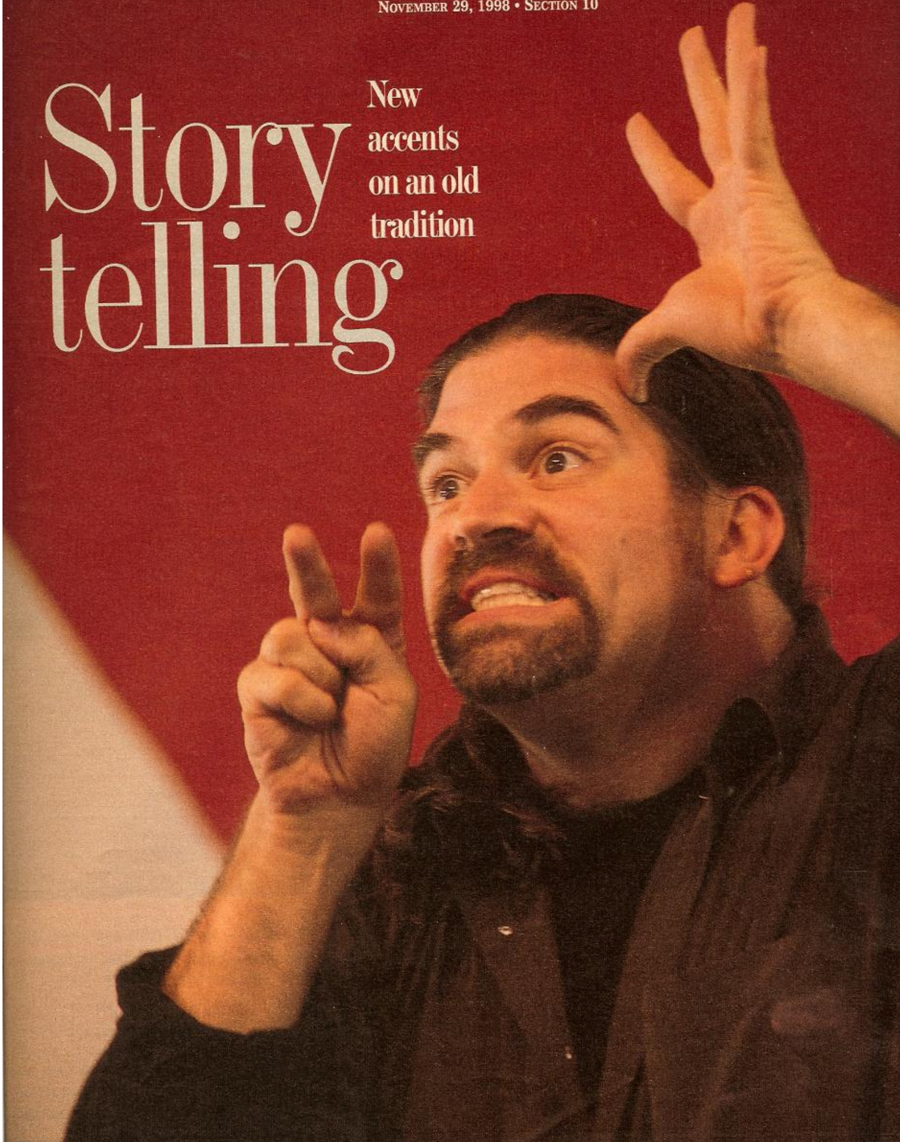
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Story telling
New accents on an old tradition

There once was a very
that for years had been

ry old tradition
t for dead.

This is the story of how people came from far and wide to bring it back to life.

By Linnet Myers
Photographs by Steve Kagan

Peter Cook stepped up to the stage, tossed the microphone aside and spoke in sign language as an interpreter translated, "I don't really need that."

The crowd laughed, but Cook, who is deaf, couldn't hear it. Don't clap or call out, he suggested. Instead, he asked for something he could see.

"You could do this," interpreter Candace Hart translated, as Cook nodded his head. "Or this," he signed, with a look of amusement. "Or that," with an expression of shock. Cook went on to act out a story, telling of the time he traveled to an Indian reservation, where he and a friend camped out.

Peter Cook (left photo) wordlessly delights the crowd at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn. (above).

It turned out that the man who invited them didn't live there at all, and the pair was actually camping in someone's driveway. Angry at the intrusion, the men who lived there requested something in return. But Cook and his friend had nothing to share.

"I said, 'I'm a storyteller. I could tell you a story,' " Cook told the audience. "So you see how stories can save your

Susan O'Halloran told of a trip to Guatemala, where she saw government oppression firsthand. She aims for stories that teach, but she doesn't leave out laugh

soul—and your butt."

Cook and what he calls his "visual poetry" are proof that there are all kinds of storytellers, even those who speak with their hands. At this fall's National Storytelling Festival in Tennessee, you also could listen to a Chinese-American who talks of the Year of the Pig, or an American Indian who was declared a "Living Treasure" or a Chicagoan contributing an urban perspective. Or perhaps an Irishman who tells of a matchmaker trying to find a bride for a man so ugly he had "lice the size of mice" dancing on his neck.

These are all storytellers, too, and they practice what was a dying art until a quarter-century ago, when a few people took it upon themselves to turn that around. By this year, 10,000 traveled to Jonesborough for the annual storytelling festival, crowding into huge tents that spring up each year around the small, historic town.

Inside each tent, a lone "teller" stood on stage, with no script, no score, no videos. Storytelling in the 1990s: In a way, it doesn't seem to fit. Then again, maybe it fits just fine.

"Nowadays we plug ourselves into machines. That's what we do; we plug ourselves in," said Syd Lieberman, a Chicago storyteller.

Unplug yourself, he urges, and listen.

Chicago sends its own share of storytellers to the national event: Susan O'Halloran, for example, a South Side Irish Catholic who says she wanted to be a nun—until she kissed a boy named Jimmy; Lieberman, an Evanston High School teacher who talks about being a scrawny Jewish kid longing to be a tough Italian; and Cook, who "tells" in his own silent way.

There are ghost stories, fairy tales, fantasies. And most of all, tales about real life.

When listeners listen, "it validates the human experience," said Lieberman. "They realize they don't have to have these dramatic television things happening to them.

"Actors pretend you're not there," he said. "Storytellers look you in the eye and tell you a story."

At the festival, "there are 500 people in some tents and you can hear a pin drop sometimes," said visitor Kirby Majer of Chicago's North Side. "I work with computers. I'm with inanimate objects all day. I send a lot of e-mail—three sentences, and I consider that communication. Or a quick phone call while walking down Michigan Avenue.

"We're losing something."

Storytelling, on the other hand, is "people talking to people." Majer misses that. And—judging from storytelling's growing popularity—so do a lot of other people.

The National Storytelling Festival started in 1973, when a hay wagon pulled up to Jonesborough's courthouse and storytellers climbed on top of it to "tell," said Jimmy Neil Smith, executive director of the National Storytelling Association.

About 60 people gathered.

"Despite the small attendance, it was a magical event," said Smith.

Before that, he said, "storytelling as a conscious cultural experience was dying. We wanted to hang on to that piece of our humanity: the told story."

The founders made it an annual event and it later moved off the wagon into a tent filled with listeners. After that, it steadily expanded.

Ray Hicks, 75, of North Carolina is the Appalachian storytelling tradition personified.

"I remember the year there were too many people for one tent," said Beth Horner, a Wilmette storyteller who came to listen. "Then it just grew and grew and grew."

Last month, the festival's ticket holders paid between $10 and $90, depending on the events they attended. That—along with sales of products such as story-filled cassette tapes—grossed about $1 million for the nonprofit association, which works for the preservation of storytelling.

Stories were told for three days straight, going into the night, when the festival's renowned ghost stories were told. Torches flickered and listeners huddled in the autumn darkness as tellers such as Anndrena Belcher stood in a lighted gazebo, telling.

Belcher began her tales by saying that "some of the scariest stuff in the world is what people do to each other."

She told of a slave named Balaan Foster, a special child who "walked like he had a king in his body."

"What does a white woman know about slavery?" she asked the crowd. Then she, a white woman, answered her own question with another: "Have you ever been trapped? Have you ever been locked in?" Balaan Foster wanted to be free, she said. He was bound to be free—even if he had to bargain with demons or ghosts.

As Belcher finished her story, ter's spirit flew to the heavens Belcher picked up the skirt of long, flowing dress and danced a j

Today, Belcher is proud of he palachian heritage, a pride that through the Tennessee festival, is nestled in mountain country Belcher's own life stories, whic also tells, reveal the pain she p through to find that pride.

Some tellers tell tales tha passed down for generations; o transport listeners to fanciful w of glorious knights and dang dragons. Yet many stories are s real life. Those often are the one mean the most to listeners, w spond with what Lieberman call laughter of recognition."

"It hits the nitty-gritty—it hits down in," said Floridian Ken Ca ter, an Illinois native who att with his wife, Thelma.

Belcher, for instance, often f on "my personal family sto migration and living life."

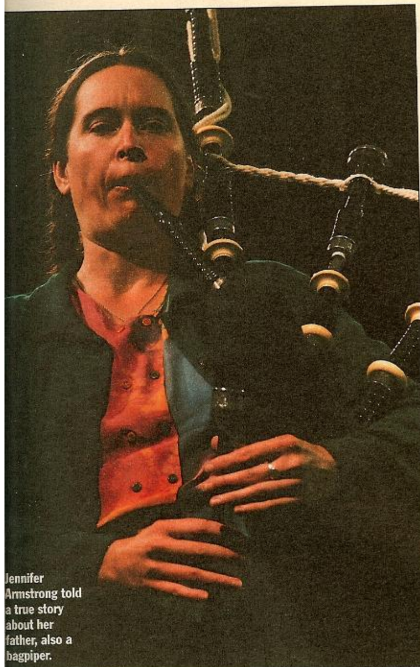
Moving from the Kentucky Chicago's Uptown when she child, "we lived between two w she said. Once taunted for her " ly" ways, Belcher now says that help preserve cultures like hers, are threatened with extinction.

"We're very much in dan assimilating people's languag cultures out of existence by leg ing one form of standardized E one model for success, for bea everything," she said.

"You don't have to be a mov to have a voice or a story."

Nowadays, there are 300 to rytelling festivals in the United most of which were stimulated "revival" sparked by the first n fest, said Smith. Telling stories so popular that the Jonesb event features a "Swappin' G that allows amateurs to give it a

The national fest actually



Jennifer Armstrong told a true story about her father, also a bagpiper.

t being "very Appalachian," but now ovides a "panoramic view" of the rld's cultures, said Smith. "There's a nderful storytelling tradition here the South, but stories are told every- iere from Michigan Avenue in icago to out on the range—cowboy ories or Native Americans."

Featured at this year's festival was Hilbert, who shares American Indi- traditions from the Upper Skagit ibe and has been declared a Wash- gton state "Living Treasure." From ew York, Gioia Timpanelli recalled cilian hearth tellers. Some listeners eard Chinese folklore from Clara Yen Los Angeles, while others heard atrick Ball, who came from Ireland to are the Celtic tradition.

Three of the festival's 20 featured llers—Cook, Lieberman and O'Hallo- n—currently live in the Chicago area, hile two others, Belcher and Jennifer rmstrong, spent childhood years here.

Today, Chicago is "certainly one of e hubs," said Lieberman. The reason r this is a matter of some speculation. mith said there is a "nourishing fami- " of storytellers in Chicago that makes the city a "wellspring" for talent.

"There's a liveliness to Chicago," said O'Halloran, who is from the Southwest Side. "From our sports teams to our politicians, we do everything full out. So it doesn't surprise me.

"Also, people have a real ethnic identity there that people don't have in other cities. You know, Mayor Daley, he's a story in himself."

The city has inspired Lieberman's book, "Streets and Alleys: Stories With a Chicago Accent" (August House Publishers), along with two of O'Halloran's cassettes, "Growing Up in Chicago, Volumes I and II."

Like Lieberman, O'Halloran stresses the intimacy—and reality—of the art form. Unlike a live play, "you keep the lights up," O'Halloran said. "In storytelling, you see their faces."

At the festival, she told of journeying with her sons in 1993 to Guatemala, where they stayed with a group of nuns. The mother superior, she said, was a tiny Mayan woman with "a road map of wrinkles across her face. If you were to name that map, it'd be called 'Land of the Wise.' So much wisdom in that face."

From the start she knew her family's bouncing bus trip wouldn't exactly be "the Cleavers do Guatemala." But while there, O'Halloran saw firsthand the deadly repression tied to the Guatemalan government—which in turn was supported by the U.S. She led listeners through villages hit by harsh brutality, then confronted the audience with a question: "How do we change things?"

Some listeners wiped tears away as O'Halloran went on, but in a moment the crowd was laughing again—as she described a time when the nuns drank beer, and danced.

"Is it grace or is it stupidity," O'Halloran asked, "when hope is rekindled?" When she finished, listeners rose to a standing ovation.

Storytellers say their craft requires what any good drama has: characters facing a challenge.

"Whether it's a fable or a personal story or a fairy tale, we want to watch them struggle and overcome—or at least learn something," said O'Halloran. "A moment of transformation, of realization."

"The same thing runs throughout literature—a sense of tension and conflict," said Belcher. "The character transforms, changes, becomes enlightened."

O'Halloran said she aims for stories that entertain while listeners learn. When dealing with violence or tragedy, that takes some special skill.

A teller can "take people right up to the point of being uncomfortable," but shouldn't leave them there, she said. "You lace it with humor so the audience gets relief."

If a story's moral weighs too heavily, "people don't learn. They'll shut down if you give them too much."

The skill with which O'Halloran delivered her Guatemala message wasn't lost on Marion Besmehn, a listener from Texas. "It was funny and it was true—really true. And that's what storytelling is: the truth." Besmehn herself holds a master's degree in storytelling, an unusual degree offered by East Tennessee State University.

At the Jonesborough fest, Besmehn was treated to the masters of her trade.

"This," she said, "is the mother of all storytelling."

Lieberman agreed. The first year he attended the national event, "I couldn't believe what I was seeing," he said. "This is the major leagues."

Along with hearing the heavy hitters, festival-goers also can witness the next generation of tellers. Among them this year was Jessica Carleton, 15, from the Chicago suburb of Glenview.

In her tale "The Other Side of Magic," Carleton started with storytelling's best-known opening: "Once upon a time. . . ."

Her story told of growing up, learning to separate truth from fantasy. As the tale went on, a conflict grew between "my heart, that wanted to stay young, to stay in the magic," said Carleton, "and my mind, that wanted to grow up."

In the end, she said, "I realized that now—now I'm on the other side of magic."

Carleton was featured as one of several "Youthful Voices" who won this year's National Storytelling Youth Olympics, held at East Tennessee State, which has become a national focal point for telling.

At the fest, while some teenagers told, others listened. Lieberman said he has discovered in teaching that many youths are hungry for stories, particularly about the lives of the adults around them.

"It's like watching fish come out of water," he said. "They put their heads up: 'What?' "

'Actors pretend you're not there. Storytellers look you in the eye and tell you a story.'

—Syd Lieberman

Real-life stories aren't the only ones that captivate kids. Lieberman said h once went to a junior high tha "hadn't had an assembly fo three years, the kids were s bad."

"I started with Edgar Alla Poe, 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' " h said. "For the first 45 second the kids had no idea what t make of me. All of a sudden the got dead silent. It's the power c Poe. He captured them."

Another time, Lieberma appeared at a juvenile dete tion center. The story "was a about me wanting to be a toug guy—this little bald-heade Jewish guy, modeling myse after this tough Italian." Thos youths, he said, "were fallir out of their chairs [laughing That story is their story. The

know what that means."

Jennifer Armstrong, another teller with Chicago roots, said she often looks out and sees that listeners are "not only laughing, but crying—running the whole range of emotions.

"So many people feel like, 'I'm not anybody important,' " she said. But when life stories take on meaning, "You find out that you're amazing.... You realize it's OK, that we're not so separate."

Several Chicago tellers said they began to "tell" after major changes in their own lives.

O'Halloran was a dancer who hurt her back and could no longer dance. That was about 10 years ago, around the time that she spotted a magazine photo of a professional storyteller.

"I said, 'Wow, this woman makes her living going around telling stories,' " she recalled. It sounded like a good idea, and she tried it.

As for Belcher, "I was in bed one morning and said to myself, 'You're not happy. What's missing?' I decided at the age of 31 to quit my regular job." That was 17 years ago, and she has been a professional teller ever since.

For his part, Lieberman said, "I was 38 years old, having a mid-life crisis right out of the book. My wife said to me, 'I think you need to go away.' "

He decided to take a class and learn something new.

"The brochure comes.... I turned the page and it said 'Storytelling.' " He chose that class and when the teacher first demonstrated a story, "I was dumbstruck, and that's the word. I couldn't talk. That was me up there. That was my art form. That was my world up there, and I didn't know it existed."

After the course, Lieberman went to a library to tell. He was so nervous he asked his wife to sit up front and hold a signboard with the stories' names, just in case his mind went blank. It didn't—and he has been telling stories ever since.

Lieberman still teaches, working as a storyteller only part-time. But other professional tellers make a living exclusively from fees for events at schools, libraries, nightclubs and festivals. Fees vary greatly, depending on the teller's experience, the audience size, travel expenses and whether the listening group is a non-profit agency. Several tellers said their fees run between $350 and $600 for an hour's performance.

While some have changed their lives to tell, Armstrong was raised with a tradition of folk songs and tales.

At the fest this year, Armstrong told of her father's Alzheimer's disease, which eventually kept him from opening the annual University of Chicago Folk Festival, which he had done for 30 years, with a tune on the bagpipes.

Armstrong, who also plays the pipes, said she was left "to mourn the slow slipping away" as her father, George Armstrong, lost his memory. It was at its worst, she said, "not when he forgot how to tell time or to write his name, but when he began to forget tune after tune on the pipes."

Finally, "we knew he wouldn't open another festival, so the next year I put on my father's jacket, put on his hat... took the pipes and went down to the University of Chicago."

Her father was there, as a spectator this time, and "he looked me up and down, head to toe." Then "Daddy said to me, 'Talk about following in my footsteps—you're wearing my socks.' And with great pride, I opened the University of Chicago festival."

With that, Armstrong took up her bagpipes and marched across the stage, playing.

"The whole passage of time," she said, "was right there."

Of all the nation's tellers, only one has been asked to the festival every year, said Smith. That is Ray Hicks, now 75.

Before the first-ever national fest, Hicks was known in "very limited folklore circles" and rarely told tales anywhere but on his own front porch, said Smith. Now, once a year, Hicks makes his way from his North Carolina mountain home to Jonesborough, where hundreds gather to hear him.

Like the national festival, "he grew up with the [storytelling] revival," said Smith. Hicks' stories are pure Appalachian tradition—tales that have been passed down through the generations.

"Ray *is* the tradition," said O'Halloran. "He doesn't try to make his living as a storyteller. He *is* one."

Hicks stayed for only one of the festival's three days. "He doesn't trust being away," said Smith. Back home, his family cooks on a wood stove and has neither a telephone nor indoor plumbing.

Many of Hicks' stories are "Jack tales"—as in "Jack and the Beanstalk." In these folk tales, "Jack is always getting into trouble—the same Jack," said Smith. "He gets around."

This year, Jack appeared on various stages in many forms. Ed Stivender—a fast-paced, funny teller who wrote "Raised Catholic (Can You Tell?)" (August House Publishers)—added a twist of irreverence as his version of Jack tackled giants and rescued maidens.

On the festival's last day, Stivender led a tent full of listeners on another rowdy adventure. Then, with a final wish, it was over. "I hope you have nothing to worry about," Stivender told the raucous crowd, "and that you live happily ever after." ■