

In Memoriam

Newbell Niles Puckett 1897-1967

On February 21, 1967, Newbell Puckett tied a rainbow 'round his shoulder and crossed the Jordan. Onomasticians know him for his definitive study of the "Names of Negro Slaves," in Murdock's *Studies in the Science of Society* (1937). Folklorists know him for his unique and honest *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926), a classic study which stands beside Cash's *The Mind of the South* and Newman White's *American Negro Folksongs*.

Born in Columbus, Mississippi, on July 8, 1897, Newbell Puckett was educated at Mississippi College and at Yale, where he received an A.M. in 1921 along with a Page fellowship, and a Ph.D. in 1925. He came to Western Reserve as an instructor in 1922, and since then has been an Ohioan, rising through all the sociological ranks until he was made a professor in 1938. His intellect comprised the cultures of both the North and the South, but he retained his intuitive and emotional understanding of his birthplace, and even a physical and financial presence, as a partner since 1941 in the Columbus Brick Company. If you threw a brick at Dixie he was quick to show you your lack of anthropological appreciation. I well remember his reaction to some of Tom Lehrer's musical canards on the bedsheet country. Yet he was close enough to the Negroes for whom he had an intense interest and allegiance to use a unique field working technique. Claiming to be himself a practitioner of *obeah* or *voodoo*, he unlocked many an uncommunicative mouth.

He was likewise honored in his adopted country. In 1954 he was elected president of the Ohio Folklore Society and in 1952 the Cleveland Folklore Society similarly honored him. The intense community efforts with ethnic groups, foreign and Negro, for which Cleveland is famous, owed much to his own practical and theoretical sociological mind. For many years he attended the Ohio Folklore Society meetings at another Columbus, and elsewhere in the state, accompanied by his first wife Marion Randell Puckett and, after Marion's

death in 1959, by his second wife Ruth Neuer Puckett. Besides Mrs. Puckett, he is survived by two sons, Randy and Robert, and a daughter, Mrs. Robert A. (Sally) Berge.

Those of us who knew him in the Ohio scene benefitted from his professional knowledge and also from his early background. The jamborees always wound up with Newbell leading us in "The Old Time Religion" and another round or two of the hymns which came out of his Baptist background. To Ohio he also contributed a careful survey of popular beliefs and superstitions, a part of the massive national survey directed by Wayland Hand of UCLA – a survey which has just been happily funded in the first year's grants of the National Endowment for the Humanities. His work in folklore was honored in 1960 by his being made a fellow of the American Folklore Society; he was also a fellow of the American Anthropological Association; and a member of the American Association of University Professors and the American Name Society. But with all of the professional greatness and widespread humanity which he possessed, he would have remembered with one of his Southern Negro informants:

Oh Deat' he is a little man,
And he goes from do' to do' . . .

He has earned his rest with Paul and Silas.

Francis Lee Utley