Bradunas's research on Martin Piniak, an Illinois urban character, represents one of the only published attempts to take the subject beyond an analysis of narrative to an examination of what she terms "the local character phenomenon."²¹ In her article, Bradunas both draws on functionalist and structural theory to investigate Piniak's place in a city neighborhood and identifies several possible directions for future study. These include the application of Linda Dégh's theory of legend formation; Victor Turner's conceptual model of structure and anti-structure; Lévi-Strauss's theory of binary opposition; and C. G. Jung's archetype of the "wise old man."

Why is it that folklorists are only now demonstrating an appreciation of the complexity and importance of "the local character phenomenon"? A review of the literature reveals that folkloristics has been more concerned with asserting its own rightful place in academics than fostering theoretical discussion of any fringe element. Regional

²¹ Elena Bradunas, "An Urban Hermit," Indiana Folklore 10 (1970): 163.

ethnographies and miscellanies represent both the earliest and the most abundant resource for local character descriptions and narratives. Arising from two continents and spanning more than a century, the collections depict characters ranging from American settlers²² and nineteenth century Yorkshire politicians²³ to contemporary urban bag ladies.²⁴

Although the types of individuals included vary from one publication to the next, all demonstrate inner-directedness and colorful personalities. Johnson Snow of North Carolina was nicknamed "Tunbelly" in the 1820s for his habit of eating turnip greens and hog's gullicks;²⁵ Blind Hughie, known for his sense of humour and repertoire of humorous ballads, eked out a living on the streets of Dundee, Scotland around the turn of the century;²⁶ in New York in the 1920s "The Barefoot Prophet," "Harlem's most picturesque figure," preached daily on street corners;²⁷ and

22 --- Skitt, Fisher's River (North Carolina) Scene's and Characters (1859; New York: Arno Press, 1977).

23 Horsfall J. Turner, Yorkshire Folklore Journal (Bingley, 1888): 68.

24 Paul Dickson and Joseph C. Goulden, There are Alligators in our Sewers and other American Credos (New York: Delacorte Press, 1983): 108.

25 Skitt 28-29. A hog's gullick refers to its adam's apple.

26 George M. Martin, Dundee Worthies (Dundee: David Winter and Sons, 1934) 5.

27 B. A. Botkin, New York City Folklore (New York: Random House, 1956) 289-290.

more recently in Indiana Pollie Barnett was a familiar sight as she "wandered like a gypsy" with a cat in her arms.²⁸

The regional collections reflect anemic awareness of the influence prominent personalities--whether leaders or characters--have on community life. Many compilers share what Adrian Henstock describes as "the Victorian view of local history...as the antiquarian study of families and 'worthies.'" ²⁹ Character descriptions and narratives are included as part of the retelling of a community's past. In Robert Grant's circa 1895 East River Worthies, the author draws on clergy and strongmen to trace the historical development of Pictou County, Nova Scotia. Grant begins his work by reminding the reader that while the East River is "distinguished for grandeur and variety of scenery," "It was also inhabited, especially in early times, by a population whose worth is not appreciated. Even their very names are being forgotten. This ought not to be."³⁰

Like Grant, who was a Pictonian, many of the compilers of historical ethnographies and regional folklore miscellanies, lived, and perhaps grew up, in the places they describe. Because the collectors often draw on personal

²⁸ Ronald L. Baker, 'Hoosier Folk Legends' (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 138.

²⁹ Adrian Henstock, "Politics and Personalities in Local Communities," The Local Historian 15 (1983): 388.

³⁰ Robert Grant, East River Worthies (New Glasgow, Nova Scotia: Scotia Printers, [c.1895]) 3.

memories of characters, the publications do not reflect the rural bias seen in much early folklore collecting. Urban beggars are as represented as rural hermits and characters are depicted as being as vital to a city neighborhood as to a small rural settlement. This is not to say, however, that all biases that mark earlier collecting are absent. A close scrutiny of the characters selected for inclusion would no doubt reveal collecting aesthetics. For example, the obvious absence of any scatological material is more reflective of collecting and publishing guidelines than the nature of the tradition.

It is difficult to speak generally about the collections for they constitute an eclectic group. Some authors include only eccentrics they feel will reflect well on the area--such as ministers and politicians--while others describe beggars and street people. Some publications constitute a portrait gallery of former residents--none referred to characters still living--while others are an eclectic mix of experience narratives about real individuals and widely circulated narratives about character and regional types. One of the only links among the disparate publications is that they contain little or no theoretical discussion. The concept of stereotyping or any other related folkloristic issue remains unaddressed. While some collections like Ronald Baker's Hoosier Legends imply an underlying assumption--in this case that character

narratives form part of the region's legend corpus--the theoretical underpinning is implied rather than overtly stated.

That local characters have not been the focus of theoretical application and debate is perhaps surprising. In general, folklorists have recognized a link between characters and heroes, the subject of much interest. In A Guide to American Folklore, Levette Davidson considers local characters as a type of folk hero: "Folk heroes may be classified as patriotic figures, frontiersmen, badmen, supermen, occupational heroes, and local characters."³¹ Others who do not specifically mention characters in their typologies of heroes present such open-ended operational definitions that characters fit in easily. Roger Mitchell defines three traditions of American folk heroes: misfits, tellers of tales, and "men who were extraordinary in some natural way"³² while Richard M. Dorson describes folk heroes as "widely diffused personalities about whom memorates and legends are told."³³ Orrin Klapp, who designates the hero, fool and villain as three distinct social types, confines most of his discussion concerning

³¹ Levette J. Davidson, A Guide to American Folklore (New York: Greenwood Press, 1951) 26.

³² Roger E. Mitchell, "George Knox: Erom Man to Legend," Northeast Folklore 11 (1969): 11.

³³ Richard Dorson quoted in William E. Lightfoot, "Charlie Parker: A Contemporary Folk Hero," Keystone Folklore Quarterly 17 (1972): 51.

characters to his discussion of the fool. In a brief analysis of "independent spirits" as heroes, however, he states that nonconformists may sometimes be regarded as heroic.³⁴ Certainly there are situations where the character matches his description of the clever fool.³⁵

Definitions that link hero and fool are representative of the numerous folkloristic efforts to clarify the term folk hero and to understand the process by which one becomes a hero. Turn of the century research by Alfred Nutt was later followed by Lord Raglan and Joseph Campbell in an attempt to isolate common thematic patterns in heroes' lives.³⁶ Others sought clues in the history and diffusion of hero-centered folklore. In the 1920s and 1930s several scholars explored the life history and legend behind the ballad, "John Henry."³⁷ They attempted to determine how and to what extent the John Henry tradition had spread from its place of origin, what changes it had undergone in the process of diffusion, and ultimately why the legend held

³⁴ Orrin Klapp, Heroes, Villains and Fools (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1956).

³⁵ Orrin Klapp, "The Folk Hero", Journal of American Folklore 63 (1949): 20.

³⁶ For a survey of biographical studies, see: Archer Taylor, "The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative," Journal of the Folklore Institute 1 (1964): 114-129.

³⁷ For example, see: Guy B. Johnson, John Henry. Tracking Down a Negro Legend (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1929); and Louis Chappell, John Henry: A Folk-lore Study (Jena, Germany: Frommannsche Verlag, Walter Biedermann, 1933).

such appeal for Black informants.

Some compared fact and folklore. In Ashton's 1934 treatment, "The Evolution of a Folk Figure," he contrasts the tradition surrounding Jack a Kent with factual information about the man.³⁸ Similarly, Mody Boatright's study Gib Morgan, Minstrel of the Oil Fields (1945)³⁹ and William Jansen's 1949 doctoral dissertation on Abraham 'Oregon' Smith, "pioneer, folk hero and tale teller" were efforts to compare the factual and the fictitious. In Jansen's words, his goal was "to present a folk hero as a folk hero and as an historical figure."⁴⁰ In addition to biographical and historical-geographical approaches, contextualism had its influence on the investigation of folk heroes. From Richard M. Dorson's historical perspective, heroes were determined by their historical and cultural context. As Dorson outlines epochs in American history, he describes the types of heroes which dominated each era. As the goals or "impulses" change so do folklore's legendary protagonists. In his 1966 review of American heroes, Roger D. Abrahams underlines the importance of context to the hero:

³⁸ J. W. Ashton, "Jack a Kent: The Evolution of a Folk Figure," Journal of American Folklore 47 (1934): 362-368.

³⁹ Mody C. Boatright, Gib Morgan: Minstrel of the Oil Fields (Austin, Texas: Texas Folklore Society, 1943).

⁴⁰ William H. Jansen, Abraham 'Oregon' Smith: Pioneer, Folk Hero and Tale-Teller (New York: Arno Press, 1977) ii.

Heroes arise because values guiding action exist within a specific group and individuals appear or are imagined who act in line with these values to a superlative degree. Heroes become celebrated and sung because their actions so fully embody these masculine values. More important for the present discussions, hero stories are a depiction, a projection of values in story form.⁴¹

By the 1960s Dorson, Abrahams and others were probing the psychological and cultural meaning of folk heroes.

Although much of the literature on folk heroes has application for the study of local characters, questions that motivated this research have not yet been applied directly to local characters. While folklorists explored how one becomes a folk hero, checked the authenticity of folklore about heroes, and eventually examined the hero's functional importance for the folk group, they regarded characters as artifacts or landmarks of a community and the stories about them as entertaining texts.

This is not to suggest that theories such as contextualism have had absolutely no influence on the treatment of characters. The change in emphasis from text to context has led to the kind of analyses by Bradunas, Taft and Stahl already mentioned. Having embraced the definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups," however, folklorists have tended to look to individuals and

⁴¹ Roger D. Abrahams, "Some Varieties of Heroes in America," Journal of the Folklore Institute 3 (1966): 341.

genres other than local characters or local character anecdotes for an expression of group membership. Folklorists generally have investigated the local character phenomenon only in so far as it has assisted their examination of other topics. Both John Szwed and Edward D. Ives have made revealing statements about characters' relationships with other community members in their exploration of folksong traditions.⁴² Similarly, Michael O. Jones in his analysis of Charlie, the Kentucky chairmaker, has compiled a detailed life portrait of a man many would consider a local character.⁴³ All three studies raise the question of a link between creativity and nonconformity, but none addresses it.

John Widdowson's research on figures used for threatening children--which includes some local characters--represents one of the only folkloristic investigations that shed light on the nonconformist's role within a community. Widdowson's informants describe how parents would often use a physically or mentally disabled person in their verbal threats to children. For example, Louis Mousae, a disfigured Frenchman who lived for many years on the north

⁴² Edward D. Ives, Joe Scott, the Woodsman-Songmaker (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978) and John Szwed, "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and his Community of Song," Folksongs and their Makers (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, n.d.) 149-167.

⁴³ Michael Owen Jones, The Handmade Object and its Maker (Berkeley: University of California, 1975).

west coast of Newfoundland was feared by children. Reports that indicate parents capitalized on that fear in the control of their children, and that Mousae actively adopted the part of threatening figure, suggest the character fulfilled a fascinating and complex role as one of the area's primary agents of social control.⁴⁴

While thus far the local character's role has been the focus of few folkloristic inquiries, it promises to benefit from expanding folkloristic interests. "Although William Hugh Jansen introduced the "esoteric-exoteric factor" in 1959,⁴⁵ only in the last twenty years have folklorists ventured beyond the search for genres that validate small group membership, to explore contexts and individuals which may at first appear to challenge social order.⁴⁶ As folklorists investigate the ethnic joke,⁴⁷ the shivaree,⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See: J. D. A. Widdowson, "Figures Used for Threatening Children: A Newfoundland Example," Lore and Language 1 (1972): 20-24; and J. D. A. Widdowson, If You Don't Be Good: Verbal Social Control in Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies 21 (St. John's, Newfoundland: Institute of Economic and Social Research, MUN, 1977).

⁴⁵ William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," Fabula 2 (1959): 205-211.

⁴⁶ This is not to suggest that local characters necessarily threaten social order. As John Widdowson points out, they may actually reinforce existing social structure by acting as agents of social control. The point is that they may at first glance be seen as a challenge to group membership and/or not to belong themselves.

⁴⁷ For example, see: Robert B. Klymasz, "The Ethnic Joke in Canada Today," Explorations in Canada Folklore eds. Edith Fowke and Carole H. Carpenter (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985) 320-328.

and forms of verbal interaction such as argument,⁴⁹ they explore folklore as expressions of conflict and dissension and contribute to a fuller understanding of multidimensional small group dynamics.

As the exploration of artistic communication in small groups expands to include expressions of inter/intra group tension within a community, it draws on well established literatures in history, sociology and anthropology. These disciplines which have been much more willing to consider concepts like social inequality, deviance and marginality provide a rich theoretical resource for folklorists. Historians such as H. R. Trevor-Roper and John Demos who have explored witchcraft and the witchcraft craze⁵⁰ provide valuable clues as to the exchange between official and traditional attitudes concerning some of the community's marginal members. Anthropological writings on the nature of peasant society that highlight the importance of principles such as reciprocity⁵¹ and the concept of limited good,⁵²

48 See: Monica Morrison, "Wedding Night Pranks in Western New Brunswick," Southern Folklore Quarterly 38 (1974): 285-297.

49 See: Martin Lovelace, "'We Had Words': Narratives of Verbal Conflicts," Lore and Language 3:1 Part A (1979): 29-37.

50 See: H. R. Trevor-Roper, The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1967); and John Demos, Entertaining Satan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

51 Robert Redfield, Peasant Society and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930).

offer useful insight into intergroup relations. In particular, recent anthropological interpretations of mummering as an expression of class struggle,⁵³ illuminate emic perceptions of economic and social organization. Finally, the work of interactionist sociologists, such as Erving Goffman, contributes significantly to understanding the use of power strategies by individuals and groups.

The recent move to apply the concepts of folklore and related disciplines to new areas of investigation, such as local characters, is an indication of folklore's maturation. Folklorists are now showing a willingness to explore what community members and personal fieldwork experience identifies as important--even if it exposes uncomfortable taboos. The study of local characters also clearly and conclusively illustrates that folklore belongs to every member of the community. Folklorists, their informants, and/or the characters themselves, share elements of traditional culture that, whether found in a neighborhood in Illinois or a Newfoundland outport, is complex and multidimensional. The next chapter introduces one community and some of the characters who bring its traditional culture

⁵² George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," American Anthropologist 67 (1965): 293-315.

⁵³ See: Rex Clark, "Romancing the Harlequins: A Note on Class Struggle in the Newfoundland Village," Contrary Winds. Essays in Newfoundland Society in Crisis, ed. Rex Clark (St. John's, Newfoundland: Breakwater, 1986) 7-20.

alive.

III

THE CHARACTERS OF AMHERST

In the early years of the twentieth century, Phomes Yorke, one of Amherst's local characters, transformed what was to be a regular meeting of a Baptist Ladies Prayer Group into an extraordinary event that has entered oral tradition. Uninvited, Yorke took his place among some of the town's most wealthy and influential women. Dressed in tattered clothing and wearing dark glasses, he listened as each member gave her testimonial. When he considered it be his turn, Yorke rose to ask, "I wonder who will take my place when I'm gone?"

A daughter of one of the women present reports that Phomes Yorke's query met with silence. Even in retrospect, nearly ninety years later, the question is difficult to answer. From Moose Kent, the strongman who attempted to fly from the town's highest building in the early nineteen hundreds, to Wayne, a developmentally delayed thirty-two-year-old popular among contemporary hockey players and supporters, there has been a parade of characters who followed Yorke. While none duplicate his appearance or personality, each has earned the designation of character. Some of the many characters who are a part of Amherst's past and present will be described here as the chapter

establishes an historical and social context for the remainder of the study.

Amherst's past is largely undocumented. With the exception of an unpublished student account compiled in 1975,¹ no history of the town has been written. Robson Lamy's 1930 honours thesis that provides a narrative account of Amherst's industrial history² and Nolan Reilly's 1983 PhD thesis, "Emergence of Class Consciousness in Industrial Nova Scotia: Amherst 1891-1925," constitutes the only full length academic analysis. This lack of documentation is surprising for the community played a vital part in the region's industrialization and de-industrialization. From a small market town, Amherst expanded rapidly to emerge in the years prior to World War One as one of the most important manufacturing centers in the Maritimes, and perhaps the country. With the 1907 recession, economic prosperity began to decline. In 1909 the town suffered a major blow when Rhodes Curry, one of the largest employers, sold out to a Montreal-based firm. Other mergers with national companies followed until 1927 when Amherst Boot and Shoe closed down operations. Nolan Reilly identifies this closure of one of the town's most successful manufacturers as signifying the

¹ Marcella Boyle, et al, "Focus on the Local Past," ms. Cumberland-Regional Library, Amherst, Nova Scotia.

² Robson Lamy, "The Development and Decline of Amherst as an Industrial Centre," BA thesis, Mount Allison, 1930.

end of the town's first stage of de-industrialization and the beginning of Amherst's "collapse into chronic economic crisis."³

Throughout each period, settlement as a market town (1760-1866), industrialization (1867-1906), integration into the national economy (1907-1927), and collapse into economic crisis (1928-1988), a combination of personalities and events has created a unique community ethos. Not to be overlooked is the influence of local characters who populated each era. As an individual's lifetime may span two or more historical periods, it is impossible to confine it to a specific time slot. Reilly's economic divisions, mentioned above, however, provide a framework around which to loosely organize any historically based discussion of Amherst.

Settlement as a Market Town

(1760-1866)

Laid out in 1760 by British engineers on land left vacant by the Acadian expulsion five years earlier, Amherst township was originally granted to forty-two families. Oral tradition has it that one of the grantees, Col. Joseph Morse, named the settlement for Lord Jeffrey Amherst, commander of the British at the second siege of Louisbourg

³ Nolan Reilly, "Emergence of Class Consciousness in Industrial Nova Scotia: Amherst 1891-1925" diss., Dalhousie University, 1983, 3.

in 1758 and at Montréal in 1760, in hopes the honour might encourage Amherst to pay Morse money owed him for military service. Oral tradition also has it the strategy was unsuccessful.

Amherst grew slowly and steadily as an agricultural community. In their 1774 survey of agricultural practices in Nova Scotia, Yorkshiremen John Robinson and Thomas Rispin comment on the success of Amherst area farmers in the growing of crops, including newly introduced produce such as turnip.⁴ Their account also indicates that prior to 1800, some demographic diversification had already begun. The British military grantees were being joined by Irish and New England immigrants. The surveyors regarded the latter group as being particularly ill equipped for farming.⁵

By 1827 the settlement had grown little, as the first impressions of Alexander Clarke, an Irish Presbyterian New Covenanter minister demonstrate:

I cannot tell you how I felt after walking three miles from the landing to Amherst and could not find the town. In somewhat over a mile of road I found nine or ten wooden erections called houses. This made Amherst proper. Mr. Logan's house was not one of them. It was three miles farther toward the SW, a town by itself, being Amherst Point

⁴ John Robinson and Thomas Rispin, Journey Through Nova Scotia, Maritimes Literature Series 6, (1774; Sackville, New Brunswick: Mount Allison University, 1981) 3.

⁵ Robinson and Rispin 27.

town.⁶

Clarke chose to establish himself at "Amherst Point, town" where he built a church. By the 1840s this community was the centre of local activity with an Anglican church, a Presbyterian church, a cemetery, and a parade square, which had been laid out but was never used. Residents travelled to nearby port communities for trade and merchandise. The court-house was located approximately fifty miles away at River Philip and the Custom-house was at Fort Lawrence.

Due to a complex of reasons, one of which was the opening of a stagecoach route from Truro to Amherst, that arrived approximately three miles to the east, the community gradually moved inland. Popular historian Will R. Bird reports that over a three year period nearly every building in the village was moved.⁷ With the removal of the Anglican Church to the new location in 1842, and the establishment of three shops and two blacksmiths, Amherst proper was firmly established.⁸

The growth of schools and services offers the first hints of Amherst's earliest characters. J. Albert Black in his essay, "Modern Amherst" (1895), describes one of the

⁶ Alexander Clarke, "Autobiographical Sketch," ms. 81-6-44; Cumberland County Museum, Amherst, Nova Scotia, 4-5.

⁷ Will R. Bird, "Historic Amherst," Amherst Diamond Jubilee 1889-1949 (Amherst: Amherst Board of Trade, 1949) 3.

⁸ Bird 4.

town's first teachers:

Abel Gore, was distinguished more for his rhyming propensity than for any lasting impressions in the teaching line. There is extant a rambling poem entitled, 'The Outlines of a speech to be delivered on the hastings [sic]' by Christopher Canstick Esq., penned in 1853 in which Mr. Gore gives free play to his sarcastic powers.⁹

While no other reference to Gore can be found, he and some of his colleagues may be among the first characters, if their natures are consistent with Gilbert Seaman's recollections of teachers of the time at nearby Minudie. In "Recollections" dated February 1866, Seaman writes, "Our school teachers were some broken down drunken soldier or person of a drinking kind...."¹⁰

Seaman's diary chronicles a culture marked by alcohol dependence. He records, "...it was the custom for all persons to keep Jamica [sic] Rum in their Houses, and when an acquaintance dropped in--without the decanters were not out--he would have considered himself badly treated."¹¹ Certainly alcohol was considered a staple stimulant for the workmen: "It was said that at one season thirteen Puncheons, of rum or spirits were consumed at Lower Cove, the

⁹ J. Albert Black, "Modern Amherst," First Baptist Souvenir Booklet (Amherst: N. p., 1895) 40.

¹⁰ Gilbert Seaman, "Recollections 20 February 1886: Diary 1875-1886," private collection.

¹¹ Seaman "Recollections," n. pag.

stonecutters then, kept a good look at the sun to judge of 11 and 4 o'clock when all adjourned for refreshments."¹² Temperance work was begun in 1848, when one of the first divisions of the Sons of Temperance in the province was instituted in Amherst by the Rev. Charles Tupper. Widespread alcoholism continued to present a problem in the county for decades to come, however, and in diary entries of the 1870s, undertaker George Christie credits many deaths to alcoholism. His comments demonstrate the breadth of the abuse that touched all sectors of the community from the town charge to the upstanding Baptist church member. In his entry for 15 December 1876, Christie describes the death of Dr. Mores who "had been drinking very hard for 3 weeks times he was only 28 years old and he was a good Doctor."¹³ While there are no specific references to alcoholics as characters in Christie's diary, it is probably a safe assumption that alcohol dependence contributed to the creation of at least the occasional local character in the town's earliest years.

Actual references to characters point to two professionals: a lawyer and a dentist. The descriptions are fleeting, offering few hints as to the exact meaning of the term's allocation at this point. With the inclusion of lawyers and medical professionals, however, it is clear

¹² Seaman "Recollections," N. pag.

¹³ George Christie, "Diary," ms. 84-129, Cumberland County Museum, Amherst, Nova Scotia, 15 December 1876.

"character" does not represent a class distinction in its initial usage. In unsigned recollections "Happenings in Amherst and Cumberland over Forty-nine Years Ago," based on a copy of the Amherst Gazette published 4 March 1870, the writer commends the MacLean family for its contributions to the town in approximately the 1860s.¹⁴ MacLean Senior served as sheriff while one of his sons became "a foremost eye, ear, and throat specialist in the province." The most detailed account, however, is of another son, Edward. Edward MacLean D.D.S. is described as being "in later years rather eccentric." The writer expands:

He took a fad for street cleaning and temperance in New Glasgow and on Sundays if the crossings were wet he would be out with his shovel cleaning the crossings and shocking the deep dyed Presbyterian element of that town. He was arrested several times. Then he made an attack on one of their local clergymen. He accused him of drinking, lying and telling vulgar stories. We would not be surprised if he was telling very nearly the truth. A big Highlander from the 'Mountain' came down on 'Ed' hit him a smashing blow over the head for insulting 'his minister' and 'Ed' while as good and clever a dentist as ever grew a little more eccentric. He moved from New Glasgow to Amherst. He made our house his home. Our boys were but babies, but he would land in with peanut brittle or some similar candy for the little ones. He would forget they were toothless. He would insist on having them downstairs. He left Amherst for the United States but his remains rest in the Amherst cemetery.

¹⁴ "Happenings in Amherst and Cumberland Over Forty-nine Years Ago," ADN 3 April 1918: 7.

In another account, lawyer John Stubbs is described thus:

Mr. Stubbs seems to have been quite a character as nearly all our old citizens have still stories to relate about him and his brother, Robert Stubbs, who was engaged in the mercantile trade. Mr. Stubbs' legal office was located on Victoria Square. It was a small one-storey building, half of which was occupied by Mr. Stubbs and the other half was for a time occupied by Neil Patriquin who ran a shoe shop there. Both ends of the building were popular resorts of the young men about the town in those ancient days.¹⁵

Stubbs, a nephew of Senator Robert Dickey, a prominent lawyer, was well connected to the town's elite. Little else is known of him except that he died in 1867 at thirty-six years of age from tuberculosis.¹⁶

A character who fell outside the professional ranks was Isaac Howe. Described at the time of his death in February 1896 as "a well known personage," Howe was a Black born circa 1828. He became a sailor and upon his return to town was known for his "romantic stories" based on his sailing experiences.¹⁷ In later years Howe worked as a laborer and lived in the Black-designated neighborhood with his mother

¹⁵ ADN 29 November 1912: 2.

¹⁶ "Records of Death," ms. Christ Church, Anglican, Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1867.

¹⁷ ADN 20 February 1896:4.

and younger brother, Jonah.¹⁸ At the time of his death he lived alone, apparently never having married. Of a second Black character, even less is known. On his death in 1880, Ned Martin is eulogized simply: "Ned Martin, a coloured man, and for many years one of the characters of Amherst, is dead."¹⁹

In contrast to the handful of individuals of whom memory has faded, the name of Moses Barrett remains alive for many contemporary Amherstonians. Although Barrett died in early January of 1865, he is still recognized as a skilled craftsman and as a character. According to a 1927 newspaper article by E. R. Wood, "general knowledge" was that Barrett was born in England circa 1800.²⁰ He immigrated to Nova Scotia where he worked as a clockmaker. Wood claims Barrett worked in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia before coming to the Amherst area, but no primary references document any time spent there. Land transactions indicate that by 1835 Barrett was living in Amherst, at which time he is described as a merchant. Wood's informants recall him living approximately two miles from town in a house that served as his workshop and his home. He never married but stayed alone with his cat. Historian George MacLaren felt

¹⁸ Canada, Census: Cumberland County, ms., Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1881.

¹⁹ The Chignecto Post 9 December 1880: 3.

²⁰ E. R. Wood, "Story of Early Clockmaker of Amherst Recalled," ADN 15 March 1939: 4.

Barrett imported clock works, possibly from New England clockmaker, Eli Terry. In the winter, Barrett would craft cases and assemble the clocks. For at least a while he was associated with a partner by the name of Ladd, as a clock in the Nova Scotia museum collection bears the mark "Barrett and Ladd."²¹ An 1835 land transaction shows Barrett purchasing land from Isaac C. Ladd and wife, traders in Pugwash, so the affiliation may well stem from this time. By 1840 Barrett sold the property in Pugwash.

Throughout the summer months Barrett would travel through the province selling his clocks. Examples have been uncovered in Cumberland, Colchester, Pictou, Hants and Kings Counties.²² One of E. R. Wood's informants recalled visits by Moses Barrett: "At certain periods, Mr. Barrett, either tiring of his solitary existence, or forced by the exigencies of business to seek fresh outlets for his products and talents, would take to the road, covering many miles, mending and selling clocks as he went. He was always accompanied by his cat, from which he could never be separated." Others Wood talked with remembered that he had a large appetite, preferring an uncut pie for dessert. One man described a model steam engine Barrett built that was

²¹ George MacLaren, Antique Furniture by Nova Scotian Craftsmen (Toronto: Ryerson, 1965): 87.

²² MacLaren 86-87.

"exceptionally original in its construction." Woods concludes: "That he had left so vivid a memory among the older generation of Amherst's citizenry, proves Moses Barrett to have been more or less picturesque and original...." In a newspaper article, "Amherst's First Clockmaker is Recalled," Elisha F. Coates echoes Woods's sentiment describing Barrett as "a character out of the ordinary."²³ Woods reports that Barrett was so renowned for his facility with language "many at the time regarded him as the prototype of Haliburton's 'Sam Slick' as he had the same gift of giving his language a picturesque twist."

Upon his death, Moses Barrett left four unfinished clocks, two finished works, books, three fiddles, tools, household effects, a carriage, a wagon, a sleigh, and a pung;²⁴ assets that were insufficient to cover existing debts. His unofficial legacy, however, is much greater: many beautifully crafted clocks, stories that have remained in oral tradition after his death, and perhaps the impetus for the province's most celebrated work of humour.

With the exception of a few recollections of Moses Barrett the clockmaker, descriptions of characters from Amherst's first years of settlement have disappeared. Most

²³ "Amherst's First Clockmaker is Recalled," ADN 15 January 1927: 4.

²⁴ Nova Scotia, Department of the Attorney General, Cumberland County Probate Records, ms. Probate court, Cumberland County Courthouse, Amherst, Nova Scotia, file no. 251. Pung refers to a horse-drawn sled used for freight.

of the narratives concerning early characters died with the residents for whom the individuals were relevant. Will R. Bird does not feel this scarcity of information indicates a lack of colorful personalities in the town's early history. He comments, "Like all the towns of the time, it had its quota of odd characters, its horseracing in the winter down the Point way at the town limits. Its fights at elections. Its various organizations fighting valiantly against the liquor traffic."²⁵ The independence of spirit required to establish a community, the alcohol problem that plagued early Amherst, a welfare system that paid local residents to care for town charges,²⁶ the very limited provincial mental health care facilities, and the greater legal flexibility in dealing with acts of minor deviancy must have allowed for the accommodation of a collection of lively town characters from Amherst's first historical period.

Industrialization

(1867-1906)

Horseracing, election time volatility, temperance organizations and characters continued to be a presence for Amherst throughout its industrialization. In this period,

²⁵ Bird 4.

²⁶ An example of tenders invited for the keep of the poor is published in the ADN 6 April 1886, rpt ADN 19 July 1910: 1.

the town emerged as a leading manufacturing centre in the Maritime provinces. Nolan Reilly reports that from the 1860s Amherst began a long transition to industrial capitalism that accelerated in the 1890s.²⁷ Expansion faltered with the 1907 recession and ended in 1909 when capital began to be integrated into the national economy. From the 1860s to almost World War I, however, Amherst enjoyed a heyday few other communities have surpassed.

According to Reilly, by the 1860s several artisans and suppliers of local wares had expanded their operations to serve larger markets. In 1865 tinsmith Alexander Robb stopped importing stoves from the United States and began to build his own. His foundry soon reported assets of \$12,000 and employed 20 men. The Robb foundry was to be the largest business in the 1860s and it grew steadily to remain a major industrial force throughout the town's history. In 1863 George and Charles Christie took over the mill and carriage shops of Nelson Mills. The two men, joined by their brother J. Alexander in approximately 1870, ran a woodworking firm that quickly developed into an undertaking business and coffin factory. In 1893 they organized Christie Trunk and Bag, manufacturing trunks and luggage. 1864-1865 saw the founding of a small shoe factory in Amherst by E. S. Crafts and a Mr. Singer. By 1867 this operation had expanded to become Amherst Boot and Shoe, a partnership of fourteen

²⁷ Reilly 3.

local merchants, farmers, and a master craftsman. Finally, the establishment of Rhodes Curry Woodworking in 1877, a firm which quickly rose to national importance, marked the end of Amherst's first phase of industrialization. It was the close of a period described by Nolan Reilly as being "characterized by class formation and the gradual emergence of an industrial base."²⁸ Other manufacturing concerns established in the town included: Taylor and Tennant manufacturer of soft drinks (1890); Hewson Woollen Mill (1902); Biden's Confectionery (1904); Amherst Piano (1908); and Nova Scotia Carriage (1912). The Amherst Foundry, begun in 1890, expanded its operation in 1904. Capitalising on the activity generated by the flourishing economy, Clarence J. Silliker opened a woodworking firm in 1897 that was to be responsible for supplying much of the town's early housing stock.²⁹ The fact that in the early 1900s Amherst was rapidly developing into an important industrial force meant it was also a centre for population growth. Between 1900 and 1905 Amherst's population doubled to 7,200. By 1911 the town had 8,973 residents, its approximate size ever since. It had reached its present status of shiretown and the largest settlement in the county.

The social stratification reflected in the 1774 account

²⁸ Reilly 13.

²⁹ Sillikers Woodworking suffered a fire that destroyed their factory in 1906 and soon after the operation moved to Halifax.

of Yorkshiremen John Robinson and Thomas Rispin, as they questioned the qualities of the New England settlers, became more complex in the early twentieth century. Encouraged by the rapid development of population diversity, and fanned by industrialization which required specialization and stratification in the workplace, Amherstonians demonstrated an appreciation of class distinction from the earliest expansion. Although the town doubled its population in three or four years, class remained the primary determinant of neighborhood. Factory owners lived outside of the sight and sound of their factories, along the eastern extension of the town's main thoroughfare, Victoria Street. The middle management families situated themselves next to the wealthy homeowners in two or three connected neighborhoods consisting of Silliker-built homes and bordered by parks and schools. Workers were grouped more collectively but even there, subtle distinctions existed. Several of the downtown streets were lined with tenements and boarding houses that housed a wide assortment of newcomers, temporary workers, and those from farming, lumbering or fishing families who were engaged in occupational pluralism. As early as 1901, however, complaints were voiced in the local press over the condition of these buildings and efforts were instigated by the developing middle class to clean up downtown areas.

With the establishment in 1903 of the West Highlands, a working-class neighborhood of several hundred homes, much of the

labouring sector lived there. Locally known as "Sand Hill," due to an earlier gravel operation located there, the West Highlands was surrounded by a ring of industries. There workers found little physical or psychological escape from the source of their employment. The West Highlands meant the demise of the remaining downtown properties and a makeshift neighborhood of Lebanese peddlers situated near Christie's factory. While some Acadians made their home within the Highlands, many remained in two connecting neighborhoods bordering the marsh. These were situated near the factories of Robbs and Amherst Piano. Finally, by 1903, a Black population had gathered on the edge of town in a neighborhood known as "the hill." The few Chinese merchants who ran laundries and restaurants continued to live above their downtown establishments.

Characters that date from Amherst's expansionary period reflect the town's demographic pluralism. Lebanese, Chinese, Black, and Acadian settlement groups are well represented. By the 1890s, the Lebanese "colony," as it was referred to in the local press, was established along the mill pond for Christie's factory. This settlement was one of several, including Kentville and Bridgetown,³⁰ that served as bases for peddling operations in the province. In 1901 Richard Koorey supplied approximately fifty peddlers

³⁰ ADN 2 December 1901: 1.

with wholesale goods and presumably helped to organize their routes.³¹ A descendant of one of the earliest itinerants feels it was customary for immigrants to live in and work from such a base for a year or two before returning to Lebanon with the profits. (T86:19). Certainly by 1904 Koorey disappears from the assessment rolls and the Lebanese population seems to decline. During their stay in Amherst, the Lebanese peddlers do not seem to have experienced prejudice expressed in some other Maritime communities. A writer in the local press in 1901 proudly claims Amherst had never experienced the "disorders" which had taken place at Truro, approximately 120 kilometers away, and asks if residents there might not "dislike Armenians."³²

A few of the peddlers chose to remain in the area after their "manager" left. These individuals became familiar faces and voices to residents of Amherst and the surrounding county. Margaret Moses, known as Maggie George, is vividly recalled by many of the town's older residents. Frank remembers:

Maggie George had a baby carriage. She delivered her stuff in the baby carriage, an old wicker carriage, I can remember seeing that. She had no education whatsoever. Sunny Gould wanted to buy a hen from her. And he

³¹ Town of Amherst, Assessment Rolls, ms. RG 35-201 Series A, Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1901.

³² ADN 13 April 1901: 2. In accounts of this time, no distinction is drawn between those of Armenian and Arabic descent.

said, 'I'll give you fifty cents for your hen.' She said: 'No, I want half a dollar [Laughs].' She wouldn't take fifty cents, she wanted half a dollar (T86:3).

Margaret Moses is described as a widow when she is refused Canadian citizenship in 1935.³³ She must have been single for many years prior to her death, however, for no informant remembered her husband. On the contrary, Sarah, an elderly Lebanese woman, describes how several men in the Lebanese community arranged a marriage for Maggie when she was in her nineties. When a recent immigrant had overstayed his welcome in the home of a young Lebanese family in Springhill, he was persuaded to marry Maggie George. Perhaps the local belief that the old woman was secretly wealthy enticed him to agree to the suggestion, but the arrangement was short-lived. Sarah describes how the men who set up the marriage stood watch outside Maggie George's home on the wedding night:

[They]... were up half the night watching him.... And she had her night dress on and was fixing the bed [Laughs]. No way he wouldn't sleep with her. [She said], 'I married you to sleep with me and now you're going to sleep with me, you old devil.' He just stayed one night. The next morning he left and went to the island (T88:1).

According to Sarah, Maggie George also had a brief flirtation with being a mother in her later years:

She was ninety years old and she want to

³³ Canada, Records of Citizenship, 2 ms. Office of the Prothonitary, Cumberland County Courthouse, Amherst, Nova Scotia, 2 July 1935.

adopt a baby [Laughs]. She adopt a baby... the mother died or left him, I don't know. Maggie George went and take the baby. And the man, he said, 'You're too old.' 'No, no,' she said, 'no I got money to look after him.' He said, 'ok.' She had the baby in a carriage. She buy him a carriage. And she used to take him over to...my sister-in-law...she thought it was a doll. No, real baby. She can't look after it. At the end of it people squeal on her and the town come and take the baby from her.

In the end Maggie George was left to live and die alone in her small house with her fifteen cats (T88:1). Until her death, however, she continued to invite neighborhood children into her home to sample Lebanese bread and dried fruit (T86:9). She was an adherent of the local Methodist/United Church and took part in church and neighborhood activities. On her death in 1937 she was described as having been "known in the community for a great many years."³⁴ To some of the town's contemporary residents, her vendor's cry is still familiar:

Ice cream, ice cream,
Good for the belly
Me make it, me sell it

Mary Mansour was another Lebanese peddler who settled in the town permanently. She immigrated to Nova Scotia by herself and for years after made her way through communities of Cumberland County peddling cloth and notions such as ribbons, corsets, safety pins, bobbins and hairpins

³⁴ Obituary, ADN 11 January 1937: 4.

(T86:13). These she carried in a carpet bag or wheeled in a baby carriage (T86:7).³⁵ As one informant indicates, some residents linked her arrival at their door with the coming of rain, "They used to say it was going to rain when she came. I remember that" (T86:7).

While it is uncertain when Mary Mansour first arrived, if she was established in 1895, she would have very probably been "at the Joggins," a nearby mining community on a Monday in mid-December of that year. A correspondent for the ADN reports, "Monday being pay-day, every second man you meet at the Joggins was a Jew peddler. And about a dozen country men with all kinds of produce were also there."³⁶ For some contemporary residents, Mary Mansour is integrally connected with this obsolete system of the two week pay period ending on Monday, once employed in the Joggins mines and other industries. Reportedly, if a customer required credit, Mansour, struggling with English, would explain she would return for payment in two weeks' time, corresponding with the next pay-day. As one informant recalls, "She used to say, 'Well, I don't come one Monday, I come Two Monday.' So she became known as Two Monday" (T86:13). When she died in 1925 her obituary describes her as a widow but a descendant claims she never married (T86:19).

³⁵ There is a possibility that informants are confusing Mary Mansour and Maggie George in their descriptions of a Lebanese woman peddling goods from a baby carriage.

³⁶ ADN 14 December 1895: 1.

Mary Mansour attracted two of her brother John's sons to Amherst. According to family tradition, George Mansour arrived in the first years of the twentieth century to join his aunt Mary and the band of Lebanese peddlers already in the area (T86:19). He applied for and was granted Canadian citizenship in 1921,³⁷ but returned to his family in Lebanon soon after.

Shortly before World War One, George encouraged his brother Mike to immigrate to Amherst. Mike Mansour, who had left a bride at home, seems to have experienced a rockier start in North America than his brother. Having been diagnosed with glaucoma, he was able to enter Canada only via Mexico and the United States. As he and a neighbor from his Lebanese village worked their way across the continent, their brothers in Cumberland County wired them the money they needed to continue (T88:1). When Mike finally arrived in Nova Scotia, the outbreak of the war prevented his wife from joining him as he had planned. By 1922, however, he and his wife, Davidā, were living with Mary and he had been granted Canadian citizenship.³⁸

Mike considered Canada his home and never talked about Lebanon nor made even a brief return visit (T87:7). After his wife's death in 1933, he raised his son and daughter with the help of George's son, Theo, who had moved to

³⁷ Canada, Records of Citizenship, 5 November 1920.

³⁸ Canada, Records of Citizenship, 4 April 1923.

Amherst in 1930s. His connection with Theo remained strong and after Mike's children were grown he continued to live with Theo's family until his death in 1974.

Mike became well acquainted with many of the people who lived throughout the county as he peddled goods during the years following his arrival. Eventually he opened a clothing store in Amherst, which was later taken over by Theo, and he ended his days managing a confectionary shop nearby. Mike became a town fixture in his later life and as one informant comments, "He was a very focal point of the town, at the races and that kind of stuff" (T86:17). He is vividly remembered for his colorful appearance: his salt and pepper cap and cigar; his adeptness in both mathematics and poker; his inability to read English (he was literate in Arabic); his frequent English mispronunciations; his fondness for horseracing; his devotion to the Liberal party; and his generosity, particularly when dealing with children. Wesley remembers:

"He always wore a salt and pepper hat and always had a double-breasted suit with pin stripes. And he had sort of a gruff way of sort of looking and talking. He always had a big cigar and he was always reading his Lebanon newspaper with Arabic printed on it but he had a sort of gruff exterior but when you went in with your parents he was always giving you free things (T87:6).

Mike's kindnesses to children and to less fortunate members of the community are long remembered. His nephew comments:

Oh yeah he was great with children, you know. He always, he'd take those poor kids, they used to have a lot of kids during the war, depression, on Electric Street used to be all houses...you know old French families, they all had big families. And Uncle Mike used to save the spotted apples and oranges, you know, they start being half rotten. They used to save them for Mike to give to them. And that, just give them, after all they were living on welfare, \$2.00 a day, a week, and the big family, they have a tough time. Now those kids grow up and they went to Ontario and they used to come in the summertime, that's the first thing they used to go to Uncle Mike. And this fellow come in one day with a great big Cadillac. 'Come on Mac,' he used to call him Mac. 'Come on Mac, let's take you for a drive.' He took him out for a drive [Laughs]. I had a lot of people said after Uncle Mike died Amherst not the same anymore. They said, 'It's not the same at all' (T86:19).

In addition to his other talents and qualities, Mike is considered within his family as having been a skilled storyteller and performer.

Chinese immigrants also moved to Amherst during its boom years to serve the growing population. Prior to 1907 at least thirteen men of Chinese origin appear in the municipal assessment rolls as proprietors of laundries and restaurants located in the downtown core. As the law forbade the immigration of Chinese families, presumably, like the Lebanese peddlers, many came to Canada temporarily in order to financially better their families at home. For example, when laundry proprietor, Tom Yee, "alias Sam Sing," died on 27 October 1931, he left a widow and five children near the

city of Canton, China. His wealth consisted of \$900 in personal assets and no real property.³⁹

Canadian law that discouraged the accumulation of real assets and permanent settlement interfered with full integration of the Chinese into the town's social life. A 1910 article in the ADN, republished from the Yarmouth Light, questions whether or not residents should patronize Chinese laundries. The writer begins by raising doubts about the standards of hygiene found in the laundries:

Is a Chinaman personally clean or unclean? Is his plant sanitary or unsanitary? Is it sanitary or even desirable to have your clothes sprinkled from the mouth of an individual? And are you aware that this is done? Do you realize these Chinese laundrymen eat, drink, smoke and sleep in the place where your laundry is handled?

Secondly, the article asks about the wisdom and patriotism of doing business with individuals who send most of their profits out of the country:

Do you know that in the City of Chicago \$30,000 per week, or \$1,560,000 per year is paid for laundry work to Chinamen who send it home to China and there is little chance for a white man to get any part of it back in a business exchange? That it is never spent where it is earned for any more than just the bare necessities of life, no amusements, luxuries, or anything else by which you may be endeavoring to make money to support your family and to carry you through your declining years of old age. Is it patriotic or unpatriotic to do

³⁹ Nova Scotia, Department of the Attorney General, Cumberland County Probate Records, no. 4981.

business where there is no chance for reciprocity?

While the piece ends by questioning what difference exists, if any, between supporting Chinese laundries and dealing with mail order businesses based in Upper Canada, it nonetheless expresses a thinly veiled hostility toward the Chinese.⁴⁰

In Amherst itself, relations between the Chinese businessmen and the rest of the town seem to have varied. In the first years of the century, the Chinese appear to have been bothered by mischief carried out by groups of children. In 1905 when one such incident ended with a young girl of Acadian descent falling and hurting herself, her parents charged the Chinese laundry proprietor with assault:

Wah Lee, a Chinaman keeping a laundry, was before the town court this morning charged with assaulting the little daughter of George Guthro by striking her. The evidence showed that four or five children were teasing the Chinaman and throwing stones into his store. He chased the Guthro girl and when she was running she fell on the sidewalk injuring her face. The Chinaman who was right behind her fell on top, but did not attempt to do her any injury. The case was dismissed as this was shown to be the first time one of these people had ever been in court and His Honour took the view that the children were more to blame than the 'Chink'.⁴¹

While there is some evidence of continuing tension between

⁴⁰ ADN 17 January 1910: 2.

⁴¹ ADN 1 May 1905: 1.

the Chinese and other residents,⁴² they seem to have made their place in the community without causing much open conflict. By 1953 the Chinese took a more active role in community affairs as is evidenced by the fact that when George Hum and his partner opened a new restaurant, they donated their first day's profits to the local Red Cross Society.⁴³ In the next ten years their restaurant gained regional recognition as a fine eating establishment.

Perhaps in large part because of the discriminatory laws that governed their initial immigration and settlement, the Chinese have left less of a mark on the town than the Lebanese. In general they represent a more transient population with no families being residents of the town for more than one generation. Two of the early Chinese immigrants, however, earned the reputation of being characters. Charlie Soo who ran a laundry until approximately 1940,⁴⁴ interacted with residents daily. His lack of mastery of English and his quick-witted remarks gave rise to a number of stories about him and his designation as a character. An informant offers one

⁴² For example a report of a scuffle between a Chinese proprietor and a customer appears in ADN 8 April 1922: 4; and an assault charge brought against Jimmy Hum by a man named Cousins is reported in ADN 15 January 1944: 4.

⁴³ ADN 28 March 1953: 1.

⁴⁴ While none of the informants commented on Soo's later years, he may have left the area in 1940 when his laundry was gutted by fire (ADN 28 February 1940: 1).

illustration of Soo's sharp responses:

Charlie Soo. We took in a linen tablecloth to wash during the war and a linen tablecloth was a scarce item. You couldn't get them for any money...because it was imported and you couldn't buy them. So I had company coming for dinner and we brought the tablecloth and put it on and it was full of holes, great big holes in each side. And she [his sister] called me, she was so worried. I said, 'What's the trouble?' She said, 'Look.' I said, 'that dirty Soo, what did he do with it?' He put a lot of Javex, you see, what they do some time, you know, instead of putting the Javex in the water, he put the Javex on the cloth so well it was right on the edge. I said, 'We'll just put one side so it won't show, just turn it under and it will be all right.' It was a little skimpy on one side. So I went in to see him. I said, 'Charlie you burned the tablecloth, put holes in it.' 'You have mice in your house,' he said, 'ate it up.' Just as quick as that [Laughs]. And he walked right inside. He used to have a little shack there so he could hide, you see.... You can't argue with him, you know. They make out they're stupid, they're not stupid. They're as smart as they make them. It was so funny, you know. He said, 'You have mice in your house.' It was wrapped up in a parcel too. It wasn't open, you know, when we took it out because he wrapped it up and we didn't need it until that day, you see [Laughs]. That was so funny that way he said it. One time I said to him, you know he wasn't doing a good job on the shirts. I said, 'Charlie,' I said, 'you're not doing a good job on the shirts.' 'Me do good work. You're too fussy' [Laughs]. Oh he was really funny.

Except for the occasional skirmish, Soo's life was a quiet one, living by himself in the same building that housed his

business. The above informant remembers a time after immigration laws had liberalized when Soo commented wistfully concerning a Chinese woman who had moved to town with her husband. The informant describes Soo's life as "very lonely" (T86:19).

Another Chinese immigrant who earned himself the designation of character is Jimmy Hum. Like Soo, Hum is remembered for his ability to make fast replies to customers whom he encountered in his laundry. Harold remembers:

'So Jimmy,' Hazel said ___ one day, she got Roger's shirts, she said, '...Jimmy, I don't know how you do it,' she said, 'I tried different times and I couldn't. How do you get them so good?' He said, 'Mrs. Mills, if I told you, you wouldn't bring Roger's shirts here anymore' [Laughs]. He said, 'I'm not going to tell you' [Laughs] (T86:19).

• Another informant recalls the chop suey dishes he would serve visitors to his home and how he would play cribbage, which he called "crip" with other young men (T86:3).

Hum appears to have been one of the Chinese residents who integrated most fully into community life, albeit always maintaining a low status position. For instance, he acted as waterboy for a baseball team and this facilitated his entry into a friendship group of young men associated with the team. One informant describes how Hum once went to an early Mae West movie with some friends from the team. The fact that the group arrived late for the first showing meant they stayed for part of the second run to catch what they

had missed of the beginning. As they stood to leave with the second showing half over, Hum loudly addressed Mae West on the screen, "I came up to see you, now you come up and see me sometime" (T86:19). By the 1940s, Hum moved to Prince Edward Island. Today, while one or two Chinese families operate restaurants in Amherst, they are relative newcomers.

Members of the Black community, numbering 300 in the 1910 census, were allowed less opportunity for social integration during the town's rise to prosperity. Isolated geographically, they were also confined socially and occupationally. Until after World War II, dances were segregated and certain businesses, including at least one restaurant and a barbershop, were known to be closed to Blacks. Occupational opportunities were equally limited. Women did housework while men were employed as caretakers or worked in industry at several physically demanding jobs. One informant recalled the situation which existed from the time industrialization began to take hold until the middle of the present century:

The Blacks on the hill could do certain types of work. They could go collect garbage, they could work in the foundries, in the shaking out or in the molding shop. They could work down at the rolling mills.... And the Negro women worked for the white women in town who wanted maids (T86:15).

This occupational stratification evoked few, if any, open confrontations for the many years it existed.

The lives of Black characters demonstrate social subservience. One man shined shoes in the very barbershop that refused to serve members of his race. The ADN reports, "Our well known shoe polisher, General Jackson, has opened for business again in J. S. Horton's tonsorial parlors, Church St. Anyone wanting a bang up shine should call on genial Joe."⁴⁵ Al Gay, a town custodian, is referred to as a "well known figure in the streets of Amherst," rather than as a character.⁴⁶ His obituary states he "was classed as the general factotum of the town and the genial colored citizen's broad smile and hearty laugh will be missed by every person."⁴⁷ Whether or not he was thought of as a character is undetermined, but he was a town fixture.

Al Downey, a small man with a head "as bald as a tea kettle" (T86:21), is specifically remembered as a character. Shortly after the turn of the century Downey moved from Preston or Cherry Brook near Halifax to Amherst in order to operate a small farm on the town's outskirts (T86:21). Today he is remembered less for his talents as a farmer than for his abilities as a blacksmith and a bootlegger. After circa 1912, Downey lived alone and his house was a gathering place for those who came to talk and to sample his liquor.

Downey's life was marked by violence. He maintained a

⁴⁵ ADN 8 January 1907: 4.

⁴⁶ ADN 13 May 1918: 4.

⁴⁷ ADN 13 May 1918: 4.

stormy relationship with his wife until at least 1912 when the two separated. During their time together Downey was charged and imprisoned on more than one occasion for wife abuse.⁴⁸ Ronald remembers how Downey would challenge friends and neighbors to physical fights which he would not tolerate losing. Ronald comments: "He was all right but if he had an argument with anybody though, that night they'd beat him and he'd be sitting on the doorstep the next morning when he was sober. He'd say, 'Now I'm sober, beat me now.' He was never beat by one person" (T86:21).

Prior to the 1920s Downey participated in local fairs where he posed as a target for a ring toss game known as "Hit the Coon." Roger remembers:

They used to have these little carnivals here.... And they had all these stands put up and they had this big canvas thing and a hole in it and baseballs. And for a nickel you'd throw three, two or three of these baseballs for a nickel. If it hit the coon you'd get a cigar [Laughs]. And he'd put his head through there you know. He'd be looking up at you and as they'd throw the ball, and he'd put his head down. He was bald headed as that. He'd put his head down. He rarely, rarely got hit. [Laughs]... Hit the coon and get a cigar [Laughs]. Oh yeah...that was one of the big attractions at every fair you went to.... I was just a kid and I remember every fair there was always Al Downey...set up in a booth.... He'd look up and he'd say, 'Hit me, hit me again. Hit me son of a bitch. Bet you can't.' But then every once in a while somebody'd pick out a big stone and

⁴⁸ For example see: ADN 7 May 1912: 3.

throw it at him. Somebody really clipped him one day down there with a stone. [Laughs] (T86:7).

A former neighbor estimates Downey left the area circa 1930 for Halifax where he was reputedly killed by thugs hired by his estranged wife (T86:18).

Another Black character, William Henry Ross, probably first worked as a domestic for the Lamys, one of the town's elite families.⁴⁹ By the 1891 census, however, Ross had left the employ of the hotel owner and was working as a laborer. He had his own family by this time and his wife was employed as a charwoman. Town assessments of his property from 1898 to 1909 suggest he earned a meager but steady living, perhaps as an employee at one of the factories, or for the town's maintenance crew.⁵⁰ Like Al Downey, Ross suffered from alcohol abuse. For example he was jailed for twenty days during the summer of 1900, probably as a result of alcohol-induced infractions.⁵¹ In 1901, the ADN reports that Ross's wife was forced to call in the police when he "came home drunk and started destroying the house."⁵² When William Henry Ross became seriously ill

⁴⁹ Canada, Census, 1881.

⁵⁰ 1901 assessment rolls show a Henry Ross working at Robbs but as there appears to be two residents by this name in the town, this may not refer to Ross, the character. The usual descriptive, "colored," does not appear by the 1901 entry, further suggesting it may refer to another individual.

⁵¹ ADN 10 Aug, 1900: 4.

⁵² ADN 18 November 1901: 4.

in 1906, he is referred to in the local press as "that well known town character" whose "greetings on the street corners" will be missed.⁵³ Upon his death two years later, he is eulogized as "a familiar and prominent figure around town."⁵⁴

When Ross's widow remarried, she affiliated herself with the Cooks, a family which produced another Black character, Percy Cook. Percy, nicknamed Jesse James, was the son of Calvin Cook. Little is known of his short life except that in 1902 he was fined for being drunk and disorderly.⁵⁵ Shortly after he must have left town for in 1908 he was welcomed back warmly after a five years' absence. The ADN reports:

Percy Cook, better known as 'Jesse James' landed in Amherst yesterday after an absence of five years and is today holding receptions on every street. 'Jessie' has devoted the last five years almost wholly to travel and has visited almost every city of importance in the American Union. He does not expect to stay in Amherst for any length of time just long enough to give a shake to old friends and pass along. We would like our young friend to write a book on his experience and give us the privilege of reading it.⁵⁶

⁵³ ADN 17 March 1906: 4.

⁵⁴ ADN 24 June 1908: 3.

⁵⁵ ADN 17 June 1902: 4.

⁵⁶ ADN 17 June 1908: 3.

Cook, "noted for his skill in handling horses"⁵⁷ presumably opted to find work in one of the local stables rather than continue his travels or write the book as the reporter suggests. Within two years he is arrested and found guilty of theft.⁵⁸ What must have been shortly after his release from a two year prison term, Cook died when he either fell under or was run over by a moving train he tried to board.⁵⁹

A final Black resident emerges from this period as a possible character. Mary Cook was born circa 1829 to Joseph Cook, a labourer, and his wife.⁶⁰ In 1871 she married Peter Duff, a fifty-five-year-old Irish Catholic widower who had served in the navy. By 1891 Peter Duff had died and Mary is listed in the census as a charwoman. Although described in the census as illiterate, Mary Duff was recognized as an orator. In 1896 the newspaper claims, "A prominent Moncton gentleman who heard Mrs. Duff's oration on Tuesday night has sent an urgent invitation to her to repeat the performance in Moncton. Mrs. Duff fears that domestic duties may interfere with the acceptance of the invitation."⁶¹ In 1902 the press announces, "Mrs. Duff, our colored spellbinder, is

⁵⁷ ADN 23 June 1910: 3.

⁵⁸ ADN 12 July 1910: 3.

⁵⁹ ADN 11 June 1912: 1.

⁶⁰ Nova Scotia, Marriage Records, Cumberland County, ms. Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1871, no. 144.

⁶¹ ADN 7 November 1896: 4.

billed to deliver one of her celebrated lectures in the Parish House, Springhill, shortly."⁶² By 1903 Duff was suffering from ill health and unable to support herself. A benefit garden party held for her in the fall of 1903⁶³ no doubt provided temporary assistance but she required town aid as well.⁶⁴ In 1905 Duff planned to leave town to live with her niece in Saint John. The newspaper claimed, "Mrs. Duff will be greatly missed in Amherst by all her friends. It is a to be regretted that her health will not permit her to appear on the lecture platform in Saint John."⁶⁵ Either she decided not to go or returned to Amherst for Mary Duff died as a ward of the town in 1907.

The Acadian segment of the population also made its contribution to the town's stock of characters. One of the earliest of these individuals, and still remembered by some of the town's older residents, is Daniel "Dandy" Gould. Gould was born in a farming family of Acadian descent, originally known as Dorion (T86:18). He grew up and first married in Nappan, a small farming settlement on the outskirts of town.⁶⁶ Seven months after his wife died on 26

⁶² ADN 27 January 1902: 4.

⁶³ ADN 16 September 1903: 4.

⁶⁴ Annual Reports: Town of Amherst (N.p.: n.p. 1902-1907).

⁶⁵ ADN 25 September 1905: 5.

⁶⁶ Christ Church, Records of Marriages, Daniel Gould, laborer, Nappan, to Ellen Robbins, widow, laborer, Amherst, 28 December 1864.

December 1895,⁶⁷ he remarried Sarah Jane Noiles, a woman also of Acadian descent, who came from a family with its own stock of characters.⁶⁸ Dandy Gould died in April of 1922 at eighty-seven years of age,⁶⁹ leaving a wife and five children. His wife died many years later in 1936.⁷⁰

For most of his adult life, Gould signalled the arrival of spring to Amherstonians with his sale of maple sugar candy. In 1911 a newspaper reporter describes some of the signs of spring such as robins and butterflies. He concludes: "These forerunners combined with the fact that Dandy Gould is doing duty on the street corners with maple candy, is sure evidence that the winter has passed away and gentle spring is here again."⁷¹ The newspaper carried annual reports of his arrival each spring and at least one informant, who questions if Gould ever actually owned maple trees, remembers the maple candy (T86:18). Gould also became well known to residents through his frequent sale of

⁶⁷ Christie, 26 December 1895.

⁶⁸ Christ Church, Records of Marriages, 21 July 1896.*

⁶⁹ Saint Charles Roman Catholic Church, Records of Deaths, ms. Saint Charles Roman Catholic Church, Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1911-1941. An obituary in the ADN gives his age as eighty-four (ADN 21 April 1922: 4).

⁷⁰ Stone in Roman Catholic cemetery, Amherst, Nova Scotia.

⁷¹ ADN 10 April 1911: 4.

gaspereaux.⁷²

Like Dandy Gould, Paul Noiles was an Acadian from Nappan. While very little is known about his life, he may have been considered a character. When he died at the home of a nephew in 1915, he was described as "a familiar figure on our streets."⁷³ A "deaf mute from childhood," he was nicknamed "Dummy Noiles." The newspaper states, "Without any education he was able by versatile signs to make known his wants to the merchants of the town...." If not a town character, he certainly was familiar to many Amherstonians.

Dummy Noiles may represent one of a group of physically handicapped characters from the town's period of industrialization that includes Phomes Yorke, the sight-impaired character who participated in the Ladies' Prayer meeting mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter. Marion and her sister recall Yorke's physical appearance vividly and describe him as a tall man who wore dark glasses to hide bloodshot eyes (T86:10). Another informant comments that as a child she would often encounter Yorke on the street and that "his eyes were always running" (T86:9). Joseph provides the most detailed account of Yorke's

⁷² Gaspereau(x) is a term of Acadian French origin that is widely used in the Maritime Provinces to refer to a small, bony species of fish related to the herring. The fish are eaten fresh or salted, or used as bait.

⁷³ ADN 10 May 1915: 4.

appearance :

I don't know where he lived, he lived in a lumber pile or some old shack somewhere, that sort of thing. And he had severe eye trouble.... I know his vision was restricted but he wasn't a pleasant individual to look at. He didn't have a pleasant face, you know. And I was only a kid. We were sort of afraid of him.... I would probably classify him as something of a mental character too. I don't think he had very much intelligence (T86:2).

Yorke did not live in a lumber pile but in a house on Poplar Street, near the Black neighborhood (T86:9). In the 1871 census he is listed as having a wife, Bridget, and a three-year-old male dependent by the name of Abel. Twenty years later, the family consists of Phones, Bridget, a nine-year-old son and a four-year-old daughter.⁷⁴ Assessment records clearly indicate the family struggled financially. In 1891 Bridget was working as a charwoman and when she died in 1900, at fifty-one years of age, she was living in the lowest-income residential section of the community.

Yorke supported his family by doing odd jobs such as whitewashing fences (T86:10). He pumped the organ in the Baptist Church (T86:3) and like Dandy Gould, may have sold maple sugar on the street (T86:10). In 1916 when he died of heart trouble at seventy-two, he was described as "a well known figure."⁷⁵ Today one woman refers to him as "being

⁷⁴ Canada, Census, 1891.

⁷⁵ ADN 10 November 1916: 4.

outside the pale" and "a derelict" (T86:16) while members of another family question the authenticity of his blindness (T86:10). For these individuals Phomes Yorke represents one of the first characters they encountered as children. Joseph summarizes their sentiments simply, "He was a character."

Sight-impaired Ephraim Chapman established himself as a tea merchant in Amherst by 1903. The son of an Amherst merchant, Ephraim had returned home to try a second career after suffering permanent eye damage from snow blindness contracted while working as an RCMP officer in the Yukon.⁷⁶ He married and had three daughters and one son.

The newspaper carries reports of Chapman's difficulties as a disabled businessman. For example in 1903 two boys he hires to help him on his rounds run off with his horse.⁷⁷ Four years later he suffers a significant loss when his horse dies. The ADN urges friends and patrons to help raise the funds to replace the animal.⁷⁸ Perhaps with the proceeds from fundraising, Chapman opens a store, but the building is soon destroyed by fire.⁷⁹ Other accounts describe minor injuries he incurred as he made his way about

⁷⁶ ADN 27 May 1933: 5.

⁷⁷ ADN 1 September 1903: 4.

⁷⁸ ADN 1 March 1907: 4.

⁷⁹ ADN 18 June 1907: 4.

the town.⁸⁰ In 1914 an accidental fall over a water drain causes hospitalization and results in permanent injury. Neither was he free from purposeful harm as the account of his hold-up by soldiers in 1916 attests.⁸¹

Despite his misfortunes, Ephraim Chapman continued as a merchant, and also ran a boarding-house, until prevented by declining health. At some point he and his wife separated so that he was cared for during his final sickness at the poorhouse. He died in 1933, a charge of the town.⁸² His obituary documents his varied career and describes him as "a great talker."

Two final characters to emerge from the town's period of industrialization had lives scarred by alcoholism. Upon his death Charles Purches is characterized as "one of our old town characters for at least half a century."⁸³ Better known as "Charley Purch," he was a reformed alcoholic. His obituary states, "In his younger manhood he was a heavy drinker and it was in one of his debauches that he froze his leg so severely that amputation became necessary. He had no advantages in his childhood and hence never learned to read and write." The paper explains that after years of alcohol

⁸⁰ ADN 24 October 1913: 3; ADN 22 April 1914: 4; and ADN 24 September 1919: 4.

⁸¹ ADN 23 October 1916: 5.

⁸² ADN 27 May 1933: 5.

⁸³ ADN 11 June 1918: 2.

abuse he "went on the water waggon" and upholds his example to readers:

From riotous living he turned to sobriety. From being a town charge he became an honest, upright workman and for forty years he was in the employ of the Amherst Boot and Shoe company. Perhaps in his life we all can find something to emulate. May he rest in peace.

Margaret (Maggie) Bulmer, on the other hand, probably was never able to control her alcohol addiction. Born circa 1872 to the son of a United Empire Loyalist immigrant farmer in West Amherst, she was one of five children (FN 20 February 1986). As a teenager she moved to Amherst where she worked as a domestic. Two of her sisters soon followed her example. In 1891 Maggie married Frank Tower, an employee of Amherst Boot and Shoe,⁸⁴ but the marriage was probably short-lived. She might be the town charge for whose keep her friend Thomas Dewire received \$10.00 in 1894.⁸⁵ Certainly her name frequently surfaces relating to liquor-related offenses in the earliest extant newspapers. In July of 1896 the paper comments, "The 'gentle Margaret' has been sent to board with Mr. Acorn [the jailor] for twenty days."⁸⁶ The description of her as gentle possibly

⁸⁴ Trinity Methodist Church, Records of Marriages, ms. Trinity Saint Stephen's United Church, Amherst, Nova Scotia, 24 December 1891 no. 215.

⁸⁵ Annual Reports 1894.

⁸⁶ ADN 24 July 1896: 4.

may be a sarcastic reference to her frequent use of obscene language. The paper follows her escapades as she returns to town after being reported dead, "thus proving that the story of her death is not true"⁸⁷ and escapes from the local jail when she was last seen "walking along without her dress and only a white handkerchief tied over her head."⁸⁸ By September 1900 Maggie Bulmer Tower is released from jail for the final time. Seriously ill, she is given over to the custody of Thomas Dewire. Approximately two months later she is dead, leaving an estranged husband, and according to a family genealogist, twin daughters. One of these children was reportedly raised by Maggie's sister, Bessie, who was married to Bridget Yorke's brother (FN 11 March 1986). Gentle Margaret was buried with little ceremony in a public lot. Her husband remarried and no mention of her appears on his headstone or in his obituary.

As the town expanded, municipal leaders concentrated on industrial growth. Most took a hard-line approach to the public support of the less fortunate. C. J. Silliker, mayor in 1906, wrote in his annual report, "Situated as Amherst is, between two cities, it appears to be a dumping ground for a good many of this [unfortunate] class. Many cases have been difficult to deal with, being those who have come to our town, either intentionally or have been taken

⁸⁷ ADN 11 September 1897: 4.

⁸⁸ ADN 2 Dec. 1898: 4.

suddenly ill after coming here."⁸⁹ Much of the discussion concerning public welfare that appears in the town council minutes for this period tried to establish the rightful place of residence of the individual in question. Once it was clearly demonstrated financial responsibility lay with the Amherst Town council, and the circumstances were proven dire, help would be extended, usually "as required." At least one councillor, Thomas P. Lowther, saw the solution for the care of the poor to lie with the creation of a poor farm.⁹⁰ A labour candidate, Lowther was mayor in 1905 and 1907 but he was never able to bring about the fulfillment of his vision.

Less public responsibility was shown towards the care of the mentally ill than the financially destitute. Only if an individual posed a threat to the rest of the community would he or she come to the attention of town authorities. If circumstances warranted it, the individual might be kept in the local lock-up until such time as train fare to the provincial mental hospital in Dartmouth could be raised. Again, matters of financial responsibility surfaced in the press as a mentally disturbed individual waited in jail. Once the money was raised from the government coffers or by a public campaign, the inmate would be taken to the

⁸⁹ C. J. Silliker, "Mayor's Report," Annual Report 1906 7.

⁹⁰ T. P. Lowther, "Mayor's Report," Annual Report 1907.

provincial hospital.

The case of Joseph DeGraw, a mentally disturbed man of approximately twenty-three years of age in 1901, was treated typically. Initially DeGraw's family struggled to care for him at home. When his violent outbreaks were too much for them, they relied on police assistance. Often this meant that Degraw would be jailed until he calmed down. In 1901 his parents planned to send him to the woods "where he would have more room to pent [sic] his pent up énergies,"⁹¹ but he refused to go. A violent outbreak in December of that year ended in his incarceration in the lock-up⁹² and probably his eventual confinement in the provincial mental health hospital. By 1905 he was back at home, but when he physically attacked his father and a child, the ADN speculated that "DeGraw will probably be kept confined in future."⁹³

Although the newspaper occasionally expressed some sympathy over the plight of illegally detained mentally ill individuals, a general impatience was more frequently communicated. George Christie echoed this sentiment when he wrote in his diary, "...Silas Corbett came and, I had to come with him and trim a oak casket for his son William he died about six o'clock has been foolish and a great deal of

⁹¹ ADN 30 December 1901: 1.

⁹² ADN 30 December 1901: 1.

⁹³ ADN 22 June 1905: 3.

trouble for a long time. I drove the casket down and put him in it."⁹⁴

Town officials and church members directed most effort at escalating the temperance movement. As they preached against the ills of alcohol, a double standard seems to have been operating. While they criticized members of the working class for drinking, the newspaper describes how a new police officer was reprimanded for charging a town leader with a liquor offence. The officer was forced to publicly apologize for what must have been a "mistake."⁹⁵

By 1907 Amherst had grown from a small market settlement to a significant manufacturing centre of nearly 10,000. During this period class lines and community segments became clearly delineated. Class structure was firmly established and expressing itself in all areas of town government. As the industrialists formed the town council, they not only held the workers' employment future in their hands but controlled other aspects of their lives as well. Social distinctions were rigidly upheld with Blacks and Acadians, and to a lesser degree Lebanese and Chinese residents, forming ethnic pockets within the total population. Each group had its own expectations and guidelines for social interaction with the greater community. Each had its share of characters.

⁹⁴ Christie 20 July 1895.

⁹⁵ ADN 6 May 1903: 4.

Integration into the National Economy
(1907-1927)

The recession of 1907-1908 brought the first signs of economic trouble for Amherst. With the depression of 1913, the days of Busy Amherst were over. While World War I improved the situation temporarily, in the 1920s economic conditions worsened. According to Nolan Reilly, the 1927 bankruptcy of Amherst Boot and Shoe "rang the final death knell for manufacturing in the town."⁹⁶

In 1909 Rhodes Curry merged with the Montreal-based firm, Canada Car. This sale heralded the beginning of several such mergers and on a popular level is still credited as the primary reason for the town's decline. Probably the most frequently repeated statement concerning the town's history is that "When they sold out Rhodes Curry they sold out Amherst." In fact, Rhodes Curry was just part of a national trend for by the 1920s every major industry in Amherst had joined with a larger concern. In 1913 Christies merged with Dominion Manufacturers; Robbs joined Dominion Bridge which later became AMCA International; the Stanfields bought Hewsons out in 1916 and moved operations to Truro in the 1920s; and Amherst Foundry became part of Fawcett Enterprises of Sackville, New

⁹⁶ Reilly 62.

Brunswick. The shift of control out of the town caused the marginalization of Amherst's industries and contributed to the town's lessening importance as a manufacturing centre.

By November 1912 unemployment had increased. Reilly notes that assessments decreased from \$4 million to \$3.3 million in a single year while unpaid taxes rose from \$8000 in 1913 to \$29,000 in 1916.⁹⁷ The downward trend was interrupted by the war when 500-1000 men enlisted and government contracts for war materials bolstered industrial profits. Even then the signs of Amherst's demise as a manufacturing centre were visible. Canada Car's decisions to convert part of their Amherst operation into a prisoner-of-war camp and to construct a new plant in Fort William rather than update the Amherst facilities, indicated the peripheralization of the town's industries had begun.⁹⁸ By the 1920s every major industry had closed. The population declined from 10,000 to 7,500 during the 1920s and jobs in manufacturing decreased from 2000 to 638.⁹⁹

The overt response to the economic decline was minimal. In 1919 the labour movement mounted its most organized effort: a general strike that affected every major industry. By the 1920s, however, the union leaders' influence had waned. Surplus labour, the workers' rural backgrounds that

⁹⁷ Reilly 90.

⁹⁸ Reilly 96.

⁹⁹ Reilly 103.

offered no union experience, and differentiation among workers that separated craftsman from laborer,¹⁰⁰ contributed to the lack of labour militancy.

In a 1919 article, amidst a flurry of false boosterism, the town's engineer emphasized Amherst's benefits as a commercial centre.¹⁰¹ Crawford's article reflects the changing composition of the town's municipal government. Positions once held by members of the older industrialist families who had since died or moved away now were filled by businessmen.

These economic and leadership changes altered the social matrix of the town. As the elite experienced a growing sense of powerlessness to prevent the escalating downside, they strove to rigidly maintain class and ethnic divisions that organized the town during its boom. Blacks continued to live on the hill and work as domestics or laborers, although by this time some of the Black men were employed on the railway as porters. Catholics and Protestants remained separate in schooling and many social activities. The Acadians, who constituted the large percentage of the Catholic population, continued to live in neighborhoods along the marsh. Although they became more and more acculturated, losing their language and often

¹⁰⁰ Reilly 326.

¹⁰¹ R. D. Crawford, "Amherst, a Thriving Industrial Town with City Ambitions," Busy East 10:5 (December 1919): 33-35.

anglicizing their surnames, they still suffered discrimination. Ralph, now in his seventies, recalls how children of an Acadian farmer met with difficulty when they started school:

When I started school in 1918, I was eight years old. The Goulds from Nappan, three or four of them came to school that same year I did.... The older ones had been there before and they had been beat up so bad they had to go home and stay there. And so when there was some more come along--there was more in numbers--then they come back to school. And some of the older boys, the bigger ones that were there when the first came were gone. Still there were some there quite rough then when I went. It wasn't because they were doing anything, it was because others were prejudiced against the Nappan, the French (T86:18).

Several of the individuals who tightly hung on to the older social structure were regarded as characters. Rachel Gee and David Steele were both born in England and immigrated to Canada when Nova Scotia was still part of the British Empire. When, in old age, they found themselves in a vastly different world, both preferred to hold on to the familiar ways of Victorian England than to accept the new. Rachel D. Gee came to Amherst after the death of her husband, John, in 1915. John Gee was ordained as a Methodist minister in 1879 and served many pastoral charges in Nova Scotia. While at Amherst Head in 1885, the Gees' son William died and was buried in the Amherst cemetery. Later John and daughter Margaret Martha were buried beside

him. When Rachel Gee moved to the town, it was chiefly to be near departed members of the family. One informant recalls how Rachel and remaining daughter Mary would often walk to the cemetery "to have dinner with father" or to read their Bibles there (FN 20 March 1986).

For twenty-eight years Rachel Gee lived in Amherst, knitting socks for the Children's Aid Home,¹⁰² teaching Sunday School, and contributing to the Red Cross,¹⁰³ but she made friends with few, if any other residents. Upon her death, daughter Mary is described as having been her "inseparable companion for so many years."¹⁰⁴

Rachel Gee distanced herself from others in the community, continuing to wear long dresses and wide-brimmed hats after they had gone out of style. She was a proud woman and annually would arrange to have a photo taken and distributed to members of her Sunday School class (FN 20 March 1986). Several informants have vivid recollections of Rachel Gee regally proceeding down main street. She may well have based her behaviour and appearance on family custom for when her family once came from England to visit, an informant remembers, "they looked like they came from another world." When curiosity rose about the visitors, a rumour circulated that Rachel's sister had died of a broken

¹⁰² ADN 6 December 1923: 5.

¹⁰³ ADN 1 April 1944: 1.

¹⁰⁴ ADN 1 April 1944: 1.

heart (FN86:2).

Rachel Gee reportedly maintained her lofty position at home as well. Mary contributed to family income by teaching music. In fact, she may well have been the sole source of income. Nevertheless, she is said to have played the role of maid for her mother. For example, Rachel demanded separate meals which Mary prepared and served. When her mother died in 1944, Mary lost a good deal of her life's purpose. In the next seven years until her own passing, she became increasingly nonconformist in appearance and manner (FN 20 March 1986).

David Allen Steele's life bears some similarities with Rachel Gee's. Born in England, he was educated at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia where he received a B. A. and M. A. and was ordained a Baptist minister. Steele served as pastor in Canse, Nova Scotia before coming to Amherst in 1867. From this time until his death in 1931, Steele was "a commanding figure in this town" (T86:12). He and his wife, Sarah raised a large family of at least seven children, many of whom tragically contracted tuberculosis from their father and died early deaths. After Sarah's death in 1911, he lived with his housekeeper. One informant, Mark, feels Steele experienced financial difficulty in later life because he had invested heavily in Amherst Boot and Shoe (T86:12).

Steele's contribution to Amherst as a minister, a

minister emeritus, a local historian and a public speaker was considerable. His status as a character, however, stems in part from his longevity and visibility, as well as his "old school" appearance and manner. Mark recalls, "He was very impressive, tall and impressive man, very dignified in the old tradition, you know. Carried a gold headed cane and wore a Prince Albert coat and a modified pipe hat. He was quite a figure to see, you know and he walked with great dignity, that type of person." The informant, a Baptist minister himself, describes his first meeting with David Steele:

We were standing around [before the church service] and this was the first Sunday in May. So someone opened the door and 'Don't see him yet.' Well this went on and there was sort of a pervasive feeling of anticipation, you know, something important is to happen, maybe it was important rather than fortunate [Laughs]. Anyway in due course Dr. Steele arrives like a royal figure. He comes in. Hands his cane to one deacon and hands his hat to another and turns around and lets another deacon take his coat off and hang it up. Well, he believed in being attended to. They were his minions, you know. Didn't pay any attention to me at all. Not the slightest. As far as I could tell he hadn't even seen me. Then he wheels around, 'Who are you?' he says. 'Who are you?' 'Well,' I said, 'My name is Mark, I'm taking the service today.' 'Oh, I'll take the prayer' [Laughs]. I had no choice. And in the prayer...he prayed at one point this, almost these exact words, 'and Oh Lord,' he said, 'Don't let all of our brainy young men go to the United States. We need them here in Canada to build this country.' Well, wasn't that a funny

prayer? But that was Dr. Steele. He dealt with issues, you see. He raised issues, he faced issues. He dealt with the actual facts of life. That was why he was here so many years (T86:12).

Steele's routine at the church door on Sunday mornings represents only one of the many traditions and rituals he formulated over his lifetime and he expected others to observe:

I was on very good terms with Dr. Steele. I had baked beans and brown bread with him every Saturday night. He insisted. And if I missed by any chance and forgot to call him, he'd call me up Monday morning, 'What did I say last time to make you mad?' [Laughs]. He had a great sense of humour.

Several of Mark's narratives illustrate his view that Steele had a keen sense of humour:

Quite often when I was with him for Saturday night, he'd have a wedding. He had many weddings because he was here for generations. He married third generations, you know, he married their grandfather and their father. So one night this man about sixty came to the door and 'Could you marry me?' And 'Got your girl with you?' Well, he had a woman about his age in the car. I assume she was in the car. 'Bring her in. Bring her in.' ... So these two appeared about sixty years of age and he looked at them and he says, 'Got your parents' consent?'

The Hickman family belonged to the Baptist church and was related by marriage to David Steele. James Hickman moved to Amherst from his home in New Brunswick around the 1860s. A lumberman and merchant, he was described by C. R. Smith in 1924 as having been "one of the outstanding figures

of our little town in 1869." Smith recalls one incident involving James Hickman:

In some ways Mr. Hickman was peculiar as the following will show. One evening his store caught on fire, and as there were no telephones or autos in those days a man walked down to Otter's Brook, where Mr. Hickman lived and where his daughter, Miss Bessie still lives, to let him know his store was on fire. On the way back he informed Mr. Hickman that probably the store would be completely destroyed and commenced to sympathize with the owner when Mr. Hickman replied, 'Oh yes too bad, too bad, but did they save my 'straw hats,' commonly called 'cow's breakfasts,' of which Mr. Hickman always kept a large assortment.¹⁰⁵

James Hickman and his wife had five children: Frederick, who died in 1876 at the age of eleven years; John, who later became a lawyer; Elizabeth, who married David Steele's son Noel; and two daughters who never married, Annie and Bessie.

Annie and Bessie Hickman developed reputations as characters. From the turn of the century until their deaths in 1950 and 1947 respectively they were watched with interest. After the death of their father in 1899 and the passing of their mother in 1911, Annie and Bessie inherited the family property. Bessie maintained the family home while Annie lived in her maternal grandmother's house across the street. The two represent very different personality types and they had serious differences of opinion. Many

¹⁰⁵ C. R. Smith, "Amherst of Fifty-Five Years Ago," ADN 11 June 1924: 8.

believe that the sisters did not speak to each other for most of their adult lives. As early as 1908 signs of a strained relationship emerge. The ADN carries separate announcements of a trip the two took to Halifax.¹⁰⁶ Either the sisters had taken separate journeys coinciding on the same day, or they insisted on individual accounts in the newspaper.

Annie Hickman was a strict adherent of the Baptist church, a very frugal woman, and an individual who valued the former prestigious position the family had held within the town. She is remembered driving in her carriage with her Black chauffeur, wearing outdated clothing. Bessie, the other hand, wore men's clothing and smoked a pipe. Very probably she was a lesbian and for thirty years she shared her home with a female companion. Bessie enjoyed golf, maintained a summer cottage, and she belonged to the Anglican church. Bessie was more of a spendthrift than her sister and at one point she had to ask Annie for \$1550.00 to prevent losing the family home. At the time Annie reluctantly agreed to pay the sum but she later made a claim against her sister's estate in hopes of retrieving her investment.¹⁰⁷ For approximately forty years these two women fascinated town residents. They were considered real

¹⁰⁶ ADN 7 July 1908: 4.

¹⁰⁷ Nova Scotia, Department of Attorney General, Cumberland County Probate Records, no. 953.

characters.

The Hewsons were a family who shared Annie Hickman's concern that their position among the town's elite was threatened as the social order changed. Principally, they feared the erosion of their financial resources. The Hewsons formed an extended family, two of whom operated the woollen mills, while others in the family engaged in lumbering and real estate. Stories circulate illustrating the extreme frugality of many of the family's members. For example, James Hewson who moved to Amherst in 1887 to operate a coal business, had a reputation for being very careful with his money. The story is told that when a public building with a clock tower was built within sight of his house, he stopped all his own clocks in order to prevent any unnecessary wear (T86:7).

C. C. Hewson was born in Amherst in approximately 1868 to Silas and Elizabeth Hewson. By 1891 he was working as a painter and in later years he operated a second hand shop. Locally he is thought to have made his living by lending money. Chan, as he was commonly called, was known for his involvement in sports, particularly horseracing. Over his lifetime, he owned a number of fine horses and spent a considerable amount of time at the local race track. In his later years Chan Hewson was considered an authority on town history and would debate points of contemporary and historic interest with a group of men who gathered regularly

on the court house steps. Referred to in the newspaper as "the Courthouse Philosophers," these individuals supplied the press with notice and interpretation of local events. Chan died in 1948 at eighty years of age, after a lengthy illness. He left two unmarried daughters, Elizabeth and Helen. The Hewson frugality continued to be demonstrated by these daughters until their passing in the 1980s.

Chan's sister, Gertrude Hewson, earned her own reputation for thriftiness. In 1888 she married John (Johnny) Moore, a salesman for Robbs. Until his retirement, Gertrude managed the couple's real estate holdings that included the Empress Theatre, which they owned jointly with Chan, a store which they rented to Mike Mansour, and a number of residences. Stories remain in oral tradition concerning Gertrude's dealings with her tenants and her neighbors. In addition, she sometimes shared her views with readers of the ADN as in 1944 when she wrote to the editor with suggestions for other townspeople on how to save water.¹⁰⁸ At least one of the couple's four children inherited the familial aptitude for thrift for in 1946 Greta Hewson's recommendations for improving the local lobster trade were published in the press.¹⁰⁹ Johnny Moore died in 1939 and his wife in 1949.

Whereas in earlier periods the disadvantaged were

¹⁰⁸ ADN 21 August 1944: 4.

¹⁰⁹ ADN 15 February 1944: 4.

officially helped in an obligatory way, by 1907 moralistic reform, instigated by the rising middle class, actively developed. There was a growing belief in the influence of environment and housing conditions were an initial target. Reformers complained about the dilapidated state of tenements and lauded the single family dwelling as the right of every working man. Temperance efforts continued so that Amherst remained a "dry" town for at least the first decades of this century. In August of 1915 the ADN proudly claimed arrests for drunkenness numbered only thirty so far that year. This compared favorably with the 250 in 1906, when the town had a smaller population.¹¹⁰ By 1907 the press was withholding the names of those charged with liquor-related offenses, suggesting a greater self-consciousness, and perhaps shame, associated with the charges.

At the same time as middle class reformers addressed working-class housing and alcohol problems, there was a growing trend to remove children from undesirable home environments. Circa 1910 the Children's Aid Society was formed and soon after opened a home for children. Throughout this period the newspaper published pleas to help disadvantaged families and to remove children from particularly poor situations. One mother who was the subject of an unsuccessful public outcry is an often named character. Mary Wilson, born in Nappan around 1891, was the

¹¹⁰ ADN 27 August 1915: 4.

subject of public attention by 1909. At this time she had just given birth to a son and members of the public felt mother and baby should be removed from their present situation. The newspaper described Mary, nicknamed "the Boy-Girl of Nappan" as being of "dissipated character." She was "illiterate," "ignorant," and had worn men's clothing for most of her life.¹¹¹ The paper bemoans, "It was only the end that could be expected. No one will condemn the poor girl for her fall. Nothing else could be expected." The reporter urged that mother and child be removed and "placed in a better environment where they will have a better chance." When no action was taken by the following week, the ADN heightened the attack, "We should not allow the perpetuation or the creation of a breeding nest of immorality. It is economy to put forth efforts to save the young and the mother is still young enough to be influenced to lead a better life. She might as well have been brought up in 'Darkest Africa' as in Christian Cumberland for all the opportunities she has yet received. What can be done? Who will move in this matter?"¹¹² Mary remained with her mother in Nappan. She continued to dress in men's clothing and reportedly worked in a lumber camp. There she is thought to have met and married a man by the name of Noiles. She lived with her husband for at least a short while and

¹¹¹ ADN 1 March 1909: 1.

¹¹² ADN 3 March 1909: 4.

subsequently bore two more children. Mary Noiles is regarded as a hard drinker, and possibly a prostitute, who spent much of her time at male-dominated gatherings such as those held at Al Downey's farm. She was right-fingered and in 1917 was arrested and ordered to pay damages for getting a soldier drunk and stealing \$15.00 and a military badge from him.¹¹³ The following year she was sentenced to a term in Dorchester Penitentiary for stealing a watch and a sum of money from another soldier.¹¹⁴ Shortly after her discharge from prison she was again charged with theft.¹¹⁵ She died in 1936 after a lifetime that caused more than its share of controversy.

Mary's two sons, Kenneth and Gilbert Noiles, are generally considered more respectable than their mother. Kenneth married and worked as a caretaker for most of his adult life while Gilbert was one of the town's most widely rumored homosexuals. Within their own social circles, however, each became known as a character.

Moralistic paternalism extended to the town's physically and mentally disabled. These individuals were still encouraged to support themselves whenever possible, but a greater sense of public responsibility was demonstrated concerning their welfare. When Joseph Francis

¹¹³ ADN 1 August 1917: 1.

¹¹⁴ ADN 28 August 1918: 4.

¹¹⁵ ADN 16 January 1929: 1.

Gouthreau was injured in an accident while on the job in 1911, residents responded by making private donations.¹¹⁶ Gouthreau, an Acadian, was born in New Brunswick around 1862. After possibly sailing around the horn of Africa in a clipper ship and travelling to the Klondike, according to a grandson he was "not very able bodied" (FN 25-February 1986) when he arrived in Amherst in approximately 1880. A few years later he married Victoria Duplessis (1884-1964) and they had four children. Gouthreau was renowned as a trapper, hunter and fisherman and for many years he received annual press coverage for catching the first gaspereaux of the season. In addition to his other occupations, he crafted, collected and played violins. When he died in 1945, he was described as having "a keen sense of humour"¹¹⁷ but one informant remembers him as "a cranky old son of a bitch" (T87:2). He is still described as a character.

Paul Gould, a contemporary of Gouthreau, was also of Acadian descent from New Brunswick. By 1903 he was on the assessment roll as a laborer at Rhodes Curry, but did not have taxable property. Gould's first appearances in the newspaper concern charges laid against him for drunkenness. By 1915, however, he was "almost blind." The press states that "he contests he is almost starving and can get no work." The writer continues, "he may be lazy but he should

¹¹⁶ ADN 7 August 1911: 8.

¹¹⁷ ADN 15 January 1945: 4.

not be left roaming our streets constantly begging and telling his pitiful story. Whether it is true or no we do not know, but he ought to be given a compulsory bath and provided for in some way."¹¹⁸ In August 1915 the town's Poor Committee provided a home for Gould but shortly afterwards he expressed dissatisfaction with the accommodations supplied. He complained the roof leaked and he had no water. He worried if he became ill he would have no one to care for him.¹¹⁹ Apparently Gould left Amherst for New Brunswick because in 1917 there is a report of "his annual visit to Amherst" and a reference to Gould's description of his life circumstances as "a regular story."¹²⁰ In 1918 he suffered serious injuries as a result of a car accident.¹²¹ Very probably he was removed to the county home in Pugwash following the accident for church records indicate he died there in January of 1924 "following operation."¹²²

Like Paul Gould, the physically and mentally infirm who had no one to care for, they were sent to a publicly run facility in Pugwash. The Pugwash home was part of a

¹¹⁸ ADN 27 June 1915: 3.

¹¹⁹ ADN 31 August 1915: 5.

¹²⁰ ADN 5 January 1917: 4.

¹²¹ ADN 8 November 1918: 4.

¹²² Saint Charles Roman Catholic Church, Records of Deaths, 1924.

provincial plan to localize mental health care facilities. In 1912 a group formed in Amherst for the support of the "feeble minded." This was four years following the organization of the provincial support group, the League for the Protection of the Feeble Minded, in Halifax.

Individuals who demonstrated a mental unbalance but who posed no threat to the community remained in Amherst.

May Purdy is recalled as an old lady who often talked out loud to herself as she walked along. An informant comments, "I wish I could remember more about May Purdy. I remember that name because she was a handful.... All I can remember is that she was a real case and I thought it was so funny talking to this, this woman who was out on the road walking.... She'd stop and talk and say all sorts of odd things to you so maybe she really was odd" (T86:13).

E. Bright Pipes lived alone with his horse, who reportedly ate better than he did (T86:7). Adam Trenholm, described by one informant as "a half wit," fascinated children with his abnormally long finger and toe nails (T86:10). He performed odd jobs around town and possibly pumped the organ at one of the churches.

One of the most renowned characters from the period of industrialization is John "Moose" Kent. More details survive concerning Kent than most of his contemporaries as he was the subject of a short biographical article by

Will R. Bird in the 1920s.¹²³ As well, stories of his antics remain in the minds of several senior citizens who were told them as children. Born in approximately 1850 to a farmer and his wife on the outskirts of Amherst, John was one of six children. By the 1881 census he had married Margaret Forrest. The couple had no children but Maggie cared for many cats (T86:3). While his wife worked as a charwoman, John had a more varied work career. A descendant believes he went to the Klondike during the gold rush and while in Amherst he operated a cab,¹²⁴ worked for the town as a laborer,¹²⁵ cut ice in the winter, and sold newspapers. Other pursuits brought him more attention. Locally Kent was recognized as a strongman and one informant tells how his parents claimed Kent lifted a 1000 pound weight at a county picnic (FN 5 March 1986). Bird writes of John Kent's exceptional abilities with a lazy stick¹²⁶ and describes him as "the champion." He is thought to have profited from his strength on at least one occasion when he set up a merry-go-round which he turned himself. (T86:3). Other ventures

¹²³ Will R. Bird, "John Kent Held Title as the Strongest Man in the Maritimes," ADN 28 March 1925: 3; 7.

¹²⁴ ADN 18 December 1895: 4.

¹²⁵ Annual Reports 1906.

¹²⁶ "Lazy stick" is the locally used term for a pastime common within nineteenth century agricultural and lumbering contexts. A stick is held between two people who sit on the ground facing each other with soles of feet touching. The winner is the one who successfully pulls the other off the ground and over the stick.

included the training of a moose to haul a punt. Kent received most acclaim for his attempt to fly from a three-storey building. The events leading up to this stunt are lost, but for whatever reason, Kent, donning large wings, leaped from the building. He hit the ground swiftly, in front of a large and expectant crowd. Both oral tradition and newspaper reports indicate he enjoyed drinking and fighting. He was colorful to the end and it is said for the latter years of his life he slept in a coffin he salvaged from World War I victory celebrations where it had been used as a prop (T86:3). When Kent died in 1929 from a heart attack, the local and provincial press noted his death.¹²⁷

The final character to emerge from these years shared Kent's entrepreneurial spirit and sense of adventure. A Black born in approximately 1879 in Annapolis Royal, William (Bill) Henry Moses came to Amherst prior to 1907. By July of that year he was employed as a molder's assistant and he had married Emma Baker Jones, a Black twenty-five year old single mother.¹²⁸ Bill Moses probably descended from the Moses family in the Annapolis Royal vicinity renowned for its musical and entertainment talents. As a child he performed on street corners in return for change from

¹²⁷ ADN 5 June 1929: 1, 4; Halifax Chronicle 7 June 1929: 3.

¹²⁸ Nova Scotia, Records of Marriage, 18 July 1907, ms. 156.

passersby.¹²⁹

During his stay in Amherst, Bill drew public attention for his violations of the Scott act prohibiting the sale and consumption of liquor. In 1914 he was sentenced to four years in Dorchester Penitentiary for stealing liquor. Shortly after his release in 1918, he was given an additional two years for selling alcohol illegally. This conviction received sensational coverage in the local press as Moses escaped custody and threatened to sue the paper for libel.¹³⁰ By 1920 he was released but continued to engage in illegal sales near Sackville, New Brunswick. In 1925 he died in Moncton where he was employed at a race track.¹³¹

Bill's estranged wife Emma Moses continued to live in Amherst until her death in 1963. Physically abused by her husband and left to raise a daughter largely by herself must have meant hardships for Emma. From an early age, however, she stood up for herself, appearing in the town records as a young woman demanding financial support from the father of her baby.¹³² An informant remembers Emma:

¹²⁹ ADN 27 May 1918: 7.

¹³⁰ See: ADN 1 June 1918: 4; 3 June 1918: 3.

¹³¹ ADN 31 August 1925: 1.

¹³² Town of Amherst, Minutes of Council, ms. Town Hall, Amherst, Nova Scotia 7 September 1898, record an application from Emma Jones for funds "under the Bastardy Act as to the parentage of female bastard child of which she delivered in Amherst 29 September 1897." Council passed a motion to obtain "an order of filiation" against the reputed father.

Emma Moses. Emma, now Emma was a character. Emma would curse you out, but she'd give you the shirt off her back. She'd do anything for you. That was Emma.... She was a little woman. She was tough. She hurt nobody (T86:21).

After the departure of her husband, Emma became a character in her own right. As one informant comments, "Everyone knew Emma" (T86:7). She worked as a charwoman, raised her daughter and perhaps several other children belonging to relatives, and was recognized as both a sharp-tongued wit and a good sport. By all reports she was not a woman to be interfered with. Stories such as the following are still told that describe her quick replies and retaliatory action:

Wilson was telling me one day that Emma was scrubbing the floor in the church and he come along and Emma was scrubbing this floor and he took a stick or his hand or something and gave Emma a little goose. And Emma — chased him but she couldn't catch him. About a month afterwards she caught him unbeknownst. She beat the living daylights out of him. Said she was only small. He said, 'She was only a little woman but boys she came up to my chin so many times it wasn't funny.' That was Emma. Get even (T86:21).

Informants speak little about Emma's daughter Hilda except to say that she became pregnant while still in school (T86:7) and that her death was sudden and tragic: "She lived in Montreal a lot. She'd come home and help her mother there for a while. Then she went back to Montreal and they found Hilda dead in an alley" (T86:21).

Collapse into Chronic Economic Crisis

(1928-1988)

Nolan Reilly's labelling of the final period in Amherst's history, "Collapse into Chronic Economic Crisis", might suggest a gradual decline ending in collapse. In reality, the period is more episodic than digressive in nature. World War II bolstered the economic situation temporarily by throwing Robbs and Canada Car into full operation. The 1930s saw an increase in transients and a subsequent crackdown on both vagrants and itinerants. By the 1930s many of the leading industrialist families were no longer an influential presence in the town so that municipal government was run almost totally by individuals from the mercantile sector. With the decline in industrial production, emphasis on the town's commercial potential developed. Throughout the period, government took on an increasingly large responsibility for the welfare of the disadvantaged as better care facilities and funding schemes evolved. In the 1950s Amherst successfully lobbied for an inter-provincial school for the deaf. In addition, it became the regional centre for the Department of Indian Affairs. Industrial decline continued despite the opening of an industrial park in the 1960s. Robbs now works on a skeleton crew in physically reduced quarters and Enheat Ltd., formerly Canada Car, maintains a fluctuating work

force dependent on inconsistent market demands.

The social divisions that characterized the town during its boom are still visible. Newcomers to the community remark on the tendency to refer to houses by the name of their original, rather than present owner (T86:8). In large part Blacks continue to live in their own community and attend their own church. Of course much integration has taken place and some Blacks move in almost exclusively white social circles. Of the approximately 150 Black residents, a few are employed in government offices, and one is a teacher. Two Black families have integrated into the higher status neighborhoods in town, but this is regarded as significant enough that it is often mentioned (T86:8). The struggle for Black equality of opportunity has made real advances in the last few decades, but it is not over.

Tensions between French and English, Catholic and Protestant, have all but disappeared from the contemporary social scene. While informants repeatedly described disharmony and distrust between Catholics and Protestants as the major social division in the town prior to the 1960s, they do not cite it as a continuing problem today. While overt evidence of prejudice has all but vanished, however, few Catholics or Acadians occupy powerful positions within municipal government or within the commercial sector. While residues of earlier prejudice remain, Catholics, Acadians, Blacks and women have all negotiated changing statuses

quietly and without strife. Today Amherst is characterized by one informant as being less divisive than nearby centers of comparable size and social composition (T87:7).

The result of these changing factors is a complex social system that reveals subtle distinctions between families and areas of the town that are recognized only by the long-time resident. While Amherstonians rarely speak of class, as August Hollingshead found in his study of "Elmtown's" social stratification, they talk of "types of families" and "the way" they live.¹³³ For example, when asked, two informants distinguished among twelve separate neighborhoods according to status (FN 10 July 1987). The allocation of status according to neighborhood is just one component of the complicated structure that helps residents organize their experience.

Understandably, the contemporary period demonstrates the fullest range of characters. One of the most vividly remembered from the pre-1940s, and an individual whose influence is still felt, is Charles William (Sunny) Gould. Although he died in 1940, Gould is still recognized as a fine tall tale teller and several of his narratives have been passed down to members of this generation. The son of an Acadian farmer from Nappan, Sunny Gould was born in approximately 1853. In 1888 he married Elizabeth Louise

¹³³ August Hollingshead, "Those on the Bottom," Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society, eds. Eric and Mary Josephson (New York: Dell, 1962) 301.

Brown and the couple subsequently had six children. One informant feels Gould may have been employed in the lumberwoods at one time (T86:3)--possibly explaining the source of at least some of his narrative repertoire--but he is generally remembered as an employee of Canada Car. Like some of the other characters, Sunny's life was touched by tragedy when his son John committed suicide. After returning from action in World War I, John was distraught to find his wife had left him, one daughter had gone to live with family in Cape Breton, while his two other children had been placed in the Home of the Good Shepherd in Halifax.¹³⁴

Despite any personal difficulties he faced, Sunny Gould maintained a persona of good humour. He was well known for his jokes and tall tales, as well as his fine checker and card playing abilities. Many of his activities and stories relied on the participation of his friend and neighbor Graham Hutchinson and the two often teamed up to play practical jokes on others. For even those who do not know any of the stories he told or were told about him, Sunny Gould's name lives on, attached to a railway crossing located near his former home in the West Highlands.

A contemporary of Gould's was Herbert (Bug-Eye) Blanche. Like Sunny Gould, Blanche was celebrated for his storytelling abilities although his name is connected with humorous anecdotes, rather than tall tales. His propensity

for drink, the time spent around the stables which was a gathering place for men and their public-space talk, his voracious reading, and his enthusiasm for horseracing and other sports, combined to make him both an entertaining performer and the focus of many anecdotes. Members of an extended family recall:

Vincent: He once stopped Harvey Pipe.

Karen: Yes, I remember you telling me that.

Vincent: Harvey, you know was a six footer and so he owned the town and Herb came up to him one night [Laughs]--he was tight of course--and asked for permission to stay in town overnight [Laughs].

Joan: He was a character. .

Rose: Was he [Pipe] mayor then Vincent?

Vincent: Oh I don't know. I remember that story (T86:10).

Blanche was born circa 1871 and by 1891 his mother had remarried to a livery owner, only six years older than her son. Bug-Eye, so called for the patch he wore over one eye, was a painter by trade but he spent most of his work career in his step-father's livery stable, looking after the horses and meeting the trains. That his step-father may have shared one informant's assessment of Blanche as "the town drunkard" (T86:1) is suggested by a clause in his will that stipulates money left to Bug-Eye, over forty years of age at the time, be given to him at the discretion of a local physician. The step-father recommends the sum of \$500.00

would best be distributed in several installments rather than one lump sum.¹³⁵ Blanche never married and when he died in 1940, he was the last surviving member of his family.¹³⁶

Peter Mann Noiles, or Crazy Annie as he was called, was considered a character because of sporadically erratic behaviour which caused him to end his days in the asylum in Pugwash as a ward of the county. An informant who remembers Peter Mann comments:

George: He had a few wheels missing.... We always called it a few years ago, not all the coys were missing but some of them. So when it got to a certain notch in it, it wouldn't work right for him. He'd be off for a while....

Diane: He had spells?

George: Oh yeah. Well, you take all those people that tend to be a little bit off. When the moon is full especially they are that much worse (T87:3).

During the time he experienced good health, Crazy Annie integrated into the community. George describes a time when Crazy Annie was working with a neighbor cutting wood:

He was working with Fred and they were sawing down this big tree and of course Annie was on one side and Fred was on the other. And they were sawing away and by gosh Annie's foot kind of broke through the brush and stuff, you know, and Annie said, 'Fred, there's something

¹³⁵ Nova Scotia, Department of Attorney General, Cumberland County Probate Records, no. 2848.

¹³⁶ ADN 8 January 1940: 4.

underneath my foot moving.' He said, 'I can feel it moving underneath my foot.' Fred said, 'You crazy old bugger,' he said, 'stop worrying about something under your foot, just saw the tree.' And he said, 'my foot's getting warmer,' he said. So Fred looked and he was standing on a bear Laughs. Fred told me this himself. He broke through the den you see and his foot was on top of the bear (T87:3).

As a Noiles from Nappan, Crazy Annie came from a family of characters. Gilbert Seaman's early diary from Minudie describes the progenitor from whom Crazy Annie descended: "[Peter Mann Noiles] has been a drunk all his days and has now passed to his last account."¹³⁷ Seaman's granddaughter also remembered the first Peter M. Noiles whom she describes as "a terror."¹³⁸ She tells how the priest refused to have the reprobate buried within the cemetery walls and only after considerable persuasion by the dead man's family and friends was the cemetery expanded to include him. One of Crazy Annie's sisters married Dandy Gould, the maple sugar vendor and character, while another told fortunes and was rumored to be a witch (T87:2).

Other Noiles family members earned their own reputations as characters. Crawford Noiles, a resident of Lower Maccan, was recognized for his huge appetite. He was less known in Amherst than in the small communities along

¹³⁷ Seaman 15 June 1879.

¹³⁸ Mary Morris, "Recollections," ms. Mount Allison University Archive, Sackville, New Brunswick 7001-128/5.

the Joggins Shore (T87:8). When George Jacques Noiles (1823-1910), known as "the King of Nappan," died the ADN reported, "At one time there was probably no better known character in the town of Amherst or in district no 1 than the deceased."¹³⁹ George Jacques's son, Seaman Noiles, commonly called Seaman Jake, followed the example of his progenitor, Peter Mann the first. Mary Morris writes that Peter Mann had the reputation of helping himself to his neighbor's belongings and Seaman is still associated in some residents' minds with his less than honest efforts to make a profit. George elaborates:

Seaman Noiles. Seaman. Maybe you were told this before...about making the maple syrup out of, he'd start putting maple syrup on the market about February because he's make it out of brown sugar, you see. He'd add maple flavoring to it. He'd sell it for maple products then because he got an early start. And this one time a fellow bought a chicken from him, see. He bought the chicken from him and he thought the chicken was heavy, you know, when he picked the chicken up, you know the chicken was heavy for the size of it. It all had been opened up and everything, washed and cleaned. It was a nice looking chicken. But when he got it home, he found the crown gear, the pinion gear off of a mowing machine wrapped up in it so he'd get the extra weight out of the chicken, so he'd make that much more money. And you know those fellows have got to be characters. There's no getting clear of it, they've got to be characters. The things like that they done (T87:3).

¹³⁹ ADN 26 September 1910: 3.

Many stories, most of which contain sexually explicit material, still survive describing Seaman's antics. One informant shares what appears to be an expurgated anecdote illustrating a resource of bawdy narratives told by or about Seaman:

He told me a story years ago that he'd, he'd been put out in some place working and boarding at this boarding house. This woman kept several boarders. And he said some of them was having a hard time; they weren't working full time and the old lady was getting a little hard pressed for money and wanted her money. And he said this night, it was supper time. He said, 'I just gone up to the bathroom and I heard her hollering.' 'You folks will have to pay your board tonight or move.' And he said, 'I just walked right out of the bathroom to the head of the stairs.' He said, 'I forgot to close my trousers and I said, 'what did you say lady?' And she said, 'Mind your business and go back to your room [Laughs].' Now that story is told of Seaman Noiles (T87:2).

Remembered as being loud (T87:2), a friend of Emma Moses (T86:21), and a member of the "canned heat company"--a group of men accused of drinking Sterno as a stimulant (T87:4)-- Seaman Noiles died in 1949, at seventy-eight years of age.¹⁴⁰ He left a family of two sons and three daughters. Today one informant still remembers Seaman Noiles coming into town reciting a little rhyme as he went along:

Wing wing
Nobody like old Seaman Noiles (T86:9).

The Noiles family was rivalled only by their neighbors,

the Finnigans. Emma, Angus, Ned and Bep Finnigan represent characters from an extended family that battled the Noiles in stealing chickens, apples, eggs, wood and hay from surrounding farmers. Informants could supply no biographical data on the family but remember some of the many stories that were once told about the notorious Finnigans. George tells of an encounter between Crazy Annie Noiles's sister, Rennie, and Angus Finnigan:

Old Angus was a character within himself and a whole lot of character he was.... He was over to Rennie's to make Rennie a visit and they sit down and they talk and this and that and jabbered away till it got pretty near dark.... Angus said, 'Rennie, I guess it's time for me to go home.' So he picked up his hat and away he went and she never thought anything about it. Gosh he was gone quite a while and she said, 'My goodness, I'd better go check my hen pen, that old rascal, I'll bet he was into my hen pen stealing eggs or something.' She went out and her red rooster was missing [Laughs]. So she goes to work, puts her hat and coat on, she didn't go right off. She had her supper and then she said, 'after supper he'll have done whatever he had done to the old rooster. I'll be able to catch him.' So she went down after she had her supper and here Angus, when she walked in the kitchen, she smelt the rooster cooking. (Diane: No.) Now this is a true story. So anyway, by golly those old fashioned stoves, they're flat for a ways they went up and the oven was in the flue part like. And she sat down by the stove talking to Angus. 'Well,' she said, 'Angus it feels cold in here, doesn't it? I think I'll put a stick or two on the stove.' 'Himmm don't put too much in.' He always said Himmm. 'Himmm, no,' he said; 'himmm himmm himmm warm enough, himmm don't put any more

in'. [Laughs]. So she put in two or three sticks. Of course it got blazing and working good and she said, 'My gosh Angus I feel cold. It's getting colder in here.' Angus said, 'Himmm I'm lots warm. Don't put any more wood in.' So she kept adding the wood to it, adding the wood to it. It came about ten o'clock and she said, 'Well Angus I guess it's time for me to go home, I've spent my stay and good night.' And away she went out the door and of course she had to look through the window to watch what was taking place. Angus run over and jerked the door open and all the smoke - it was just one big cloud of smoke coming out the door. And the rooster sizzled right up pretty near to nothing [Slaps leg and laughs]. She said if she wasn't going to have that rooster, 'the old bugger,' she said, 'he stole my rooster, he wasn't going to have it either.' She cooked it beyond cooking (T87:3).

George also vividly remembers Bep Finnigan who was well known for his exceptional strength. When encouraged by liquor, he could be heard challenging anyone and everyone to hand-to-hand combat. He would shout, "Let them come, big and small clean from Barronsfield to Minudie, I'll lick them all."

In Amherst proper one of the general physicians gained character status in the eyes of some, Gerald C. W. Bliss was born to a medical practitioner in Amherst and by the 1890s he had opened his own medical practice there as well. Gerald maintained a practice for many years and this, in addition to his involvement in the fire department and the Orange Lodge, introduced him to many of the town's residents. He married Bessie Botsford who died in 1894 at

thirty-four years of age and remarried to Francis Crane who predeceased him in 1924. The two marriages produced six children, one of whom was considered "a little odd" (T86:6). Bill describes this son as "a mental math wizard" but socially inept. Dr. Bliss is credited with many quick replies, as illustrated in a newspaper report concerning his eighty-seventh birthday. When a well-wisher commented that Bliss was probably the oldest practicing surgeon but "too bad we're getting old," Bliss replied: "Speak for yourself old fellow."¹⁴¹ He died in 1948 at ninety years of age.

Murray Nicholson, a native of Sydney Mines, a graduate of Dalhousie University School of Dentistry and a first World War veteran, settled in Amherst following World War One and opened a dental practice. He soon became heavily involved in local politics, sports, and a men's social club. During World War II he served in the Dental Corps attached to the North Nova Highlanders. Until the latter years of his life, Nicholson experienced a serious alcohol addiction which gave rise to many narratives describing his outrageous actions and inappropriate remarks. Many of the stories about him tell of his efforts to extract teeth when intoxicated (T86:21). Nicholson reformed, however, and the local branch of Alcoholics Anonymous is named after him. In his retirement, Nicholson devoted time to community organizations such as the John Howard Society but he

¹⁴¹ ADN 21 December 1944: 1, 9.

experienced many health problems stemming from an automobile accident in 1955. His death followed in 1960.

Elmer Farnell was a veteran of World War I but he was known as a character for very different reasons than Nicholson. Recognized throughout Eastern Canada as a fine baritone soloist, and from 1918 as a commercial traveller for Bryant-McDonald Co., he was dubbed "the singing tea man." Farnell came to Amherst with his parents from their home in Sheet Harbour, Nova Scotia in approximately 1908. From that time until his death in 1958, he actively promoted the town. He is credited with having attracted other commercial travellers to the area so that by 1949, 150 to 200 travellers and their families resided there. Farnell belonged to, and was perhaps responsible for establishing the Commercial Club, later reorganized as the Amherst's Traveller's Club. He sang in churches throughout the Maritimes and within town participated in concerts, benefits and inter-denominational church activities. His generosity and community-mindedness was demonstrated through innumerable small acts such as his fundraising efforts for the Highland View Hospital and his donation of baseball equipment to the town's recreation department.¹⁴² Elmer Farnell never married but showed support for several of his brother's daughters who shared his musical ability. One niece received considerable acclaim which allowed her to

¹⁴² ADN 18 May 1934: 4.

study voice in England.

There is not unanimous agreement among informants as to whether or not this man was a character. Some claim they never regarded him as one and they remember Elmer Farnell as a kind man who always tried to act in the best interest of the community (T86:19). For others the constant boosterism and boasting made him a character. One man claims Farnell was "a professional bullshitter" (T86:7). He adds, "He'd even cry for a sale." Certainly Farnell's account of a recreational train trip where he describes his rescue of a one-armed suicidal woman bears the marks of a well crafted tall tale.¹⁴³ When he died, after nearly twenty years of heart trouble, his obituary carried the unusual claim that he was "one of the most useful citizens."¹⁴⁴

Russell Briggs frequently accompanied Farnell on the piano. In a 1965 interview, Briggs credited Elmer Farnell and his family for his own prominence as a musician.¹⁴⁵ Briggs was born on 22 July 1887 to Abel Briggs, who had once lived with Phomes Yorke.¹⁴⁶ When his father died in 1895, the Amherst Town Council arranged to send the sight-impaired child to the Nova Scotia School for the Blind in Halifax.

¹⁴³ ADN 21 January 1928: 3.

¹⁴⁴ ADN 13 June 1958: 2.

¹⁴⁵ ADN 18 December 1965: 1.

¹⁴⁶ Abel appears to have been referred to by both Briggs and Yorke, Christie 1 February 1895.

There he learned braille and earned a diploma in music education. Following graduation, Briggs wrote a musical cantata and according to a step-sister, may have tuned pianos for the Amherst Piano Company (T86:9). During the 1930s Russell Briggs published several poems in the local press but he never became widely recognized as a writer or composer. Rather, until circa 1940 he taught music lessons at twenty-five cents per session. After this he played solely for service groups and church affiliated organizations. His contribution to the Kinsmen Club was memorialized when the club purchased and erected a gravestone on his grave. Many informants remember Briggs for his involvement in community activities and describe his stance at the piano; how he would copy the notes with his fingers as he listened to a new piece of music and then play it flawlessly later; and how he sometimes became so involved in the music he was playing he would forget the solofst beside him.

Briggs never married and a surviving family member observes that he was not close to other family members. She describes him as "sensitive," "nervous," and "prone to tantrums" (T86:9). His true home seems to have been the community at large and in particular the family with which he boarded for most of his adult life. In 1969 Russell Briggs died tragically after being struck by a car outside his boarding-house.

While Briggs contributed to the community through his musical talents, Lida Pipes is remembered by some as a character who generously gave of her domestic skills. Graduating in 1902 from Acadia University, with what must have been a degree in domestic science, "Lide" became an active member of the Baptist Church and organizations such as the golf club. To support herself, she worked as a dressmaker, ran a small food catering service and taught cooking and sewing classes. Lide earned herself the reputation of character within several of the community and church organizations to which she belonged. The designation stemmed from both her unconventional way of doing things from the washing of communion glasses (T86:7) to the making of choir gowns (T87:2), and her intolerance of either assistance or criticism. After reportedly terrorizing the nurses during her final hospital stay, Lida Pipes died in February of 1966 at the age of eighty-seven. Her parents had died years earlier and she left only one unmarried sister.

Bessie Downey worked as town clerk for nearly as long as she served as regent of the local chapter of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire. As clerk, she expected the staff to respect her erratic hours which accommodated a penchant for sleeping in and the occasional game of golf in the summer. She dispensed municipal funds as if they were being deducted from her own salary and one

woman described how Downey often was reluctant to pay teachers hired by the county. The informant continues:

But the men were all scared to death of her; you know the county council, she ran it [Laughs].... The registrar of deeds, they put in this neon lighting, you know in his office and this was when she was county clerk.... And he went to her and he wanted a new light. Now this was in the court house. The light burned out. And this was in the court house which was county property. She said if he wanted a new light, he'd buy it. And he went and he wouldn't buy it and...I guess when it came a little later in the day they had to give out because they couldn't see and a councillor came in wanting some information. They couldn't tell him until the next day [Laughs]. I guess he soon straightened that out and Bess had to buy the light (T86:7).

She must have been a daunting work colleague for one woman remarks, "She was clever, she never made a mistake" (T86:16).

Downey ruled the IODE with equal severity. One member comments, "Nobody would dare take it [the Regency] away from her" (T86:19). Another echoes, "Everyone was scared to death of her" (T86:16). Even on the golf course she was feared for she was a founding member and would refuse to allow anyone behind her to pass. One informant summarizes her attitude, "After all she was a Downey" (T86:1). "Miss Downey," as she was called by all, died in 1976.

By the 1960s Eva Gibson ruled her neighborhood with the same firm control Bessie Downey exercised over those around her. A large, always flamboyantly dressed woman with a low

tolerance level for noise, Eva Gibson was considered a character by the time she reached middle age. The sight of youngsters riding "double" on their bikes past her house would be enough to send her rushing to the phone to call the police. Members of the police force and fire department, as well as those who listened to the local radio phone-in show on which she was a regular, were familiar with her many complaints. As one informant comments, "She'd rather fight than eat" (T86:7). Some adults recognized her strengths for she was an accomplished pianist and as a former fire chief remarks, "She had a heart as big as a bucket. She'd give you anything" (T86:3). To some she was outrageous and humorous. Neighborhood children, however, thought she was terrifying and tried to avoid antagonizing her. Eva Gibson died in 1984 at the age of eighty-four years, leaving one grown son.

Watson Weaver actually lived in Parrsboro and Springhill but his frequent visits to Amherst for over fifty years brought him in contact with many of the town's residents and earned him the reputation of a character. Born in 1895 to a miner and his wife, Watson was one of five children. The family experienced financial difficulties and a schoolmate remembers, "The Weavers were very poor" (T81:3). She adds that Watson Weaver would be classified as "slow" if he were in today's school system.

In adult life, Weaver briefly operated two small

businesses. In one shop he sold sheet music and later he managed a photography store. Both ventures were short lived, however, and for most of his life, Weaver travelled door to door selling articles made by his sister or purchased at a local department store. During his visits Weaver would also show his latest mail which might include a card from Queen Elizabeth II or Dr. Sydney Gilchrist.

Watson Weaver specialized as a photographer. Much of his work was of events, ships launched along the Parrsboro Shore, and portraits of children either taken at home or in the schools. He sold the photographs individually or mounted them on cardboard backs for use as calendars. During World War II Weaver compensated for some of the intense disappointment he experienced when he was refused acceptance into the army during the First World War and he appointed himself the official photographer of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. Local tradition that depicted Weaver as a wounded war vet ensured his acceptance by the regiment and allowed him to follow them throughout the province, documenting their activities.

After his mother died, Weaver resided with his sister. Erma managed any bookings for photographs and organized his files. Despite her attention, Watson became increasingly dirty and unkempt. His death in 1972 signalled the passing of the last peddler in northern Nova Scotia, and a local institution.

Watson Weaver has not been the only developmentally delayed individual in recent memory to create a niche for himself or to earn the reputation of character. Avard Hire lived with his parents prior to their deaths in the 1970s and made deliveries for a small grocer. He was well known to the customers of the grocery store and reportedly was treated sympathetically by most of the adult clientele. On the other hand, young males in the neighborhood where he lived were fascinated by Hire and spread stories of his reputed sexual prowess. Unbeknownst to their parents they tried to incite him to publicly masturbate and jokingly accused friends seen in Hire's presence of carrying on a homosexual affair with the man (T86:15). Hire died in 1984 at the age of seventy-six.

Two Edgett brothers did odd jobs around town from the 1950s to the 1970s. As grown men, they cut lawns and helped homeowners with the installation or removal of storm windows. The two went about their work silently as one brother apparently had little or no speech, while the other spoke with difficulty. Some informants describe vivid mental images they still hold of the Edgetts working, the elder always dressed in a tweed jacket and cap, even in the hottest days (FN 9 February 1988). Wesley comments: "They were characters because I, it seems to me they used to have two lawnmowers and they'd both be going at the same time, you know at different ends of the property and they wouldn't

talk and they'd walk in straight lines and they just sort of seemed to be so organized, like little soldiers or something" (T87:6). Wesley remembers that the Edgetts' father coordinated most of their work and that he placed certain restrictions on the way they were able to carry it out. The mute brother died circa 1980, leaving his younger brother to continue alone.

Homeowners divided household tasks among several mentally handicapped men. While the Edgetts looked after the lawn and some outside work, a man whose name has been forgotten by informants who mentioned him, was hired for heavy tasks such as beating carpets. Referred to within one friendship group as Beady Eyes because of his piercing gaze, this individual lived alone for most of his life in a decrepit building at the edge of town. In later years he shared his house with a small woman of Acadian descent who worked in Amherst as a housekeeper. She was nicknamed "the Shadow" by those who called the man Beady Eyes as she customarily walked along behind him. Beady Eyes died in approximately 1978, probably in his seventies.

Although several informants referred to a man known as Happy Day, none knew his name nor could supply details about his background. Like Beady Eyes, while he was a familiar face to so many, he led a largely anonymous life. Happy was mentally disabled and spent much of his spare time walking through town or at a baseball diamond. In

approximately 1980, he died at about seventy years of age.

Blanche Cannon was an only child, born to parents who probably had never planned to have children (FN 4 March 1986). One informant reports that Blanche had a difficult relationship with her parents, and that she spoke bitterly of her mother. The same informant feels that Blanche's father might very well have been abusive. Despite any tension that may have existed within the family, Blanche stayed at home and cared for her parents in their old age. When her father died in 1931, she hoped to continue his milk route and maintain the family farm on the outskirts of Amherst through her profits, supplemented by a small annual allowance derived from her father's estate. Her plans were shattered, however, when she learned he had died intestate and his estate was inadequate to pay his debts. After the farm was sold, Blanche entered domestic service in Amherst. The family with whom she worked for many years is generally thought to have been a demanding employer and most informants who spoke of Blanche did so sympathetically. They described her as a kind and generous person, an art-lover, and a hard worker who was eminently practical. They also felt she had been ill treated by many of the people she lived with and relied upon. Blanche Cannon's hard work paid off, however, and she was able to save enough money to buy a small house for herself in the West Highlands in 1953. Although in later years ill-health forced her to leave her

home and move into a boarding-house, she remained independent of spirit until the end, as the description she gave of herself as "widow" on a 1981 deed indicates. When she died in 1984 at the age of eighty-one, Blanche donated her body to Dalhousie Medical School. Today she is remembered fondly for her often comical analysis of social issues. For example she linked the institution of old age pension with an observation that female senior citizens had taken to wearing more cosmetics and finer underwear (T86:7). On another occasion she philosophized on the debilitating effects the decision to abandon publicly sounded fire signals had had on town life. From her perspective people liked going to fires and helping the firemen gave them something constructive to do (FN 5 April 1988).

Billy Wells may not have concurred with many of Blanche Cannon's views, but he was as quick as she to express opinion. A reporter for a regional publication describes how Wells consented to be interviewed only after he criticized her for having yellow teeth and made several recommendations to her as to how she might remedy this (FN 5 April 1988). His best known unconventional action took place shortly after the death of his wife when he placed an ad in the local paper for a female companion. This remains the single most referred-to incident concerning Wells and informants often mentioned it first. When he died in 1984, Billy Wells was a self-made millionaire from profits from

blueberry land he acquired as a young man. In his later years he became increasingly obsessed with the preservation of county cemeteries and in his will left a large fund to finance the restoration of older cemeteries.

John (Johnny) Davidson delighted in Well's eccentricities when he heard of them and carried the millionaire's want ad in his wallet. Not all informants agree with the designation of Davidson as a character, but at least some regard him as a loud, and sometimes outrageous, voice from the Black community. In his youth Davidson was involved in athletics; throughout his entire life time he maintained an involvement in town sport. Widowed as a young man, Davidson remarried and raised two sons. Both he and his second wife were strong supporters of the local African Methodist Episcopal church. Davidson was a Canadian National Railway porter for most of his work career and acted as an informal courier for Amherstonians who had messages or goods to be picked up or delivered in Montreal. During World War II he would often return with coveted items such as silk stockings or publications not available locally. He was well known as an honest, frank and humorous individual who had many friends and was particularly well thought of within the larger white community. After retirement Davidson regularly visited certain businesses, the police department, fire station, and the court-room to keep abreast of news. He continued in his

earlier role as messenger as he spread the word of local events on each of his stops. In 1986 he died in his sleep while in his seventies.

Contemporary Amherst continues to boast an assorted cast of characters. Robbie, a fifty-nine-year-old mongoloid, shuffles along main street making regular stops at businesses where he knows he is welcome. In greeting everyone he recognizes, Robbie often reveals a remarkable memory for detail. For example, one informant describes how Robbie once asked his dog's name and then was able to recall it at a much later meeting (T86:17). Others tell of how he is able to identify individuals he has not seen for many years and call them by name (T86:7; T87:6). He is recognized as being very sensitive and prone to having his feelings hurt easily (T87:1). The son of a deceased mechanic, Robbie now lives alone with his mother and attends classes organized by the Canadian Association for the Mentally Handicapped (CAMR).

Francois LeBlanc was a long time participant in CAMR classes prior to his death in 1986. His younger brother Charles LeBlanc, now in his thirties, still attends. The men and their mother, Theresa, have attracted a great deal of attention over the years and what one informant describes as their "pre-neanderthal appearance" (T87:6) has earned them the collective nickname of "the Monkey family." The three roamed the streets for approximately twenty-five

years, checking garbage cans, looking for bottles, and wandering into businesses, frequently engaging in loud argument peppered with obscenities and references to incest. Raoul LeBlanc, the husband and father of the family, has been less visible and is rarely mentioned by informants. His appearance is normal and it is thought he may have worked at Enheat (T86:7) or repaired televisions (T86:17).

Jimmy, a developmentally-delayed man in his thirties, is one of several contemporary characters who uses the community rink as a focal point. In the winter he does odd jobs around the stadium and in the summer months he mows lawns. When Jimmy rides on a small tractor along sidewalks, hauling a lawn-mower, he often leans back casually steering and smoking a large cigar. At other times he makes his way on one of several decorated bicycles, the most festive of which sports approximately twelve flags, a radio and several horns. A generally held attitude is that Jimmy is one of the happiest people in town (FN 19 April 1986; T87:1).

Wayne, a mentally disabled thirty-two-year-old, spends most of his spare time at the rink during the winter months. He is a keen supporter of the Amherst Junior A division minor hockey team and frequently is given responsibilities such as goal-box tender. During the day Wayne helps a milkman on his delivery route.

Jerry, a former boxer and track athlete, is an equally avid supporter of Junior A hockey. If he notices crowd

interest waning during a game, he will jump on a seat and loudly encourage the spectators to cheer. He coordinates their response with conductor-like hand movements. In the summer, Jerry helps with the organization of travelling professional wrestling matches that visit the rink. In addition to being an avid sports supporter, Jerry has a reputation as having been a hard worker in his job at the foundry (T86:15). Although originally from Saint John, New Brunswick, Jerry has other family members in Amherst. He lives with his sister while his estranged wife and younger children live with his brother. Jerry's bright clothing and shining white shoes are a personal trademark that focus attention on him. It is rumored that his boisterousness when drinking has caused him to be barred from most drinking establishments in town.

Jean came to Amherst in the 1950s to play Junior A hockey. After he completed his contract, Jean found employment locally, married and raised a large family. Unlike others described here, he is not known as a character by residents within the entire community. Rather, he belongs to a class of characters associated with more limited, semi-public or private contexts dominated by familial or friendship groups. His reputation extends only to a collection of people that includes co-workers, neighbors and hockey fans.

Ralph, in his forties, belongs to a well established

family of professionals. While attending university in 1965, Ralph sustained head injuries in a motorcycle accident that have left him permanently brain-damaged. For nearly twenty-five years Ralph and community have been negotiating a new status. Now he lives alone in the country, travelling in on his bicycle or hitchhiking a ride when he wishes to sell handmade greeting cards and other small pieces of artwork. Recently he has taken to using his middle name.

Reg, now in his sixties, spends a good part of the day walking the streets and visiting local businesses. Although he reportedly once suffered from a serious alcohol addiction, for the past ten years he has been a reformed alcoholic and has developed a respectable facade. Perhaps following Billy Wells's example, Reg recently placed a want ad for a female companion. As when Wells attempted the ploy, the ad has caused much discussion and joking among other residents.

Harry is a familiar face on downtown streets or at the doors of the two shopping malls. By supplementing his government income from the profits he earns from ticket sales, he has developed into a professional ticket salesman. He attacks each prospective customer with equal vigour, often with a patter that for men begins, "Hello there Handsome Romeo." His approach to women usually starts, "Hello there Teen-age Beauty." While Harry will sell different types of tickets, his specialty is a weekly 50-50

draw sponsored by the Springhill Fire Department. The Fire Department honored Harry's contribution by hosting a birthday party for him on his sixty-fifth birthday in 1985. At that time a member of the Fire Department estimated Harry had sold fifty to sixty books of raffle tickets per week for the past seventeen weeks. His career as a ticket salesman spans over thirty years.¹⁴⁷ Harry, originally from Springhill, peddled from door to door in his earlier days (T87:1). Although at least one informant feels he may have recently moved to Amherst (T87:1), Springhillers still regard him as one their own. Reportedly his most enthusiastic reception and most ready sales continue to be from Springhillers (T87:4). Amherstonians are not unanimous in their assessment of Harry, as one woman comments, "That guy drives me nuts" (T86:4). Another informant expresses a doubt if Harry is a character or if he's "just stunned" (T86:20).

Individuals of negotiable status are described as "soft of characters." Those who rate consideration but have not yet been granted full character status by informants include an eighty-year-old marathon runner, a businessman nicknamed "No Pay Jackie," a wealthy family whose members go to ridiculous lengths to save money, a practical joker, an elderly alcoholic sports fan, a woman from rural Nova Scotia

¹⁴⁷ "'Number 1 Ticket Seller' honored by firemen," Springhill-Record 10 April 1985: 11.

who speaks with a British accent; an eccentric United Church member, a brain-damaged man in his thirties, and a twenty-one-year-old whose obsession with guns has earned him the nickname of Rambo.

A cursory glance at Amherst's growth from a market town through its industrialization and decline demonstrates that in each of its stages of development, the community has been home to individuals known as characters. Some, like the peddler, the tall tale teller, the strongman and the booster are firmly rooted in a particular segment of the town's history. Others such as the physically handicapped, the mentally disabled, and the alcoholic are less rooted in a specific context. Throughout all three periods, many of the names which emerge challenge the archetypal image of the local character as village idiot. Certainly those who belong to formerly elite families or who work as professionals do not easily conform.

One of the few conclusive statements to be made based on this eclectic list is that there is no single archetypal character. Portraits of Amherst's characters demonstrate that Phomes Yorke was justifiably worried when he expressed the concern that there would be no one to take his place when he was gone. Descriptions of Yorke and the stories that are still told about him attest that no one could

completely take his place. Yet there have been many who have followed him and filled the character role. The common characteristics of this widely varied group that make them characters will be the subject of the next chapter.

IV

THE CONCEPT OF CHARACTER

Establishing a precise definition of "character" is a difficult task, even within a relatively confined context. Informants' opinions vary, and as the wide assortment of personalities listed in the last chapter attests, the label can be applied to a broad range of performances. While this study differs from David Hufford's work on ambiguity and belief in that it concerns the assessment of individuals rather than of personal experiences, the concept of "character" exhibits many of the types of ambiguity outlined in his article, "Ambiguity and the Rhetoric of Belief." Of primary importance is Hufford's conclusion that language can sometimes fail to provide adequate terminology for a given experience.¹

Community vocabulary confines Amherstonians to the single term "character" when describing minor nonconformists. While residents would recognize expressions such as "case" or "hard ticket" that are employed in other areas,² they do not depend on them themselves. "Worthy,"

¹ David Hufford, "Ambiguity and the Rhetoric of Belief," Keystone Folklore 21:1 (1976): 19.

² G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin, and J. D. Widdowson, Dictionary of Newfoundland English (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 241, defines "hard ticket": "Anyone who

commonly found in British ethnologies and regional miscellanies may have been used in Amherst at one time, but it has not survived. In 1917-1918, "worthy" was drawn on by at least one of the reporters for the ADN when referring to older, well known residents. In 1917 a writer mentions "some worthies" who threw a sleeping traveller off the town bench so they could sit for their usual conversation.³ That "worthy" does not appear in the press before or after 1917-1918 suggests that by this time it might have been reserved for the written register, and perhaps more particularly, the tongue-in-cheek observances of the newspaper's staff member(s). That it has not surfaced in over two years of fieldwork, indicates it is now out of common usage completely. On the other hand, "character" has survived from the 1880s until the present as the familiar categorization for those who resist classification. The general dependence on this single expression excludes possible differentiation among types of nonconforming behaviour. "Character"'s unparalleled nature broadens its meaning and contributes to the concept's complexity.

Describing an individual as a character requires both observation and interpretation. The label not only identifies a colorful personality who differs from those

playing practical jokes was referred to as a 'ard ticket."

³ ADN 14 July 1917: 8.

around him, but communicates a particular predisposition as well. Hufford's point that such terms encourage heterogeneity of personal belief and meaning⁴ is echoed by informants who express an awareness of the designation as indistinct. If informants were not asked to articulate their understanding of "character" at the beginning of an interview, they would often ask for a clarification. An overt discussion of definition seemed to be required before many informants were able to assume we had a shared understanding of the concept. Repeatedly, they expressed an uncertainty that the sense they had of the term extends beyond their use of it within familial and friendship groups. Contextual concerns dominated many discussions and for every individual named a character, the informant usually furnished information such as how well the informant knew the person in question, the nature of their relationship, and a description of the performance that led to the designation. An appreciation of the influence of changing contexts in the assessment of a fellow community member's role or status emerged strongly from the interviews.

Notwithstanding the ambiguity associated with "character," some common criteria are evident. The repeated need felt by informants to openly state a definition of "character" was illuminating in that it reveals common

⁴ Hufford.17.

considerations when applying the status upon another individual. Analysis of the traits of the more than seventy-five persons described in the last chapter, and discussions with informants, result in the following explanation of a character within the study community:

A character is an individual whose dramatic performance, consistent within a particular context, is recognized as being in contrast to, or in conflict with, governing social norms. The character is seen as nonthreatening, and often humorous, by most, if not all, other group members.

In examining the above definition, "performance" presents the first problematic key element. Used here in the sense in which it was introduced to folkloristics by Dell Hymes and others in 1975,⁵ performance draws its meaning from the work of sociological interactionist analysts like Erving Goffman. These theorists see performance as "not a wastebasket but a key to much of the difference in the meaning of life as between communities."⁶ According to Hymes, "there is behavior, as simply anything and everything that happens; there is conduct, behaviour under the aegis of social norms, cultural rules, shared principles or interpretability; there is performance, when one or more persons assume responsibility for

⁵ See: Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein, eds. Folklore: Performance and Communication (The Hague: Mouton, 1975).

⁶ Dell Hymes, "Breakthrough into Performance," Performance and Communication: 18.

presentation."⁷ Successful performance brings with it a recognition of responsibility and shared understanding of the rules that govern it.

Erving Goffman acknowledges that a performer occasionally may be taken in by his own act,⁸ but generally he is conscious of his presentation on some level. Goffman postulates, however, it is usually in the best interests of the performer to prevent his audience from discovering they have been part of any conscious performance. Much of the sociologist's discussion in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life centers on the ways in which an individual may control situations through what Goffman terms "the arts of impression management" to prevent audience members from identifying any contradiction in the performer's manner or appearance that might invalidate his or her efforts.

One of the most striking discoveries of fieldwork was the realization that most informants understand the role of character, by definition, to possess some degree of consciousness. To become a character is to adopt what Richard Bauman labels "a performance role."⁹ While the image of the village idiot may come to mind when the word "character" is heard, for the people interviewed, physical

⁷ Hymes 18.

⁸ Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday, 1959) 208.

⁹ Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," American Anthropologist 77 (1975):299.

or mental disability is not a significant enough marker by itself to guarantee character status. An individual of limited intellectual capacity is only considered a character if that person accepts the role and plays along with it. Of the almost eighty names elicited from informants, only seventeen were specifically described as having a mental disability and only eleven are known to have a physical handicap. For example, it is significant that the town's only dwarf was never mentioned. Although he exhibits many of the characteristics one associates with character status, he was never described as one. Without exception, when his name was suggested to an informant, it was rejected. Ted is in his thirties and he has worked as a custodian for a downtown church for about the last ten years. A family member describes him as slow (T87:8) and an acquaintance calls him naive (FN 7 October 1987). As an individual who has extraordinary physical traits and who is known to a large number of the town's population, he could easily have been a character. He is not because he has not chosen to adopt the role. One businessman comments, "I don't think Ted is a character". It's just his size, you know. I mean he's not super bright but he's not too bad. I mean there's nothing real the matter with him" (T87:4). Because Ted does not cultivate the status of character, his size alone does not contrast enough or present a significant enough challenge to social norms that he would be labelled a

character against his will.

Other informants were reluctant to identify Robbie, the sixty year old mongoloid, as a character because they do not feel he consciously adopts the role. One woman comments, "He's not a character. That Robbie is retarded" (T86:20). When asked to elaborate on her refusal to consider him a character, she compares him to Wayne, the developmentally delayed thirty-five-year-old who helps on a milk truck, "Well, I think he's [Robbie] the type of person, he doesn't joke to people or talk that much to people and maybe that's why they respect him, you know where Wayne, he curses at people and he responds to people, he responds to all these crazy things, and I don't think that Robbie does." She indicates a local businessman more closely fits her conception of a character "because he's not retarded. He really is different." Others who were able to tell how Robbie had outwitted people of average intelligence who tried to tease him tended to be quicker to recognize him as a character. Throughout the interviews, statements indicate characters are expected to consciously play the role.

Community members' acceptance of the character's behaviour as playing out a performance role carries with it certain criteria for success. Group members demand the character demonstrates responsibility for the performance, but the individual may experience difficulty and risk rejection if he is regarded as what Goffman terms a "cynical

performer."¹⁰ If the character becomes too detached from his act, others may detect insincerity. He may be suspected of adopting the role for self-interested reasons. One informant comments that a particular community member who has developed a jocular front is not a character because he "tries too hard" (T86:15). Another woman concludes that although people expect characters to have some control over the ways they are funny or provocative, it is important they appear sincere. She remarks, "We don't like to think we're being had" (T87:7).

When the character's presentation is interpreted as being honest, informants express a willingness to become a part of the performance. In something akin to Goffman's concept of a "performance team,"¹¹ individuals describe their participation in complementary roles such as instigator, straightman, or accomplice. Through this involvement, they permit and/or encourage the development of a dramaturgical element played out in daily life. Standing out as they do from the mainstream of life around them, characters present a striking presence for other community members. The miserly Hewsons or Mrs. Gee, the old world, class-conscious widow, do not purposely work to attain character status in the way a town joker or storyteller like Bug-Eye Blanche might. However, through the conscious

¹⁰ Goffman, The Presentation of Self 18.

¹¹ Goffman, The Presentation of Self 77.

maintenance of an extraordinary front, they introduce a dramatic element to town life that is defined as being of character status.

In accordance with the dictionary definition of drama as "a presentation of a story involving conflict or contrast of character,"¹² these individuals introduce a contrast to or conflict with social norms. As many community members strive to achieve the middle class goals of home ownership and acquisition of material goods, a character might live in a dilapidated structure and wear old and dirty clothing. Such contrasts are particularly striking for children. Throughout the research period, social acquaintances contributed innumerable descriptions of characters remembered from childhood. Not only does this barrage of memories from across North America and Britain reinforce the fact that characters are not a culturally specific phenomena, it also demonstrates the vividness with which youngsters experience nonconformity. Steven describes his early memory of the blind piano player, Russell Briggs:

He used to be at the Hotel playing the piano when I was young. I went there for Christmas dinner with the Kinsmen and he knew all the songs, no matter what song they'd sing, you know, Christmas tune. And he was always playing when you went in, you know. It just filled the whole dining room there, this boom, boom, boom. He'd be using the whole piano like. And I think I met

¹² The American College Dictionary (New York: Random House, 1953) 365.

him before and he said, 'How are you?' and stuff. And I sort of, the first time I ever met anybody that was blind and that was kind of an experience when you're a little kid (T87:4).

Russell Briggs offered this informant a vivid, unthought-of alternative to his own way of life. Another informant comments that the shock one feels as a child when confronted with a new life experience, represented by a character, lessens as one grows older. He feels that as one develops a social awareness the sense of contrast is minimized and replaced by an adult's concern for another who is seen as less fortunate (T87:6). There are indications, however, that characters never lose their ability to take individuals aback and perhaps to cause them to reflect for a moment on their own community position and lifestyle. Most adults interviewed regard the elements of contrast, and sometimes conflict, to be an integral part of the character's performance. A young Black offers his view of what being a character means: "Mostly when you think of characters, renegades who are not mentally retarded per se, but who are just the nonconformists [come to mind. They are] the rebellious type, ones who don't hold the same political, small "p", political views, like you know who jump up and fight against the establishment" (T86:17).

It is acceptable to at least some informants that the character role be only one side of a complex individual, but they insist that the dramatic role be adopted consistently

within a particular recurring context. Paul describes the behaviour of the son of Mary Noiles, "the Boy-Girl of Nappan." Kenneth had been a former co-worker and the informant tells how he would entertain the other men of a grounds crew with practical pranks and quick replies. The fact that Kenneth's jocular performances did not extend beyond the basement staff room and the other custodians to include the service employees at the government building where he worked, or reportedly even his own family, was not a concern. Paul explains Kenneth was still considered a character by those he worked with most closely. How he conducted himself outside this context did not have bearing on his relationship with his co-workers. However, if he had been inconsistent in his performance with them, his status would have been questioned. Paul comments:

If he had been the kind of person that came in and fooled around one day and was sort of ah, straight and oh managerial the next, he would have been inconsistent in his behaviour and I know he would have been much less fun. Then I wouldn't have considered him a character. I would have considered him a pain in the neck. And the fact that he would go home and behave differently as far as I was concerned, that just added to his characteristics, or to his general demeanour. It added to his eccentricity (FN 9 February 1987).

Bill, a retired shoemaker who has known most of the town's characters over the last fifty years, emphasizes the importance of a consistent presentation by characters in the contexts where they are recognized as such: "Well, a local

character here as far as I am concerned would be what most people figure is a person who is seen in a picture pretty much all the time in the same way" (T87:2).

The character represents a performance role that often depends on a supporting cast of players such as victim or respondent. As a result, others must acknowledge his presentation and cooperate with it in order for the character to be successful. The need for group consensus explains a pattern which arose early on in fieldwork. If an interview began with the request that the informant name some of the characters he or she knew of, the most frequent response was silence. Yet, over the course of the ensuing interview, the person might suggest and describe scores of individuals he or she considers characters. The response occurred even if preceded by a discussion of definition. When asked to comment on this pattern of question and reply, the shoemaker mentioned above points to the importance of group consensus in designating character status. He states, "People cannot automatically name characters because we did not make them characters. I did not make them a character. They were made characters long before I came on the scene" (T87:2). That informants are hesitant to take the sole responsibility for labelling an individual a character is not surprising. It takes a group process in the same way other forms of folklore have been shown to become part of a community's repertoire. Cecil Sharp's work demonstrated early on that a

folksong must not only demonstrate the characteristics of continuity and variation, but it must have undergone selection by the community.¹³ Just as songs and legends, folksay and housing styles, must be accepted by a group before they can become a viable part of its repertoire, an individual must be selected as a character by others around him. One informant remarks, "I guess part of being a character is how you're looked at by other people" (T87:4).

Criteria for judging characters change from one time period to another and from one context to the next. For example, strongmen like Moose Kent and tall tale tellers such as Sunny Gould have given way to individuals like Rambo, the present day teenager who fashions himself after the protagonist in the popular movie. While the content of the performances vary, their quality remains constant. From the earliest reference to characters in the study area until the present, the character designation has had generally positive connotations.

In 1886 Gilbert Seaman describes Jo Brian, a local character from his youth:

Jo Brian was a noted character in his day a Tippler for a large portion of his life or until he took the pledge in Rev. Mr. Goreau's time would never taste liquor after. He was a Town Charge here for many years and died at a good old age. I remember when very young of going into his house and seeing a Birch

¹³ Cecil Sharp, English Folk Song: Some Conclusions, (1920; London: E. P. Publishing, 1972).

Bark hanging over the fire in which were potatoes boiling, the water inside preventing the Bark burning. Joseph at one time done militia duty in Halifax.¹⁴

It is difficult from this earliest account of a character to determine Seaman's attitude towards him. No strong condemnation comes through, however, and the description of his childhood visit to Brian's home suggests he found his interactions with the man interesting.

The only other documentary evidence of previous use of the terms is in the newspaper. From approximately 1900 to 1930 "character" appears frequently. Most often it is used in headlines. Churchill is described as "an interesting character"¹⁵ in 1908 and a community leader is referred to as "a strong character."¹⁶ Sometimes reports which accompany the headlines describe a minor offence, usually from a humorous angle. A "famous Indian character"¹⁷ predicts the weather in exchange for alcohol and a man charged with robbery is a "well known character."¹⁸

After the 1930s, "character" disappears from the press. Within the community's oral tradition today, "character" identifies minor nonconformity with warmth and frequently

¹⁴ Gilbert Seaman 20 February 1886. Private collection.

¹⁵ ADN 1 June 1908: 2.

¹⁶ ADN 23 March 1914: 1.

¹⁷ ADN 1 June 1914: 3.

¹⁸ ADN 12 July 1910: 3.

humour. When asked if she considers an eccentric older woman rumoured to be a millionaire a character, one informant replies negatively. Debbie states, "She was just sort of a mean old rich woman. I always think of characters as being nice and I always get the impression that she wasn't nice" (T87:7). No informant ever expressed a concern that a character's behaviour, no matter how unconventional, might be dangerous to others. Frequently the adjective "harmless" is used to describe the nonconformist. A general approval and even admiration for the individual's willfulness and inner-direction emerges. On several occasions, following an interview in which an individual described many of the characters he had known during his lifetime, he declared that other people consider him a character. Ronald announces with pride, "They call me a character" (T86:21). In another situation, Hazel indicates her husband is sometimes called a character. The husband readily agrees. Because characters may require a victim or scapegoat when carrying out their performances it is impossible to state categorically that all group members admire and encourage them. Among the informants interviewed, however, character designation is certainly not regarded negatively.

Having no fear for their personal safety, community members are free to enjoy the character's bizarre behaviour or outrageous remarks. One of the implications in labelling

individuals as characters is that they are entertaining. For some, the entertainment must take the form of intentional humour. Harold comments, "Well, they should be funny to be a character. Oh yeah, they should have something like that because that's what makes them characters, the things they say and the things they do" (T86:19). For others, humour is not a necessary element. The contrast some characters present through manner, dress, or performance, is seen as entertaining enough.

Characters vary so widely, each must be evaluated on his or her own merit. It is not a role which lends itself well to the precise structural analysis M.O. Jones has applied to the folk hero.¹⁹ While one can determine the general guidelines relied upon when community members assess another, much of the term's value lies in that fact it cannot be defined exactly. As Hufford concludes in his research on belief, some ambiguity within a tradition is useful. In a town such as the study community, where direct conflict is avoided, sometimes at high cost, ambiguous labels can help to prevent the open expression of differing opinions. Debbie describes how she will utilize different cues to signal other participants in a conversation of her meaning when introducing the term, "character":

I guess I use the word in different terms, in different ways. Like now I'll

¹⁹ See : Michael Owen Jones, "(PC+CB). X SD(R+I+B)= Hero," New York Folklore 27:3 (1971): 243-260.

say, 'Oh boy, that's a character.' And that would imply humour. But I don't remember Jimmy as being funny but still I say, 'God, he's a character' [Laughs]. It depends on my tone of voice [Laughs].

Whether or not others choose to pick up on these cues is their decision. By drawing on the word "character" the informant allows someone else to establish the tone of the ensuing conversation. At the same time, she identifies the individual in question as a minor nonconformist who diverges from applicable social norms significantly enough to be noticed, but whose behaviour is not interpreted as dangerous or self-serving. She indicates the individual is in control of his actions without being manipulative. Finally, she accepts his performance as entertaining. In relying on this overtly acknowledged ambiguous term, the informant issues an invitation for negotiation. If a discussion of the third person is to follow, she has opened herself to the possibility of joint assessment. She has not committed herself on a potentially divisive subject nor has she offended anyone.

Ways in which this negotiation takes place within the community's oral culture, and the manner in which characters themselves take advantage of the freedom of the designation, are subjects of future chapters.

V

THE ADOPTION OF THE CHARACTER ROLE

Characters earn and maintain their reputation through a labelling process that requires their participation, but also involves other members of their social group. As outlined in the last chapter, in order for the "character" designation to remain active, the individual character must stage a consistent performance within one or more contexts that other participants or observers judge appropriate to that character. Performer and audience, character and community, negotiate the label together.

Recent investigations of the dynamics of labelling emphasize the role of audience members. In his work on the labelling of deviants, Howard Becker writes:

We become much more interested in the process by which deviants are defined by the rest of society.... We look to the process by which the common definition arises. This is with increasing frequency referred to as the process of labelling. People attach the label 'deviant' to others and thereby make deviants of them.¹

Kai T. Erikson echoes Becker's stress on audience:

Deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behaviour; it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or

¹ Howard Becker, "Introduction," The Other Side: Perspectives on Deviance, ed. Howard Becker (New York: Free Press, 1964) 3-4.

indirectly witness them. The critical variable in the study of deviance, then is the social audience rather than the individual actor, since it is the audience which eventually determines whether or not any episodes of behaviour or any class of episodes is labelled deviant.²

The literature on labelling, with its shift in emphasis from biological to social causes of deviance, offers important insights into the nature of roles and relationships. At the same time, however, it suggests that the labelled individual's role is passive, which is not always the case. Bruce Jackson's work with convicts, for example, illustrates that in at least some contexts, individuals will adopt a stigmatized role as an accommodation strategy. Rather than being viewed as a deterrent, the stigma is what ratifies identity in a manageable way.³ While Orrin Klapp identifies the "fool" as a particularly low status designation,⁴ this chapter argues that some individuals consciously adopt the closely related role of character. For them, it is not a descent but a positive alternative to an already existing undesirable

² Kai T. Erikson, "Notes on the Sociology of Deviance," The Other Side, ed. Howard Becker 11.

³ Bruce Jackson, "Deviance as Success: The Double Inversion of Stigmatized Roles," Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society, ed. Barbara Babcock (New York: Cornell University Press, 1978) 262.

⁴ Orrin Klapp, "The Fool as a Social Type," The Pleasures of Sociology, ed. Lewis A. Coser (New York: New American Library, 1980) 11.

status.

The apparent unselfconsciousness with which most characters carry out their performances might lead one to conclude that they have earned the designation because of their personality characteristics. That is, one might suspect that they cannot help being characters, it is just the way they are. While an "outgoing" individual is no doubt predisposed toward the choice of a character designation as a coping strategy, personality type alone does not fully explain such a choice. As Dentler and Erikson argue, "deviant behaviour is a reflection not only of the personality of the actor, but of the structure of the group in which the behaviour was enacted."⁵

A shared characteristic more fundamental than personality is the social mark or stigma that most characters experience. As The Oxford English Dictionary clearly shows, the word "character" has a well established, etymological link with the concept of marking or branding. The Greek root, "xapaktnp" refers to an "instrument for marking or graving; impress; stamp; distinctive mark; or distinctive nature," while the Middle English "caracter" is defined as "a symbol marked or branded on the body; also fig an imprint on the soul; a symbol or drawing used in sorcery; or a badge."

⁵ Robert A. Dentler and Kai T. Erikson, "The Functions of Deviance in Groups," Social Problems 7:(1959): 98.

Characters are marked individuals, exhibiting a range of what Erving Goffman describes as "stigma." Goffman explains:

The Greeks, who were apparently strong on visual aids, originated the term stigma to refer to bodily signs designated to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor--a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places.⁶

Goffman adapts the term "stigma" to refer to a "special discrepancy" between virtual identity (the category to which one expects a person belongs) and actual social identity (what the individual actually is).⁷ Characters may be marred by tribal stigma of race, nation, religion, or association with a stigmatized family; suffer from a stigma that Goffman terms an "abomination of the body"; or experience a character blemish. The latter category of stigma relies on an outside evaluation of the individual as flawed in some way, perhaps reflecting a weak will, a domineering nature, or unnatural passions. Goffman includes alcoholism, homosexuality, dishonesty, or an unwillingness

⁶ Erving Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963): 1.

⁷ Goffman, Stigma 2-3.

or inability to obtain employment as character blemishes.⁸

The following chart indicates the distribution of all three of Goffman's stigma types among characters in Amherst :

| Name | M | P | B | F | E | A | L | S* |
|------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| Gore | | | | | | | | |
| MacLean | | | | | | | | |
| Stubbs | | | | | | | | |
| Howe | | | x | | | | | |
| Martin | | | x | | | | | |
| Barrett | | | | | x | | | |
| George | | | | | x | | | |
| Mary Mansour | | | | | x | | | |
| Mike Mansour | | | | | x | | | |
| Soo | | | | | x | | | |
| Hum | | | | | x | | | |
| Jackson | | | x | | | | | |
| Downey | | | x | | | x | | |
| Ross | | | x | | | x | | |
| Kitty Cook | | | x | | | x | | |
| Mary Cook | | | x | | | | | |
| Dandy Gould | | | | x | | | | |
| Paul Noiles | | x | | x | | x | | |
| Peter M. Noilesx | | | | x | | x | | |
| Yorke | | x | | | | | | |
| Chapman | | x | | | | | | |
| Purches | | | | | | x | | |
| Bulmer | | | | | | x | | x |
| Gee | | | | | | | x | |
| Steele | | | | | | | x | |
| James Hickman | | | | | | | x | |
| Bessie Hickman | | | | | | | x | x |
| Annie Hickman | | | | | | | x | |
| James Hewson | | | | | | | x | |
| Chandler Hewson | | | | | | | x | |
| Gertrude Hewson | | | | | | | x | |
| Wilsch | | | | x | | x | | x |
| Ken Noiles | | | | x | | | | |
| Gilbert Noiles | | | | | | | | x |
| Joe Gouthreau | | x | | | | x | | |
| Paul Gould | | x | | x | | x | | |
| Purdy | | x | | | | | | |
| E. Bright Pipesx | | | | | | | x | |
| Trenholm | | x | | | | | | |
| Kent | | | | | | x | | |
| Bill Moses | | | x | | | x | | |
| Emma Moses | | | x | | | | | |

⁸ Goffman, Stigma 3-4.

| Name | M | P | B | F | E | A | L | S |
|--------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Charles Gould | | | | x | | | | |
| Blanche | | x | | | | x | | |
| Peter M. Noiles II | | | | | | | | |
| | x | | | x | | | | |
| Crawford Noiles | x | | | x | | | | |
| George J. Noiles | | | | x | | | | |
| Seaman Noiles | | | | x | | x | | |
| Emma Finnigan | | | | | | x | | |
| Ned Finnigan | | | | | | x | | |
| Bep Finnigan | | | | | | x | | |
| Bliss | | | | | | | | |
| Nicholson | | | | | | x | | |
| Farnell | | | | | | | | |
| Briggs | | x | | | | | | |
| Lida Pipes | | | | | | | x | |
| Downey | | | | | | | x | |
| Gibson | | x | | | | | | |
| Weaver | x | x | | | | | | |
| Hire | x | | | | | | | x |
| Everetts | x | x | | | | | | |
| Beady Eyes | x | | | | | | | |
| Happy Day | x | | | | | | | |
| Cannon | x | | | | | | | |
| Wells | | | | | | | | |
| Davidson | | | x | | | | | |
| Robbie | x | | | | | | | |
| Francois LeBlanc | | | | | | | | |
| | x | | | x | | | | x |
| Charles LeBlanc | x | | | x | | | | x |
| Theresa LeBlanc | x | | | x | | | | x |
| Jimmy | x | | | | | | | |
| Wayne | x | | | | | | | |
| Jerry | | | x | | | x | | |
| Jean | | | | x | | x | | |
| Ralph | x | | | | | | | |
| Jim | x | | | | | x | | |
| Harry | | | | x | | | | |

*(M: Mental Disability; P: Physical Deformity; B: Black; F: French; E: Ethnic group member; A: Alcoholic; L: Lost Income; S: Sexual abnormality)

Tribal Stigma

Although the three classes of stigma are evenly distributed, a tribal stigma is most common in that thirty-six individuals are associated with ethnically or racially

stigmatized groups. With the exception of two persons who married into one of these low status categories, the stigma is congenital; it cannot be altered or abandoned. If the ethnicity of characters who are Black, French, Lebanese, or Chinese cannot be identified at first glance, it forms part of shared community knowledge. Tribal stigma frequently supplies a person with what Everett C. Hughes identifies as a "master status"⁹ or determining trait in that it is virtually inescapable and influences the individual's role in all his or her social interaction.

As elsewhere, the heritage of Nova Scotians with tribal stigma is characterized by struggle. Joy Mannette's diachronic analysis of the Black experience within the province describes how their social and economic marginality is reflected in their occupation, as well as in their experience of religious and educational segregation.¹⁰ Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill's examination of the contemporary position of Blacks reveals their continued low status. Defining marginality as having "little influence in societal decision-making and/or a low degree of

⁹ Everett C. Hughes, "Dilemmas and Contradictions of Status," The Pleasures of Sociology, ed. Lewis A. Coser (New York: Mentor Books, 1980) 226.

¹⁰ J. A. Mannette, "Setting the Record Straight: The Experiences of Black People in Nova Scotia 1780-1900," M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1983, 3.

participation in the mainstream social and economic life,"¹¹ the authors indicate "Nova Scotia Blacks can be classified as marginal in the fullest sense." Being Black in Nova Scotia continues to mean reduced occupational and social opportunities and probably inadequate housing.

Clairmont and Magill describe how some Blacks will try to escape their stigma by "passing"¹² as white: "It is an indication of racial oppression and an indication of dissatisfaction with marginality that many Nova Scotia Blacks came to deny their Blackness; often identifying the beautiful and socially rewarding with light skins and straight hair."¹³ Shirley, a member of the African Episcopal Methodist Church in Amherst, confirms that this attitude is held within Amherst's Black community when she comments, "[When] marrying someone, the lighter the better. A lot of Black people in Amherst still have that attitude. Really a lot of Black people in Amherst still have that attitude that if you're light skinned, you're better" (T86:14). Passing represents an alternative, however, for

¹¹ Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill, "Nova Scotia Blacks: Marginal People in a Depressed Region," Social Process and Institutions: The Canadian Case, ed. James E. Gallagher and Ronald Lambert (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) 480.

¹² See Goffman, Stigma 93-102, for a discussion of "passing" as one of the chief strategies open to an individual with a stigmatized social identity.

¹³ Clairmont and Magill 487.

very few of the Black characters mentioned. For some, like Emma Moses, there was no escape from their Blackness as one informant recalls, "I think Emma Moses was the darkest colored girl in town. She was really black" (T86:19). Characters like Emma not only battle the implications of living with what members of the larger community consider a tribal stigma, they find little comfort within the confines of their own minority group.

Acadian descent represents as significant a tribal stigma in the study community as being Black. As mentioned earlier, older Amherstonians pointed to prejudice against Acadians, who constitute almost the entire Catholic population, as the primary source of tension in the town prior to the 1960s. For example, that Carmen recalls children of an Acadian family being badly beaten when they tried to attend school circa 1920 (T86:18), indicates that Acadians have been victims of persecution. Sociological studies of Canadian culture document the inequality between French and English Canadians. Alfred Hunter states: "... in terms of wealth, the fact which stands out most prominently is the relatively poor position of Francophone Canadians."¹⁴

Three additional characters with a tribal stigma were Lebanese. While this group formed a tight support unit for each other, its members definitely constituted an ethnic

¹⁴ Alfred A. Hunter, Class Tells: On Social Inequality in Canada (Toronto: Butterworth, 1981) 140.

minority and they faced a language barrier most never fully overcame. Over the years, hard work improved the economic situation of most Lebanese immigrants, but some remained economically disadvantaged.

Family tribal stigma may not be as obvious to an outsider as an ethnic or racial tribal stigma, but is recognized by community members. As connecting lines on the above chart indicate, many of the characters have kinship associations. Undoubtedly there were others, but for the individuals in earlier historical periods, it is now impossible to determine all familial relations. Some belong to, or married into, families that are locally considered to have "bad names." An informant explains:

There are names in the country that are good and there are names that are no good.... I found that out in the Truro area. There's some names that are no good...you can just pick them out. I remember one time I said, 'Isn't that a peculiar name?' and they said, 'Well, that's a bad name' (T86:13).

Twelve characters are associated with three particularly low status families: the Towers, the Goulds and the Noiles. An informant comments:

The Towers, the Goulds, and the Noiles, that was the lowest family in town, you know. They were poor and they cheat, and you know, because they didn't have anything, they had to do these things.... And there used to be a lot of them marry each other.... They used to call them the Royal family (T86:19).

Like Emma Moses whose dark colour lowered her status, even

7

among other Blacks, many characters suffer a second stigma that interferes with the receipt of full social and psychological benefits open to other members of their ethnic group.

Physical Stigma

At least eleven individuals who suffer from what Goffman terms an "abomination of the body,"¹⁵ experience a similar lack of group membership. According to Beatrice A. Wright, disability delegates one to an inferior status position similar to that of a minority group member in that employment opportunities, as well as social and recreational activities, may be severely limited. Wright emphasizes that unlike most minority group members, however, the disabled individual cannot derive strength from a common membership.¹⁶

Most disabled adults experience real difficulty in substituting anything other than their disability as a master status. In Amherst, as one would expect to find in any other community, there is a range of attitudes expressed toward disabled individuals. Informants describe at least

¹⁵ In the category, "abomination of the body", Goffman (*Stigma*), includes not only disability and disfigurement, but obesity. While obesity potentially can be altered, when present it represents a stigmatized master status.

¹⁶ Beatrice Wright, Physical Disability: A Psychological Approach (New York: Harper and Row, 1960) 19.

occasional derision of handicapped persons (T86:15; T86:20), but the overall expression toward such community members is sympathetic. Over the town's history, fundraising campaigns have been organized to alleviate disabled individuals' financial needs ¹⁷; local branches of national organizations such as the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded and the Canadian Institute for the Blind address the specific needs of particular interest groups; and a mental health clinic unit has been providing treatment since the 1960s.

Public support of disabled individuals provides a real resource. As Wright points out, however, as long as sympathy remains the dominant motivation in others' relations with them, disabled persons will never be permitted to leave their low status position. She comments that individuals will experience a conflict if dealt with tragically when they really wish to be thought of normally.¹⁸ Informants' remarks that usually highlight a person's disability before other aspects of his or her character or accomplishments, suggest that disability has been and remains a primary identity marker. Further, an

¹⁷ See: ADN 16 September 1896 where financial contributions are being sought to aid the plight of a man left disfigured by gangrene. An example of a more recent fundraising effort, was a successful campaign held circa 1980 to raise funds to send a local woman suffering from spina bifida to Germany for treatment.

¹⁸ B. Wright 82.

survey of disabled individuals indicates none hold high status jobs. At least two work in custodial positions, two acted as delivery men, and a mildly retarded woman was employed during the 1970s as an assistant in a florist shop. One physically disabled man operated his own tobacco shop for a while in the 1970s, but the venture was shortlived. For most, physical and mental disability continues to represent a master status that is characterized by few opportunities and is almost impossible to abandon.

Character Blemishes

Goffman's third category of stigma, the character blemish, is the most complex. It is both difficult to delineate all the attributes considered blemishes within a particular group at a given time, and to determine which are identified with individual characters. While one kind of blemish may be dominantly associated with an individual, he or she may suffer from others as well. Of the stigma specifically outlined by Goffman--alcoholism, unemployment, dishonesty, homosexuality, and /or weak or domineering will--all are linked either individually or in combinations with twenty-nine characters listed above. In addition, in light of the study community's experience, the category of lost income or lost status is included as a blemish. While this trait might fall under a descriptive such as weak will, it

is separated here because of its thematic importance within the town's history. Ten individuals fall into this category.

In Amherst, character blemishes range from those that are considered reflective of minor weaknesses like alcoholism, to faults that are regarded more seriously. The actions of ten characters described as suffering from alcohol addiction were described with varying degrees of condemnation and humour. Low or lessened income, also common, is similarly considered. Less frequent, but also relatively lightly regarded, is dishonesty. Informants were less likely to describe a person as dishonest, but once the label is attached, it appears to become a trademark. Two of the families renowned for their dishonesty--the Finnigans and the Noiles--lived on a road still referred to by some as "the whoring and thieving road." The most seriously regarded, and least often mentioned in interviews, are individuals identified by the general community with sexual abnormality. A prostitute, two homosexuals, a family suspected of engaging in incestuous relations, and an exhibitionist were referred to, but these characters were first mentioned, and then discussed, cautiously. Although informants did not make overt links, it is possible that three of the characters who demonstrate no apparent stigma were suspected to be sexual nonconformists. Two of the unmarried men might have been at least thought of as

homosexuals and it is widely known, although not so widely discussed, that another man carried on a long-term adulterous relationship with a much younger woman. There is insufficient information to pursue these possible connections, but one may conclude that although rarely spoken of outside closely knit social groups, even a suspected sexual stigma strongly influences an individual's position within the community.

Only four characters show no link with any of the types of stigma described above. Three of the men--Abel Gore, Edward MacLean and John Stubbs--are representative of Amherst's earliest period of development. As such, little information is available to assess the reasons for their character designation. Their inclusion as characters is based on fleeting references that allow for little analysis, or even speculation. A more recent character, Billy Wells, does not fit easily into any category. Frankness, or social ineptness, depending on one's opinion, and financial wealth, became Wells' primary identity markers but no evidence indicates either was ever regarded as a stigma.

The table above clearly demonstrates that, with few exceptions, characters in the study community suffer from debilitating tribal, physical, or character stigma that interfere with full acceptance by other community members. In addition, many also experience a second stigma that inhibits their participation with a minority group or with

others who share a single stigma in common. These individuals, whether consciously or unconsciously, have recognized the character role as a viable strategy in coping with what Erving Goffman calls "a spoiled identity."¹⁹

The individual who is dissatisfied with his or her status, either due to a perceived loss of ground, or because he or she aspires to an elevated status, faces a dilemma not unlike that of a working-class boy who strives for middle-class status. Albert Cohen writes: "To the degree to which he values the good opinion of middle-class persons or because he has to some degree internalized middle-class standards himself, he faces a problem of adjustment and is in the market for 'a solution'."²⁰ A solution may lie in what Orrin Klapp describes as "self-typing." Klapp argues that "In our society we do not have, as one might at first suppose, freedom from typing but a choice of type."²¹ Through a number of techniques ranging from aggressive rejection to the emphasis of another trait, individuals "disidentify" themselves with an undesirable status. As Fred Davis observes, "A recurring issue in social relations

¹⁹ Erving Goffman, "Management of Spoiled Identity," Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective, eds. Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinburg (New York: MacMillan Pub, 1973) 381-385.

²⁰ Albert Cohen, "The Bottom of the Heap: Problems of the Working Class Boy," Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society eds. Eric and Mary Josephson (New York: Dell Pub., 1975) 379.

²¹ Klapp, Heroes 2.

is the refusal of those who are viewed as deviant to concur in the verdict. In our society this is especially true of deviance which partakes to ascription (e.g. the Negro) as against that which partake, to some degree of election (e.g. the homosexual).²² If few alternatives are available, one may choose a role that either is not usually highly regarded, or actually carries with it negative connotations. Jessor et al. state that "the selection of deviant behaviour adaptations despite the ultimate possibility of negative sanctions, appeared to be more likely when other alternatives had come to be seen by the actor as promising him little in the way of success."²³ Some of those who are dissatisfied with their present stigmatized and low status, see the adoption of the character role as one of their few options:

For the individual who experiences his community position diminishing as a result of decreased financial standing or a change in the social order, one alternative is to hold on tightly to the way of life associated with a former, higher status. Rachel Gee, David Steele, Annie Hickman, and members of the Hewson family refused to acknowledge changes within the social matrix of the town

²² Fred Davis, "Deviance Disavowal: The Management of Strained Interaction by the Visibly Handicapped," The Other Side, ed. Howard Becker 119.

²³ Richard Jessor et al., Society, Personality, and Deviant Behaviour (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1968) 408.

that had altered their status. They interpreted the maintenance of a facade of power and prestige as a public declaration that, as Yi-Fu Tuan expresses it, "I am much more than the thin present defines."²⁴ Other community members did not always share this interpretation but saw the behaviour as indicative of the kind of rigidity and inelasticity that Henri Bergson in his pivotal 1911 essay on laughter defines as comic.²⁵ For Rachel Gee and others the character role may not have been as much a goal as a preferable alternative to what they regarded as diminishing community position. Through a presentation of extremity, they received special social consideration.

Bill Moses, Sunny Gould, Ralph and Wayne are examples of those who have more intentionally pursued the role of local character. The nonconforming fool, as Klapp describes the role, has been customarily regarded as suitable for some stigmatized individuals. From the midget as court jester in the middle ages, to the Negro of the minstrel shows, a variety of fool-related roles have been open to those with stigmas. In Amherst Moose Kent developed and advertised his exceptional strength to earn himself the reputation of strongman. "Strongman" or "character" were preferable to

²⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1977) 186.

²⁵ Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. Cloudesley Bereton and Fred Rothwell (London: MacMillan, 1911) 87.

other labels open to him such as alcoholic or financial failure. The role of character offered Kent and others one of few opportunities to alter an existing unsatisfactory master status.

Individuals become characters either by gradually taking on the role or by assuming it more dramatically at a status passage or life turning-point. Those born with spoiled identity may adopt character status early in their lives. A 1918 report from the ADN describes how people who knew Bill Moses in his native community of Lequille, near Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, remembered him as a young street performer: "He would dance and sing on the street corners for a few pennies."²⁶ As a third generation member of a family well known for its entertainment abilities, Bill would have encountered characters within his family at a young age. In researching the history of Annapolis Royal, Charlotte Perkins recalls Henry Moses,²⁷ the man who is probably Bill's grandfather:

Henry in his day was to Leguille and

²⁶ ADN 27 May 1918 7.

²⁷ I have been able to gather little concrete biographical information concerning Bill Moses but there is a strong possibility that he is a grandson of Henry Moses. On Bill's marriage certificate dated 18 July 1907, William Henry Moses, 28, lists his parents as James and Almira. No James Moses with a son William or Henry appears in the 1881 or 1891 census. However, in 1871, Henry Moses, 60, and his wife, Isabel, 40, have James, 23,--presumably a son--in their household. It would follow traditional naming patterns in Nova Scotia that James name his son after his father, Henry.

vicinity what the Hungarian orchestra is now to the millionaire's home in New York. He supplied all the music needed for the dances of the day. The instrument upon which he was so proficient and from which he drew, or rather expelled, such harmonious sounds as to keep the lovers of the terpsichorean art on the floor until dawn, was nothing less than a pair of puckered lips, through which he whistled all the popular airs of the day. It hardly needs mentioning that in order to keep this whistle in the high state of efficiency required by Henry's patrons it had to be frequently wet, so that no discords or ragged tones might result.²⁸

Perhaps Bill Moses felt public expectations to be entertaining in the way that other members of his family had been. As George Casey has determined, specific categories of folk traditions such as songs and ghost stories are associated with specific neighborhoods or families.²⁹ As successful as he might have been in his role of character in his younger years, however, in later life, Bill Moses overstepped the role's boundaries.³⁰

Others who develop into characters at a young age use the role as a survival strategy. Because of the reputation of his mother as "The Boy-Girl of Nappan," Kenneth Noiles was born with a spoiled identity. While it is unclear how

²⁸ Charlotte Perkins, "The Negro Population of the County of Annapolis," ms. MG 100 vol. 102 no. 32, Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 7-8.

²⁹ George Casey, "Traditions and Neighborhoods: The Folklore of a Newfoundland Fishing Outpost," M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1971, 1.

³⁰ ADN 27 May 1918: 7.

he viewed his mother as a child, by adulthood he had rejected her. A former co-worker describes how Kenneth would disidentify himself from his mother whenever the topic of mothers would arise in general conversation:

Every once in a while Eddie would say something like, 'Didn't your mother ever do such and such or teach you good manners?' Or something like that. And Kenneth would say, 'No, never taught me anything, Old Bitch.' And that's how he would refer to her, as 'Old Bitch.' And he never really spoke of her otherwise" (FN 7 November 1987).

A narrative related by another informant that describes Mary Noiles taking her very young and frightened son, Kenneth, to a neighbor's orchard to help her steal apples, suggests her maternal lessons were less than average (TB3:3). However, as Kenneth later disassociated himself from his mother, he created an identity for himself apart from his family. Among his co-workers, he earned his own reputation as a character.

Wayne has also come to identify the character role as a coping strategy for an unsatisfactory status. Stigmatized from birth by a mental disability, Wayne experienced difficulty sustaining any sort of normal interaction with those outside his family by the time he was of school age. A friend of a younger sibling recalls the type of experience Wayne encountered when he attended a special class held in an elementary school:

Debbie: Well, I always liked Wayne because he was Kate's brother and I sort

of saw the other side of Wayne. Like if you only knew Wayne at school and stuff when he was picked on and saw him at the rink and stuff like that you wouldn't think of him as a nice person. But if you saw him at home when he's sort of treated nicely, Wayne was o.k. I really felt sorry for Wayne.

Diane: Was he picked on a lot?

Debbie: Oh yeah, Wayne was for sure. For sure. I remember that. Just being teased and stuff. And people trying to get him to do things or to yell at somebody or to chase somebody and stuff like that, when you're a kid.

Diane: Would he do it?

Debbie: He'd tell them [Imitating],
'Fock off' [Laughs] (T87:7).

A contemporary acquaintance of Wayne's indicates that all the teasing has not ended. At least once in the last year Wayne has been reduced to tears by a member of the hockey team whose progress he watches so closely (T86:20). Yet, in most of his interactions, Wayne exercises some control over conversation through his adoption of the character role. He approaches people he meets, often attempting to joke with those he encounters. If they joke with him, he usually cooperates with their performance. He has helped to create a niche for himself in the world of sports players and spectators who frequent the stadium, based on the view articulated by Brad, an informant who knows Wayne well: "As long as you can get someone going, you'll pay attention to them" (T86:20). Like Bill Moses and Kenneth Nilles, Wayne gradually took on a character role as

a preferable alternative to his low status.

In contrast to a gradual adoption, the character role may be acquired more dramatically. When an individual's identity markers change during a status passage or at a turning point in his or her life, the individual may search for a new role. For example, there are no references to Emma Moses as a character prior to her marriage to Bill. While she could have carried out character performances from a young age, marriage to someone who utilized a character role might have encouraged her use of it as well. Certainly oral narratives and newspaper accounts document innumerable character performances that characterize her interactions throughout the rest of her life. Conversely, after approximately forty years as local character, Reg left the role behind when he married. Reg improved his appearance, spent less time on the streets, controlled his alcohol problem, and replaced a jocular front with a quieter, more conformist one. When individuals find themselves single after years of marriage, their social position changes. Widowhood and retirement are contributing factors in John Davidson and Billy Wells becoming characters. When Davidson's wife died and he retired, he began to fill his days with visits to the police station, the court room, the fire station and coffee shops. His primary identification changed from that of father, husband, and CNR porter, to news carrier and character. In his senior years, Wells's

eccentricities became known to the larger community. His nonconformist actions, his want ad for a female companion, and his unconventional opinions earned Billy Wells the reputation of an eccentric millionaire rather than the successful head of a household.

If a stigma develops suddenly, it represents a turning point in a person's life when a character role may be selected. After Joe Gouthreau suffered permanent eye damage as the result of an injury, his life was significantly altered. As Gouthreau began to draw more heavily on new identity markers, relying on his sportsman's abilities, and storytelling and musical talents, he became known as a character. The contemporary case of Ralph offers another striking example of acquisition of character role at a life turning point. As a university student in 1965, Ralph had a motorcycle accident that left him permanently brain damaged. Returning to town after months of hospitalization, he was a changed person. The tragedy appears to have strained family relations and recently Ralph has moved from town. He continues to supplement his disability pension with profits from the sale of drawings that he peddles to retail outlets and individuals. Community oral tradition contains a wealth of personal narratives describing interactions with Ralph that are both inescapable and unpredictable.

Like status passages, life tuning points may also offer the option of getting rid of a character label. When Murray

Nicholson abstained from alcohol during the last years of his life, his reputation as a character subsided. Although not all character-related narratives concern Nicholson's alcohol-induced behaviour, he became more serious in later life. His comments seem to have been less outrageous, he devoted more of his time to community organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and the John Howard Society, and the accident which seriously injured him just years before his death restricted his mobility. When Murray Nicholson is referred to as a character, it invariably relates to a time prior to his reform from alcohol abuse and his physical injury.

The fact that individuals may not maintain a character role throughout their entire lives, or in every context, is not a problem for other group members. Rather, society expects its members to be able to appropriately gauge their performances to suit particular audiences. Speaking of a man who served as high school principal in Amherst for many years, an informant laments his inability to tailor his performance to accommodate the interactive situation:

"But you see he was really a wonderful man. He was his own worst enemy because nobody liked him very much. Well, and he would have liked to have been friends but...on account of his disciplinary attitudes, nobody felt very friendly with him, you know. It was too bad. It was kind of true but with some people you see they can't mix things at all (T84:1).

The principal was generally considered rigid and socially

inept because he was not flexible enough to put aside his professional persona in social situations. An individual's success is judged not so much by the fact he employs different strategies within various roles such as husband, businessman, or churchgoer, but the appropriateness with which he selects interactive techniques to suit the context.

Informants accept that characters may utilize different coping strategies in various aspects of their lives. Throughout the history of the study community, many of those considered characters have had lives scarred by tragedy and unhappiness. Bill Moses, who assumed the role of character from an early age, demonstrated frustration and lack of control over some areas of his life. In addition to a series of convictions for theft and an alcohol addiction that plagued him during his adult years,³¹ Bill's home life was characterized by violent outbreaks that occasionally had to be settled by police intervention. One conflict in 1912 was taken to the Supreme Court. The ADN records that Moses got intoxicated and "abused his wife." When a boarder intervened, he was severely slashed with a razor and lost "considerable blood."³² Similarly, informants told of

³¹ Reports of Moses being charged with liquor-related offenses appeared in the ADN at least for the period 1912-1918. The tone in some of the pieces indicate liquor had been a problem for Moses for some time. Examples include: ADN 16 October 1912: 4; ADN 10 February 1914: 1; and ADN 8 May 1918: 4.

³² ADN 20 January 1912: 3.

domestic violence in the lives of John Kent and Al Downey. Downey, well known for a jocular manner, is the butt of

several humorous personal narratives still in circulation. For those who lived with Downey, however, life was not always pleasant. In 1911, the ADN told of "Al Downey, rather a well known colored man" who was imprisoned for assaulting his wife. In defense she had hit him over the head with an Oxola bottle and he had pursued her with a razor in an attempt to cut her throat. The paper claims if the police had not arrived when they did, the scene "probably would have terminated in murder." Downey's wife's throat had been slashed and her head was covered with lumps and bruises.³³ The ten dollar fine he was charged apparently was not sufficient to deter Downey from assaulting his wife in the future for the next May he was sentenced to three months in jail for another attack.³⁴ The Downeys presumably separated following the latter assault, for his wife is thought to have moved to Halifax around this time. As mentioned earlier, oral tradition has it that Downey was killed in Halifax by those hired by his estranged wife (T86:18; T86:21).

Other characters who are the focus of items in the newspaper's court news, as well as oral narratives, demonstrate that the pattern of relying on a character role

33. ADN 20 January 1912: 3.

34. ADN 7 May 1912: 3.

only in particular contexts continues. Being a character is not understood by performer or audience as simply a matter of taking a carefree attitude to all aspects of life. As George McCall and J.L. Simmons indicate, however, in order to understand a certain behaviour, or to discern a role, one must determine for what audience the performer is staging his presentation.³⁵

Jerry, one of the local characters most often mentioned by informants, provides a contemporary illustration of how the character role may be just one of many interactive strategies employed by an individual. In his sixties, Jerry descends from Black Loyalist stock. He came to Amherst from Saint John, New Brunswick, in his youth to work in the foundry and when the industry merged with the Enterprise Foundry in Sackville, he moved with it. An informant comments on Jerry's worklife:

Jerry still works...over at the foundry... Now it seems to me, if I remember correctly, that a shaker used to be able to do five or six floors. Jerry could do thirteen. And Jerry is older than I am and if you ever saw him with his shirt off when he was working, I'll tell you that man has got muscles in his shit. He's well put together (T86:15).

Jerry is an avid sports enthusiast and there is seldom a hockey game or a wrestling match held at the stadium that he does not attend. Often he assists in the organization of

³⁵ George McCall and J. L. Simmons, Identities and Interactions (New York: Free Press, 1966) 133.

the event, and he frequently takes on the responsibility of inducing crowd participation. On weekends Jerry can be seen in shiny white shoes, walking through town or visiting the Legion, cajoling and joking with everyone he meets.

Throughout the community people recognize him and most white residents, especially those who frequent the Legion or participate in local sports events, respond to his name as did this informant: "Now there are some characters in the Black people. Jerry is a character and a good character"

(T86:15). Another elaborates:

Jerry? [I would say he's a character]. Well, have you ever seen him at a wrestling match? Or at a hockey game? Anybody could get a crowd going, it's him. He'll stand right up there on the seat, eh? The game's going and they're losing and he wants that crowd to get going. He stands up and he's going, 'Get them going.' And he'll just holler and pound his arms up and down and that whole rink will just be going.... It's just bedlam (T86:4).

Like Moses, Kent, Downey and others, Jerry does not assume the character role in all interaction. As with those mentioned above, his domestic life is marked by tension and violence. Jerry boards with his sister while his wife and children live down the street with his brother. An acquaintance describes his homelife as unhappy and believes that within the Black community where he lives, Jerry's primary identification is that of cuckold rather than character (T86:14). A neighbor refers to his domestic situation simply as "sordid" (T86:17).

It appears Jerry does not usually assume a character role in familiar situations where he considers his position to be either equal to, or perhaps superior to, others in the interaction. At home, he is able to express himself and perhaps exercise his will without drawing on the character role. Perhaps because those in his family and neighborhood know him so well, he sees it as impractical, even impossible, to assume the character persona as a master status. Those closest to him know his strengths and weaknesses. Under these circumstances, this particular, manipulative strategy is not effective.

Watson Weaver, the photographer and peddler who died in 1972, created a history for himself as a World War I veteran, although he had never actually served overseas. Through references to and narratives about his wartime experiences, he successfully fashioned an image of himself as a wounded war hero that was accepted at face value by many customers along his route. That he did not actively cultivate this image in Springhill, where people knew him from childhood and were aware of how he spent the war years, prevented most people he met from discovering a discrepancy between his ideal and real life stories. His unkempt appearance, which discouraged others from developing close relationships with him, further ensured that customers he met never discovered inconsistencies in his story or presentation.

The experiences of Jerry and Watson Weaver indicate that at least some individuals prefer not to take on the character role permanently or in contexts where too little social distance separates performer and audience. It is significant, for instance, that none of the informants describe members of their immediate family as characters, even if those individuals are regarded as such in the larger community. A man who once worked as an assistant to an often cited character, comments, "Well I found when you're not working for him, he's more of a character than when you're working for him [Laughs].... Because I found him, it to be quite a shock when I first went there how he tended to be a bit of a hard task master, you know" (T87:6).

Conversely, too great a social distance may also inhibit character performance. Informants indicate that Jerry, for example, does not assume his character role in interactions with those in higher authority positions. The son of an engineer at the foundry recalls Jerry seldom, if ever, joked with his father. Rather, the informant remembers Jerry showing respectful subordination:

I think he treated Dad with a little deference. There was a little deference to AG because Dad was an engineer at the foundry. Jerry would be very polite, you know. I mean he wouldn't carry on any amount of conversation (T86:15).

In contexts where the performer perceives his status to be significantly lower than that of persons in the interaction, he may not see any advantage in adopting, or at least

emphasizing, the character role. The substitution of this role in place of an existing stigma may not raise his status enough to warrant the use of the technique.

Characters tend to reserve most of their performances for contexts where participants are separated by a moderate social distance. Johnny Davidson is remembered fondly as a character by the white community. Without exception, white informants speak of him positively, as one man recalls:

He was a real nice man. I liked Johnny. He was kind of like a character but he was kind of, told it like it was almost more than, like he was really sort of up on things. He wasn't say, an educated man but he was, you know, he was educated in life" (T87:4).

Another man describes him as a "great mixer or a great talker" (T86:19b). People tell of how he performed the role of messenger or courier between Amherst and Montreal and how his love for debate would occasionally get him into trouble.

After telling several humorous stories about Johnny and his willingness to argue on any topic, an informant commented that he felt Johnny's son does not share the same perspective on his father as members of the white community: "I don't know, I just sort of always felt he was hesitant to discuss Johnny]. He probably had Johnny at home and that sort of stuff, you know. You know what I mean, having somebody twenty-four hours a day is different than knowing them casually for fifteen minutes a day" (T87:4). When approached, John's son did agree with the assessment of his

father as character but for different reasons than others mentioned. He does not refer to John's performance as amusing or enjoyable, but points to his father's habit of challenging the status quo: "[He would be a character] probably because he was a fighter.... I'd put him in as a character because he was outspoken" (T86:17). A peer of Davidson's and a member of the Black community has yet another view of his performance. The informant did not speak of John Davidson as a character, but identifies a personality trait which he considers more important in the assessment of this man he knew from youth: "He was scared of a cat half the time. He was the biggest coward I ever seen" (T86:21). Clearly the white residents Johnny met in the course of his everyday activities constituted his target audience. Certainly they proved to be his most accepting audience.

In his study of marginality, Robert Ziller demonstrates how the low status role of "marginal man" can be used to one's advantage.³⁶ Similarly, if the role of character is well managed and accepted, a performer can stand to make personal psychological and sociological gains. Character performance may be a successful tool for those suffering from stigma in that it can help to enhance one's image. By presenting a unique performance, characters force others to

³⁶ Robert Ziller, The Social Self (New York: Pergamon, 1973) 47.

consider them on an individual basis. John Szwed's work on Paul E. Hall, the Newfoundland songmaker,³⁷ and M. O. Jones's study of Charlie, the Kentucky chairmaker,³⁸ have already established that individuals on the social edge of their communities will sometimes create a special role for themselves.

In the context of the study community, assumption of the character role sometimes removes individuals from the stigmatized group they belong to and demands for them individual evaluation. For example, several white informants comment that Johnny Davidson was the only Black in his time who was permitted to have his hair cut in the town's segregated barbershop. Jimmy with his wildly decorated bike creates a category all his own that defies initially grouping him into a collective with other developmentally delayed adults. When characters create a performance that is out of the audience's experience, they force others to consider them individually, at least briefly. Rev. William P. Oliver's comments regarding the situation of Black Nova Scotians apply to those suffering from other stigma: "We are all too inclined to group people rather than accept them as individual human beings.... This

³⁷ John Szwed, "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and Community of Song," Folksongs and their Makers, Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives, and John F. Szwed (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1970) 149-169.

³⁸ Michael Owen Jones, The Hand Made Object and Its Maker (Berkeley: University of California, 1975).

builds up an enormous pressure to deprive the Negro of any personality of his own. He is forced into a certain pattern of behaviour which it is almost impossible for him to escape."³⁹ The adoption of the character role as an adaptive strategy allows some stigmatized individuals to escape the pressure of stereotyping which Oliver describes.

Having suspended instantaneous judgement based on stigma as the master status, characters accentuate what they consider to be their positive traits. They attempt to demonstrate exceptionality and perhaps superiority through musical or verbal proficiency, feats of physical strength or endurance, demonstrations of a particular skill or a show of moral supremacy. Through performances designed to illustrate their unique worth to the community, they hope to gain higher status.

Characters may derive a sense of power from aspects of their performances that interfere with, and perhaps influence, the usual process of assessment. A performance in the form of a show of physical strength, a demonstration of quick wit, or a portrayal of moral fortitude, may depend on showing up the weaknesses of others. Characters who rise in status at the expense of other individual(s) may enhance their social standing in their own eyes, and in the eyes of other group members through the power they demonstrate.

³⁹ Marcus VanSteen, "Nova Scotia: Model in Race Relations," Saturday Night 5 June 1959: 20.

The character performance may permit a usually socially powerless individual to temporarily control an interaction. Characters are routinely difficult, and often impossible, to interview because of their protective front. One interview proved to be a game of mental football as the character jumped from one topic to another, relying on a rapid succession of sexually suggestive comments, anecdotes, and humorous remarks. He controlled the interview situation almost exclusively as I struggled to keep up. By means of a barrage of jibes and cracks, the informant successfully avoided a confrontation of any sensitive issues such as the consciousness of the character performance, his role in the community, and the implications of his minority group membership (T86:21). The character role is one defence mechanism open to stigmatized individuals that allows them to sometimes control the course of interaction. If the control falters, they may have at least strengthened their social image. As Jerry beats out a rhythm on the back of a wooden seat in the hockey rink, he motivates a crowd of several hundred people into action. As he incites and then orchestrates their cheers, he exhibits a control over the audience he may well find enjoyable.

For Jerry, the performance may be also a defence mechanism against a sense of not belonging. Finlay MacLeod believes Gaels tell stories against themselves in order to develop a thick skin that helps them survive in the world as

minority group members.⁴⁰ Like the Gael, stigmatized individuals may cushion themselves against the reality that they are not a part of mainstream culture by assuming the role of local character. As the hockey crowd cheers on Jerry, the spectators joke with Wayne, or churchgoers accommodate Annie Hickman into their congregation, they notice these individuals. By drawing attention to themselves through the adoption of the character role, stigmatized residents may develop a sense that they have some sort of rightful place within the group. It may have been important to individuals such as John Davidson and Rachel Gee, that they at least be given the option of belonging. Evidence clearly indicates that as a Black, Davidson tested the conditions of his membership in the overall community from time to time. An informant remembers:

He [John] came in one day to Mike during the depression. 'Mike there's two colored fellows there. Lend me five dollars.' Mike lent him five dollars. He went out and came back and, 'Here's the five dollars.' He said, 'You just got it.' 'I don't need five dollars, Mike,' he said, 'I was just wanting to show those Black niggers,' he said, 'that I could get money anywhere where they can't' (T86:19).

Today some stigmatized individuals are questioning the

⁴⁰ Finlay MacLeod, "Cultural Maintenance in Gaelic Scotland: or, Do You Have to Live in a Black House to be a Gael?" paper read to the International Conference on Gaelic Language and Culture, Sydney, Nova Scotia, October 1987.

advantages offered by the character role. They see its benefits as temporary and its possible drawbacks as long-term and damaging. They question if government and those with influence will take their needs seriously if masked in humour and drama. John Davidson's son describes how he has encountered opposition since deciding to abandon a constant use of humor: "I was often the comedian among the group. That's why when I try to go serious, they'll say, 'What's wrong with you?' [Laughs] (T86:17).

Despite his choice, however, the informant recognizes the role of character remains as a viable alternative for others. He comments, "Blacks in a majority area, if there's a Black in the group... nine times out of ten, the Black in the group is the comedian. It's true. I think it is. And it's a means of survival. I'll be funny, you know, and they'll accept me being funny. And it's probably more of an acceptance thing." For the socially failed, the socially frustrated, and the socially powerless who recognize the importance of the character role to the structure of the group, playing the character is an alternative to existing stigma, burdened with negative connotations.

The vocabulary of performance theory that speaks of actors and audiences, in addition to the notion of performance itself, forces one to confront the issue of consciousness and calculation. How aware are individuals of their motives and use of manipulative strategies? Goffman

considers there to be a range of awareness shown from those who are overtly manipulative to persons who are completely taken in by their own acts.⁴¹ Clearly this brief discussion of characters within one community suggests that individuals exhibit differing levels of self-consciousness in their assumption of the character role. Nevertheless, it is essentially a performance role. As the definition of character in the last chapter indicates, it is a role that is associated with a degree of drama. Residents expect individuals to be aware of their reputation as characters, in fact many demand it as a criterion of the label. Stigmatized individuals who do not adopt the character role continue to rely on their stigma as a master status. A businessman explains there are many mentally disabled adults in town, in addition to Robbie, Wayne, and Jimmy, but they are not considered characters (T87:1). There has to be some degree of conscious playing out of the role in order for the label to be attached to an individual and to be considered appropriate.

As Dentler and Erikson indicate, personality alone is not explanation enough for deviance. Deviance is permitted within groups because it is important to the groups' very social structure. Once an individual has adopted the character role, he or she affects the community in fundamental ways. As McCall and Simmons comment, "The

⁴¹ See: Goffman, Presentation of Self.

working agreement on social identities can be called into question from time to time but it provides ground upon which participants may stand as they proceed to negotiate the specific shape and content of their respective interactive roles in the encounter."⁴² What value characters are to their community, and the mechanisms inherent in the community that help ensure their survival and acceptance will be the subject of remaining chapters.

⁴² McCall and Simmons 148.

VI

LOCAL CHARACTER ANECDOTES

While a marked individual's contribution to the adoption of a character role should not be overlooked or underestimated, public response also represents a significant component of the labelling process. Community members continually re-evaluate the designation, questioning, rejecting, or re-affirming the character status. Together, residents strive towards consensus in establishing boundaries for the role and in reaching collective interpretations of the nonconformist's performances. Throughout their part in the labelling process, community members rely heavily on character anecdotes. Information and impressions gleaned from this narrative body, in addition to assessments of the character's performances and interactions with others, determine if the label is applicable, and if he or she should be permitted to take advantage of what James C. Faris terms "sanctioned deviation."¹

As outlined in chapter one, folklorists have been hesitant to specifically address character narratives.

¹ James C. Faris, Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement, Social and Economic Studies 3 (St. John's, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1972) 105.

While their prevalence and importance has not been overlooked, local character narratives have most often been considered as part of a larger repertoire corpus. Collectors such as Botkin² document their presence in regional miscellanies while researchers completing community studies have commented on the local character anecdote's importance to local verbal art traditions and community identity. In his exploration of life in Isle Royale, Timothy Cochrane describes the local character anecdote as a kind of barometer of community perception and attachment to place. He states that "Attitudes and even situations expressed in local character anecdotes are excellent indicators of a person's and group's response to place."³

Others have recognized the importance of character anecdotes within an individual performer's repertoire. In Robin Gwyndaf's analysis of the prose narrative repertoire of a passive tradition bearer from a rural Welsh community, the collector includes sixty-six humorous anecdotes relating to well known local characters. While these narratives do not represent a majority of the total repertoire of three hundred and fifty-six items, Gwyndaf notes their special quality. In the retelling of these anecdotes, the informant

² For example, see: B. A. Botkin, A Treasury of New England Folklore (New York: Crown Press, 1947) 58-127.

³ Timothy Cochrane, "Place, People, and Folklore: An Isle Royale Case Study," Western Folklore 46 (1987): 10.

demonstrated his greatest degree of performance:

When he recited the narratives which were alive in his mind, in particular the jokes and anecdotes relating to local characters and events, he retold them, in the words of an old chronicler, 'iocunde et memoriter' ('with joy and from memory'). Even when referring to an event which may have occurred 60 or 70 years previously he would sometimes add such a remark as: 'I remember it as if it had happened yesterday.' The distant past became part of the present, and the old characters would appear vividly before him once again.

As folklorists come to recognize the significance of local character anecdotes within regional, community, and individual repertoires, they are beginning to address the question of how to best classify and describe them. In her article, "The Local Character Anecdote," Sandra Stahl provides the most comprehensive analysis. She contends that many orally circulated character narratives, which she distinguishes from newspaper or literary legends, can be considered local character anecdotes. Stahl argues that three narratives collected about a character, named Ethan Roe, fit comfortably under a single heading. They include an idiosyncratic personal experience narrative, a personal experience narrative of limited circulation and a third person, "traditional" anecdote with recognizable motifs.

⁴ Robin Gwyndaf, "The Prose Narrative Repertoire of a Passive Tradition Bearer in a Welsh Rural Community, Part Two," Fabula 22 (1981): 35.

She explains:

In terms of genre, then, all three Ethan Roe stories seem to be local character anecdotes. Two of them happen also to be personal narratives. Traditionality in terms of function, form and style is surely enough to 'counteract' the idiosyncratic content. Once again, any story that illustrates the character of a real local individual and uses the form and style of the anecdote should be considered a local character anecdote.⁵

Stahl's definition of local character anecdote is accompanied by a cautionary warning, however. In her discussion of Levette J. Davison's collection of material centering on a character, Gassy Thompson, Stahl points to the presence of narratives which neither illustrate Gassy's character nor approach anecdotal style or form. Therefore she concludes that genre classification is often irrelevant when an individual character is of paramount importance.

Stahl warns, "If we are to make a case for the local character anecdote as a distinct genre, it must be with the recognition that the category is an etic one, that much in its definition is arbitrary and probably impractical when applied to a group of field-collected narratives."⁶

Notwithstanding Stahl's reminder that the creation of a genre known as the local character anecdote is an etic tool, her classification is useful. In adopting a

⁵ Sandra Stahl, "The Local Character Anecdote," Genre 8 (1975): 292.

⁶ Stahl 296.

multidimensional perspective to genre classification, Stahl approaches the view of Max Lüthi, Kurt Ranke and others that genres represent forms of discourse, each with its own rhetorical features, vocabulary, disposition toward reality, use of descriptive language, types of character and symbolic meaning.⁷ Sandra Stahl points to similarities in the form and style of the narratives she considers local character anecdotes, such as exaggeration and the creation of humour based on that exaggeration.⁸ These shared elements, together with the common purpose of exploring a real individual's character, argue more strongly for their consideration as a single genre than their differences, expressed in the use of first or third person narration and the presence or absence of motifs, argue conversely.

If one accepts Ben-Amos's view that forms of oral literature are multidimensional symbols of communication and folklore genres are a set of systematically related conceptual categories in culture,⁹ Sandra Stahl's inclusion of the three Ethan Roe narratives under one genre is not questionable, but reasonable. To delineate any further, solely along content lines, would be to create artificial divisions that neither reflect reality nor foster analysis.

⁷ See: Dan Ben-Amos, "Introduction," Folklore Genres (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1976)-xxx.

⁸ Stahl, "The Local Character Anecdote," 293.

⁹ Ben-Amos xi.

From this perspective, orally transmitted local character narratives in the study community, which demonstrate the characteristics of the anecdote, will be considered collectively. Narratives which are fragmentary or well crafted and related in the first person or the third will fall under the classification. Discussion of the local character anecdote's role within Amherst's oral narrative repertoire, and its functions for character and community, will include the elements outlined by Stahl and will be organized according to what Lauri Honko has defined as four basic criteria of narrative: context, form, content, and function.¹⁰

Performance Context

In defining anecdotes, Archer Taylor indicates "They are common stock."¹¹ The narratives are not restricted to any particular subject matter nor are they the property of specific individuals. While anecdotes may belong to a body of folklore shared by many individuals, rather than dominated by specialists, little is known about exactly who does tell them, when they are told, and in what settings. As Robert Georges has pointed out, in order to fully explore

¹⁰ Lauri Honko, "Genre Theory Revisited," Studia Fennica 20 (1976): 24.

¹¹ Archer Taylor, "The Anecdote: A Neglected Genre," Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies, eds. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970) 224.

a narrative genre, one must consider not just the text, but the whole performance event.¹² What stories people judge appropriate to tell to whom and when they think it timely and appropriate to tell certain tales to particular audiences, are important aspects in the understanding of the narrative form.¹³ Michael Taft raises some of these questions specifically in relation to the local character anecdote:

The local character has long been the focus of discussion not only among the folk, but among folklorists. Folklorists have been interested mainly in content and style of local character stories, the place and function of characters within the community, and the personalities of local characters. The conversational context of these stories, however, has not been sufficiently studied. When, and under what conditions are local character stories told? How are such stories incorporated into narrative sessions, or into casual conversations? Who tells such stories and to whom are they told?¹⁴

Because local character anecdotes may be personal narratives, much of what John Robinson says concerning the

¹² See: Robert Georges, "Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events," Journal of American Folklore 82 (1969): 313-328.

¹³ See: Robert Georges, "Timeliness and Appropriateness in Personal Experience Narrating," Western Folklore 46 (1987): 115-20.

¹⁴ Michael Taft, "Characterizing the Local Folk: Narrative Sequence and Narrative Ownership in the Conversational Flow," paper read to Folklore Studies Association of Canada Meeting, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 31 May 1979, 1.

contextual use of this genre is applicable. Robinson indicates that personal narratives are considered appropriate in conversational interactions, but not in discourse situations.¹⁵ They belong to informal speech situations rather than the more formal setting of the classroom or lecture, even if relevant to the topic. Taft comments that the local character anecdote is best suited to contexts such as family and friendship circles.¹⁶

In Amherst, local character anecdotes are generally transmitted within three distinct informal conversational speech contexts. The first is linked with a public space, such as a retail outlet or park bench that provides a meeting place. The neutral physical space acts as a facilitator for the exchange of news and narrative among a group of individuals who frequent the spot. While the space remains constant as a meeting place, consistency among participants depends on a variety of factors. Attendance at some public speech situations is best described as fluid, while at others it is predictable.

Secondly, local character anecdotes may arise when specific small groups gather, regardless of time or space. These speech situations might be described as semi-private in that they are closed from public scrutiny in the way a

¹⁵ John Robinson, "Personal Narratives Reconsidered," Journal of American Folklore 94 (1981): 84.

¹⁶ Michael Taft, Discovering Saskatchewan Folklore (Edmonton, Alberta: NewWest Press, n.d.) 55.

gathering in a shop or office might be, yet group members may not share the same level of intimacy with all participants. Semi-private contexts may draw on members from formally organized groups such as service clubs, for example, or from informally generated friendship groups. While some of these collectives may meet in pre-designated spaces, even formally organized monthly meetings may rotate from one member's home to the next. Physical space acts as less of an incentive for the exchange of verbal art than does group composition. All possible participants may not be present at every speech situation, but the group members have a stronger sense of closed membership than those attending informal public gatherings. When friends come together, whether or not for specified ends, a speech situation that fosters the exchange of verbal art--and sometimes includes local character anecdotes--develops.

Lastly, characters are the topic of some conversational interaction that takes place within the family. Here physical space is less of a factor although it generally remains fairly constant--in that most interaction takes place within the home, or within the familiar spaces of the family car or houses of extended family members. Speech situations held among family often are the most intimate verbal art exchanges for membership is limited to an established and well known set of participants. Of the three speech situations, the informal public small group

gathering has been the most fully explored. In Richard Bauman's study of the verbal art of a Nova Scotian community, he concludes that residents "exhibit a rather narrow range of interest and elaboration with regard to speaking, with almost all their sociolinguistic interest and attention focused on one speech situation--evening talk at the general store."¹⁷ Older Amherstonians place a similar importance on the store as a gathering place for talk during the first half of this century. One informant described how during her childhood neighborhood men congregated at several corner stores to tell what she describes as "jokes and yarns":

There used to be a store down here at the corner of Patterson Street and Park. And it was run by Dolph Cormier and they'd gather there at Dolph Cormier's a whole bunch of them. And Peter Gallant ran a store on, up on the hill here too. They'd gather and congregate there. Louis Alteen had a little store up here too and that was another congregating place (T86:9).

Locations other than grocery stores fostered public speech situations. Informants mentioned barbershops, shoe repair shops, fire stations, coffee shops, and two undertakers' offices. Today restaurants, corner stores, downtown retail outlets, the two shopping malls, the pool hall and the rink remain the most generally recognized

¹⁷ Richard Bauman, "The La Have Island General Store: Sociability and Verbal Art in a Nova Scotia Community," Journal of American Folklore 85 (1972): 332.

public meeting spots. Three drinking establishments near the downtown core provide a locus for a few, but more often seem to serve the needs of groups already formed, rather than providing an impetus for individuals to gather primarily for talk. At least some proprietors of the well known public speech contexts are aware of their role and foster the gathering. A corner store installed a coffee machine, for example, and shopping mall promotions describe the centres as places for meeting and socializing as well as shopping.

The range of verbal art exchanged within Amherst's public small group contexts corresponds with Bauman's typology of evening talk at the general store in LaHave. The three genres of conversation he identifies also represent the major divisions of public verbal art within the study community: news, arguments, and yarns or stories.¹⁸ Bauman places local character anecdotes under the heading of yarns which he defines as "narratives told and accepted as true about something that transcended common knowledge, experience or expectation."¹⁹ Bauman comments, "Included here were accounts of pranks, the exploits of local characters, humorous situations and the like..."²⁰

In the Amherst context, some local character anecdotes

¹⁸ Bauman, "The LaHave Island General Store" 335.

¹⁹ Bauman, "The LaHave Island General Store" 336.

²⁰ Bauman, "The LaHave Island General Store" 336.

fit very comfortably under the heading of yarns, while others are more suited to the category of news. Depending on factors such as performance expectation and group composition, information and anecdotes about characters may be shared in much the same way as gossip. Stories are exchanged and narrative lines created through collective contributions of many or all present. If a discrepancy in versions arises, the exchange may become more aggressive and participants polarize. Watson and Potter describe polarization as the process by which individuals differentiate themselves from one another, and exaggerate their differences.²¹ This polarization can extend into the area of argument, but characters are not usually considered part of the community's active resource of argument topics as is politics, for example. More often the account of an encounter or confrontation with a character will serve as subject matter for an anecdote.²²

When situations arise that either demand or allow a greater level of performance, individuals may develop an

²¹ Jeanne Watson and Robert J. Potter, "An Analytic Unit for the Study of Interaction," *Human Relations* 15 (1962): 256. The authors contrast "polarization" with "matching," the process by which participants assert their similarities. Both represent means by which individuals may move between "presenting" and "sharing" relationships.

²² An example of this arose during one interview when the informant described a match or argument he had with an older man who was considered a character around the main fire station. The narrative demonstrated the informant's quick mental ability as he emerged from the match ahead of the character (T86:3).

anecdote, initially regarded as a piece of news, into a narrative. This sequence of events led to Bill's telling of an anecdote about the LeBlancs. Bill takes a news report and structures it into a narrative form that incorporates contrast and concludes with a brief analysis:

I didn't see this but there was a place right along Church Street that opened a furniture store. They were having this grand opening and the fellow said, 'You want to get up there.' Here sitting right in the window, in one of the big settees was Mrs. LeBlanc and the two boys, you know. The cameras taking pictures and of course they figured they had their right just the same as anyone else and of course they did (T87:2). 22A

Some individuals become recognized both for their large repertoire of anecdotes and their fine storytelling ability. In its definition of an anecdote, The Standard Dictionary of Folklore mentions that almost every community has its local raconteurs and storytellers who are masters of the genre.²³ Narrators like Bill include many local character anecdotes in their repertoire. Some which become pre-formulated and self-contained²⁴ exhibit detail and rely on the use of dialogue and dramatization. While not restricted to a high degree of performance, the local character anecdote can

^{22A} For a discussion of evaluation in narrative, see: William Labov, Language in the Inner City (Philadelphia, PA.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

²³ Benjamin A. Botkin, Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, ed. Maria Leach (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1949) 56.

²⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett quoted in Sandra Stahl, "The Oral Personal Narrative in its Generic Context," Fabula 18 (1977): 19.

accommodate gesture, imitation, and other narrative devices associated with high performance genres. As one of the most skilled storytellers interviewed, George advances the action of the anecdote and explores the local character's personality through a dramatic style that may involve the playing of more than one role. In the following example the value George places on the anecdote's narrative quality is demonstrated when he is unsure even which characters he is depicting. In the presentation, George develops the part of Emma through imitative gesture. He speaks the dialogue assigned to the second character, John Noiles:

They told a story up the back road. I think her name was Emma Seaman, well it was Emma anyway. Emma Finnigan. And this other John, fellow by the name of John. I think it was John Noiles. You can just put John was coming down the road and of course they didn't agree. They never, whenever they'd meet, they were just like cats and dogs fighting. So anyways he went by this morning and the house was right close to the road and in them days you had no screen on the windows, you know. So she would stick her head out the window and look down the road and then she'd stick her head out the window and look up that way [imitates]. And this morning John was coming and John said, "Pull your head in there, pull your head in woman till I get by." Now I guess that stirred up a hornet's nest. I guess that old back road, they called it, the Gould Road, it just came into full bloom. Boy [Laughs]. I guess she told him where he could go. Oh my (T87:3).

Bill, an expert on public space talk in Amherst, emphasizes the importance of yarns or stories in general,

and of character anecdotes in particular, to the local tradition. For over sixty years, first in his father's shoe shop and then in his own, Bill mended shoes and listened to men talk. His store, like his father's before his, was a recognized gathering spot for conversation and drink and he now believes he has heard nearly every narrative structure:

I tell people now, I'll almost gamble they can't tell me a story that I don't know the punch line or a very similar story, you see, because I've heard so many all my life and I don't get the story ~~exactly~~ the same but I know what the punch line is or what it refers to (T87:2).

When asked to specify the types of stories told, Bill identifies for local character anecdotes two main characteristics: most were humorous, and, as he says, "More were a little risqué." While he indicates changes in the concept of humour, "[There were] not the amount of sick stories around in my time that seem to be now..." (T87:2), he sees the sexually explicit nature of many of the narratives as a consistent factor. The following is one of several such examples he repeated:

Well now, you mentioned Avard Hire. Roger Mills ran the grocery store and he had Avard Hire around some of the time, helping. And they tell me, I have it on pretty good authority, that he would tell his wife, she worked there too. And he would tell Avard Hire to go into the freezer or into the back room and masturbate. And when he got out there and thought that, Roger thought he was doing it, Roger sent his wife out to the back for something (T87:2).

Roger himself claims to know a whole body of sexually explicit anecdotes concerning the character Bug-Eye Blanche. Unfortunately he felt restricted by gender difference so that he would not share the narratives with me. However, he did communicate one to my husband when the two met. He told an anecdote concerning Bug-Eye and a prostitute that ended:

Prostitute: Well, Bug-Eye, I have to say I've seen bigger.

Bug-Eye: Well, I have to say I haven't (FN 25 March 1988).

The sexual nature of many of the narratives introduces another important element in the local character anecdote of public tradition: it has been and continues to be male dominated. It is largely men who congregate on street corners and who sit on the town bench; who frequent corner stores or who spend time at the pool hall or fire station. While none of these publicly designated speech contexts are exclusive to males and some of the spaces--notably the restaurants and coffee shops--are equally patronized by women, with few exceptions men seem to rely on public spaces more heavily to give or receive news, engage in argument, or to share narratives.²⁵ When women wish to gain access to these communication channels they may rely on indirect means and have male family members or friends relay the message or

²⁵ One public space which may provide a context for female dominated verbal art is the beauty salon, but it was not mentioned by any informants and has not been investigated for the purpose of this study.

story.²⁶ While the male dominance over the general store of a decade ago has been documented in Nova Scotia by Richard Bauman and Wayne Fanning,²⁷ it is interesting to discover the trend extends beyond the store to other public space domains and remains a present day reality for at least some women in at least some communities. The comments of Debbie, a thirty-year-old woman who describes her thinking as feminist, are revealing. When she becomes frustrated with her inability to supply character anecdotes, she mentions her brother:

I think I hung around in exclusive circles or something. It was Steven who was more of a street person than I was [Laughs]. He'd go to the pool room and meet these guys (T87:7).

For Debbie the rink represented the one exception. It was a public speech situation to which she had some access and where she was most likely to hear local character anecdotes directly. Nevertheless, the rink was, and still is, male dominated in terms of staff, team membership, and perhaps spectator composition.

* While public space gatherings still tend to be

²⁶ One female informant described how she will send her husband or son to the corner store if she wants to inquire about a particular event or person. If no male members of the family are available for news gathering, she will call a friend who works at the store, rather than make the trip herself (T86:4).

²⁷ See: Richard Bauman, "LaHave Island General Store..." and Wayne Fanning, "Storytelling at a Nova Scotia General Store," Culture & Tradition 3 (1978): 57-67.

dominated by males, the gender split is more equally divided in semi-private contexts. Here groups may be comprised of men and women or be exclusive to one sex. Whatever their composition, however, they remain an important impetus for verbal art and represent a significant opportunity for exchange among women. Female informants described acquiring local character anecdotes from friends, neighbors, and fellow members of formally organized groups such as service clubs or church organizations. Debbie spoke of obtaining most of her narratives in interactions with friends at school. Such exchanges take place outside the formal structure of class or business meeting and are fit into socially defined periods of time such as the recess period of the school day or social hour after the business portion of the IODE meeting. Male informants described exchanging anecdotes at the Legion or with close friends but these channels were mentioned in addition to the more public resource offered by the corner store or fire station. Through their lack of references to public space situations, women inferred semi-private group contexts are more central to their verbal art exchange in general, and their knowledge of local character anecdote in particular.

As informants de-emphasize argument in the semi-private context, it is improbable local character anecdotes

would be used frequently as a means of debate.²⁸ However, as in public space talk, within the semi-private setting of the friendship group, local character anecdotes may be shared as news. They are drawn on either when a discrepancy exists between the experience of participants within the interaction or to help clarify a character's status. On the other hand, as in the public space context, the anecdote may be fashioned into a full blown narrative and related in a manner that allows the narrator to demonstrate his or her storytelling abilities. The inclusion of sexually explicit material would be very dependent on the make up of a particular group.

Fieldwork data suggests public and semi-private talk provides the most usual contexts for local character anecdotes which have been crafted into pre-structured and complete narratives. When the three most talented storytellers were interviewed, their wives remained close by. Each of the women explained that she was listening to many of the anecdotes for the first time. Well developed and skillfully presented character anecdotes do not seem to have diminished within public, or semi-private contexts,

²⁸ Grace described how her IODE group withstood Bessie Downey's tyranny as regent for over thirty years because no one wanted to openly oppose her:

"She was regent for approximately thirty years or something. And nobody ever questioned any decisions she made.... But everybody was scared to death of her. Of course, I was very young, comparatively in the chapter. But nobody ever, nobody ever talked back to her. Nobody ever questioned her in any way" (T86:16).

but informants like George claim their prevalence within family settings has lessened. Today it appears even expert narrators may have few opportunities to exercise their talents within a family context designed primarily around talk. Prior to television, radio, central heating, and the widespread use of automobiles, older informants describe evenings as a time when families and neighbors would gather to visit and talk.²⁹ While folklorists must be careful not to accept at face value informants' claims that the present is a pale reflection of the past when a genre experienced its golden age, there may be validity in the association some informants drew between the decline of visiting and the decrease of fully developed character anecdotes within the home. A local character anecdote that has been molded into a self-contained narrative and artfully told for the enjoyment of those listening, depends on a high degree of performance. The presence of the neighbor or friend visiting might provide the impetus required for an individual to adopt the role of poser. In addition, the sexually explicit nature or otherwise deemed adult content of many of the character anecdotes learned during public talk might be repeated to an adult visitor in the presence

²⁹ George has noticed a decrease in the presentation of character anecdotes within family contexts and credits at least part of the decline to the lack of visiting. He claims only to tell character narratives from his own repertoire when "my memory is jogged." Apparently conversational topics that dominate his family's talk do not spark character anecdotes (T87:3).

of children but would probably be considered inappropriate for narration exclusively to children, or young people. It is interesting that when one master storyteller did practice his craft at home to a family audience, he generally chose to relate character anecdotes to the male teenagers in the home, rather than the female (T87:7).

Within the contemporary family setting, character anecdotes are less likely to be valued for their narrative qualities than for their message. Family members are not expected to turn every interaction into a display of verbal arts skills. Conversely, at least in some circumstances, individuals are discouraged from adopting the high performance role of "poser" and presenting a narrative. This excerpt from an interview demonstrates a wife's frustration as her husband struggles to include all the elements he thinks necessary to a well structured narrative--including place and names of characters. His wife, who has heard the narrative many times previously, does not enjoy the anecdote for its narrative qualities. She does not sympathize with her husband's efforts to establish the correct details but pushes him towards the goal of the narrative:

Scott: Who else was there that night?

Dawn: It doesn't matter.

Scott: Just wait till I figure out who was with us.

Diane: It was in the mall, wasn't it?

Scott: Yeah it was in the mall.

Diane: It's one of my favorites.

Scott: What's his name was with us.

Dawn: [Sarcastically] Yeah, I know him well.

Scott: Oh shit, what was his name?

Dawn: [Emphatically] It doesn't matter.

Scott: No, what the hell was, the poor guy got all red-faced. He didn't know which way to go. He tried to go through the counter [Laughs].

Dawn: Tell it from the start, not the end (T87:5).

Although some local character anecdotes are told within the family and enjoyed primarily for their entertainment value, more often informants reported exchanging anecdotes for other purposes. Some described being told as children and teenagers frightening anecdotes, full of cautionary warnings and social comment. In most circumstances, the anecdotes were shared in the same manner as news. Often several family members, perhaps over dinner, piece together a character's life history or relate a recent character-related occurrence (T87:6).

When local character anecdotes are exchanged as news, the family context offers another contrast to public and semi-private speech situations. In the latter settings younger individuals may generally participate as supportive listeners. Fieldwork in Amherst supports Richard Bauman's

statement that a period of verbal apprenticeship is common in the public speech tradition.³⁰ Bill describes his hesitation as a young man in asking the older men in his father's shop to leave at closing time:

I got caught an awful lot of Saturday nights. I'd go to the shop and he'd (his father) say, 'Well, I've got to go up town for a minute.' And I had to stay there until ten o'clock and not only that but there were several people, several older men at that time down there.... But they used to come in, two or three of them and they'd sit around talking. And I didn't dare say, 'Well men I'm closing up.' And I had to stay until they wanted to go home and that, would be ten thirty, sometimes quarter to eleven (T87:2).

Bill's experiences mirror the sentiments expressed earlier by Grace that she was reluctant as a younger member of IODE to speak out against the leadership of Bessie Downey. Certain types of talk and vocabulary may be off bounds to younger members of a family as well, but character anecdotes, provided they do not contain suggestive or other material considered inappropriate by some family members, are regarded as an acceptable conversational resource for children as well as adults. Similar to James C. Faris's description of the role children play in a family's acquisition of community news within a Newfoundland outport,³¹ younger family members contribute to their

³⁰ Bauman, "The LaHave Island Genral Store" 333.

³¹ James C. Faris, "The Dynamics of Verbal Exchange: A Newfoundland Example," Anthropologica 8, (1966): 239.

parents' store of local character anecdotes. One man spoke of learning narratives of the LeBlanc family from his children (T86:15). His son highlighted the multidirectional flow of narratives within the family unit as he described learning character anecdotes from grandparents, parents, younger siblings, and in later years, in-laws (T867:6). Not within the confines of this study, but a fascinating research topic would be the exploration of local character anecdote acquisition in the development of a child's verbal proficiency.

Form and Content

As Sandra Stahl points out, "local character anecdote" is a difficult phrase in that each word lacks a clear definition.³² In her article Stahl attempts to clarify "local character" by specifying it must refer to a real local individual rather than a character or regional type such as a miser or New England Yankee. For the purposes of this study, local character refers to the approximately seventy-five individuals within Amherst already described in chapter two. "Anecdote" is more problematic. Archer Taylor, in his article, "The Anecdote: A Neglected Genre," concludes that the anecdote's "definition has yet to be written and put to use."³³ In his classification, Taylor

³² Stahl, "The Local Character Anecdote" 284.

³³ Archer Taylor, "The Anecdote" 228.

follows Stith Thompson's precedent, considering the anecdote as a simple form of folktale that is closely related to forms of the sage and the jest. On the other hand, Jan Harold Brunvand, in his introductory text, The Study of American Folklore, advises students that anecdote is a subgenre of legend.³⁴ More recently, Michael Taft has suggested local character anecdotes might best be considered as part of the gossip complex.³⁵ While the variety of interpretations is at least in part due to the fact that anecdote has only recently become a focus for narrative scholars, it is also indicative of the genre's flexibility and of its loose narrative form. That the anecdote can serve as entertainment, an educational tool, or a vehicle for social comment, attests to its adaptability and contributes to its resulting popularity. Archer Taylor states that while the anecdote generally has been overlooked, it is "as numerous as the sands of the sea and as easy to find."³⁶

Central to the anecdote's popularity is its conversational nature. Scholars describe anecdotes as "short, pointed, pithy narratives," consisting of a single incident or motif.³⁷ Taylor offers the following

³⁴ Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978) 115.

³⁵ Taft, "Characterizing the Local Folk" 1.

³⁶ Archer Taylor, "The Anecdote," 223.

³⁷ Maria Leach 56.

definition: "An anecdote is a brief narrative current in oral tradition that tells something unusual about a person, an event, or a thing. It may involve quotation of a witty remark or description of a remarkable situation."³⁸

Certainly the narratives concerning local characters in Amherst meet the criteria of being short and consisting of a single motif or incident, as the following example from a cycle of stories about Moose Kent told by Lloyd demonstrates:

It was a dead end [street] and there was three houses on it and Moose Kent lived in the first one, we lived in the second one and then the Thomas family lived in the third. Well, this was when I'm nine, ten years old. And Moose Kent was there next door. Well, now I don't know if this would be a good story to tell or not but Moose would, he drank a lot, oh he drank a terrible lot. Maggie was his wife. Great big woman. And he'd abuse her badly when he was drinking. Not, ah, tongue lashing, see? He never hit her or anything. He couldn't, that's for sure. Anyway he'd come home. This time I remember, he'd come home. He just struggled down between the Baptist Church and where the postoffice is now. Right, come to his door, and he couldn't make it up the steps and he was sitting, laying on the steps and pounding on the door and calling her a lot of names. So she come to the door and she had what they call a potato pounder and it was made of wood. It looked well, you know what an Indian club would be like, big Indian club. Well, if it was cut in two and flattened, that would be what, that's what she used for a potato masher. She come to the door with this in her hand.

And the crowd was gathered around and she opened the door and she said to the crowd, 'Watch me kill a moose out of season.' And she hit him between the eyes and I can see the blood yet running down his face and he rolled, he rolled off the steps and laid there. Never.

It was late in the afternoon when he come to and crawled into the house (T86:3).

Unrestricted by what Taylor terms "formulistic quality,"³⁹ as evidenced in the opening and closing formula employed in Märchen, for example, the anecdote may be adapted to meet a variety of conversational demands. Narrators may adopt formulas or conventions usually associated with other genres. This artistic freedom is evidenced as Lloyd modifies his anecdotes of Moose Kent to approximate other narrative genres with which he is familiar. At least in a formal interview situation, Lloyd retells some of his anecdotes about Moose Kent, especially those he learned from his father, as would a narrator of legend. He establishes the context and vouches for the narrative's authenticity through the inclusion of "reality markers":

The last story that my father told me about him was up there on King Street, what we call King Street now, where the Pentecostal Church was, that was a saloon or a barroom type of thing, I guess. There was bunch of sailors, my father said there was a bunch of sailors stationed here and they got in there drinking and Old Moose Kent walked in and he was, he liked to fight. He was a

³⁹ Archer Taylor, "The Anecdote" 224.

fighter. And he wanted to fight all the time. So he walked in through the door. And he hollered out, "Will somebody please call me Moose?" He didn't like that name. Somebody called him Moose and then the fight started. But he got all broke up that time because these sailors weren't taking nothing from him, you see. He was in the hospital again (T86:3).

At other times he slips in conventions characteristic of the folk-tale. In relating an anecdote that describes Moose Kent's efforts to train a moose to haul a wagon, Lloyd concludes with an ending one might expect to hear in a Märchen or tall tale. He finishes, "I don't know whether the moose died or not but Old John, which they called Moose, he didn't die that's for sure. I don't think he's dead yet and he must be at least two hundred years old."

The anecdote is also easily condensed to fit into different types of conversational interaction. Taylor comments, "Anecdotes, like some other forms of folklore, may be transmitted in an abbreviated version."⁴⁰ They fit John Robinson's description of personal narratives in that they need only contain the basic requirements of narrative. Often local character anecdotes imply, rather than overtly state, elements such as evaluation.⁴¹ Lloyd has condensed a favorite narrative of his father's that describes Moose

⁴⁰ Archer Taylor, "The Anecdote" 224.

⁴¹ John Robinson 85. Robinson is drawing on the earlier work of William Labov. See: W. Labov, Language in the Inner City (Philadelphia, PA.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

Kent's predictably unsuccessful attempt to fly:

Yeah he made himself a pair of wings.
And up where the curling rink is now
used to be the old winter fair building,
flat roofed building. He got to the top
of that and he said he was going to fly
to Halifax with his wooden wings. Well,
he didn't get very far. He just got off
the edge of the roof and he fell down
and, he was in the hospital all broke up
(T86:3).

Michael Taft elaborates on the concise nature of local character anecdotes when he writes of their "in-joke" quality.⁴² Taft finds that just as in the above example where Lloyd refers to known buildings and place-names, most tellers of anecdotes will draw on a communally shared body of knowledge. Taft observes that when outsiders join the conversation, the narratives change as tellers append "footnotes," to supply necessary additional information already known by other audience members. He finds that when told in a natural context without any outside presence, however, local character anecdotes may be related as little more than dities. As in L. G. Small's exploration of the relationship between community narratives and traditional expressions,⁴³ the message of a local character anecdote may be reduced to a phrase or sentence and transformed into a community expression such as a proverbial comparison or exaggeration.

⁴² Taft, "Characterizing the Local Folk" 5.

⁴³ L[awrence] G. Small, "Traditional Expressions in a Newfoundland Community: Genre Change and Functional Variability," Logic and Language 2:3 (1975): 15-18.

Amherstonians might say, "You're as crazy as Moose Kent" or "He's stronger than Moose Kent." In the Amherst context at least, the expressions never take the form of true proverbs, characterized by balance and even measure.

Despite their brief, single episodic nature and lack of recognizable introductory and concluding formula, anecdotes do share common narrative features. In the case of local character anecdotes, Sandra Stahl has pointed to the consistent presence of exaggeration. She states, "The most obvious convention indispensable to the local character anecdote is exaggeration. A local character's actions always 'overstate' his character; otherwise he wouldn't be known as a 'character'." Stahl continues, "The humour of a local character anecdote lies in the consistency of 'correctness' of the 'character's' actions in light of his abnormal or extreme character."⁴⁴ Lloyd's anecdotes about Moose Kent rely heavily on extremity and exaggeration. In his renditions of Kent's fight with the sailors and his confrontation with his wife, Lloyd tells of two incidents where Kent's extreme provocations, compounded by extreme intoxication, do not stop until he meets with extreme violence. In the anecdote describing Kent's interaction with his wife, Maggie, she reacts to his extremity in a way that could be described as anything but moderate. Kent's name calling, his wife's choice of weapon, the force she

⁴⁴ Stahl, "The Local Character Anecdote" 292.

uses, and his response--to pass out on the door step for hours--all take the listener's imagination to the limit without necessarily questioning the reality of the account.

Character anecdotes, such as the ones about Moose Kent, represent the most, the worst, or the best that could realistically happen and are amusing because of it. Kent drives a sleigh hauled by a moose, drinks more than seems humanly possible, lift weights other men cannot budge, attempts to fly, is local champion of the "lazy stick," is said to be continually seeking out matches for his physical strength and then often suffering abuse when he does, and in his latter years sleeps in a coffin. Nothing in the stories about Kent is mundane and Lloyd inserts exaggeration and contrast in other aspects of the anecdote to match the extremes presented by Kent's character. Lloyd tells of doing some plumbing for the family:

Now the next story that I'm going to tell you about him, they lived down here on Palmer Street. And I was in the plumbing business then, a young man in the plumbing business. O.k. In those days they had a high tank, you know, with the chain on them. And I went down there one time to fix some plumbing. And I said, and I went upstairs and there was the tank lying on the floor. And I said to Mrs. Kent, 'What happened to the tank?' 'Oh,' she said, 'that damned old fool, John, was sitting on it,' she said. 'And he pulled the chain and the tank come down and hit him on the head. Damn near killed him,' she said (T86:3).

Lloyd not only presents a narrative illustrating Kent's

extreme strength and focuses on an extraordinary interruption in an ordinary sequence of events, but also introduces other forms of contrast. He portrays himself as a young man in the business, accentuating his unfamiliarity with this kind of an experience. Finally, he presents Maggie Kent's description of a most unusual event calmly as if it were an expected part of daily life. Both the narrative's goal as well as its presentation style rely heavily on the use of exaggeration and the contrast of extremes. Like Lloyd's story of Kent pulling the toilet tank down on himself, many local character anecdotes in the Amherst repertoire are intended to be funny. Others, like the capsule version of his father's story of Moose Kent's flying attempt, are recognized for their entertainment value, but are not necessarily regarded as humorous. Lloyd considers the flying episode as extraordinary and therefore worthy of an anecdote, but there is the sense communicated through his presentation that he isn't sure what to make of this event. Maybe because of missing pieces that would explain Kent's motivation and possibly reveal manipulation of Kent or perhaps even mental instability on his part, Lloyd does not tell it simply as a humorous event. Nevertheless, like other character anecdotes, it relies on extremity and exaggeration both in subject matter and style as Lloyd contrasts the height of the building and how far Kent planned to fly with his quick descent. Kent's admission

to hospital is an added touch not found in several other anecdotal versions of the event told by different narrators.

The strong imagery of Lloyd's narratives is characteristic of local character anecdotes as a whole. Undoubtedly it is a feature of the genre that contributes significantly to its popularity. In her investigation of the personal narratives of the narrator Homer Spriggs, Jane Masi Hall discovered that "The durability of the personal experience story is highly dependent upon the individual narrator's ability to create vivid and lasting impressions through the use of plot development and character portrayal, and also upon his ability to impart to his listeners a sense that what he is talking about is worthy of being remembered."⁴⁵ Hall's findings are in agreement with Richard Tallman's observations of a Nova Scotian storyteller. Tallman determined that for his informant, the criteria of a well told story include relevance to context and the creation of strong imagery.⁴⁶ Others have determined an individual's narration depends heavily on his or her ability to visualize the events of the story.⁴⁷

Because of its brief nature, each anecdote hinges on a

⁴⁵ Jane Masi Hall, "Homer Spriggs: Chronicler of Brunmetti's Creek," Journal of Folklore Institute 14 (1977): 31.

⁴⁶ See: Richard Tallman, "You Can Almost Picture It," Folklore Forum 7 (1974): 121-30.

⁴⁷ See: D. A. MacDonald, "A Visual Memory," Scottish Studies 22 (1978): 1-26.

central image, similar to what Edward Ives has identified as a tableau. In exploring a legend corpus told within the Maine lumbering tradition, Ives discovered the importance of a key image to each narrative. He suggests the tableau is crucial to the legend's form, meaning and transmission.⁴⁸ From Amherst's repertoire of local character anecdotes, tableaux emerge that become strongly identified with individual characters. For example, when the LeBlanc name is mentioned, Amherstonians often describe two tableaux. The first concerns the neglected state of their former house, which has been torn down, while the second explores the family's alleged habit of contaminating food during visits to local grocery stores. When asked what they know of the LeBlancs, Ann and her teenage son Brad, offer the following:

Brad: They really had no bathroom in their house. They had to use the bathroom through the floor, a hole in the floor. And they had it right in front of the t.v. so they could watch the t.v. Did you hear that one? That's true. I think that could be true, I don't know. Everybody says that.

Ann: About going into Sobeys and lifting, taking the tops off jars and sticking their fingers in. They do that.

Diane: Do they?

Brad: Who told you that?

⁴⁸ Edward Ives, "The Man Who Plucked the Gorbey," Journal of American Folklore 74 (1961): 1-8.

Ann: Oh I heard that story.

Brad: I never heard that.

Ann: Oh I did. I heard that a couple of times.

Brad: And I heard when they got their, the public thing [Public Health Department] made them put the toilet in, they put it right in front of the t.v. [Laughs]. Right in the middle of the room. Right in front of the t.v. (T86:20).⁴⁹

Anecdotes describing the LeBlancs' innovative solution to indoor toilet facilities and their contamination of bottled food in the grocery store comprise "common knowledge" for the majority of community members. Dawn emphasizes the community's reliance on these two tableaux when she repeats similar versions in response to being asked for stories and information about the LeBlanc family:

They used to live on Central Avenue too. But ah, I don't know if you'll want this on tape or not but they, I don't know if they had a bathroom in their house or if they had an outside toilet, now I don't know which was which. But anyway they never used the toilet. They'd lift the boards up and do it like in the boards of the floor. I guess when they tore that out, there were rats and all this....

Diane: Where was this? Central Avenue?

Dawn: On Central Ave. I heard that when I was young and I guess it's pretty true that they used to pick, just pick one up

⁴⁹ Another informant reported that a character in Springhill had a hole cut in his floor for use as a toilet (FN 24 September 1986).

and do their business and put one back down. And.... you know what they'll do? They'll take the lid off of food like peanut butter, Cheese Whiz and stuff and they'll run their finger through it. They've had to stop them from going, they stopped them for a while from going into No Frills and Save Easy and they were doing it at Sobeys. Dragging their finger through the peanut butter (T86:4).

The loose floor board that is used as a toilet and the contamination of bottled food from a grocery store shelf have become paramount images for Amherstonians in their dealings with the LeBlanc family. The contextual details used to create these pictures can be very consistent. For example, when the LeBlancs are described contaminating food, one grocery store is most often named. In the majority of anecdotes, the jar they open contains peanut butter. The floor board they use for a toilet is frequently specified to be in front of the television set.

Anecdotes, like those that describe the LeBlanc's contamination of bottled food, explore characters' personality and lifestyle. Accordingly, I label them exploratory anecdotes. Others, termed here explanatory anecdotes, help justify the character's presence within the community. Many of this latter type share a common pattern which Ronald L. Baker identifies in his collection of character narratives from Indiana:

Although these local outcasts come from all parts of the state, several of their

stories share the same pattern. Supposedly they are from respected, wealthy families, are well educated, and once had good jobs; however, something happens to them. Either they experience some tragedy, usually the death or disappearance of a spouse or sweetheart, or they protest some injustice, often unfair taxes or unequal rights. At any rate, they give up their social position and good job and become hermits, living in a shack, under a bridge, at a dump, or in the woods.⁵⁰

The pattern that Baker outlines is also evident in the stories Elena Bradunas collected concerning Chicago character, Martin Piniak. Some informants she talked with believed Piniak was an intelligent, handsome and well dressed young man who gave up his well paying job to become a local character when the government instituted income tax. A second story that painted Piniak as a victim of a tragedy described how he had lost his fiancée in a car accident and this had "flipped him out a bit."⁵¹ In a recent publication of oral testimonies from teenagers in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a high school student, Clinton Evans, demonstrates the pervasiveness and the credibility of this biographical pattern when he expresses his concerns for the future: "Like I walk around, see bums, and I hear stories that they were once rich, and one thing, like losing their

⁵⁰ Ronald L. Baker, Hoosier Folk Legends (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982) 14.

⁵¹ Elena Bradunas, "An Urban Hermit," Indiana Folklore 10 (1977): 161.

wife, turns them into bums."⁵²

As evidenced in this sampling, explanatory anecdotes often depict the character as victim.⁵³ While perhaps the most common narrative pattern--the character as victim of unrequited love--was not collected within the study community, Amherst's characters are believed to have suffered other injustices. One of the most detailed cycle of anecdotes, and one of the most firmly believed, concerns Watson Weaver. Like Martin Piniak of Chicago, Weaver is commonly thought to have been an intelligent and handsome young man before tragedy struck. In Watson's case, wartime involvement is believed to have left him physically and mentally deficient. Maurice supplies a brief description of Weaver in his later years and offers an explanation for his character status:

I remember Watson. I'll give you the first time I ever saw Watson. Scared the heck out of Chris and I. We were both little guys. And Watson was a big hero, you know, during the First World War. You know, he was decorated by the king during the First World War. Watson never washed. Watson had on, like he used to have it looked like he had coal dust stacked on about two inches thick. Of course he had a runny nose. That's

⁵² Olive Pierce, No Easy Roses: A Look at the Lives of City Teenagers (Boston, Mass: Thomas Todd Co., 1986) 58.

⁵³ Edward D. Ives's exploration of Joe Scott's ballad, "The Norway Bum," demonstrates that the theme is not confined to anecdote alone. See: Edward D. Ives, Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978) 282-306.

what scared us, oh, as kids, you know.... He was a very clever man and everything like that. It was just that some people, just drift off and end up like that. Oh yeah...I guess at one time, like I said, he was a very smart and intelligent man. I don't know, maybe something snapped (T87:1).

Other informants told of Watson's wartime sacrifice and credited his mental handicap to the fact that he had been gassed (T80:1, T81:2). Only when Watson's sister, Erma, casually mentioned that her brother had never served overseas was the commonly known version of Watson's life history identified as an explanatory anecdote (T80:1). Even after Erma's claim was substantiated by military records from the Department of National Defence, and a former elementary school classmate of Watson's described him as a slow learner from his entry into the school system (T81:2), some individuals who had known Watson well had difficulty believing the new version of his life story (T81:2).

Another large body of explanatory anecdotes concerns the LeBlanc family. Theresa LeBlanc is said to have come from a wealthy family who disowned her when she married. One informant described her sister as a millionaire and another linked her with a respected public health nurse;⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Theresa LeBlanc is the daughter of a native of Prince Edward Island who came to Amherst circa 1942 to work as a labourer in Enamel and Heating's aircraft division. It is difficult to speculate on her relationship with her family. There is no mention of them in the write-up of her wedding. Her husband's relatives act as bridesmaid and best man and his mother hosts the reception. As LeBlanc's father was sentenced to five years in Dorchester Penitentiary in 1949

Well they said that she came from a rich family, but now Mrs. Thomas knows a lot about her. Like I thought she was related to ah Mrs. Fraser [the Public Health nurse]. Like I was told that that was her sister. Mrs. Fraser was her sister. And Mrs. Thomas said no. She said like she had a really good upbringing and they disowned her when she married this LeBlanc guy. Her family disowned her and she just went right to (Diane: Pot?) Yeah (T86:4).

In turn Theresa's sons are seen as victims of her inadequacy as mother:

A man told me, Mr. Tait that died, Larry's father, I think it was him maybe that said, one time when we were in there visiting, that he went there when the babies were small. There was like one of them lying in this pile of rags with this old bottle of milk, with curdled milk inside it. So, it was like malnutrition, almost undernourishment... [that caused their present condition] (T87:4).

Rather than the innocent victims of other's injustices, a second anecdotal theme depicts characters as makers of their own fate. Here the character's present status is not credited to misfortune, but to his or her own previous inappropriate unnatural behaviour. Robbie, a mongoloid from birth, is believed by some to have "studied too

for "indecent assault on children", there is a possibility Theresa's family saw the match as less than ideal. However, through the 1960s the ADN continued to publish news of other members of Theresa's family who had left Amherst, suggesting they may have maintained contact with at least some friends or relatives residing in the town. That Theresa's sons were named for her father and her brother also indicates family relations were not completely estranged in the 1950s.

hard" (T86:4).⁵⁵ Theresa LeBlanc and her husband are thought to be first cousins who by inbreeding have produced children of low intelligence (T86:15). Other anecdotes link François LeBlanc's terminal struggle with cancer to the allegation he ate garbage. Finally, a cycle of anecdotes describes an alleged incestuous relationship between Theresa LeBlanc and her sons.

Function

The character's life story as readapted "common knowledge" represents a communal rewriting of history as it should have been. Presented with an individual who does not conform to community held expectations, residents seek explanations in the character's background and performance. Faris writes: "a powerful motivation in human affairs is continually to order and improve upon areas of potential ambiguity. We attempt, therefore, to perfect our relationships and our interaction--to constantly search for or create information which makes this possible, which facilitates this end."⁵⁶ Local character anecdotes are more reflective of the type of moral truth Herbert Halpert has

⁵⁵ This explanation was also reported by an informant who had heard that a woman in Cape Breton had warned her children, "If you study too hard, you'll get brain damage" (FN 2 April 1986).

⁵⁶ James C. Faris, "The Dynamics of Verbal Exchange: A Newfoundland Example," Anthropologica 8, (1966): 235.

identified in folksong,⁵⁷ than factual information. They conform to the Standard Dictionary of Folklore's entry concerning folk anecdotes in general:

Folk or traditional anecdotes appeal to the same taste, applied to fictitious or legendary characters, though, unlike myths and fairy tales, folk anecdotes are often told to be believed or as if they were true.... In Folk and traditional anecdotes the historical and biographical interest is frankly subordinated to the apocryphal. With the loss of historical truth comes a corresponding gain in moral application, as in the great medieval collections of exempla or illustrative stories....⁵⁸

Local Character anecdotes describing Watson Weaver's war history, Robbie's efforts to excel beyond his means or standing, and the LeBlancs' innovative solution to indoor plumbing tell what could have happened, and more importantly, what residents believe should have happened. For most, the stories are easier to believe than the facts. Undoubtedly many Amherstians flatly reject the possibility that Theresa LeBlanc's family was wealthy, or that she and her sons contaminate food in the grocery store. A striking element of fieldwork, however, was the number of informants

⁵⁷ Herbert Halpert, "Truth in Folk-Songs--Some Observations on the Folk-Singer's Attitude," Traditional Ballads and Folk-Songs mainly from West Virginia John Harrington Cox, ed. American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series 15 (1939; Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964) xiii.

⁵⁸ Benjamin A. Botkin, Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, ed. Maria Leach 56.

who at least half believed the stories.⁵⁹ Only one person expressed strong disbelief in a local character anecdote. A government employee who grew up in the same neighborhood as Robbie refused to accept the possibility that Robbie's handicap has any other cause than mongolism (FN 28 April 1987). This man's refusal to accept an anecdote as presented by two friends stands out as an exception. In all other fieldwork situations, individuals showed a willingness to consider the authenticity of an anecdote, even if they had not heard it previously. An excerpt from a conversation between Martha and her husband Maurice illustrates this. Although the idea that Robbie was disabled when he suffered injuries in an accident or experienced a mental breakdown is a new one to Maurice, he does not reject it. Rather, he eventually tries to supply his wife with additional relevant information to aid her short, conversational search for a meaningful explanation of Robbie's condition:

Diane: How did he get that way?

Martha: He was in an accident, wasn't he, Maurice? Do you know?

Maurice: No, I actually don't know. I don't know if Robbie was born that way or what, or what happened with that. I don't know.

Diane: You've never heard anybody say?

Maurice: No, I've never actually heard anything.

⁵⁹ This statement is not to suggest there is no factual basis to any of the anecdotes.

Martha: What I heard was that he was really smart, he was borderline smart and went crazy, you know, he snapped. That's what I heard. Now, I don't know if that's true but that's what I heard. He was so close to genius, he just cracked. But I don't know when and in what place that that happened and I don't even have a clue what his age would be.

Maurice: I guess Robbie would be in his fifties (T87:1).

In another context, Paul jokingly accuses his sister of having told him Robbie's disability was due to mental overexertion. He is surprised when she responds by defending the possibility:

Paul: Yeah, one of my older sisters told me that (Diane: I like this story) that he studied too hard and ended up that way.

Dawn: Well, I had heard that. I did hear it. I don't know who told me that.

Diane: Was it a friend? It wasn't your mother?

Dawn: I can't remember but I heard that he was really brilliant and that he had studied so hard that you know? (Diane: That happened?) Yeah. And you know something, it may be true because he's got quite a bit of memory. So you never know, it may be true. I mean look at John [his brother], John's brilliant. I mean John is smart. So, I mean that may have happened (T86:4).

One of the reasons informants show little hesitation in accepting local character anecdotes as factual is that they conform to recognized patterns. As has already been mentioned, character anecdotes collected across North

America share common themes, portraying characters as innocent victims or, adversely, as deserving masters of their own fate. Debbie describes how an acceptable explanation of the character status facilitates other residents' interactions with the character. Her comments concern Ralph, an individual whose status as character was brought about as a result of an accident. She states, "I think people basically felt sorry for him. See, it's funny, like, you sort of, because everyone knows he was o.k. until he had the car accident, that sort of almost excuses him for being the way he is. They can't blame him, sort of thing" (T87:7).

When the unknown can be made to conform to an already established pattern, residents feel they are confronting and controlling some of the anxiety created by the nonconformist's presence. As Elena Bradunas discovered, narratives mediate between sets of oppositions represented by the character.⁶⁰ Individualism versus conformity, one of the principal oppositions identified by Bradunas, is just one of several which surfaced in the study community. Interpreted in light of traditional belief systems of the region, characters present Amherstonians with a real dilemma. As in other areas historically comprised largely of small communities, the Maritimes has an abundant store of folk beliefs that attest to a fear of strangers. Until

⁶⁰ Bradunas 162.

approximately a generation ago, strangers were generally unknown in many farming and fishing communities. As research in Newfoundland has demonstrated, their arrival was interpreted as threatening in that it endangered the systems of reciprocity and kinship that fostered solidarity among residents and ensured the smooth operation of the village.⁶¹ Economic prosperity, or even survival, in addition to social well being, depended on cooperation among area residents. The community's insurance of its survival depended on community members sharing their physical and emotional resources. Fear of strangers and the necessity of caring for the less fortunate members of the community are concerns reflected in the body of traditional belief that is transmitted and still believed or at least half believed by some Maritimers. Dropping a piece of silverware or a dish cloth, setting an extra plate at the table, or entering and leaving a house by different doors are all traditionally thought to signal the arrival of a stranger. On the other hand, turning someone away at the door means bad luck or ridiculing a handicapped person brings the disability on you or your family.⁶²

⁶¹ For example, see: Melvin Firestone, Brothers and Rivals, Social and Economic Studies 5 (St. John's, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1967).

⁶² See: Helen Creighton, Bluenose Magic (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968) for a comprehensive sampling of Maritime folk beliefs.

In the person of the character, these two sets of traditional beliefs meet. If the character's background is unknown, his status will be a mystery to others in the community. Even if the individual's family history is established, the unfamiliarity of his or her performance, as demonstrated by an apparent rejection of material possessions, for example, aligns the character with the role of stranger. Any uneasiness is complicated by the fact that traditional belief also demands even the less fortunate be respected and looked after. Local character anecdotes alleviate some of this apparent contradiction by reassuring community members that the character shares a similar background with other residents and/or experiences similar motivations. Although the character may not be the most successful group member, he or she is not a stranger. By regarding Theresa LeBlanc as a woman whose status is a result of familial rejection, Amherstonians identify more closely with her. They may think, "Except but for the grace of God there goes I." Anecdotes draw individuals whose economic level, personal appearance or other aspects of their personality or performance makes them unpleasant, closer to the mainstream. Residents replace their fear with a concern for the character's welfare. Certainly there is evidence that some characters recognize the benefits of establishing a sympathetic life story and will contribute to the community's anecdotal store about themselves. Watson

Weaver is one individual who actively cultivated his persona as wounded war veteran. He appointed himself photographer for the North Nova Regiment during World War Two, spoke to school classes on Remembrance day, and would go so far as to relate incidents of his military career to those he encountered. A retired photographer told how Watson, who was a regular customer in his shop, would often describe his wartime experiences (T80:1).

One of the messages explanatory local character anecdotes communicate is that the character is not what he or she may initially appear. The anecdotal tradition encourages individuals to temporarily suspend judgement until they have enough information to fully evaluate the character and his performance. The single most frequently voiced statement concerning Robbie is, "He's not stupid, you know." Elena Bradunas encountered a similar response when she asked about Martin Piniak "Everyone including those who grew up with him said he's not crazy."⁶³ Informants discourage researchers or newcomers from accepting the most obvious explanation. Rather, they insist the character be more fully considered before an assessment is made. By emphasizing that more than one aspect of a character's life story and performance be evaluated, community members strive to make a true assessment of the individual's status. It is a justification of the membership of all group members and

⁶³ Bradunas 162.

an assurance that if they themselves should ever experience a misfortune, others will consider their past circumstances and offer them assistance and respect.

Local character anecdotes also function to alleviate another central fear of many community members--the fear of envy. George Foster has pointed to this fear as a prime motivator in much social interaction between those of unequal status.⁶⁴ Foster explains that group members often experience anxiety that those of lower status might envy their possessions and/or position and ultimately attempt to take these things from them. Anecdotes that help protect community members from fear of envy rely on the belief that the character's low status position or uncomfortable lifestyle is a matter of choice. The individual really has an abundance of hidden resources that outweigh those of the average community member. Often, the resource takes the form of financial wealth. Blanche Cannon, an underpaid domestic for most of her adult life, was thought by some to have a great deal of money (FN 4 March 1986). Lebanese peddlers, Two Monday and Maggie George, were both thought to have been secretly wealthy. When the latter died, her small house was torn apart to unearth the fortune. That no money was discovered did not shake this belief. Rather, people began to say she must have sent her money out of the country

⁶⁴ George Foster, "The Fear of Envy," Current Anthropology 13 (1972): 165-202.

prior to her death (T88:1).

During his lifetime, Avarid Hire worked at low-paid delivery jobs and experienced at least some ridicule and teasing on the part of neighborhood boys (T86:15). The teasing was kept to a minimum, however, by the circulation of a series of anecdotes describing Hire's sexual prowess. As an informant phrased it, Hire was "very popular with the colored ladies on the hill." According to the teenage boys in the informant's peer group, Hire was thought to have a secret sex life, the envy of any boy who teased him. They described him as both physically well endowed and sexually very active.

Such anecdotes work to the benefit of both character and resident. As in Avarid Hire's case they can help to ensure the character receive some respect and be given humane treatment. On the other hand, if at times residents do not live up to their ideal of fair treatment, their belief that Hire is involved with low status Black women, that the LeBlancs eat garbage, or that Blanche Cannon is secretly wealthy but refuses to spend her money, acts as a safety valve that appeases any guilt they feel about unfair treatment. The character gets what he deserves.

Many of the character anecdotes force community members to confront the meaning of their own group membership. In bringing individuals face to face with unpleasant aspects of life, the narratives help sharpen the boundaries of

community membership and articulate what is and is not considered acceptable. They encourage the development of consensus attitudes towards issues such as the treatment of the financially disadvantaged and the disabled; incest and other aspects of sexuality; and drug abuse. The process is not always a comfortable one. Informants expressed hesitation in sharing some of the character anecdotes that they considered distasteful. In the following excerpt, a married couple in their seventies skirt the possibility of telling a particular character anecdote about the LeBlancs. They privately debate the appropriateness of sharing it before the wife finally initiates the narration:

Roger: They used to go down to Atley Chapman's store, you know and they'd get Atley, one would get Atley on the other side. Atley would be watching one fellow and the other would go around and take a bottle of jam and whip the top off and [imitates dipping his finger into the jar and makes a slurping noise as he pretends to lick off the finger.]
Laughs].

Diane: No, that's not true.

Roger: Yes, it is.

Hazel: They say, [Pauses]

Hazel: The place they lived in was something terrible.

Diane: On Albion Street, yeah.

Roger: It was something awful.

Hazel: They're in a new place now.

Roger: Yeah, they got one of those new houses.

Hazel: Yeah, but they used to cut up the floor, you know. And all such things as that. They should be looked after.

Roger: They had a board in the floor for a toilet.

Diane: I heard that.

Roger: Yeah.

Hazel: Yeah.

Roger: They had it sort of in a closet and they had a board across it so they could sit there and watch television [Laughs] (T86:7).

In the above exchange, Hazel and her husband, Roger, confront the contemporary western preoccupation with sanitation, hygiene, contamination of food, and the influence of technology on our lives. As in urban legends that center on these very themes, the collective confrontation of uncomfortable elements in local character anecdotes acts as catharsis for group members. At the same time as they offer individuals release, the anecdotes act as a form of social control, offering illustrations of the possible consequences of ignoring group norms. Parents may rely on the genre as a type of exemplum to emphasize any number of lessons ranging from the importance of good personal hygiene, to the necessity of practicing caution and good judgement when on the highway.⁶⁵ Both parents and

⁶⁵ An example of this is a conversation held between Ann and her teenage son, Brad. Ann warned Brad against the dangers of riding on a motorcycle by using Rufus as an illustration (FN 15 November 1986).

children may use the story of Robbie striving beyond his ability when it is to their best interest.

Ultimately local character anecdotes contribute to the group's continual reassessment of each of its members. They help make up the mental file each Amherstonian maintains on other residents. John Szwed explains:

From out of the reported flow of events--who went where with whom, how much did he get for it? What did he sell, etc.--comes a series of case histories on each person and family in the parish, and every person in the parish carried some form of history of each other person. Each of these is a unique version. Yet, at the same time there evolves a summary statement of community opinion; the gossip process provides a form of tally sheet of community values on given subjects.⁶⁶

Each character becomes associated with one or more tableaux created in the anecdotes. For instance, the mention of Seaman Noiles's name prompts strikingly similar responses from informants. Lloyd states:

Well, oh he was an old character, he was a rough old character. And they claim that in the spring of the year he tapped the bedpost to get maple syrup because he had maple sugar and maple syrup earlier than anyone else did (T86:3).

George's comments concerning Noiles correspond closely to Lloyd's:

Now Seaman Noiles, he sold maple sugar in the spring, he was supposed to tap

⁶⁶ John Szwed, "Gossip, Drinking and Social Control: Consensus and Communication in a Newfoundland Parish," Ethnology 5 (1966): 435.

the trees and get maple sugar and it was never maple sugar. It was only brown sugar and vanilla, that's all. Maple extract. But he sold it and people said he never had a maple tree in the world and he may have a maple bedpost and tapped that [Laughs] (T87:2).

Close identification of characters with one or more visual images is a reductionary measure relied on by other members to concisely label an individual who initially seemed unclassifiable. The image of Noiles tapping the bedpost vividly captures the essence of his personality as interpreted by other community members.

For the narrator(s) and the audience, much of the concern with the character's assessment is self-interested. As previously mentioned, most of the anecdotes are told in the first person or focus on an individual who is well known to the teller. While this indicates there is very little distance separating the performer from his tale, it also suggests an important narrative goal for many local character anecdotes is the exploration of the narrator's community status. Many of the anecdotes compare and contrast narrator and character. Wesley plays with his solid sense of membership when he makes himself the butt of a character story:

I remember I bought myself a brand new blue trench coat in at Mansours and I was so proud of myself, having this navy blue coat. And I went up, I was walking to work a couple of days later and up the street comes Reg with one exactly like it so I went in and said to Liz, 'I spent one hundred or whatever dollars on

this brand new coat and I just saw Reg going up the street in one exactly like it' (T87:6).

In another interview a woman in her seventies jokingly compares herself to Blanche Cannon when she pulls an unattractive hat down over her head (T87:2). Characters are used as reference points for the rest of the community and members judge their own status in relation to them. When the positions of character and narrator move closer together, it is time for concern. When they just give the illusion of being similar, it is a source of humour.

In the right conversational context, the local character anecdote may be fully developed, well structured, and artfully performed by a single narrator. At other times, it is fragmentary and pieced together by a number of participants. Yet, whatever its form, the local character anecdote plays an essential role in the community's assessment of the nonconforming individual. Informants consistently identified a person from the past as a character much more quickly than they named a contemporary. While the reluctance to call a fellow community member a character may be due in part to a hesitation to use a label that might be interpreted as derogatory, it also indicates that the process of character designation is an ongoing and communal one. Informally transmitted local character

anecdotes form an important component in a community's consensus articulation both of the parameters of its membership and the status of its characters in relation to other members. Once the character's status is at least initially assessed and his or her presence has been accommodated, the nonconformist is free to play an active role in community interaction. The character's multifaceted contribution to community dynamics will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER VII

CHARACTERS AND THE COMMUNITY

In her comprehensive evaluation of the trickster and his tales, Barbara Babcock-Abrahams inextricably links the trickster with the concept of marginality, which she defines as a situation where "commonly held boundaries are violated, be they those of social structure, of law and custom, of kinship, family structure and sexuality, of the human person, or of nature."¹ She argues that marginality is neither a state of "betwixt and between" nor a phase through which one necessarily passes, but an essential component to the social structure. Babcock-Abrahams concludes, "again and again one is confronted with the paradox that that which is socially peripheral or marginal is symbolically central and predominant."²

Earlier chapters demonstrate that like tricksters, characters are marginal beings living on the social periphery of their community. Yet, as Orrin Klapp points out in his consideration of the fool as a social type, "the

¹ Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, "A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," Journal of the Folklore Institute 11 (1974): 150.

² Babcock-Abrahams 155

fact that the role is--institutionalized in comedy and perpetuated in folklore suggests that the fool has important social functions."³ Anecdotes discussed in the last chapter, as well as other folklore forms which arise about the local character, not only facilitate his or her accommodation within the overall community, but are indicative of the character's social relevance. In a multifaceted role that is sometimes akin to trickster, fool, or sage, the character clarifies the boundaries of group membership and helps to articulate each member's position within the group. Through a process of confrontation and catharsis, the character aids individuals, and the community as whole, in developing a clearer awareness of the meaning of membership.

Folklorists have long suspected that characters play a vital part in the creation and transmission of a community's folklore. For example, John Szwed has clearly stated that he believes his informant, Paul E. Hall, is typical of song-makers in general, in that he is "seen as an eccentric and--held somewhat apart from the community around him. He is 'a character...a case...a strange one.'"⁴ If Szwed is correct in his assessment, not only are characters generative of

³ Orrin Klapp, "The Fool as a Social Type," The Pleasures of Sociology, ed. Lewis A. Coser (New York: New American Library, 1980) 255.

⁴ John F. Szwed, "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and his Community of Song," Folksongs and Their Makers, Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives and John F. Szwed (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, n.d.) 157.

folklore, such as local character anecdotes, they also play a direct role in the folkloric process. All of the characters in Amherst can be considered active tradition bearers in that they are, as Paul Smith describes, "individuals who have knowledge concerning a tradition and transmit it, consciously or otherwise, to prospective adopters through performance, usage or intentional communication."⁵ Each is a transmitter of one or more of the five types of folklore delineated by Michael Taft in his introductory text to Saskatchewan folklore: verbal, musical, material, ritual, and belief.⁶ While the transmission of belief is almost impossible to isolate for, as Taft points out, it "cuts across the other four areas to reveal the beliefs we hold," the character's contributions as a tradition bearer of verbal, musical and material folklore forms, as well as a purveyor of ritual, are easily illustrated.

Many characters are experts in verbal expressiveness and have earned a reputation as being entertaining storytellers or "good talkers." While a context like the corner store might be associated with talk, specific individuals may also be identified with the expression of

⁵ Paul Smith, "Tradition: A perspective, Part IV," Lore and Language 5:1(1986): 8.

⁶ Michael Taft, Discovering Saskatchewan Folklore (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, n.d.) 13.

verbal art.⁷ Whether in the sphere of yarns, news, or argument, they fill what might be termed "an expressive role." According to informants, the presence of Sunny Gould usually signalled an occasion for talk, or heightened the expectations of a verbal exchange already in progress. Gould was recognized as one of the community's best "liars" and throughout his adult years he transmitted a large corpus of tall tales which presumably he acquired while working in the lumberwoods.⁸ For many older residents who remember a time when tall tales were a prevalent expressive form, his name remains paramount among the tellers. Ronald remarks, "He was the biggest liar that ever walked" (T86:21). Harold confirms, "He was supposed to be the biggest liar in the country. He always told us stories you'd hardly believe" (T86:19). Pearl Maltby gives an indication both of the nature of Gould's tales and the manner in which they were told:

We have a crossing here called Sonny Gould's crossing. A man called Sonny Gould lived near here. He and another man tried to outwit each other telling yarns (lies) for fun and some of them were quite humorous, such as Sonny

⁷ Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," American Anthropologist 77 (1975): 299, states, "As with events, certain roles will incorporate performance as a definitive attribute."

⁸ George repeats a tall tale told by Gould that describes his first effort to prepare tapioca while working as a cook in a lumber camp (T86:3). As the tall tale tradition is linked with the lumbercamps, this narrative is taken as evidence that Gould might have developed his repertoire while working in the woods.

saying how strong he was--that he had stood in his back yard and thrown a ball over the moon. The other chap, Hutchinson by name, said, 'Oh I know, I was on the other side and caught it.'

These two told the yarn about going to a hunting camp. After being there awhile, Sonny decided to go hunting with Hutchinson to stay in the camp. By and by, so they said, Sonny came back with not a dead bear, but a live one. Opening the camp door he shoved him in and said, 'You take care of that one, I'll be back with the other one.'⁹

If Maltby's memories and the tales contributed by informants are representative of Gould's entire repertoire, his corpus reflects the type of tall tales collected throughout North America. The narratives attest to his extraordinary strength and quick wit¹⁰ and describe some of the extreme conditions he overcame in the performance of certain tasks.¹¹ Gould's tall tales earned him the label "Sunny Gould, the Nappan Fool" and residents, some of whom have

⁹ Pearl Brown Maltby, The Gift of Love (Amherst, Nova Scotia: Aladdin Printing, c. 1985) 23.

¹⁰ Harold relates a tale told by Gould where he outwits the police by having his elderly mother rock him in a cradle. Gould could then truthfully make the claim to the police that he has not had a drink since his mother rocked him in the cradle (T86:19).

¹¹ One of Gould's tall tales, retold by Lloyd, describes the difficulty he encountered when trying to drown his cat: "Wanted to get rid of his cat. Took it down to the crick. Fired it in the crick down there. He said when he got home the cat was sitting on the veranda. He said I took it back down and fired it in the crick again and when I got back down home, the cat was there. So he said took it and cut its head off, put it in a bag and threw it in the crick. And I got back home and the cat was sitting on the veranda with its head in its mouth (T86:3).

never heard of Gould nor any of his stories, continue to refer to a railway crossing, near the house where he lived, as "Sunny Gould's Crossing."

Other characters specialize in less stylized forms of narrative such as legends, personal narratives and anecdotes. Isaac Howe, one of the earliest known characters in the study community, told "romantic stories" of his seafaring experiences.¹² As one of the "Court House Philosophers,"¹³ Chan Hewson had a reputation as a "yarner" (T86:9). In 1917 the ADN reports:

The sun proved too hot for the 'Court House Philosophers' this morning therefore they transferred the scene of debate to the shade side of the street, secretary Chandler Hewson called the roll--all reported present. Owing to the fact that we had an important business meeting at the office we missed the topic of discussion.¹⁴

Hewson's expertise was in local history and occasionally he took on tasks such as the identification of individuals in older group photos. For example, in 1934, he identified the

¹² ADN 20 February 1896: 4.

¹³ In Hewson's obituary, the Court House Philosophers are described: "He was also linked with a group of citizens that were characterized at one time as the 'Court House Philosophers' --and who later moved their gathering place from the Court House steps to the shoe repair shop conducted on Church Street by the late C.O. MacDonald. In subsequent years the discussions were carried on in the grocery store of the late A. W. Moffatt or the tailor shop of the late M. D. Walsh." (ADN 27 July, 1948:5).

¹⁴ ADN 22 June 1917: 6.

members of a 1897 hockey team photo.¹⁵ On his death Chan Hewson is eulogized:

Possessing a fine memory, a great sense of humour and a dry wit Mr. Hewson had a fund of reminiscences dealing with the past history of this community. It was always a pleasure to meet Mr. Hewson on the street and bring the conversation back to the early days of the town's incorporation and even before that period. Mr. Hewson could recall the many characters of the past that contributed to the life in the town at such early periods.¹⁶

Through a sharing of historical anecdotes and legends, characters like Chan Hewson provide residents with a sense of their past. Hewson, like Mike Mansour who could recite most family genealogies back at least a generation or two and Watson Weaver who related his albeit fabricated war-time recollections, doubled as a storyteller and one of the area's unofficial historians.

Bug-Eye Blanche and Murray Nicholson are recognized more for their humorous anecdotes than their historical recollections. In his obituary, Blanche is remembered in this way:

He was renowned for his sense of humour and his dry witticisms, and many of the humorous references that he made regarding the town and its citizens have been told and retold in the community.¹⁷

¹⁵ ADN 3 November 1934: 4.

¹⁶ ADN 27 July 1948: 1+.

¹⁷ ADN 8 January 1940: 4.

Many of Nicholson's personal narratives and humorous remarks are also repeated, including one based on his encounter with a very proper middle-class business woman. An informant remembers:

Then one other cute little thing was he, he was on Victoria Street and it was election time, coming close and he met, from what I'm told, SR who runs R's place there. And the doctor had a little black satchel with him, possibly, I don't know what he would do with it, might have been going to see someone. Had a little black satchel and he said, 'Look Sarah,' he said, 'those Conservatives,' he said, 'they're giving away pints of rum,' he said, 'but we haven't got enough money.' He said, 'I'm giving away condoms. I've got a whole bag full of them' (T87:2).

Other characters specialize in the transmission of news. For those who worked as peddlers, the dispersal of news was an important aspect of their visits. The peddler's arrival was an occasion for talk, and as a result was looked forward to as an "event." James Spears describes the peddler's visit: "It was fun time for all, for in those days before radio, television, and movie theaters, the peddler was both a source of entertainment and a link with the outside world."¹⁸ Spears's comments are echoed by Evalyn U Gautreau when she writes of the visits of peddler, Salem Joseph, in her popular history of the Cumberland County

¹⁸ James E. Spears, "Where Have All the Peddlers Gone?," Kentucky Folklore Review 21-22(1975-76): 79-80.

lumbering community of Shulee: "Salem Joseph not only gave good value for money, but he knew how to make the small things in life entertaining, regaling the women with humorous incidents and passing on news of relatives and friends in other localities."¹⁹ More recently John Davidson acted as messenger between Amherst and Montreal, purchasing articles in the city for residents or delivering parcels to family and friends in Quebec. After retirement he maintained a news network within the town that allowed him to continue in his role as news gatherer.

Davidson was also renowned in what Richard Bauman describes as the third area of verbal art, argument. When Davidson entered a public speech context, armed with facts and opinions gathered from previous public space interactions or from the proceedings at the court room, he challenged others present to a debate. Where there was Johnny, there was frequently an argument. He became so closely connected in people's minds with debate, stories arose and are still told that depict his readiness to argue:

Funniest story about Johnny was [that Johnny was] in the store [and] a big truck was going by, a lumber truck. And Johnny always had something to say about everything so he said, 'There's no way that truck should be going by main street....' And this woman that was in the store owned the truck, like Hoeg's

¹⁹ Evalyn Gautreau, Shulee the Way it Was. (Amherst, NS: Amherst Township Historical Society, 1986) 104.

lumber. So she said, 'Why not?' You know, 'so it can go down Station Street and all those bumps and everything else and ruin the shocks?' and this and that. So Johnny sat down and didn't say very much. And he was sitting like, near the front door in behind a rack. And Frank [an employee] came by and Frank said, 'Johnny sure put his foot in his mouth that time.' Right in front of Johnny. Johnny heard it. [Laughs] (T87:4).

Another anecdote told about Davidson also illustrates the danger of arguing with someone you do not know. Davidson, having sat beside a stranger on the town bench, engages him in argument and challenges his opinions on a range of subjects. Finally, he begins to question the man's credentials. Harold reports, "He [Davidson] said to this fellow, he said, 'What do you do anyway?' He said, 'I'm the president of Mount A.' He [Johnny] said, 'I shut right up,' he said, 'I didn't argue anymore' (T86:19).

Narratives which have been condensed to a phrase, or rhymes or expressions customarily used by characters, may become a component of community folksay. Seaman Noiles's, "Wing, Wing, nobody like old Seaman Noiles" (T86:9) and Maggie Georges's vendor's cry, "Ice cream, ice cream, me make it me sell it. Good for the belly" are remembered and sometimes repeated within neighborhoods, families, or friendship-groups (T86:9; T87:4). Paul has incorporated into his own repertoire two rhymes he heard Kenneth Noiles recite many times. He comments, "He'd say them over and over again, anywhere, anytime, though not in polite company,

not that I was ever in polite company with him":

The frog and mouse went to bed,
None of your business what they did.

The tears he shed till his arse turned
red
And he fell right in the water.

Paul reports singing the rhymes when "things are quiet and you need something to break the stillness." He continues, "But having said that, you would only do it among people that you knew ...it's a bit of nonsense" (FN 9 February 1988).

Mary Mansour's less-than-full command of English which gave rise to her nickname, "Two Monday," has helped to etch a place for her in the mind of the contemporary community, even though many residents do not remember her. Some of Mike Mansour's mispronunciations have also lived on after his death. "Springhill" is still pronounced "Spighill" by family members (T87:7) while former poker players imitate Mike's, "Two dollar I gall [call]" (T86:15). Wayne's lisp (T86:4) is a source for much contemporary imitation and is utilized as an evocative tool within contexts where the character is familiar.

John Szwed's work with Paul E. Hall attests to the character's creative role within folk music traditions but in Amherst characters have made their most significant contribution on popular and elite levels. For example, Mary

Duff "the colored spellbinder,"²⁰ and Elmer Farnell sang religious music; Phomes Yorke and Dandy Gould may have pumped church organs; and Russell Briggs played the piano for church sponsored activities. Briggs also composed at least one cantata titled, "The New Born King."²¹ In addition, Briggs is remembered for his long standing contribution to service clubs such as the Kinsmen and Rotary Club, while Eva Gibson played for community events and activities. Her tasks included supplying background music for the early silent movies that played in the theatre. Only Bill Moses and Joe Gouthreau are mentioned specifically in relation to forms of folk music. Gouthreau was a fiddler and Moses was a singer and performer.

Joe Gouthreau not only played the fiddle but also crafted the instrument²² and in 1922 he turned his talents to the design of a "Hawaiian guitar."²³ As craftsman, he followed in the footsteps of Moses Barrett, one of the town's first and most widely celebrated characters. Several of Barrett's clocks, which he peddled throughout northern Nova Scotia, now form part of the collection of the provincial museum. Others who left their material mark on

²⁰ ADN 27 January 1902: 4.

²¹ ADN 18 December 1965: 1.

²² ADN 9 June 1930: 1 records that Joe Gouthreau collects and makes violins.

²³ ADN 7 June 1922: 1.

the town include Rachel Gee who knitted unique toys for the Children's Aid Society and annually distributed photos of herself to her Sunday School class members and others. In addition to the manufactured items he peddled, Watson Weaver sold photos of local events and people. These photos, which he mounted or fashioned into calendars and greeting cards, remain on walls or in scrapbooks of many county residents. Today Ralph peddles small pen and ink sketches.

No matter in what other area(s) of folklore the character may act as a tradition bearer, by the very fact of being a character, he or she introduces a ritualistic element to community life. If one accepts that characters are marked individuals who are conscious of their role on some level and use it as a coping strategy, their performance conforms to Michael Taft's definition of ritual:

Ritual, too, as a form of common creativity, is inescapable in our lives. At various times, we escape from the workaday patterns of everyday life--working, eating, relaxing, making love, and so on--and play a part in some communal celebration or some extraordinary event. Of course, as Shakespeare wrote, 'all the world's a stage,' and thus we are always playing one role or another, but when we become conscious of the role, when we know beforehand how we should respond to the playacting of others (that is, when we have a 'script'), we perform a ritual."²⁴

While Taft is referring specifically to forms of folk drama

²⁴ Taft, Discovering 15.

or rituals surrounding rites of passage, character performances also incorporate the essential elements of his definition--escape from routine, sharing in an extraordinary event, and the conscious playing out of a role.

Characters offer residents an opportunity to escape from, as Taft describes, "the workaday patterns of everyday life." Informants' descriptions indicate that their interactions with characters are dependent on an implicit, but mutual, agreement of role responsibilities that separates these encounters from other forms of usual discourse. For example, if the character does not introduce the role adoption, he or she is expected to cooperate at the informant's initiation. The use of phrases such as "getting a character going" (T86:20; T87:4; T87:5) or "getting the character wound up" (T87:4) to describe this initiation suggests the adoption of a dramatic stance that stands out from ordinary discourse. Steven describes some of the strategies he employs to activate one of the characters who visits his store:

Steven: Gary [comes in] every morning. Gary, like he gets wound up about anything. Usually it could be the French and English, or it could be something political, ---Mulronee and all the women working....

Diane: Do you try to get him going?

Steven: Oh yeah, tease him. We'll say, 'Well, what's the topic today, Gary?' Because he'll have one topic.... Sometimes you can say stuff to him to get him going. Usually he's just fired up about politics.

Diane: Who would get him going?

Steven: Everybody sort of. I'm kind of the main agitator but...they all do or...they try to, or they like to go along with him, laughing or whatever, something (T87:4).

Just as Steven acts as "the main agitator" in his store, the responsibility in any context for "getting the character going" and then assuming the respondent role in an ensuing interaction, often falls to a limited number of willing individuals. These agitators or initiators develop an expertise in what excites each individual character and most quickly prompts him or her to adopt a high performance stance. To initiate such an interaction with the least amount of effort, is a goal shared by the agitators. Brad describes a guaranteed method to get Wayne going:

He [Wayne] knows everybody and, every half hour he goes up to them and gets more fries or something..., knows the whole stadium. And the sure way to get him going is to say, 'Wayne, Jimmy's doing the 'box tonight.' '...No, no, he'll start yelling at them (T86:20).

Once a character "is going," the interaction usually follows a mutually agreed-upon course that is governed by rules and boundaries. While the participants do not have a predetermined script, they are familiar with the stance each has taken and what is demanded of the role they are playing. Often the initiator maintains the dramatic interaction by assuming the role of the apparently innocent bystander. Scott is an expert on how to get his friend and co-worker,

Jean, going. Jean, who is described by Scott as "jumpy" or "goosey," may suffer from a nervous disorder similar to what the Yakut term "emirak."²⁵ As the following example indicates, Scott's narrative repertoire contains anecdotes that provide examples of Jean's inappropriate behaviour which he has prompted:

The men went through the mall and...when he [Jean] got in the mall, the first thing he walked into was the women's section. And I'm watching him, see, because I knew what he was doing. He was buying his wife something...he's looking all through them, the bras and everything. There's a woman standing on the other side of the counter and I seen that. And I know how goosey he is so I walk by him and I said when I walked by him, I touched him and I said, 'Do you fuck?' Jean went, 'Do you fuck?' The woman looked at him. [Laughs]. And I kept on going and by this time I was on the other end of the store. Him and her's in a big argument [Laughs]. That was the end of that but I mean the woman was, she was kind of cheesed off. She looked at him. Jean didn't know what to do. He turned around and walked away (T87:5).

In keeping with Taft's definition of ritual, once Scott has set up the character performance, the interaction follows a predetermined course. Scott knows what to expect of Jean, even if the man's behaviour might seem irrational or unpredictable to others:

²⁵ Lucile Hoerr Charles, "The Clown's Function," Journal of American Folklore 58 (1945): 27 comments, "The Yakut derive amusement from the antics of persons suffering from emirak, a nervous disease of the North, which is manifested in an inclination to imitate loud or sudden noises or action."

We were walking through the Mayflower Mall, Jean and I together, you know and Jean strayed, he went into the women's, 'The Ladders' they call it, the women's shop. I looked at Bruce I said, 'He's going in there shopping.' So we went for a coffee. I said to Bruce, I said, 'You sit here and I'll sit there.' And I knew what was going to happen. Jean won't sit beside me because I'm always goosing him, eh? So he'd sit beside Bruce. Twenty minutes later Jean walks back, throws the bag on the table. He sits down, orders a coffee. 'Well,' I said, 'Let's see what you bought.' 'Oh,' he said, 'you know what I bought.' 'Yeah,' I said, 'well Bruce don't.' I said, 'Show Bruce.' He hauls out a pair of panties, you know. 'Oh,' he said, 'I got a pair of panties for the wife.' So all you have to do is sit there and the minute he took the panties out and he had it in front of him, all I did was [Sniffs]. Sniff [Sniffs] and he [imitates Jean sniffing the panties. Laughs]. So Bruce, he was facing the waitress, I made sure he was sitting over there and the waitress was over there and the waitress was looking at him. And Lord Jesus he tried to go through the wall. He got all red in the face _____. Holy Jesus Christ he was wild. The next day on the job, he said, 'You dirty bastard,' he said. Everybody looked at him, you see (T87:5).

For Scott and Jean the interaction follows a pattern established by previous interactions. While at first glance, it might appear that Jean has little or no control over the exchange, this is not the case. He may or may not have physical control over his actions at the time Scott provides a stimulus, but that he cooperates generally with the performances is evidenced by the men's friendship that spans over twenty years and that they usually choose to room

together if the construction job on which they are employed demands that they stay away from home. The fact that both are francophones who moved to the Amherst area at the approximately the same time, may suggest the two form what Goffman describes as "a performance team"²⁶ that has helped them cope in an unfamiliar culture. Both consider the relationship a "special"²⁷ one and Jean resists any substitute for Scott as the instigator of his performances. Scott's wife, Dawn, describes how Jean once became angry when he spilt a cup of coffee after being purposely startled by one of her sons. Scott's comfortableness as member of the performance team is reflected in the emphasis he places in the second anecdote on the embarrassment experienced by Bruce, rather than Jean.

As the focus on audience suggests, the presence of a third party represents an important component of a successful character performance. Dawn describes a visit she made to the shopping mall one Friday night:

We were standing there in the mall right beside that thing you take your blood

²⁶ Erving Goffman, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959): 79 defines "performance team" thus: "I will use the term 'performance team' or, in short, 'team' to refer to any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine."

²⁷ Orrin Klapp, Collective Search for Identity (New York: Holt, 1969): 30 distinguishes between a special relationship which only two people share and a class relationship that involves more than two participants. In the first, the contribution of each is considered unique, while an individual in the second might be easily replaced.

pressure at. Jean's standing there talking and Scott comes up and he says, 'I'm feeling seven up.' And Jean goes, 'I'm feeling seven up.' [Grabs his genitals]. [Laughs]. Right in the middle of the lousy mall. Grabbed right on to it and just 'I'm feeling seven up.' I think I left [Laughs] (T87:5).

- As Scott's wife, Dawn was regarded as a suitable public. They predicted no risk of damage to a social relationship and the fact that she tells the anecdote occasionally and always laughs while she does (T87:5; T86:4) indicates they accurately assessed her appropriateness as an audience. She was suitably embarrassed but not offended.

In addition to an audience, certain contextual factors must be present in order to ensure a successful character performance. The character performances of Scott and Jean have limits in that they have a beginning and end and are set off from other aspects of their relationship. Scott and Jean team up in their performances but they also are loyal co-workers who have supervised construction jobs in most Canadian provinces. On the work site their mutual respect for each other's judgement and craftsmanship, and Scott's concern for Jean's safety, precludes any character performances. Scott comments, "We wouldn't tease him when he was up on the iron" (T87:5).

In most contexts outside of work, however, Scott has now come to regard Jean as synonymous with the play

element.²⁸ Some characters are identified so closely with play, they fulfill what might be described as an expressive play role. Just as certain community members are identified with particular folklore genres such as narrative or music, characters may be associated with the opportunity for play. Their presence may be enough to prompt a playful exchange among participants or to initiate teasing. Occasionally even young children recognize this link as Ronald remembers:

[Charlie Sum] never chased me but they used to have a saying. They'd say, 'Chinky Chinky Chinaman, Bally full of rats'. And then they [the children] would run and he'd chase them (T86:21).

In this regard, much of Finestone's work on the social type found within American urban Black culture known as "the cat," is applicable to the character. Finestone identifies the generic characteristics of the cat as those of play²⁹ and describes how the cat launches an indirect attack against central conventional values by relying on manipulative techniques rather than violence. Like the character, the cat resorts to these techniques as a means of escape from daily routine and structure.

²⁸ Here play element is used as defined by Jbhan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950): 8-9. Huizinga describes play as a voluntary activity, set apart from ordinary life, that is characterized by secluedness or limitedness.

²⁹ Harold Finestone, "Cats, Kicks, and Color," in The Other Side, Howard S. Becker, (New York: The Free Press, 1964) 288.

The fact that the character performance is at once nonconformist and predictable not only heightens the play element, but allows the character to become a reference point for others who share group membership. The very presence of the character represents a traditional element for community members that symbolizes their attachment to place and intensifies their awareness of a shared past and group membership.

An important and often mentioned characteristic of the character performance is its consistency within a particular context. As Bill's definition of a character quoted in chapter three indicates, "characters are individuals who are seen in pretty much the same way all the time" (T87:2). As indicated in the last chapter, informants frequently offer similar responses when asked about a particular character. When Annie Hickman is mentioned, for example, most informants offer similar replies. Like Lloyd, they describe how Hickman would drive around town in her open wagon or pung with a Black chauffeur:

Bessie and Annie Hickman. And they had a chauffeur. They had no car but they had a chauffeur, a horse and a team of horses. In the wintertime they had one of these pung type sleds and they'd sit on that and he'd drive them. He was a colored chauffeur (T86:3).

Marion has a similar recollection:

Then we had another funny person in town. A Mrs. Blenkhorn. She had a

daughter, Annie Hickman, or a niece,³⁰ I don't know. And they used to go up with a double seated wagon up Victoria Street and if she'd see anybody [she'd say], 'Lovely day, lovely day, lovely day.' She used to stop Jean and me and she'd give Jean a penny (T86:10).

Annie Hickman is so strongly linked with an image of her riding through town, that the tableau has become an identifying one for her, even in the minds of some who never had the experience personally:

Now Annie Hickman was distantly related to Dr. Steele.... She had a horse and carriage.... She didn't have her horse and buggy when I was here but up until shortly before I appeared on the scene, she still did that [go out for drives] (T86:12).

For others, Hickman's customary greeting is primary:

Annie, Annie Hickman. Funny old lady. No matter when you saw that woman on the street, she'd speak and say, 'Lovely morning.' And she'd say that every time, no matter who she passed. 'Lovely morning.' (T87:2).

Finally, when Annie Hickman's name was mentioned to one informant, he responded in a falsetto voice with an unintroduced one line imitation, "It's a nice day." (T86:7).

Characters like Annie Hickman act as tradition bearers not only in the sense that they may transmit particular genre forms or exert a ritualistic presence, but because they exhibit a high degree of continuity in both spatial and

³⁰ The Mrs. Blenkhorn mentioned by Marion was Annie Hickman's maternal aunt and the woman with whom she made her home during her adult years.

temporal dimensions. In his exploration of the meaning of tradition, Paul Smith states "in reality, as opposed to the mind of the researcher, traditions are transmitted not only by oral or oral/literary means but rather by the individuals involved utilising their audio, visual, tactile and olfactory sensory mechanisms."³¹ Not only by their performance, but through their very presence, characters create a continuity for others that contributes to a sense of group belonging.

The character's ability to provide a feeling of rootedness and evoke a sense of collective membership may be so powerful, it does not always end with his or her death. For the remaining members of his family, Mike continues to symbolize tradition, as well as family and cultural identity, over ten years after he died. During the sometimes turbulent sixties and seventies when the grand nieces and nephews with whom he lived were growing up, Mike represented a constant presence. Much about him was unchanging; from his appearance--he always wore a salt and pepper cap--to his easy going, engaging nature, and overflowing font of stories. Today when the family gathers, recollections of Mike form an important component in their effort to recapture the sense of closed membership they once enjoyed as a family unit. These, together with renditions of his stories and the sharing of his favorite expressions--

³¹ Paul Smith 8.

or what one grand niece refers to as "Uncle Mike-isms"--are at once evocative of a time when the family was closer, and represent a "safe" topic of exchange among individuals whose life styles and world views now differ significantly.

Several of Mike's stories that are particularly meaningful for the grand nieces and nephews have been assigned titles, such as one that has become known as "The Story of Albert's Watch":

Diane: Would you consider him [Mike] to be a storyteller?

Debbie: Oh yeah. Anyone who tells the same story twenty times is a story teller. [imitates] 'Al-bert, what time of day?' 'Oh, two o'clock.' 'Oh Al-bert your watch is slow like me.'

Diane: What's the story?

Debbie: [Laughs]. That's 'The Story of Albert's Watch.' Some guy named Albert coming into the store. Steven knows it better than I do. Uncle Mike asks him what time of day and he says 'Two o'clock.' And he says, 'Oh Albert, your watch is slow like me.'

Diane: And that's one that he would tell?

Debbie: Over and over. That's the one he told in church. The time we took him to church on Christmas Eve. Um, and we were all sitting in the cubbyhole there, the whole clan and Bob Coates [Member of Parliament] was there too. And Uncle Mike was sitting between Steven and Ian and they just got him going. Something crazy. Told 'The Story of Albert's Watch' in church (T87:7).

Like the inappropriate telling of "The Story of Albert's Watch" during a Christmas Eve church service, the contexts

in which Mike's stories were shared have become an important part of their meaning. Debbie's anecdote communicates the feeling of belonging to one family as she describes the presence of "the whole clan." In other tellings of the incident she emphasizes the ambiguous feelings of embarrassment and delight that all the family members shared as Mike interrupted the service with his story. The incident and anecdotes based on it now represent a type of public statement of who the family is, and perhaps how it differs from other congregation members. Debbie comments, "That's the number one memory [Laughs]. Everybody laughing and everybody pretending they weren't. They were just sitting there shaking.... Norbert [Mike's son] tells that story a lot."

Other memories of Mike or narratives from his repertoire are personal favorites of individual family members because they evoke not only Mike's personality but are symbolic of how he or she wishes to regard/remember a father, mother, sibling, or child. For example, a favorite anecdote of Debbie's father reflects the nature of the relationship his daughter shared with Mike. He recalls:

When Ian was in the old country and Steven went to St FX and Debbie was the only one home--they all used to play cards with him to amuse him, you know--Debbie said, 'Uncle Mike, want to play?' 'Well, all right Debbie, I'll play with you, nobody else, so I may as well play with you' [Laughs]. Yeah, he said, 'nobody else around here I may as well play with you.' She didn't want to

play cards, she was doing it as a favour
[Laughs]. He thought he was doing her a
favour [Laughs] (T86:19).

As the youngest member of the family, Debbie was considered a child by Mike until his death. In his anecdote, Harold recaptures something of their relationship that was characterized by mutual affection and a high level of psychological distance.

Of all the family, Mike's stories are most obviously important to his grand-nephew Steven. He seems to initiate their telling more often than the others, and will correct any mistakes he detects when one of the family relates a favorite anecdote of Mike's. According to his sister, he still relies on many of Mike's expressions: "He'd [Mike] say 'Spighill' for 'Springhill' so Steven always says, 'Oh I went to Spighill.' Mike and the narrative body that surrounds him are so important to Steven's sense of tradition and continuity he has passed on most of the stories to his girlfriend. Whether intended to ease her entry into the family and facilitate her sense of belonging, or because he considers information and stories about Mike to be an integral aspect of his identity that he feels the need to share with her, Steven's transmission of these narratives and expressions is an important one. Like folklore itself, Mike Mansour, during his lifetime, and now through his legacy, helps those around him balance

traditional stability against dynamic change.³²

The character's overt performances as a tradition bearer, either through the transmission of folklore genres or through symbolic representation of community or cultural stability, constitute what Paul Smith defines as the superstructure of tradition. The character performance offers "the behavioral component necessary to reify the tradition." On the other hand, the message of the performance, and its significance to the group, comprises traditional infrastructure, communicating underlying ideology, beliefs and functions.³³ For group members, the character symbolizes some of "the rules by means of which a given context is made sensible, by means of which further contexts are made possible."³⁴

Like tricksters, characters generally belong to what Barbara Babcock-Abrahams describes as "the comic modality or marginality where violation is generally the precondition for laughter and communitas, and there tends to be an incorporation of the outsider, a levelling of hierarchy, a reversal of statuses."³⁵ Narratives that describe Murray

³² See: Jan Harold Brunvand's definition of folklore in "The Study of Contemporary Folklore: Jokes," Fabula 13 (1972): 5.

³³ Brunvand, "Study of Contemporary Folklore" 6.

³⁴ Kay L. Cothran, "Participation in Tradition," Readings in American Folklore, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979): 445.

³⁵ Babcock-Abrahams 153.

Nicholson's comments to the middle class businesswoman concerning election give-away condoms, Jean's inappropriate remarks to a salesclerk and Mike Mansour's relating of an anecdote in the middle of a church service, are reflective of much of the folklore generated by and about characters in that they depict a violation of conventional norms of propriety. Such narratives are humorous because audience members have a shared appreciation of the nature and extent of the violation. For example, Debbie and Steven relate similar narratives describing how Wayne told an elderly lady on his milk route to "Fock off" when he became frustrated with her inability to put out the correct coupons for her milk (T87:4; T87:7). The incident has been incorporated into each of their repertoires although neither was directly involved. While the use of profanity is not personally offensive to the informants, each is appreciative of the shock and outrage it would instill in some of the older residents of this conservative and largely Protestant area. The humour of the incident is heightened by the informants' awareness of the disruption this outburst caused, and the repercussions which followed--Wayne was temporarily suspended from his duties on the milk truck.

At the same time as they explore boundaries and rules that govern forms of social interaction, such narratives offer group members a vehicle for projection or wish fulfillment that demands no direct involvement or

commitment. That wish fulfillment may be the source of at least some of Steven's enjoyment of the above narrative is reflected by a second anecdote it prompted:

He [Wayne] told Harold [Steven's father and boss] in the store one day [to fuck off]. The way he talks, he [Harold] couldn't recognize what he was saying. Ken said that. Harold was teasing him or something, just said something. He doesn't tease too much but he sort of just says something and he [Wayne] says, 'Fuck off Harold' [Imitates] and went out (T87:4).

For Steven—who works with his father—the inappropriateness of Wayne's use of profanity, and the fact that he got away with his remark, adds to the narrative's humour and personal value. Similarly, the anecdote of Wayne using profanity with a customer may have special significance for a businessman such as Steven who deals with customers during every work day.

Since the 1940s, folklorists such as Herbert Halpert have been emphasizing the importance of functions such as projection and wish fulfillment in forms of folk narrative and humour. Halpert identifies "the psychological pattern of aggression" as prominent in American folk tradition and warns, "The tall tale, the fool story, and other humorous tales directed at individuals and groups serve not merely as amusement and pastime; they also satisfy what is apparently a deep-seated need in our rural folk culture, a way of expressing aggression and achieving success in

competition."³⁶

As with trickster tales, character performances and narratives based on them often result in a reversal of statuses and a leveling of hierarchy. When Emma Moses was faced with what she deemed were unreasonable demands from a woman whom she had known from childhood, she righted the situation:

Roger had his little store down on Church Street, we had just been married a year or so.... So this day Emma was coming to scrub the floor and I was there and of course she knew me from that high. So a crowd was standing by the stove talking with Roger and Emma wasn't moving anything. 'Emma,' I said, 'Emma you got to move that apple barrel, you've got to move this, you've got to move that.' 'Go away girl, go away girl, go on home girl.' 'No now Emma you do that, you know better, you can't scrub that way. You just move those things and scrub behind them.' So she looked over at Roger and she said, 'Does she go on like that all the time?' And Roger said, 'All the time, Emma what would you do if you were me?' She said, 'I'd make my peace with God and take chloroform' [Laughs] (T86:7).^{36A}

Use of humour and adoption of a character role represented one of the only options available to Emma that allowed her to assert any control over the interaction. By relying on these techniques she re-directed the course of the exchange and attempted to bring to it more balance and equality. She successfully undermined Hazel's newly assumed position of

³⁶ Herbert Halpert, "Aggressive Humour on the East Branch," New York Folklore Quarterly 2 (1946): 86+.

^{36A} Barbara Babcock-Abrahams 153.

employer and superior and reduced her status to a level that was more in keeping with Emma's assessment.

The character, customarily regarded as being on the psychological fringe of the community, may act as one of its primary agents of social control, guarding against those who attempt to increase their social status inappropriately or without community consensus. In several of Bill's narratives, Phomes Yorke curbs unwarranted status elevation to restore social equilibrium. In the first anecdote, he gets the better of Bessie Downey:

Bessie Downey was the organ player and this Sunday, they tell this story about this Sunday, ah, she was playing the organ, playing the organ. And after they came out of the church, he [Phomes Yorke] come up to her and he said, 'Miss Downey we certainly made good music today.' And she said, 'Get away from here you old man,' she said, 'I don't want to talk to you.' She said, 'You don't have nothing to do with making the music.' So he walked away. Next Sunday he was pumping the organ. Just in the middle of the song he stopped pumping the organ and put his head around the organ and he said, 'Who's making the music now?' I guess he showed her [Laughs]. That was Phomes Yorke.

Bill continues:

One night this Phomes Yorke come running into the fire station and he said to the old fellow, to Jim [the supervisor], he tapped him on the shoulder and he tried to tell him something, you know. And Jim Palmer said, 'Get away from me, I don't want to bother with you. Get away from here.' And just then the fire whistle blew and JP said, 'Oh, there's a fire.' And old Phomes Yorke said, 'I've been trying to tell you for half an

hour. Blair McLaughlin's store's on
fire'-(T86:3)4

Linked closely with the play element, character performances and narratives concerning them may serve as an acceptable channel for aggression not only for the individual character but for the entire group of which he or she is a member.³⁷ Frustrations with particular groups, specific individuals, or injustice of the social order all may find expression in the character's performances and the stories told about them. Any success in bringing about the "proper moral order," even momentarily, reflects on all group members. As a result, character performance may be utilized as a technique to combat group problems such as prejudice. As Richard Stephenson comments in his exploration of the conflict and control functions of humour, "Conflict humour not only functions to express aggression but serves to strengthen the morale of those who use it and to undermine the morale of these at whom it is aimed."³⁸

While Blacks are no longer forced to participate only in segregated activities, narratives including one that tells of a white employee in a government office rustling the hair of a Black co-worker and calling her "bucktooth"

³⁷ Roger D. Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle (Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates, 1964) 40, states "Aggression is usually allowed in a play or contest situation."

³⁸ Richard M. Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," American Journal of Sociology 56 (1950-51): 569-74.

(T86:14), clearly demonstrate that they continue to experience indirect prejudice, or what Joy Mannette describes as "polite racism"³⁹ from some majority group members (T86:14). In particular, Blacks specify "poor whites" as the most difficult social group they encounter. John Davidson commented, "Poor whites were the worst."⁴⁰ As character performances are most effective in contexts where participants are familiar with each other and the social norms governing the interaction, and are separated by only a moderate amount of social distance, Blacks report sometimes adopting the character role to combat prejudice (T86:17).

In bolstering minority group morale through a brief leveling of hierarchy, character performances provide a catharsis for marked community members, helping to relieve possible intragroup tension and prevent any open expression of conflict. While not endorsed by every member of Amherst's Black community, both John Davidson and Jerry are described by informants as political men who struggled for Black equality. Whatever criticisms may be leveled against their performances, they have succeeded in bringing Black culture and concerns to the attention of majority group individuals.

Characters with membership in a minority group, such as the Black community, but who are a visible presence in

³⁹ Mannette fl.

⁴⁰ John Davidson, T45 Cumberland County Museum, Interview by Anna Lowther, 22 November, 1978.

contexts dominated by majority group members, act as mediators. As Stonequist comments in his study of marginality, "the marginal man is the key personality in the contact of cultures.... He is the crucible of cultural fusion."⁴¹ Through their performances, characters facilitate the accommodation in the community of all individuals who share their mark. Not only is their high visibility a constant reminder of the presence of marked community members, but because of their association with the play element, characters frequently offer majority group residents an opportunity to directly confront a mark.

Harold describes a discussion he held with Emma Moses about her Blackness:

I was in the West Indies. And one day I showed her [Emma] a picture. Emma, I think was the darkest colored girl in town. She was really black.... So I said, 'Look Emma, this girl looks like you.' 'Like hell, it does. She's a lot darker than I am' [Laughs]. She [Emma] couldn't be darker.

On another occasion an informant approached Russell Briggs concerning the cause and extent of his blindness. Mark recalls:

I met him on the street one day and I said, he was walking along the sidewalk, along by the Maritime block, Woolworths. And I said, 'Russell, are you completely blind?' I didn't really know. I thought, I had assumed he was. 'Well,'

⁴¹ Everett Stonequist, The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961): 221.

he says, 'only when the pension inspector comes,' he says [Laughs]. I got a kick out of that but he was functionally blind, there's no doubt about that. He wasn't being dishonest. But he had to have his little joke (T86:12).

By responding in a playful manner to an inquiry about his blindness, Briggs helps to deemphasize the mark and to keep it in perspective.⁴² The interaction emphasizes Briggs's desire for integration into the overall community and asserts his normalcy.

The character performance is only one strategy open to those suffering from a physical, character or tribal stigma; other possibilities include direct confrontation and perhaps violence.⁴³ It continues to be relied upon, however, not only because it is the least socially disruptive alternative, but also because it offers the psychological benefit of demonstrating a potential for social change. It encourages all residents to reexamine the existing social order and to reflect on the possibility for constructive

⁴² See: E. E. Jones et al., Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1984) 215. The authors state: "Forms of self-depreciating humor may be especially effective as the markable person displays his ability to keep the mark in perspective and to inform the marker that it is all right (i.e. not upsetting) to talk openly about his condition."

⁴³ Research has documented that the assumption of the more confrontational role of witch was once an alternative open to marginal individuals. For example, see John Demos, Entertaining Satan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

reorganization.⁴⁴ It presents a safe form of evaluation, however, for any social change resulting from the character performance, is more illusory than real. Van den Berghe states:

Games, then, often reinforce social inequality. They also relieve the tensions caused by inequality. A great many societies have rituals that have variously been called of rebellion, of reversal, or of license. In these rituals, acts which, under normal circumstances would be condemned, become permitted under specified conditions (such as within a certain time span or between certain persons). Akin to these rituals are what anthropologists call joking relationships between privileged individuals such as the king and his fool, an uncle and nephew, a grandparent and grandchild.⁴⁵

At the close of a character performance nothing is really changed. The higher status individual has played with a marked individual, or the idea of being marked personally, but his or her status has not been seriously threatened. Likewise, any status elevation enjoyed by the character is only temporary. Emma Moses may put her employer "in her place," but following the exchange Emma still remains the employee and Hazel her employer. Phomes Yorke challenges Bessie Downey's attempt to take sole responsibility for the organ music he has helped to create but cannot seriously

⁴⁴ Babcock-Abrahams 183, identifies this as an important function of the trickster.

⁴⁵ Pierre L. Van den Berghe, Man in Society: A Biosocial View. (New York: Elsevier, 1975) 240.

alter Downey's position in the community as a member of one of the most established families. The physical conditions of his own position as a visually handicapped, lower income, sporadically employed individual have not been improved.

While many character performances end in status reversal of the participants, like the licentious behaviour of the carnival, they are accepted and enjoyed in part because of the knowledge they are out of the ordinary.⁴⁶ Participants are aware that when the performance is completed, natural order will return and perhaps be strengthened because of the community's brief flirtation with disorder or alternative order. One of the most central functions of the character's role is the representation of the outermost limits of what is acceptable, or conversely, the illustration of what is not allowable.⁴⁷ Narratives that circulate concerning the LeBlancs are not only cathartic for residents but reinforce a shared emphasis on personal cleanliness. Anecdotes ridiculing the Hewsons' miserliness or Lide Pipes's argumentative nature and imperfect work habits reify other guidelines of expected

⁴⁶ For an analysis of carnival behaviour see: Roger Abrahams and Richard Bauman, "Ranges of Festival Behavior," The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society, ed. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978) 193-20.

⁴⁷ See: Robert A. Dentler and Kai T. Erikson, "The Functions of Deviance in Groups," Social Problems 7:2 (1959):101. The authors state that the presence of deviance within a group is a boundary maintenance function.

social behaviour. The character's presence, in addition to many of the narratives generated by or about him or her, validate community held social norms (T86:7). John Widdowson's research on the use of threatening figures in the disciplining of children reinforces the fact that marginal individuals, including characters, are often held up as examples of how not to behave.⁴⁸ As discussed in the last chapter, characters are often seen as representations of a failure to conform to established norms.

As agents of social control, characters contribute to community discipline and help strengthen social structure. For many residents, their presence and performances facilitate an exploration, and frequently an affirmation, of group membership. Ann has incorporated into her active narrative repertoire an anecdote that describes an interaction with Wayne when he caused her to doubt her own social position. She tells how she was embarrassed one day at the rink when Wayne declared in front of another parent that his co-worker, Trevor, had taken very ill after eating a pineapple square that she had baked. When she had an opportunity to speak to Trevor a few days later, she apologized, saying she wondered what might have caused him to become sick as no one else who had eaten the squares

⁴⁸ J.D.A. Widdowson, If You Don't Be Good: Verbal Social Control in Newfoundland (St. John's, Newfoundland: Institute for Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977).

suffered any side effects. The response surprised her, but reaffirmed her original concept of her self and her abilities, and fixed the narrative in her repertoire:

[Trevor said], 'What are you talking about? What square?' He laughed and he said, 'Look, that character never even gave me a square.' He said, 'He ate two of them right in front of me. And I could smell them.' And he said, 'Did they ever smell good....' So I said, 'Oh my soul.' So each time I see this Trevor we have a joke about the pineapple square. And ah not only that, I was pretty quick to tell this parent that it was just a joke on the part of Wayne and that Trevor wasn't sick at all (T86:11).

While statuses might have been temporarily in question, the narrative ends with order restored and the informant's view of herself reified. Wayne may have got the better of Ann temporarily but the end result of the interaction is that she and Trevor have a strengthened sense of *communitas* at Wayne's expense.

Characters like Wayne are central to a community's identity voyage, for as Klapp says of fools, they "provide vacation from conformity but affirm the order they seem to flout either by holding up negative models, or by catharsis through vicarious misbehaviour and the spirit of carnival."⁴⁹ Through observing and discussing characters, the rest of the community comes to understand the demands of membership more clearly. Kai Erikson writes that deviants,

⁴⁹ Orrin Klapp, Heroes 82.

like traditional folklore creatures such as demons, devils and witches, represent another kind of reminder of the otherwise formless dangers that threaten a community and its members:

As trespasser against the group's norms, he represents those forces which lie outside the group's boundaries; he informs us of what evil looks like.... It may well be without this ongoing drama at the outer edges of group space, the community would have no inner sense of identity and cohesion, no sense of the contrasts which set it off as a special place in the larger world.⁵⁰

As transmitters of tradition and/or mediums of catharsis and control, characters help the marked and unmarked better understand themselves and the group(s) of which they are a part. In a multifaceted role that may represent continuity, introduce the play element, articulate community personality, and/or emphasize rules that govern interaction, characters both help to clarify group boundaries and establish the relative relationship of individual members and subgroups, one to another. How formal community organizations recognize the significance of the character role and attempt to institutionalize it, will be the subject of the final chapter.

⁵⁰ Kai T. Erikson, "Notes on the Sociology of Deviance," The Other Side, ed. Howard S. Becker (New York: Free Press, 1964) 15.

VIII

CHARACTERS AS PUBLIC SYMBOLS

Amherst is representative of other communities in the Atlantic Provinces in that characters and aspects of their performances are not only important to the town's folk culture, but also play a role in the community's public depiction of its past and present. Popular writers portray characters of earlier eras as being integral to the area's history and new characters or mascots, based on elements of traditional character performances, are created and form a component of local festivals. This chapter will explore meanings of the character role when it becomes intertwined with the public presentation of a community's historical and cultural identity.

Incorporation of character performances in public presentations of community history and culture follows mutually, albeit implicitly, agreed upon rules. Although not as specific Michael Owen Jones's formula for the creation of a folk hero-- "(Personal Charisma + Credulous Biographer) x Social Definition (Recognition + Imputation + Expurgation) = HERO"¹--common criteria are exercised both in

¹ Michael Owen Jones, "(PC+CB) X SD(R+I+E) = Hero," New York Folklore Quarterly 27 (1971): 243-60.

the selection and the treatment of characters. The process conforms to Jones's mathematical formula in so far as a character must exhibit some quality that a writer, curator, or festival organizer recognizes as being potentially representative of a particular time period or social group. In addition, the biographer or promoter often molds the character's biography and/or presentation to better fit a pattern or suit purposes such as historical display or community festival.

Characters as Symbols of the Past

In their article "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious," Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin argue that "The public presentation of private life is a juxtaposition that suggests why we must speak of invention rather than preservation.... Tradition is not handed down from the past, as a thing or collection of things; it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present."² The past a community invents is more reflective of an ideal than a real history. The chronology it fashions communicates more of current attitudes or contemporary needs than what actually happened. Mary Ellen Wright observes that "the things chosen for commemoration and celebration from a community's past reflect what that community considers to be important truths

² Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious," Journal of American Folklore 97 (1984): 280.

about its present, whether these truths have to do with progress or loss. They reflect, in fact, the kind of community that is supposed to exist...."³ Following the example of Wright and others, this invented history will be referred to here as "popular history."⁴

As pointed out in chapter two, Amherstonians have not had much experience in the public presentation of their past. A few authors and local historians have produced a handful of articles and books while the museum, which contains a permanent exhibit tracing the county's settlement and development, only opened in 1981. Yet, even within this modest output, characters are depicted as inherent to the community's past and are celebrated in ways representative of local museums and publications throughout the region.

Characters who make up Amherst's popular history conform to acceptable character types commonly found in public presentations of Atlantic Canadian history. For example, several articles focus on peddlers, reflecting an historical interest expressed in the province since at least

³ Mary Ellen Wright, "'Past' and 'History' in the Colchester County Museum," unpublished essay December 1987, 1.

⁴ Mary Ellen Wright relies on the concepts of popular, people's, and official history as outlined by Patrick Wright in On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain (London: Verso Publishers, 1985). Patrick Wright describes popular history as being in negotiation with the past. In contrast to people's history which is a conscious critique of the official past, popular history is often whiggish in tone and meshes with official history.

Thomas Chandler Haliburton's creation of Yankee clockmaker and peddler, Sam Slick.⁵ E.R. Wood describes Moses Barrett, the itinerant clockmaker;⁶ a piece of locally written poetry is published in the Springhill Record commemorating Watson Weaver, itinerant photographer and peddler;⁷ and Evalyn Gautreau includes descriptions of two Lebanese peddlers--including Mary Mansour from Amherst--in her history of a nearby lumbering community.⁸ Will R. Bird's 1920s article on John (Moose) Kent⁹ followed an already established precedent which included James D. Gillis's full-length work on Cape Breton's Giant Angus MacAskill (1914).¹⁰ Finally, Charles (Sunny) Gould, included in Pearl Maltby's circa 1985 memoirs, belongs to a smaller but celebrated group of verbal artists, skilled in

⁵ Thomas Chandler Haliburton, The Clockmaker or the Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick (1837; New York: George Doran, 1923).

⁶ E. R. Wood, "Story of Early Clockmaker of Amherst. Recalled," ADN 15 March 1939: 4.

⁷ Hilton McCully, "Watson Weaver," The Springhill Record 17 September 1980: 4A. For complete poem, see Appendix A.

⁸ Evalyn Gautreau, Shulie: The Way it Was (Amherst, Nova Scotia: The Amherst Township Historical Society, 1986).

⁹ Will R. Bird, "John Kent Held the Title as the Strongest Man in the Maritimes," ADN 28 March 1925: 3+.

¹⁰ James D. Gillis, The Cape Breton Giant: A Truthful Memoir (Halifax, Nova Scotia: T. C. Allen, 1914).

genres no longer widely encountered.¹¹ In classifying Barrett and Weaver as representative peddlers, or Gould as a verbal performer, Amherst's popular historians slot some of the community's most ambiguous, and at times difficult to assess, members into safe and manageable stereotypes. As David Lowenthal explains, "We mask diversity and collapse countless disparate images into a few dominant ones."¹² Amherstonians, like many other Atlantic Canadians, rely on one or more character types to publicly represent the broad range of character performances found in the community's past.¹³

In describing characters in history, writers utilize what Lowenthal terms "selective recall." He

¹¹ For example see: Ron MacEachern, ed. Songs and Stories from Deep Cove Cape Breton as Remembered by Andy Thomas (Sydney, Nova Scotia: University College of Cape Breton, 1979) and Joe Neil MacNeil, Tales until Dawn trans. John Shaw (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

¹² David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," The Geographical Review 65 (1975): 28.

¹³ Within this narrow range of character types, an individual often comes to represent "the peddler" or, more generally, "the character" for a geographical area. For example in Digby County, Nova Scotia, one of the only local characters celebrated is Jerome, a legless, speechless man found on the beach in 1866. His life story from the time he entered the Digby area is recorded in several publications such as: Mary Kate Bull, Sandy Cove: The History of a Nova Scotia Village (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot, 1978) 57-58; R. Baden Powell, Second Scrap Book: Digby Town and Municipality (Digby, NS: Wallis Print Ltd., 1973) 87-89 and is documented in the collections of the Fort Point Museum and the Admiral Digby Museum.

explains "Selective recall eliminates undesired scenes, highlights favored ones, and makes them tidy and suitable."¹⁴ Selection is influenced by the same "cultural prejudice" Lowenthal identifies in the interpretation of built heritage. He states, "Features recalled with pride are apt to be safeguarded against erosion and vandalism; those that reflect shame may be ignored or expurged from the landscape."¹⁵ Like biographers of folk heroes described by M. O. Jones, creators of popular historical characters expurge any information that might send negative or mixed messages to the audience. For example, in his presentation of John Kent, Bird takes care not to interfere with the reader's identification with the character. Aspects of Kent's background and personality that do not conform to societal goals go unmentioned. Kent's alcoholism, his varied work career that might suggest unwillingness or inability to maintain steady employment, and his violent outbursts which according to one informant characterized his home and social life (T86:3) are overlooked in Bird's telling of his story.

Ambiguity that forms an important part of oral character narratives is also removed. In its place is the depiction of individuality as harmless and colorful, and as a positive contributing factor to the fabric of community.

¹⁴ Lowenthal, "Past Time" 28.

¹⁵ Lowenthal, "Past Time" 31.

life. Bird fails Kent's efforts to train a moose and to fly from the top of a building while Gautreau writes of Two Monday's unique method of communication that relied on the use of her "dark expressive eyes and hands."¹⁶ Similarly, when Wood describes Moses Barrett, she mentions Barrett's fondness for his cat and his large appetite. The picture she creates is one of a colorful peddler who lived a free, almost pastoral life, with only his cat and his wares. Like other publicly presented characters of the past, Barrett is strong willed but well adjusted, complacent, and happy.

Cleaned up to safely embody the personality and colour of the "good old days," characters are often linked with pleasant childhood memories. E.R. Wood relies on informants with warm recollections of Moses Barrett and in an article titled, "There Came Along a Pedler," Amherst writer Grace MacLeod Rogers shares her elderly aunt's early memories of peddlers along the south shore of Nova Scotia.¹⁷ Rogers's aunt describes the eagerness with which the peddler's arrival was greeted--"It was a joy to see one approaching"--and the childish delight she took in the peddler's stock of ribbons and materials. A more recent poem about Watson Weaver is also written from the perspective of a remembered childhood. The poem begins:

¹⁶ Gautreau 105.

¹⁷ Grace MacLeod Rogers, "There Came Along a Pedlar," Maritime Advocate and Busy East 33 (April 1943): 13f.

When first I knew him,
 Watson used to come to mother's door,
 For gingerbread and buttermilk
 And then with smiles galore
 He'd launch into his sales pitch;
 He seemed to like this chore.

Stanza three reads:

I remember him at Granny's,
 With his chuckle and his smile
 He wouldn't take his coat off,
 But would sit there for a while.

Whether or not characters were a part of the all pervasive industrialization of the region, in popular history they are associated with a simpler and more rural way of life.¹⁸ In Amherst, as in most areas, characters are generally linked with the region's agricultural roots. For example, Will R. Bird only refers to John Kent's long and varied work history as a laborer when he talks romantically of an accident Kent suffered while cutting ice. Bird states that in 1923 at seventy-two years of age Moose Kent walked two and a half miles morning and night to cut ice cakes on Embree's ice pond and was able to outwork the other men there. After an accident occurred during which one man lost his life and two others were seriously injured, "only his

¹⁸ Handler and Linnékin note the tendency of popular history to be selective. They state: "...only certain items (most often, those that can be associated with a 'natural' preindustrial village life) are chosen to represent tradition. National culture and other aspects of the past are ignored or forgotten" (p.280). Mary Ellen Wright identifies the same pattern in the historical interpretation offered by the Colchester County Museum (CCHSM). She observes that Truro's "industrial boom itself is missing from the CCHSM's exhibits" (p.3).

iron constitution" kept Kent alive through "ten days in the death ward of the hospital." He recovered but, Bird records, "his huge frame" was now "bowed and shrunken."¹⁹ The author goes on to describe Kent's demonstrations of strength at country picnics and agricultural exhibitions and his exploits in the training of a moose to haul a sleigh.

Mary Mansour, or Two Monday, was a woman who chose to settle in Amherst and was able to earn her living there because of the area's successful industrialization. When she is mentioned by Evalyn Gautreau in Shulie: The Way It Was, however, Two Monday's rural connections are highlighted. Gautreau describes Two Monday arriving in Shulie on the mail wagon with needles, thread, "and other miscellaneous items used by the good housewife to cut clothing costs and keep her family neatly dressed."²⁰

Similarly, when museums incorporate historical local characters into their exhibits, they do not portray alienated industrial workers confined by a narrow range of employment and social opportunities and resorting to one of the only power strategies open to them. Rather, the depictions are like the treatment of Ned Beals, a Black from Halifax whose picture hangs in the Dartmouth Heritage Museum. When the picturesque photo dated circa 1905²¹ Beals carrying a wicker basket was included in a publication

¹⁹ Will R. Bird, "John Kent" 3.

²⁰ Gautreau 105.

of pre-1920 Nova Scotian photographs, the accompanying caption read: "Sometimes known as 'Sky' Beals, this fellow was a local character--pedlar, trader, dancer, and handyman. Walking more than five miles to town, he frequented city businesses and taverns telling stories, selling goods and making friends."²¹ The photo with its explanation firmly ties Beals to a market economy even though it was taken at the height of the region's industrialization.

As Handler and Linnekin suggest, "Traditions thought to be preserved are created out of the conceptual needs of the present."²² Characters, linked with a rural, pastoral life, and presented as distinctive, carefree and unhampered by schedules and demands of contemporary life, symbolize the freedom of the past. They reinforce the popular vision of the past as a less complicated and happier time.²³ Their depiction in regional literature or in some local museums--as demonstrated in a photo of Rose, a Black character and

²¹ Scott Robson and Shelagh MacKenzie, An Atlantic Album (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nimbus, 1985) 102.

²² Handler and Linnekin 280.

²³ Michael Taft, Discovering 12 addresses the conception of the past as a simpler time: "The general feeling that folklore is a product of simpler times and simpler people lies at the base of many misconceptions.... The truth is that there have never been 'simpler' times or 'simpler' people than ourselves; human culture has always been, and will always be, infinitely complex and infinitely fascinating."

taxi operator in the Fort Anne museum, Annapolis Royal²⁴-- invites the reader or the museum visitor to speculate on the possibility of living with fewer social restraints. Characters help to create a comfortable picture of a remote agrarian past which encouraged personal expression. The view is one that fulfills contemporary needs for, as James Overton demonstrates in Newfoundland, a nostalgic attitude towards the past "contains the residuals of a powerful opposition to the contradictory changes which have resulted from capitalist development."²⁵ Certainly the presence of characters in popular history supports Neil Rosenberg's observation that romantic interest in folklore represents part of the search for an antidote to homogenizing pressures.²⁶

Because characters provide the escapism that members of the general public may demand of history, they successfully

²⁴ A drawing of Rose Fortune in the Fort Anne Museum, Annapolis Royal has the following label: "Rose Fortune. 'Old Rose' flourished about the middle of the nineteenth century. She was the 'Cartae Company' of Annapolis Royal at that time, running a 'wheelbarrow service' between the hotels and the boats. She was self appointed policeman of the town and kept all small boys in order. She always appeared in a man's coat and hat, worn over her woman's dress and white cap, and wore very large and heavy men's boots. She was a noted character in her day and those who remember her say that this is a capital portrait. The Lewis family are descendants of Rose Fortune" (FN 16 September 1986).

²⁵ James Overton, "Coming Home: Nostalgia and Tourism in Newfoundland," Acadiensis 44 (1984): 97.

²⁶ Neil Rosenberg, "Folklore in Atlantic Canada: The Enigmatic Symbol," Atlantic Provinces Literature Colloquium. Marco Polo Papers 1 82.

27 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 241.

28 Mary Ellen Wright 4.

notably absent from popular history. Just as Will R. Bird transmitted narratives and beliefs about characters is the often unresolved guilt present in many orally the roots of the present in the inequality of the past."28 the realm of nostalgia, and it is not appropriate to find between this past and the present are only permissible in most important of all, this past is finished: relations of Truro, Nova Scotia, Mary Ellen Wright concludes, "Perhaps vision of the past created by the Colchester County Museum removed from the present day. In her assessment of the Secondly, the past that characters help to create is

and accepted one. not be familiar, the notion of characters is a commonplace As a result, while the social context presented may or may encountered some of the characters described in this study. Few, if any, contemporary Angherstonians would not have characters are a central component of small group structure. entry point for, as previous chapters have explored, past. Firstly, they constitute a familiar and accessible reader or museum-goer into "the foreign country" of the characters facilitate the voyage of the twentieth century earlier age."27 To again adopt Lowenthal's terminology, constitute what David Lowenthal terms "anachronisms of an

ignores community efforts to control Kent's nonconformity-- as evidenced in his omission of Kent's court appearances-- most character biographers create the belief of total community acceptance.

During the first years of the twentieth century when peddling was a viable means to earn a meager livelihood, regional publications reveal an uneasiness concerning the influx of Arab and Asian immigrants.²⁹ Reports tell of violent outbreaks among peddlers or between peddlers and their customers.³⁰ In the case of the editorial from the Yarmouth Light quoted in chapter two, some articles contribute to ethnic tensions by planting suspicion of poor standards of personal hygiene and questioning the wisdom and patriotism of doing business with immigrants who send their money to another country.³¹ By the turn of the century there was growing pressure to legislate against itinerants. In response to a growing outcry, such as that expressed in a 1904 article in The Maritime Merchant, "The Curse of the Itinerant Pedlars," municipal governments, including the Amherst council, instituted a licensing system for

²⁹ For example, see: "The Curse of Itinerant Pedlars," The Maritime Merchant 2: April 1904: 25+. In an editorial published in the ADN 7 June 1909: 2, the editor states, "the merchants of our town should be protected from the travelling pedlar and wandering hawker."

³⁰ See: ADN 26 August 1897: 4; Christie 27 September 1897; ADN 4 August 1900: 4; and ADN 10 November 1908: 8.

³¹ Rpt. ADN 17 January 1910: 2.

itinerants.

None of the anxiety that might have been felt towards the peddler surfaces in popular treatments. Evalyn Gautreau writes of peddler, Salem Joseph: "Welcomed into every home, his visit took the form of entertainment as he displayed a fine array of wearing apparel for the family."³² Gautreau's image of the peddler being embraced warmly by every community member is echoed throughout the region's popular historical literature.³³ Only a newspaper article published in 1959 refers to any uneasiness felt towards peddlers. The author writes that while the peddlers were looked forward to by most of the women in remote sections of the province, there was also a fear of allowing peddlers into the home while male family members were away at work.³⁴

Any apprehension that might have been instilled by characters in real life is neutralized in a nostalgic presentation. Will R. Bird concludes his portrait of John Kent: "John's heart was always as light as his muscles and he spent with a free hand, so at an advanced age he has little more than the barest necessities of life, but makes no complaint. Content is he to dream of by-gone days and

³² Gautreau 103.

³³ For example, see: Lena Ferguson, "Colorful Days of Peddling along Eastern Shore Recalled," Dartmouth Free Press 2 May 1979: 7.

³⁴ Unsigned, "Visits by Pack Pedlars Regular Part of Rural life up to 1910," Halifax Chronicle Herald 20 May 1959: 20.

now and then make contemptuous comparison of the 'grand old boys' the 'all-day.'³⁵ With two sentences Bird offers justification for the apparent injustice of the economic circumstances of a man whom Bird has just depicted having brought recognition to the town. Kent is poor because of his own, "free hand." The community need not feel any discomfort, Kent is both the master of his own fate and satisfied with his lot. Content to dream, he "makes no complaint."

As Will R. Bird argues that Moose Kent is satisfied with his substandard existence and Evalyn Gautreau describes how immigrant peddlers like Joseph were warmly received and appreciated, readers are not forced to confront any inadequacies of the past or present social system. Inequalities among community groups, or other injustices illustrated in characters' lives are further neutralized when linked to today's successes. Rather than being seen as failures of the system, they may be interpreted as indications of contemporary progress. Rose Fortune, the character of the Fort Anne museum, may have belonged to the recent past when she was first commemorated there, but her descendants constitute one of the, if not the, most successful Black families. Beside the sketch of her hang photos of prosperous and happy descendants who carried on a trucking business in the 1930s. The fact that Rose Fortune

³⁵ Bird, "John Kent" 7.

continues to be commemorated in the museum perhaps is linked to her granddaughter's success in becoming the first Black mayor in the province. Ironically, one of the messages communicated by popular history's inclusion of minority group characters is the assurance that ethnic and racial populations have made significant contributions to the development of the community.

In addition to their symbolic use to depict an uncomplicated past that allowed and perhaps encouraged individualistic contribution, characters may also serve as illustration of moral values.³⁶ In his article on Moose Kent, Will R. Bird not only echoes James D. Gillis's interest in strongmen but also reflects something of his moralistic approach. Gillis wrote his biography of Angus MacAskill primarily for a young audience and he produced an exemplum based on the giant's life. In his preface Gillis encourages all Cape Bretoners to be proud of the giant and notes that apart from "our hero's bodily strength--he was also an excellent man otherwise."³⁷ Gillis describes MacAskill as an affable, courteous and friendly man whose hospitality was famous. According to the biographer, MacAskill did not attend church regularly because he did not

³⁶ An early example of a character's life as subject of a moralistic sketch is S. W. Christophers's Foolish Dick: An Autobiography of Richard Hampton the Cornish Pilgrim Preacher (London: [c. 1873]).

³⁷ Gillis viii.

want to be a disturbance but that "he knew the Bible well" and observed the Sabbath. He was also a dutiful son who was especially considerate of his mother. Finally, Gillis admits that MacAskill smoked and drank, but he reminds readers that these habits were widespread practices in MacAskill's time and that the giant did not harm his body by tobacco or alcohol abuse. In his writing of Moose Kent, Will R. Bird also lauds the character's accomplishments, relying heavily on the use of superlatives. Kent is "the strongest man in the Maritimes" and "the champion of the lazy stick."³⁸ Although to a lesser extent than Gillis, Bird also imparts a moral quality to Kent's feats which he implicitly suggests continues to reflect well on all Amherstonians.

While time has even further exposed the biases of Gillis and others, many informants express tacit agreement with the concept of reworking past and present characters for public presentation. Repeatedly they would introduce or conclude character narratives with the statement, "I'm sure you don't want to put that in your book" (T86:15). One informant urged that the study only consider characters who have been dead a long time (FN 4 March 1986). There is a recognition that characters should be included only after they undergo a reshaping process that removes any potentially embarrassing information for the community or

³⁸ Bird, "John Kent" 3.

other family members and highlights the character's contributions. When J. Gordon Drysdale published his 1984 collection of portraits of local characters he had encountered while living in two Nova Scotian villages, residents met his book with public outrage.³⁹ An acquaintance comments that Drysdale was "completely ostracized" by fellow members of his native community (FN 20 August 1986). His honest portrayal that names individual characters and details their economic and emotional hardships, their struggles with alcoholism, and their reception by the neighbors, breaks the rules of public presentation. While community members may recognize the importance of local characters, usually they are not considered suitable for public celebration. Aspects of characters or their performances that may not be understood by outsiders and possibly will reflect negatively on the characters, their families, or the community as a whole, are tightly controlled. For example, when members of a small settlement in Cape Breton recently produced a videotape featuring both characters and residents telling local character narratives, the group placed the finished tape in a local museum for safe keeping. They made the deposit with the understanding, however, that it not be available for general viewing (FN 25 January 1988).

³⁹ J. Gordon Drysdale, Characters Including Me (Hantsport, Nova Scotia: Lancelot Press, 1984).

Similarly, residents of Cheticamp, Nova Scotia, have been reworking the personality and status of the local character, Marguerite Gallant, since her death in the 1980s. Gallant surprised the heritage society of Cheticamp by leaving them all her property and possessions. Her modest estate, together with an exhibit of hooked tapestries, now constitutes the village's local museum. Photographs documenting the collection in its original state when still in Gallant's very small house are the only suggestion this exhibit is out of the ordinary. Displayed in cabinets and behind roped off areas, it looks like an historical exhibit in many other communities, containing items such as hat pins and old bottles. When questioned, the guide describes Gallant as "a real sweetheart" who was loved by everyone (FN 11 August 1987). She neglects to mention any of the stories still in oral tradition that describe the apprehension locals felt towards her and how many refused to enter her house for fear of contracting some dread disease (FN 24 August 1987).

In minimizing ambiguity associated with local characters and interpreting their individuality as an appreciated community resource, curators and popular historians adopt the view advocated by the Tourism Department of Nova Scotia. According to Ian McKay, the fifth and current stage in the province's tourism development, which he labels "Total Tourism," is

characterized by the attitude that everything is marketable. He states, "Everything--people, landscape, history--is seen as part of 'the product' just as the facilities used by the tourist--hotels, highways, gift shops, state-funded convention centres--are now all components of the tourism 'plant.'"⁴⁰ By presenting characters as part of the rich resource of the past, this history encourages Atlantic Canadians to take pride in the strong character of the people and the unique nature of the region, thus diverting attention away from unpleasant realities such as regional dependency on national transfer payments. In using characters to create a collective, happier past, Amherstonians and other Atlantic Canadians brace themselves for the uncertainties of the future. As Kevin Lynch comments, "Relying on history to maintain coherence and common purpose in moments of stress and disunity is a familiar human tendency."⁴¹

Characters as Symbols of Cultural Identity

Although local characters may represent tradition for many of the town's residents, and characters of the past are used as symbols of continuity in popular history, in festivals they are not recognized as a suitable

⁴⁰ Ian McKay, "The Five Ages of Nova Scotian Tourism," The New Maritimes July-August 1987: 9.

⁴¹ Kevin Lynch, What Time is This Place? (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1972) 30.

representation of tradition or cultural stability. While town officials may recognize local characters' contributions to community life, and may even like to capitalize on some of what they identify as positive aspects, there are few actual characters in Amherst's festivals and tourism promotion. Characters are not incorporated into daily summer activities coordinated by the Business Improvement Downtown Commission (BIDC) nor have they ever played a significant role in the county's annual celebration, the "Blueberry Harvest Festival." At least some informants feel that parades and other festival activities are inappropriate contexts for character performances. A teenager comments "it would be like making fun of them" (FN 16 March 1988). Rather, organizers opt to incorporate elements of local character performances in newly created characters or mascots.

The notion that real characters are inappropriate for inclusion in events such as parades may stem from the fact that by definition parades are ostentatious displays. Evolving from the French "parade" meaning "a (boasting) appearance or shew; a bravado or vaunting offer" these processions are customarily associated with aspects of official culture, whether religious, military or civilian. Anthropologist Carole Farber argues that contemporary Canadian small town summer festivals represent a dramatic performance in which official town myths and ideology are

presented and re-presented.⁴² In particular Farber describes the festival parade as a primary expression of that official ideology. Based on her study of a festival in Ontario, she comments, "The Mammoth Parade, the main parade of the festival, was definitely a display of the symbols of community organization and tradition...."⁴³

In a setting where order is emphasized, local characters who at least occasionally challenge the status quo are out of place. As a result, Harry's verbal art proficiency is not utilized in any aspect of the Blueberry Harvest Festival nor is Jimmy ever invited to ride one of his decorated bikes in the closing day parade. In the only instance any informants could remember when a local character appeared in a parade, he showed obvious outward signs of conforming to social expectations. When Wayne was in the last Blueberry Harvest Festival parade, he was dressed in a suit and tie and riding in his brother-in-law's decorated company car. His dress communicated desire to conform to official standards and his presence in the car prevented any possible exchange with parade goers. Formally dressed and sequestered from the public, Wayne presented no threat to the social organization the parade lauded.

⁴² Carole Farber, "High, Healthy and Happy: Ontario Mythology on Parade," *The Celebration of Society*, ed. Frank Manning (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983) 36.

⁴³ Carole Farber 44.

Perhaps organizers recognize what informants express so clearly--the meaning of character designation is inseparable from context. The LeBlancs, often the first residents identified as characters by those under the age of forty, may be overlooked entirely by informants outside this age group. While to some they represent the town's foremost characters, to others they are an embarrassment. When asked about their place in the community, one senior citizen comments, "I'm afraid that somebody's going to see them and think we're a bunch of nuts here" (T86:13). By including local characters in a festival--one of the goals of which is to present positive and unified images of the community--organizers could not guarantee the elicitation of positive associations, such as tradition and stability.

Unintentionally, they could stir in some audience members mixed, or even strongly negative, reactions. Unlike historical characters whose negative aspects may be edited out, contemporary characters are living reminders of the inadequacies of the social system or existing inequalities among the community's social groups. Certainly there would be no easy way to control feelings of guilt participants might harbour towards the plight of the characters. Presumably the generally higher levels of public awareness and sense of public responsibility shown toward the mentally ill and the economically disadvantaged--particularly the homeless--might interfere with some residents'

identification with characters.

Town officials and promoters seek fresh, clean symbols that will be interpreted as strong images of community success by all residents. Since the 1970s, "Mr. People" has been the town mascot. He is the personification of the BIDC's slogan, "Amherst, the People place" and his bright yellow furry form is now a familiar presence at most community celebrations and in every parade. During the Blueberry Harvest Festival, Mr. People is accompanied by "Mr. Blueberry." In 1987 the BIDC decided Mr. Blueberry's costume, which took the form of a blue balloon type affair that was intended to resemble a giant blueberry, was no longer befitting the festival mascot. The weird costume and blue face paint were interfering with some residents' ability to identify with and embrace the symbol. He presented a particular problem for younger residents; some children were afraid of his eerie appearance and teenagers thought him ridiculous. As a result the commission changed his costume to a blue Raggedy Andy outfit and created a Raggedy Anne mate for him. She goes by the name, "Blueberry Muffin."

In the creation of these symbolic characters, the BIDC attempts to focus attention on the community's social and economic successes. Mr. People reminds residents of the great human resource within the town and creates an image of Amherst as a friendly and open place. It is perhaps

significant that Mr. People embodies some of the very qualities newcomers complain they find lacking. One new resident describes Amherst as a difficult town to break into and reports it has the reputation of being a "cold" town (T86:8). Perhaps Mr. People fulfills an alter ego function by representing the kind of community residents would like to be known for.

Mr. Blueberry, his new companion Blueberry Muffin, and the whole Blueberry Harvest festival, highlight one of the only economic bright spots for the region. As one of the areas in the province with the highest unemployment statistics, jobs are scarce. Industries that once employed thousands now are shut down or operate with skeleton crews. Its reputation as "the Blueberry capital of Canada" is perhaps the only evidence of the county's economic viability and offers one of the few hopes of expansion.

With the use of these symbols, the BIDC and festival organizers not only wish to instill pride and increase identity but hope to attract the attention of potential investors, employers, and residents. Carole Farber comments, "festivals are about identity, whether personal or social, and they are the context and the process of creating links between people in the community, as well as between the community and the wider national and cultural environment."⁴⁴ In adopting Mr. People and the Blueberry

⁴⁴ Carole Farber 34.

couple as symbolic embodiments of community resources, spirit and economic possibilities, the BIDC and festival organizers turn to what might be termed "elaborated symbols."⁴⁵ Unlike local characters whose meanings are restricted to the town, or even to social groups within the town, created characters or mascots are easily understood by outsiders as well as townspeople. Whether resident or visitor, each person who watches the parade should have a similar response to Mr. People. Interpretation does not depend on a long association of meaning.

As the costumed figures make their way along the parade route or greet people on the street during a festival, they demonstrate some of the qualities associated with actual local character performances. With the clowns and the costumed symbols of corporate identity like Mr. Munchie, the Hostess Potato Chip character or Ronald MacDonald, the fast food chain mascot who make up the parade, town mascots literally bring the festival to the people. Approaching people as they do, shaking hands, posing for photographs, or passing out candy, they engage passersby and invite their participation. If they are successful, the mascots may also instill the sense of belonging that association with a real local character often incites.

⁴⁵ See: Basil Bernstein, "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences," The Ethnography of Communication, ed. John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, American Anthropologist Special Publication 66:6 Part 2 (1964): 5-69.

Like local characters, mascots heighten the sense of play--a central element of festivals when people are freed from everyday routines to gather for contests, suppers, and other events including parades. Unlike characters, however, mascots allow for play and at the same time do not challenge the social order upheld by the festival. In a parade setting, mascots represent the "right type of play." Victor Turner comments, "Play, paradoxically, has become a more serious matter with the decline of ritual and the contraction of the religious sphere in which people used to become morally reflexive, relating their lives to values handed down in sacred traditions."⁴⁶ Frustrations with the social system take other forms in popular culture, such as the professional wrestling match where costumed representatives of good and evil do battle.⁴⁷ In the festival setting, however, real or created challengers of the status quo are largely absent.

Determining if a potential entry represents the "right type of play" is sometimes difficult. Andy MacDonald, a

⁴⁶ Victor Turner, "Carnival in Rio: Dionysian Drama in an Industrializing Society," Celebration of Society, ed. Frank Manning 105.

⁴⁷ See: Roland Barthes, "Wrestling," Mythologies trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 15-25; Gerald Craven and R. Moseley, "Actor on the Canvas Stage: The Dramatic Conventions of Professional Wrestling," Journal of Popular Culture 6 (1972): 327-36; Jim Freedman, "Will the Sheik Use His Blinding Fireball? The Ideology of Professional Wrestling," Celebration of Society, ed. Frank Manning (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983) 67-79.

"professional" character, has been a part of most parades for approximately ten years. MacDonald, wearing bright colors and several plaids, rides in his car stuffed full of soft sculpture figures which he refers to as his dummies. Accompanying signs identify the dummies--often as politicians or culturally recognized stereotypes such as mother-in-law--or make humorous remarks based on MacDonald's Cape Breton and/or Scottish heritage.

Town officials and promoters are at a loss to know what to make of MacDonald. His clown-like dummies and his own costumes seem to belong in a parade setting, and as the author of three books of humour and the focus of many journalistic profiles, MacDonald has become a local, or regional celebrity⁴⁸ not unlike the politicians or Blueberry Harvest queen contestants included in the procession. Despite similarities to other parade entries, however, MacDonald's often politically based jokes and obviously contrived efforts at humour contrast with the messages communicated by the rest of the parade.

Lukewarm public reception prohibits one of the few possibilities open to organizers--the promotion of MacDonald

⁴⁸ Andy MacDonald is author of Bread and Molasses (Don Mills, Ontario: Musson Book, 1976); Don't Slip on the Soap (Don Mills, Ontario: Musson Book, 1978); and Tell Pa I'm Dead (Toronto: Doubleday, 1985). Articles written about MacDonald include: Rosemary Chaisson, "Andy and the Dummies," Atlantic Advocate June 1975: 27-28; Miss Châtelaine 15:10 December 1978; and Gail Taylor, "Maritimes," ArtsCanada December 1969: 4-11.

as a comic folk hero. The largely English population does not identify with his exterior as a professional Cape Bretoner and they are unsure how to assess his use of the front as a strategy to earn money. MacDonald's development of the character front in order to permanently better his situation differs markedly from the role's customary use as one of few available tools to temporarily better one's position. Wary of being conned or of rewarding MacDonald undeservedly for his performances, the general population joins town officials in treating him with bemused tolerance. MacDonald's greatest successes and recognitions come from outside the immediate region. While the consensus within Amherst is that Andy MacDonald is a character whose actions are generally designed to elicit laughter, his role in officially sanctioned events remains questionable.

The cool reception shown Andy MacDonald by town promoters confirms that just as in its oral form, folklore fits cultural rules when publicly presented. As local historians in cooperation with town promoters and officials struggle to select and create acceptable public symbols of Amherst's past and present, they invent a picture in contrast with reality and with messages and images communicated through oral tradition. Ambiguity, possible sources of embarrassment, and associations with unpleasant contemporary reality are tailored as positive aspects elicited by character performances, such as tradition,

accessibility, and play are highlighted. Remade for different audiences with different needs, characters are filtered through a public frame of reference that sanitizes and stereotypes them, rendering them appropriate representatives of historical and cultural identity.

IX

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the equivocal position of local characters within one Nova Scotian community. The lives of many of Amherst's local characters were documented and discussed in an attempt to establish their socio-historical position within the community. Based on this eclectic collection of nonconformists, the following working definition of "character" was adopted:

A character is an individual whose dramatic performance, consistent within a particular context, is recognized as being in contrast to, or in conflict with, governing social norms. The character is seen as nonthreatening, and often humorous, by most, if not all, other group members.

In examining the list of seventy-five plus characters, it was discovered that most suffer from what Erving Goffman describes as physical, tribal, or character stigma.¹ As a result, it was argued that the character role is identified by at least some stigmatized individuals as a means of improving low standing and exercising some power in interactions with others. For them becoming a character represents a viable means to capitalize on stigma over which

¹ See: Erving Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

they have little or no control.

Community participation is an important component in the character labelling process. Local character anecdotes provide a vehicle for the development of community consensus concerning a character's status or position and help alleviate uneasiness generated by the character's presence. Their transmission contributes to the nonconformist's accommodation by the community.

Fieldwork indicates that while characters may at first appear to be positioned along a group's outer fringe, they are actually central to it. Reflective of many of the community's fears and preoccupations, characters in Amherst help residents come to terms with ambiguities faced in everyday life and with uncomfortable emotions and concepts such as envy, fear of envy and inequality. Characters also mediate between individuals and segments of the community, facilitating ongoing negotiations for power and status.

Finally, the study determined that official culture recognizes some of the benefits the community derives from local characters. Remodeled or recreated for inclusion in popular representations of local history or culture, characters of official culture pose no threat to existing social order nor introduce any of the ambiguity associated with actual local characters of traditional culture. Rather, their link with tradition is emphasized and their ability to induce the play element capitalized upon.

Further investigation of the scope and nature of local

characters' contributions to folk culture will help to advance central folkloristic concerns such as the relation of context to generic form and meaning. Its greatest value, however, may well lie in the research's ability to develop new lines of inquiry such as the exploration of folklore's link with a group's distribution of power. The study of local characters leads folklorists away from multicultural displays of ethnicity and towards meaningful analysis of ethnic groups and their dynamic relationships with majority group cultures. Although folklorists are only now beginning to recognize the potentials of such analysis, local characters provide a natural avenue to explore what is most central--the structure and dynamics of small group culture and the meaning of tradition. It can be no surprise that characters who cause even the young child to reflect upon the meaning of group membership, have much to reveal about the very nature of the discipline.

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APPENDIX A

"Watson Weaver"
by Hilton McCully
(Filidh Na Choille)

When first I knew him,
Watson used to come to mother's door,
For gingerbread and buttermilk
and then with smiles galore;
He'd launch into his sales pitch;
He seemed to like this chore.

From around Springhill and Amherst,
He made his way along,
He hitched on cars and wagons
And while he hummed a song,
He'd jump into a pung sled
And as the old mare flew,
What energy he seemed to have as he talked
to me and you.

I remember him at Granny's,
With his chuckle and his smile
He wouldn't take his coat off,
But would sit there for a while.

He'd try to sell you bobby-pins,
Dish cloths, a spool of thread,
A pencil, some elastic,
To earn his daily bread.

He would pull things from his knapsack,
And every trip had more,
He said 'twould save you walking
Three miles to Tibbett's Store.

He came along his shoreline trip,
'Bout every month or so.
We used to watch for Weaver,
And the goods he had to show.

He would sell a little snapshot
Of a vessel at the pier;
Or a picture of the King and Queen;
The price was never dear.

But, sad, one day we missed him
On his trip along the shore;
He'd gone to meet his comrades
Of the Great and Bloody War.

Still o'er the miles of Cumberland,
In both the east and west,
His friends remember Weaver,
By whom they oft were pressed,
To buy some little knick-knack,
For just a dime or two
From Watson Weaver's treasure.....
He waves-'Be seein' you.'

Springhill Record 17 September 1980: 4A.

APPENDIX B
List of Tape Recorded Interviews

| Tape Number | Date Recorded (D-M-Y) | Informant(s) mentioned by name |
|-------------|--------------------------|--|
| T80:1 | | |
| T81:1 | 1-3-81 | |
| T81:3 | | |
| T83:1 | 25-11-83 | |
| T84:1 | 12-6-84 | |
| T85:1 | 11-6-85 | Andy MacDonald |
| T85:2 | 1-8-85 | |
| T85:3 | 5-8-85 | |
| T85:4 | 6-8-85 | |
| T85:5 | 14-8-85 | |
| T85:6 | 17-8-85 | |
| T86:1 | 8-1-86 | |
| T86:2 | 9-1-86 | Joseph |
| T86:3 | 25-2-86 | Lloyd |
| T86:4 | 27-2-86 | Dawn |
| T86:5 | 5-3-86 | |
| T86:6 | 6-3-86 | |
| T86:7 | 12-3-86 | |
| T86:8 | 13-3-86 | Roger & Hazel Mills |
| T86:9 | 14-3-86 | |
| T86:10 | 18-3-86 | Vincent, Karen, & Joan Ann Mark |
| T86:11 | 19-3-86 | |
| T86:12 | 19-3-86 | |
| T86:13 | 26-3-86 | |
| T86:14 | 18-9-86 | Shirley |
| T86:15 | 23-9-86 | Carl |
| T86:16 | 23-9-86 | Grace |
| T86:17 | 23-9-86 | |
| T86:18 | 24-9-86 | Carmen |
| T86:19 | 24-9-86 | Harold |
| T86:20 | 24-9-86 | Ann & Brad |
| T86:21 | 25-9-86 | Ronald |
| T87:1 | 27-4-87 | Martha & Maurice |
| T87:2 | 28-4-87 | Bill & Helen |
| T87:3 | 28-4-87 | George |
| T87:4 | 28-4-87 | Steven |
| T87:5 | 12-6-87 | Scott |
| T87:6 | 13-6-87 | Wesley |
| T87:7 | 25-6-87 | Debbie |
| T87:8 | 18-7-87 | |
| T88:1 | | |
| T88:2 | 4-2-88 | Sarah Paul |



