

Appalachian Folklore & Stories

2017 FCE Literacy Leader Lesson
Sarah Ransom, FCS Agent in Johnson County

Goal of Lesson:

- Inform participants of the history behind storytelling
- Teach classic Appalachian folklore
- Increase storytelling ability among members

Lesson:

Storytelling is the oldest form of narrative communication we have. The first known use of the word story dates back into the 13th century. Before languages and written storytelling came into existence, people used images, signs and sounds to tell their stories. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary *story* can be defined as an account of incidents or events, a statement regarding the facts pertinent to a situation in questions (especially amusing ones), a fictional narrative shorter than a novel, the intrigue or plot of a narrative or dramatic work, a widely circulated rumor or a news article or broadcast (Story, n.d). Stories allow us to understand complex topics, human emotions and everyday occurrences. If you think over your most memorable experiences, they are stories tied to our emotions and everyday life happenings. Storytelling is something done every day. From the simple questions - “how was your day?” stories unfold as we answer that question. Many every day stories are short descriptions of daily happenings, a piece of interesting news about someone or something funny that has happened to us.

Storytelling is good for the teller, but just as pleasing to the listener. Storytelling invites us to use our imagination. A story can become its own special event, but this only happens when

the teller has fully engaged the listener. Being able to tell a story is much more than memorizing facts and information, but being able to understand tone of voice, facial expressions, appropriate inflection and a good understanding of the story. These are the tellers who can bring stories to life.

Storytelling is often used to teach history and life lessons. Storytelling is an exceptional tool that can be used to help enhance or change a perception. This is where we see things like Aesop's Fables, parables and object lessons being used. They are short stories that are full of principles. Stories can also be used to pass along history. These are told to remind us of our heritage and teach us how to face the future. It was once written that storytelling helps us "keep the present in touch with the past, reaffirms values and passes on wisdom in an entertaining and memorable manner" (ACUI, 2012).

Storytelling happens every day around us – in advertising, government relations, news media and more; while these are taking off in popularity, some of the importance on oral storytelling in a community is being lost. Deep in the heart of Appalachia, we are still telling stories. These are found as we gather in homes, attend club meetings, in our churches and everywhere we go. In 1973, the first National Storytelling Festival was started right here in Tennessee. Deep in the heart of Jonesborough, the town comes alive every year with storytellers. For 2017, event tickets can be bought anywhere from \$20-500, depending on the events you want to attend. These are the people who value the importance of oral storytelling. We have historical tales that include stories of Jack, African tales of Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit, legends from the Cherokee and other tribes of Indians and personal family stories such as Nick the Hermit and many more, ghost stories, tales of big foot, black panthers and other creatures

that roam the woods and hills of Appalachia, and of course we have many stories of the foods and traditions we hold near and dear to our hearts.

Being a good storyteller means more than just reciting information. The best storytellers:

- Starts with a compelling beginning – get their attention in the first 30 seconds to a minute or they will begin wandering
- Brings it to a close with a big finish – leave them with emotion (happy, sad, content, excited, etc.)
- Use body language, words, facial expression and tone of voice to communicate the story
- Know your story – everyone tells the same story just a little differently, know the facts and then tell it with your own flair
- Stay on topic – don't get sidetracked with another great story that needs to be told, save that for another time and finish the one that you're telling

There have been some storytellers who have taken the time to pen down some of these stories, these would include books like: *Grandfather Tales* by Richard Chase, *Cripple Joe: Stories from My Daddy* and *Southern Jack Tales* by Donald Davis, and other stories can be found by Ray Hicks, Doc McConnell and many other local storytellers. The Appalachian folks even have their own versions to some classic fairytales, one of these is *Smoky Mountain Rose* by Alan Schroeder.

Here's a classic Appalachian folk tale that fits right into Halloween spirit:

The Tale of Stingy Jack and Jack O’Lanterns

Stingy Jack was a miserable, old man who took pleasure in playing tricks on anyone and everyone – friends, family, his mother and even the Devil himself! So one day, Jack invited the devil for a drink and then convinced him to shape-shift into a coin so that Jack could pay for the drinks. The devil knew this was a good idea because once paid, he could shape shift again and they’d get their drinks for free. With that, the devil obliged and shifted into a coin. Jack then decided he wanted that coin for other purposes, so he placed the coin in his pocket next to a small silver cross. This prevented the devil from turning back into himself. Jack paid for the drinks and left the building. The devil was not too happy about this, and eventually Jack freed him with the condition that the devil didn’t bother Jack for another year.

A year rolls by and Jack was out in the apple orchard. Jack spotted the devil walking down the lane and knew what he was coming for. He began to think quickly. Jack hastily climbed a nearby tree and waited for the devil to approach. When the devil got to the bottom of the tree, he called out and asked what Jack was up to. Jack exclaimed that the devil would never believe what he could see from way up in the top of the tree. Jack carried on, laughing and whoopin’ and a hollerin’ and looking shocked. The devil quickly became curious and started to climb the tree. Jack quickly halted his climb and said “Now Devil, this tree ain’t big enough for the both of us. Lemme climb down and then you can go see”. So down Jack scampered and stepped back, allowing the devil to climb up the tree. The devil started the climb, but didn’t go very far before he grouched. “I don’t see anything! What was it?” Jack pointed higher. “Keep goin’, it’s up a little higher”. As the devil scooted up the tree, peering through the branches, but seeing nothing. Jack called out encouragement to keep going as he approached the trunk of the

tree. Quick as a flash, Jack whipped out his knife and carved a cross in the tree's trunk. The devil reached the top of the tree, but then realized that Jack had made it up and there was nothing to see. The devil was mad for having to climb and work so much, so he came down the tree. But when he went to step to the ground, he found that he was stuck. That is when he saw the cross and realized that Jack had tricked him once again. Jack told the Devil that he would let him down if he promised to not bother Jack for another ten years, and that the devil wouldn't claim his soul when he died. The devil was none too happy, but agreed so that he could get down. So, Jack took his knife out and carved the cross into something else so that the devil could climb down.

Well, many years went by and Stingy Jack went on playing tricks on others around him. Before he made it ten years though, Jack died. As he approached the gates of Heaven, Jack began to get excited. Only he was told by St. Peter that while on earth, Jack was a mean and cruel man who lived a miserable and worthless life. Because of this, Jack could not enter heaven and there was only one other option. So Jack turned and walked down towards the gates of hell. Now Jack was real scared. Now, the devil had been waiting for the day that Jack came to visit. True to his promise, the Devil refused to take Jack's soul. "But where will I go?" cried Jack. "I can't go to Heaven, and you won't take me!" Jack's fear began to rise, he had nowhere to go. The devil told him that he was going to be stuck between the worlds and left to wander about forever. Jack asked how he was supposed to find his way. The devil responded by throwing him a burning coal from the flames of hell to help light the way. All Jack had with him was a turnip, you see, these were Jack's favorite, so he always carried them with him. Jack used his knife to hollow out the turnip and carefully placed the burning coal inside. From that day on, Stingy Jack roamed earth with his "Jack O'Lantern" and never found a place to rest.

Smoky Mountain Rose by Alan Schroeder

Once upon a time, "smack in the heart o' the Smoky Mountains, there was this old trapper livin' in a log cabin with his daughter. One night, while Rose was fryin' a mess o' fish, the trapper, he starts lookin' dejected-like. "The long and the short of it was that he wondered if it wasn't hard on his girl, not having a mother around? And he wondered if she would mind if he married the neighbor lady? Rose answered, "I don't mind. You go a'courtin', Pa, if you think it's best." So he did, and before she knew what she had said, Rose was sorry. Oh, was that neighbor lady mean, and her two daughters "why, they were so mean they'd steal flies from a blind spider." They spent all day, every day, admiring themselves and calling each other names. And they were lazy too, making little Rose work all day, "milkin' the cow, and collectin' the firewood and churnin' the butter." Her dad hated to see her treated so badly, but it turned out that trying to talk to his new wife "was like kickin' an agitated rattler." So he held his tongue. And then the worst thing happened.

One day, he died, leaving poor Rose all alone with the hateful lady and her horrible daughters. There was nothing to stop them now, and they mocked her and worked her and generally made her life a lot harder than it should have been. Many years passed. "Now, it so happens that on the other side of the creek, there was this real rich feller- made his fortune in soubellies and grits." And he was looking for a wife, so he got the idea to throw a fancy party and invite all the neighbors. That's when Rose really began to feel sad: the sisters hooted and sneered at the idea of her going. "Lawd-a-mercy! Who'd want to dance with a dirt clod like you?" But oh, how they worked Rose to fix them up for it. When the day finally came she watched them, "whippin' the mule, they went a-rumblin' down the dirt road, chortlin' out 'Skip to

M 'Lou' the whole time." Rose watched until she was alone, and then collapsed into tears. The sound of the far off fiddle music made all her sorrows flood over her. And that's when "one of the hogs comes moseyin' up to the fence and starts talkin' to her." He told her to "stand up and turn around real fast, like you got a whompus cat bitin' at yer' britches." This caused her raggedy overalls to become "the purtiest party dress" she had ever seen and instead of bare feet, sparkling glass slippers. Next, the hog asked for "a mushmelon and two field mice" which she turned into a wagon and team of horses. Warning her that the magic would hold only until midnight, the hog sent her off the square-dance.

When she got there she saw "two fiddlers, a harmonica man, even a square dance caller come all the way from Nashville." A hush fell over the crowd as Rose walked in, the rich man's eyes danced and he held out his arm to her. But her sisters said to each other, "Well, shut my mouth!" and "I ought to wring her neck, she's been going through my bood-whar!" But Rose couldn't hear them, and she danced the night away. Suddenly, she saw the "big granddaddy clock in the corner. 'Tarnation!" she cried, "its midnight!" and she fled. One of her slippers flew off into a ditch but she made it home with the other. Looking down, she saw her rags, and thanked the hog for her night of fun. "Anytime, Sugar!" it answered. That's when her stepmother and sisters got home, mad as hornets. "Ain't you gonna whip her now, Ma?" asked Liza Jane. "My whippin' arms tired, I'll do it tomorrow", said the old meanie, and they all went to bed.

Lucky for Rose, the very next morning they all heard the news: " the rich feller' had found Rose's shoe and was stopping at every cabin to find its owner. Before they knew, rich Seb was there with the shoe. "Me first!" yelled Annie, the elder girl, and barged over. Seb tried his best to fit it, but "gettin'" the slipper onto her big foot was like tryin' to stretch a little bitty

sausage skin over a side o' beef." Shoving her sister out of the way, Liza Jane had a try, but "the minute the tuggin' started, she purt-near went blue in the face. "Lemme get the axe' she said, a-gaspin'. "I'll get that shoe on if it kills me!" That's when Seb saw Rose, hiding over near the hog pen. "Come over here and stick out yer foot" he said," come on now, jest set yourself down on this here bucket and stick out yer tootsie." So Rose did, and that shining slipper "went glidin' right on, just as smooth as butter!" It was love at first sight of her feet in those shoes, and Seb proposed on the spot. Those mean old sisters saw the love shining between Seb and Rose, and "'pon seein' that, they done burst into tears."

Rose, sweet girl that she was, forgave them for being cruel to her, and declared that she loved them " like soup loves salt", and from then on, all was well. And "to this day, Rose and Seb are still livin' there, and folks reckon they're 'bout the happiest twosome in all o' Tarbelly Creek."

And that is the Appalachian version to Cinderella. Storytelling is something that is unique to each area. So share your stories with your kinfolk, your friends and any strangers you may meet. You may be harboring a precious bit 'o history within the catalogue of your mind. Don't let your stories be forgotten. Remember a story every day, write down your stories and most importantly, tell a story whenever you get a chance.

References:

Association of College Union International. (2012, 11 9). *A brief history of storytelling*.

Retrieved from http://www.acui.org/content.aspx?menu_id=122&id=2150

Schroeder, A. (2000). *Smoky Mountain Rose*. Puffin Books.

"Story." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 21 Dec. 2016.