

You and I and Nobody Knows

An Occassional Column on
Children's Folk Song
by Dave Spalding

Spider Songs

The nicest pet spiders I ever kept were a pair of English Wolf Spiders known to scientists as *Pisaura mirabilis*, and to me as Patience and Griselda. Jolly little fellows, who used to go with me down to the pub for a drink. I was quite into spiders at one time, and they left a fascination that has never quite left me. The fascination seems to be widespread, judging by the spider's role in folklore and children's song.

Spiders have a firm place in folklore and children's songs, so the subject is a natural for a delver into odd holes and corners like me.

Introducing the Spider

Just to correct a few common misapprehensions for a start, spiders are

the little fellers with a body in two parts, and eight legs. They are not insects, which normally have three part bodies and six legs. They date back as far as the oldest land animals known, have a bite which is poisonous to their prey (and in some species, to man), and have the most fascinating habits. The biggest are the furry brown bird eating spiders, normally seen on movies crawling over James Bond in bed, to the strains of a Hollywood orchestra playing weird spider music.

Close relatives are Harvestment, Scorpions, Mites and other odd beasts. North Americans have to worry about Black Widow Spiders, which like outside toilets in the old west, and an even more obscure creature called the Brown Recluse. Otherwise, they are nothing but fun.

Tarantulas, Anyone?

Most notorious are the tarantulas, which are reportedly the origin of the lively Italian folk dance the Tarantella, supposedly mimicking the effects of a person bitten by the said spider. Unfortunately for folklore, the reported epidemic of tarantula bites in early Italy are now ascribed to our old friend the Black Widow.

Spider Rhymes

More accurate is the little folk rhyme, reasonably descriptive of the araneid sex life.

"The female spider, can't abide
'er
Husband till he's tucked inside
'er"

Other rhymes are indicative of the supposed bad luck associated with the killing of a spider.

"If you wish to run and thrive,
Let a spider run alive"
"Kill a spider, bad luck yours
will be,
Until of flies you've swatted
fifty-three"

Why Little Miss Muffet Didn't Like Spiders

With all this bad luck around, you may feel little Miss Muffet, from the well known nursery rhyme, had enough cause to dislike spiders. However, the real Miss Muffet, whose name was actually Patience Muffet, conceivably had even more cause to dislike them. She was a daughter of Dr. Thomas Muffet (1553-1604), an early entomologist, who was probably one with his eighteenth century colleagues in regarding spiders as an excellent cure for fevers. A colleague in 1760 recommended "A spider gently bruised and wrapped up in a raisin, or spread upon bread and butter."

Old Women in baskets as Scientific Pioneers

The old woman tossed up in a basket is equally memorable in folk lore, for the quaint fantasy of

"Old woman, old woman, old woman" said I,
"Oh Whither, oh whither, oh whither so high,
To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky"

The concept was however not as fantastic as we may think, with the disadvantages of Twentieth century science impeding our understanding of the Seventeenth century. At the time, scientists were intrigued by gossamer, the delicate threads of spider web that issued from baby spiders when they float away on spring days. No less an authority than the brilliant Robert Hooke thought that it "is not unlikely that those great white clouds that appear all the summertime may be of the same substance."

This and much more neat spider folklore can be found in Bristowe's "The World of Spiders," one of my all time favourite natural history books.

Incey Wincey Spider

A little rhyme from my own childhood tradition is the fragment

"Incey Wincey Spider, climbing up the spout,
Down came the rain, and washed the spider out,
Out came the sun, and dried up all the rain,
And Incey Wincey Spider climbed up the spout again."

In books this is described as a finger game, though my wife knows it as a rather lively contact game for small children which is likely to have them convulsed in laughter at the end of the rhyme.

I was intrigued recently on getting a fine collection of children's songs from the US, performed by Mike and Peggy Seeger (Rounder 8001-3), to find the same rhyme in the collection as a song. No information as to its source is given, and I do not have the original song collection it is based on.

Why Incey Wincey? It does not seem to have any relation to the old English spider name of Attercop ("poison head"), yet does have an intriguing similarity to the Jamaican name Anansi (Annancy). The "Annotated Mother Goose" has a slightly different version of the rhyme, but no explanation of the name.

Anansi

Anansi was a magic spider man, who was at the bottom of everything that happened in the world. A wealth of stories collected in Jamaica have been shown to be of West African origin, where Anansi is the Ashanti word for spider. (Jekyll, Jamaican Song and Story).

Modern Spider Songs

The spider has not lost its fascination. There are at least two current spider songs going the rounds in Canada. One which has been recorded by Raffi (Singable Songs), is Bill Russell's "There's a Spider on the Floor," which is also published in Raffi's song book.

Another entertaining one is by Mike Absalom of Vancouver, which is available as far as I know only on a privately distributed tape.

Dan, Dan Rides Again

When my first column went in, our editor Tim Rogers quite rightly reminded me that the little verse "Dan Dan, the dirty old man," is also a "floating verse" in a number of comic folk songs of the "Old Joe Clark" variety.

He reminded me of two versions, which I quote. One is "Old Grandma" in Fowke and Johnston's "Folk Songs of Canada."

Great Grand-dad was a busy man:
He washed his face in a frying pan.
He shaved his beard with a hunting knife,
And wore the one suit all his life.

Another version is in Dwyer & Cohen's "Songs of the American West," in which the second verse is:

Great-grand-dad was a lusty man,
Cooked his grub in a frying pan,
Picked his teeth with a hunting knife,
And wore the same suit all his life.

Both these versions are obviously related, and are interesting because they have obviously disposed of the fantasy element altogether, and become more straightforward descriptions of frontier life than the originals. A fascinating part of the acculturation process.

A less than exhaustive check through my song collections has not pulled out any more variants. If anyone knows any others, I would be grateful.

(Comments, letters, suggestions and contributions to this regular (but intermittent) column are welcome, and should be sent to me at 18504-85th Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta, T5T 1G7)