

[William D. Naylor's Story]

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FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Earl Bowman

ADDRESS 86 West 12th St

DATE September 19, 1938 (and Oct. 5)

SUBJECT MEDICINE SHOW AND CARNIVAL—Wm. D. Naylor's Story

1. Date and time of interview Sept, 19, 1938; Sept. 27, 1938; Oct. 1 and 3, 1938.
2. Place of interview 486 Sixt Ave., (Sept. 19); 86 West 12th St,(Sept.27) Daca's Book Store, (Oct. 1); Washington Sq. (Oct 3.)
3. Name and address of informant Wm. D. Naylor. Met him at 486 Sixth Ave. He would not allow me to visit him, claiming that his room was not the sort in which to have guests; my impression is that he lives in some of the municipal lodging houses, from night to night.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Mr. Naylor retains something of the "theatrical pride" and since he would not allow me to call on him at his room, I cannot describe the surroundings in which he lives. Personal appearance is: A very well preserved man, smooth shaven, scant gray hair, brown eyes, in age in the seventies. He does not show dissipation and is neat and clean though his clothing shows long service. So far as I know he is not a hard drinker but I will say that he enjoyed quite a lot a couple of cans of beer on the date (Sept. 27) when I had him come to my place (86 West 12th Street) for an evening's visit/

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER EARL BOWMAN

ADDRESS 86 West 12th St. New York City

DATE Sept 19, 1939

SUBJECT MEDICINE SHOW - WM. D. NAYLOR's STORY:

I was born in New York City ... on the West Side, but when I was just a baby my people moved up to what is now the Bronx. You can tell by looking at me that that was a good while ago. Still ...seventy-two years ain't so much.

Anyhow, it was long before electric street cars or automobiles. And naturally I've seen lots of changes in New York City. Whether they're better or worse, I don't know.

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One thing I do know though is that we kids had lots of fun back in the old days when the fire-wagons were drawn by horses that seemed like they were just as anxious to go to a fire as we kids were when we'd chase after them when there was an alarm and those beautiful animals would come charging along the street...

Our chief diversions on Sundays was to go to Coney Island. We used to ride our bicycles out there. I suppose I always had a flare for the kind of entertainment Coney Island offered. There wa a kind of fascination to me, even when I was a kid in the excitement and glamour of the "Carnival spirit" I suppose you would call it.

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Eventually, when I was about 19 years old, I joined "DOC" PORTER's KICKAPOO INDIAN MEDICINE HOW. The show was then "playing" in The Bronx and every night I'd go over and listen... envying the performers who entertained the crowd before "Doc". Porter came out to give his lecture and sell his medicines.

I stayed with Doc Porter for six years, singing " Poor MOURNER, YOU SHALL BE FREE. " " KANSAS ", and other songs like that of course with some of the popular (then) songs like "Two Little Girls in blue," "Down Went M'Ginty" "After The Ball," etc.

All my work was black-face, and I imagined I was just as good as most vaudeville performers on stages in theatres.

One thing I'm sure of and that is that our old "Medicine show" gave a lot of people who otherwise didn't have very much entertainment a chance to see and hear something different and be amused.

We traveled all over the small town circuits of upper Now York, part of Pennyslvania, New Jersey and as far south as Virginia.

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There are so many “stream lined” entertainments now-a-days that I don't suppose the old simple entertainment we offered would interest people these days...but...sometimes I think maybe an old fashioned medicine show would draw crowds just like it used to do.

Of course we traveled in covered hacks or spring wagons and all our shows were given out of doors. Our lights were gasoline flares on each side of the stage which was a platform that we'd set up at the back end of the wagon.

In the days of the “medicine show” there were not so many laws regulating the practice of medicine or the sale of drugs and not so many licenses and restrictions as now. This was especially true in the backwoods towns such as we'd usually show in. Towns often without railroads and where other shows didn't come.

So Doc Porter didn't have anything to do but drive into a town, pick out a vacant spot somewhere and set up our pitch there.

Everybody would know as soon as we got into a town.

But Doc usually hunted up the newspaper office if there was a paper and gave the editor an ad telling where our show was located. That got him on the good side of the editor, and the editor in those backwoods places was an important person.

He would also call on the marshall and if there was a mayor he would visit him too.

With his ‘dignity,’ Prince Albert coat, silk hat, double-breasted watch chain with a buck-eye set in gold bands ([He?] believed the buck-eye kept him from having rheumatism!) he looked and [could?] act like a combination Bishop, Senator, Supreme Court Judge, all rolled into one. The natives in those small backwoods towns never had a chance with him!

Doc Porter's medicines were all made up by himself and he was jealous of the “ancient Kickapoo formulas” he used. They were all made...‘from roots and barks and the tender

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succulent foliage of healing, life-giving herbs the Great Manitou of Nature planted in the forests, on the hills and in the valleys so that his children, the noble tribe of Kickapoos these priceless secrets of Life and Health and Happiness; they were handed down from father to son and from generation to generation—cherished and guarded with the very lives of their possessors! Then, then my great-great Grandfather saved the life of the Chief Medicine Man of the Kickapoo Tribe, 'Clack-Wah-Eelah,' 4 the 'Bounding Cougar,' that great Chief showed his gratitude by giving my noble pioneer ancestor these marvelous formulas and he bade him go forth and give to his White Brethen the blessings the Great Manitou had bestowed upon his Red Children of the forest..." (Mr. Naylor laughed with a little homesick note in his chuckle as he remembered and recited the bombastic quotation.)"

Doc Porter sure had a great string of palaver and though I heard it a thousand times I never got tired of listening to his 'lecture,'

In addition to his Kickapoo Remedies, Doc Porter also had a 'madstone.' It was a bluish-gray, porous lump about the size of a pullet's egg. It was supposed to cure mad-dog or snake bites by sucking the venom out. When pressed against the wound if it stuck there was poison in the injury. It would stick till it had sucked itself full of venom and then fall off. It would then be boiled in milk till it was clean again and then re-applied. That was kept up till the 'madstone' wouldn't stick anymore. The patient was then supposed to be safe...

The legend was that 'madstones' were found only in the stomachs of some deer. And that the deer had picked them up from some salt-lick where they had fallen from the sky.

I never saw Doc Porter use his madstone but once and that was on a girl who had been bitten on the calf of her leg by a copperhead snake while picking blackberries. It was in Virginia at a little cross-roads place called 'smoky Run', I think. The madstone stuck all right. And Doc applied it three times, boiling it in milk after each application when it would fall off and wouldn't stick anymore.

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The girl didn't die but she was almight sick.

That was just one of the queer experiences we had with the old medicine show. Once we hit a place where a feud was being settled.. That was down in Virginia too..."

It was back in the hill country of Virginia and the place was called 'Rocky Comfort.' It really wasn't a town. There was a water-power grist mill, a store, a blacksmith shop and about a quarter of a mile up the little valley there was a 'meeting house,' where traveling preachers would sometimes hold revivals which were called 'camp meetings.'

Doc. Porter stopped there to have the horses shod and it happened there was a camp-meeting going on. It looked like a pretty busy place; the natives from miles around had come, brought their families, their hound dogs and their rifles and were camped out in the grove around the meeting house. It was a big event and they at those camp meetings they went on a sort of 'emotional picnic.'

Doc got the idea that our Medicine Show would add to the general entertainment and we could give shows between religious services. It worked. Doc was diplomatic and didn't try to compete with the preaching but sort of helped it out and never gave a show wile preaching was going on. Instead we'd all attend the services. That put us in solid with the 'brethren' and we sold a lot of medicine.

The feud was between the 'Buxton' — or 'Bruxton' and another bunch of natives named 'Greenberry,'—I think that was the name.

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Old Uncile Jed Buxton, a tall, sharp-eyed old fellow with a yellowish-gray, hang-down, moustache was boss of the "Buxton' bunch and 'Grandpap' Lindsay Greenberry was head of the 'enemy' tribe.

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I never heard what the feud started over, probably some 'Buxton' stole a 'Greenberry' pig, or some 'Greenberry' shot a 'Buxton' cow. But whatever it was that started it there'd been killing on both sides and from what I heard about it they were always gunning or ganging up on each other, or cutting each other up with 'Bowie knives.' The cause of the feud wasn't important, though; it was the way it ended that seemed funny to me.

And a queer thing was that both tribes were religious and when they'd go to the 'camp-meetings' they've have a temporary truce while the meeting was going on.

It was at the camp-meeting the feud ended. The preacher was a big raw-boned 'Hard-shell Baptist,' and he certainly believed in hell-fire and damnation; and when he'd get up and start to preach he'd always pull out a twist of long-green tobacco and pull off a big chew—then he was ready to go at it. And he went. He was almost as good as Doc Porter when it came to oratory. He talked hell-fire and brimstone.. 'sizzlin' and bilin' and smokin'" until he'd have the whole audience sweating and groaning. Finally he got under the hides of the 'Buxtons' and 'Greenberrys' and had them all 'tremblin' on the brink' as he called it... 'jest hangin' over eternal damnation by a 'brickle' thread!

The payoff was that old Uncle Jed Buxton and Grandpappy Greenberry both got more religion than they'd ever got before and decided to 'make peace' and stop their tribes from carving and 7 shooting and beating each other up.

The preacher got them together at the 'mourner's bench' and got them to agree to 'make friends' and be brethren. But they had to do something to prove the 'treaty' would last and they could 'trust' each other... And that's where the funny part of it came in.

Old Uncle Jed Buxton and Grandpap Greenberry acted for the whole bunch of each of their tribes. The 'peace ceremony' was performed at the camp-meeting in the presence of the whole audience, the Hard-shell Baptist preacher acted as master of ceremonies. You'd never guess how / they 'pledged' themselves and proved that they 'trusted' each other.

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Those two old mountain codgers who had been ‘killin’ enemies shaved each other! And not with safety razors either!

They did it right on the preacher's platform while the whole congregation looked on and muttered a lot of ‘Amens’ and “Praise the Lords“

They drew straws for to see who should shave who first, and Uncle Jed Buxton got 'the chair' first. Grandpappy Greenberry lathered Uncle Jed up, took that wicked had long-bladed razor (the preacher supplied the outfit) and whittled the whiskers off of Uncle Jed's face and neck...but when he Got down around Uncle Jed's wind-pips I noticed the ‘Buxton clan' got mighty tense and silent. But Uncle Jed didn't bat an eye while his old enemy was fooling around his neck with that darned sharp razor!

When Uncle Jed was well shaved, Grandpappy Greenberry sat d down in the chair, which was a common hickory split-bottom kitchen chair, and Uncle Jed took the razor and went over him!

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That settled the feuds. Each had trusted his neck to the other when the other had a sharp razor in his hand...and as far as I know they never ‘feuded’ again. But I'll say those two tough old mountain hill-billies had a lot of nerve.

That was just one of the funny incidents that happened while I was with Doc Porter's Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show. But it was one that I'll never forget.

Finally, along in the early 1890's I quit Doc. Porter, or rather he quit me for his show busted up and I went into the carnival grift. It was while I was doing carnival stuff at country fairs that I invented—or maybe you'd say ‘discovered’—dancing Turkeys.’ It was down in Arkansas at a little County fair and I made a lot of money with my ‘waltzin' turkey's...but that's another story...

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NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Earl Bowman

ADDRESS 86 West 12th St

DATE September 19, 1938 (and Oct. 5)

SUBJECT Wm. D. Naylor, 72 year old Medicine Show and Carnival man, Mr. Naylor's description is set down in Form A. Mr. Naylor has a rich background of experiences with the Medicine Show and Carnival period during the late 1880's and the 1890's and I am getting some further stories from him, especially of his activities and experiences with Carnivals, Country Fairs, etc. in the southern and middle west. He is rather difficult in an interview as he frequently digresses to current topics...political both domestic and foreign and I have to ease him through such discussions and get him back to his own personal experiences which I take it are the things we desire in this effort to gather "Folktalk" and "Folk-Tales." I have still further visits scheduled with Mr. Naylor.