August 2nd-3rd, 2014 was the twentieth anniversary of the Suggs Freedom Festival in Vandalia, a predominantly African-American village in southwestern Michigan. Sponsored by the Suggs family, and led especially by Martha Suggs Spencer, it welcomed family members and the public, whites and blacks, to a weekend celebration of ethnicity, history and American patriotism.

The origin of the festival lies in the friendly relationship between Richard M. Dorson (1916-1981), who set the standard for folklore research in the United States, and James D. Suggs (1887-1955), whom Dorson frequently described as “the best storyteller I ever met” (1958a, p. 22) because of Suggs’ vast repertoire of narratives and songs and his engaging performances of them.

In his recent two-volume *American Folktales from the Collections of the Library of Congress* (2005), editor Carl Lindahl, Professor of Folklore at the University of Houston, rightly devotes Chapter 3 to James Suggs. He updates Suggs’ relevance by also describing Martha Suggs and some features of the Suggs Freedom Festival. However, the festival and its context in American folklore and in Suggs family history and identity is complex and deserves consideration in its own colourful right. The festival demonstrates the development of folklore about folklore (metafolklore) and the way that festival behaviour expresses identity. It also vindicates the “real life” value of the work of academic folklorists, since it shows the humane outcome of the relationship between fieldworker and informant, lasting into several generations and creating personal, family and communal meanings.

**Origins of the Festival**

Martha Suggs (b. 1940) (Figure 2), the fourth of twelve children of James and Sylvia (b. 1912) Suggs, has only vague recollections of the college professor who befriended her father and recorded his tales and songs in Calvin Center, Michigan, from March 1952 through August 1953. One fragment of that memory is the financial relief brought to her poor family from the payment that Dorson gave Suggs for the time he spent performing his materials for Dorson. (However, the promise of additional payments if Dorson published Suggs’ materials for profit never materialised.)
The family’s revival of interest in the Dorson-Suggs collaboration began in 1975, after Martha’s children had matured and Martha set out to do the writing that she had long delayed. One day in the Niles, Michigan, public library, her sister Toka was shown Dorson’s classic book, *Negro Folktales in Michigan* (1956), which includes many narratives by their father. Only then did they begin to realize the prominence that their otherwise humble father had attained in American studies. It took an additional sixteen years, until 1993, for them to more fully know and understand.

If she needed more motivation to become a writer, she had found it in discovering the publication of her father’s stories and songs. The immediate result was a number of writing projects for the U.S. bicentennial in 1976. One was her song “Bicentennial Back Track” (Spencer, 1995, p. 14), which she composed and performed for a bicentennial kick-off celebration. Another was her black history play “Blacks in the Westward Movement”, based on interviews she conducted with elderly black residents. The third was her anthology of Suggs family personal histories and experiences with racism, *Suggs Black Back Tracks*, intended for the bicentennial but not published until 1995 (see below).

The turning point, toward establishing the Suggs Freedom Festival, occurred in 1993 when Martha and Toka travelled to Bloomington, Indiana, to visit the Folklore Archives, where Dorson’s papers are kept. There they discovered his voluminous Suggs manuscripts; the photo of his and Dorson’s last meeting, which has often been reprinted; and, from Dorson’s briefcase, his final note about Suggs. In addition, from the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music they obtained a CD containing twenty two recorded performances by Suggs.

The note from Dorson’s briefcase was, emotionally, very important for them. In it, Dorson recorded that, after leaving Suggs in 1953, he had learned of his death only in 1956 and had tried three times to contact his survivors, but without success. Dorson had also carried Suggs’ photo in his wallet until his (Dorson’s) death, and had dedicated his major work, *American Negro Folktales*, to Suggs’ memory.

The family had wondered why, upon leaving Michigan, Dorson had not kept in touch with Suggs, after having been so friendly with him. Had Dorson only mined Suggs’ repertoire for academic advantage? The note and other evidence from the archives proved to them that the friendly relationship was indeed genuine. The entire experience in 1993 at the Folklore Archives, Martha says, made it all “come together”. It was a “big discovery” that for her was “like a movie script”.

Enlightened regarding the details of Suggs’ importance, and now emotionally moved by the proven friendly ties between Dorson and Suggs, the following summer of 1994 the
family began the Suggs Freedom Festival, which has endured. The first festival was held on June 2nd-4th, 1994, in Vandalia, Michigan, on the property surrounding the small house where the Suggs family had lived from 1945-1950 before moving to nearby Calvin Center, where Dorson met Suggs. Although the heyday of the festival was in its first few years, it continues today as a tribute to the persistence of Martha Suggs, to the helpful support of her husband Willie, and to the lasting effects of the history, legends and other folklore that have become part of Suggs family identity, stemming largely from Dorson’s friendship with their father and grandfather.

As with other festival behaviour, the Suggs Freedom Festival contains a wide variety of verbal, visual and performance folk genres. At the risk of fragmenting a holistic event, these elements will be identified prior to a survey of the personal, familial and public meanings that the festival expresses.

**Festival Genres**

**Museum** At the centre of the Suggs Freedom Festival is a monument of material culture, the small, one-storey frame house in which the large Suggs family lived as renters for a few years, now owned by Martha Suggs and her husband. It is the Suggs Museum, with a $5 admission fee. Martha and Willie invested their life savings in the property and building, which serve only the festival, not as anyone’s dwelling.

Inside one finds a vast, eclectic assortment of odd, old-time objects. Interspersed are newspaper clippings about the festival and the local underground railroad; an artful portrait of Suggs based on Dorson’s photograph; and enlarged copies of Dorson’s writings about Suggs, especially the chapter “The Astonishing Repertoire of James Douglas Suggs”, from Dorson’s *Negro Tales from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Calvin, Michigan* (1958b) (Figure 3). The most haunting artifact, for folklorists, is the suit of long underwear, hanging in full length, that James Suggs wore one night when he rescued a friend from a fire (Figure 4).

**Yard Art** The symbolic heart of the festival is an arrangement outside the museum under shade trees. It centres on two life-size metal silhouettes, one white and one black, representing the persons of Richard Dorson and James Suggs, in stances drawn from the iconic photograph of Dorson (in trench coat) and Suggs (in double-breasted suit) published in *Negro Folktales in Michigan* (Dorson, 1956, p. 18) (Figure 5). Between the figures is a placard, decorated with two U.S. flags, dated March 22nd, 1952, commemorating “The last conversation of two friends ...”. In front of that arrangement is a space enclosed with a fence of tinsel rope, behind which are photo cards on yarn hangers in tribute to individual Suggs family members who have died. Beside this arrangement is another poster that announces the festival as a “Celebration of James Suggs, Famous Man”.

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Across the road to the east, Martha has also erected a three-dimensional mural (Figure 6) that honours Quakers from near Vandalia who prior to the Civil War were very active in the Underground Railroad. The Vandalia area was where the Quaker route from the west, originating along the Mississippi River, intersected with the Quaker route from the east, originating in North Carolina through Cincinnati. The Quaker meeting at Young’s Prairie west of Cassopolis and east of Penn was a radically Abolitionist meeting, helping escaped slaves either settle in southern Michigan or move farther north, including to Canada.

The mural depicts white human forms peering above a fence, looking at three members of a black fugitive family running northward, pursued by the “Kentucky slave raiders” who came north in 1847 to try to capture and retrieve runaway slaves. A placard lists the names of many Quakers who were active in the underground railroad. Stephen Bogue and Amos Smith, Quakers, are represented in silhouette cutouts, “frozen in time”. Such acknowledgement fulfils the official name of the house museum: “James Suggs Underground Railroad Museum and Historic Site”.

Rituals The festival includes no religious service, even though a white cross dominates a small hill on the north end of the property. Instead, the Saturday festival day begins with an assembly of family members who walk together up the hill to the cross and memorialise members of the extended family who have recently died. In earlier festivals, this commemoration was part of an evening candlelight programme.

The first four years included a parade of family members down the streets of Vandalia at noon on Saturday. The largest turnout for the festival parade was in 1995, with about ninety family members participating. The largest attendance at the festival has been about
In 1997 the programme included opening comments by the mayor of Vandalia and an address by the county sheriff. A minister served as marshal for the parade. However, permission for parading was withdrawn by town authorities after 1998.

Food Martha’s husband Willie Spencer leads others in preparing food for visitors under a tent festooned with patriotic bunting (Figure 7). They set up a barbecue pit and sell ribs, chicken, hamburgers and hot dogs with chips, baked beans and soft drinks. Alcohol is permitted, but not sold at the festival.

Costumes One can buy a baseball cap with “Suggs Freedom Festival” on it and a white T-shirt depicting Dorson’s photo of Suggs and his life dates 1887-1955. Martha sometimes wears one white shoe and one red or black shoe, both to empathise integration of the races and to “let people know who I am ... not Nike or Michael Jordan”.

Proverbs and proverbial phrases Martha’s writings displayed in the museum and elsewhere emphasise phrases that are keys to her motivation. One is “black back tracks”, which is the title of her book (Spencer, 1995) and the way she expresses the need for American blacks to discover their history, as she herself began to when she discovered the achievements of her father. Another is “black and white coming together”, her plea for good relations derived from the legend of her father’s heavenly vision (see below). “How bright they blend!” affirms her own vision of a social order transformed by good race relations. The motto in her family anthology, in the light of their migration north, is: “Fear not death, the way is very short now”. In addition, one placard on the festival grounds lists Martha’s “words to family and friends”, beginning with “Life is what you make of it. Live for today. We only have one life. Never limit your dreams ...” followed by ten more encouraging proverbs.

Music Amplified music is played throughout most of the festival, using favourite CDs that guests bring with them. Blues music tends to predominate, although gospel music and rock and roll are also played. Only occasionally is live music performed on a stage.

Narratives

Martha and her siblings have an odd relationship to their father’s stories. Although his narratives are what have made him “a great man”, neither Martha nor any of her many siblings continue to tell his stories. Martha only says that whenever she feels depressed, she listens to the CD of her father’s performances. She says, “It’s a weird feeling, hearing my father’s voice. Now, when I’m down and I need a lift, I’ll listen to the tapes of him telling stories and singing the old spirituals.” Martha herself, like a folklore fieldworker, collects
narratives, as with her bicentennial play, cited above, and the collection of personal-
experience stories by family members in her book *Suggs Black Back Tracks*.

**Family Legends** Even so, a rich set of legends, especially origin stories, lie behind the family
erial festival, even if only occasionally alluded to in texts in the museum and on the grounds and
repeated orally by Martha. The main origin story, concerning the family’s history in Africa,
came secondhand to Suggs’ daughters, as told to him long ago by an unnamed ninety-year-
old person. The following version was told to my students by Martha in 1996:

The story goes many years back to the shores of Gambia. There was two black
girls and another little boy on the shore. They was watching this big ship as it was
sailing in. They was just curious. They never saw a big ship before. This ship got
closer and closer to the shore. They got closer and closer. Finally, when the ship
docked these two white guys, here, they come out and they grabbed the two little
black girls. And the brother, in the jungle he went. So they just dragged the little
girls screaming, screaming, screaming! So the men pulled them back into the
boat. The last they saw of their brother, he was going back into the jungle.

On the origin of the family name:

Well, the two girls finally made it here – to America, North Carolina. This is
when [Dr.] Roland Suggs, our slave master, he bought – he named one Clarissa
and one Rachel. He put them into his household. Also, Master Suggs had a young
lady – at this time he was, like, fifty two – and he had a young white lady, like, twenty three. And so Master Suggs started to have quite a bit of fun [with the
three women]. The name started out S-U-G-G. Then finally he had a lot of little
Suggs running around. A lot of them! He had a lot of them! So he put the –s on to
the name. So now we put the –s on to the end.

The Suggs family claims associations with two legendary Americans, Daniel Boone
(1734-1820) and Casey Jones (1863-1900). According to family tradition, a distant white
step-relative of Clarissa and Rachel helped pursue Cherokee Indians when they kidnapped
Daniel Boone’s daughter. During the chase the relative fell in a creek and later died of
pneumonia. The kidnapping of Jemima Boone occurred in Kentucky on July 14th, 1776.
Casey Jones enters Suggs lore as the famous railroad engineer of the *Cannonball Express*,
who in 1900 near Vaughan, Mississippi, was killed while saving all his passengers in what
could have been a disastrous train wreck. According to Martha:

Casey Jones, he worked with my father ... for the Illinois Central back at the time
of the fatal accident at Vaughan, Mississippi. My sister and I had the opportunity
to visit Vaughan, Mississippi, and it’s still preserved as it was in the 1900s. ... We
found two spikes out at the wreck, where they had the accident.

In 1900, the year of the accident, James Suggs was only thirteen years old. Working for
the railroad at that young age, he certainly would not have been closely associated with
Casey Jones, who had risen to the status of most elite engineer on that important railroad line and of that fast passenger train. Suggs claimed to have seen the dead body of Casey Jones.

The family legend most often repeated by Martha was printed on a one-page handout distributed at the first freedom festival in 1994:

In the late thirties and early forties, the Suggs Family lived in the Vandalia, Michigan, area. Martha Ann Suggs and her father James D. Suggs used to go fishing directly in the back of the Suggs Freedom Festival site. Christ Ann [Christiana] Creek produced many a meal for the poor family. The family was very thankful for the horny-head fish and suckers. One day, Martha and her father had gone fishing. Mr. Suggs told her things about his life as a young boy growing up in the Mississippi Delta. Slavery, black and white, was always the main subject. This particular day, they had to rush home, half running. It was a storm coming up. There was a hill that they had to climb. Once up on the top of this hill, Mr. Suggs said to Martha, “Look at those clouds.” He pointed to the east, then to the west. He said, “Those clouds are coming together. Sure as those clouds are coming together, black and white will come together. I might not live that long to see it, but remember what I tell you.” His word came true to Martha Ann Suggs.

**Festival Meanings**

That visionary narrative is foundational for the personal, familial, social and political meanings of the Suggs Freedom Festival. As Martha told my students in 1996: “This is my theme: Black and White coming together”. Considering the American historical context in which Martha and her family matured, that theme is impressive. Born in 1940 into a very poor African-American family, Martha matured in the 1960s and 1970s, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement in America. Martha occasionally refers to Martin Luther King and carries out his dream for America, of nonviolence, racial harmony and integration. Hers is Black Pride, but definitely not Black Power militancy and racial separation.

Prior to the freedom festival, Martha joined public discussions about race and justice. Her earliest contribution to public discussion about race stems from 1976 and her play “Blacks in the Movement West” and her “bicentennial song”, “Bicentennial Black Back Track”, which protests, among other things, “working with no pay”, and celebrates the coming of “godfather Abe [Lincoln]” (Spencer, 1995, p. 14).

Most important, she planned her book *Suggs Black Back Tracks* as a bicentennial discussion of “freedom” based on the difficult lives that her Suggs extended family had endured in the U.S. during the twentieth century and earlier. The self-published, well edited book consists of thirty chapters of mostly personal-experience narratives by twenty one different members of the Suggs extended family. Virtually all of them chronicle the harsh treatment of blacks by racist whites. Discrimination, beatings, rape, sadistic abuse – even murder – are narrated simply and directly in unadorned prose, usually without complaint or special pleading. The effect is chilling, but somehow also warmly moving, since formerly muted voices have been given a chance to speak.
In the opening sentences of her preface to the book, Martha states her goal of “portraying how they once lived in the South and their struggle for freedom as they went north.” At the conclusion of her narrative, she gives an image of her longterm hope and commitment: “I began to think about life after death. I would love to see every race there is, standing hand in hand. Then, there would be no racial barriers” (Spencer, 1995, p. 7).

Some elements of muted protest have been included in the freedom festival. For instance, the festival parade in 1998, following the Million Man March in Washington, D.C., was named a “Million Youth March”. It included a coffin that represented a mock burial of racism. But the coffin was also a moral symbol. When people looked inside, they saw their own faces in a mirror. The point, according to Martha, was to eschew violence and avoid a violent death. Six members of the Suggs extended family have been murdered.

One writer, Marshall Suggs, became actively engaged in the Civil Rights struggle. In 1960 he participated in a freedom march in Union City, Tennessee, and adds, “I am still going on Freedom Marches” (Dorson, 1958a, p. 64). He was also active in the Berrien County Action Committee in Niles, Michigan.

During the twenty years of the festival, the overwhelming message has been one of integration, inclusion and social harmony. One evidence is the warm credit that the festival gives to local white Quakers who assisted runaway slaves in the Vandalia area. Also, the 1999 festival was announced as celebrating “White History Month”. Earlier Martha had spoken to the Baha’i Human Rights Forum in Niles about the need for a White History observance to match Black History Month, which is observed every February in the U.S. She wrote to federal government officials, proposing such a programme, but never received a response. Unfortunately, the White History theme of the 1999 festival attracted few participants, black or white.

What accounts for Martha’s and her family’s benevolent, optimistic view of racial conflict in America? One influence would certainly be her own personal experiences with white people. Her chapter in Suggs Black Back Tracks dwells on her and her family’s friendly treatment by white employers and neighbours in Arkansas prior to their migration north and, especially, by the warm welcome the whites gave them when Martha and others returned as adults to her childhood home and were treated like long lost family members by those white people.

But probably the greatest influence was the family’s historical connection with Richard M. Dorson. In fact, the turning point may have been their visit to the Folklore Archives in 1993, especially when Martha and Toka were shown the letter from Dorson’s briefcase, which meant that Dorson was Suggs’ true friend and that Dorson had tried to keep
in touch with him after he (Dorson) left Michigan. Dorson and Suggs, as true friends, proved that black and white could indeed “come together”. In 1993 they discovered the tapes and letters. In 1994 they began the Suggs Freedom Festival to commemorate that friendship and use it as a model for human relations in their community.

Upon learning of Suggs’ death, Dorson observed, “It is consoling to know that the spirit and salt and kindly humor of Suggs will not completely vanish with his death” (Dorson, 1958a, p. 64). For twenty years, the Suggs Freedom Festival has made sure that Suggs would not “vanish”. As an academic folklorist, Dorson initially resisted younger, activist folklorists’ interest in promoting “applied folklore”, that is, the design, implementation and use of folklore projects to improve the social welfare and support political goals. Eventually, Dorson’s sponsorship of the “Gary Project” fieldwork in that racially troubled Indiana city represented, to some degree, his change of mind (Brose, 1996, p. 39). The Suggs Freedom Festival, an outcome of his early fieldwork, is an example of the unplanned, natural public benefit of folklore study, and might encourage contemporary folklorists in their often lonely, under-appreciated tasks.

As Lindahl suggests, the experience of Dorson and Suggs underlines “the importance and redeeming quality of fieldwork. We may get it wrong theoretically, our scholarship may sometimes seriously misrepresent our ‘informants,’ but as long as we can record their remarkable performances and deal with them personally, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, we have done something remarkably right. ... We justify our existence by prolonging that of the storytellers” (Lindahl, 2005b, 12).

References
Spencer, Martha A. Suggs, Suggs Black Back Tracks II, Vandalia, Michigan, the author, 2013. A smaller volume with some repeated and some new material.