

7. Riddlings: Newfoundland Examples

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Abstract

While researchers have produced lists of riddles recorded from oral tradition, few have documented how riddles play out in practice. This chapter is an attempt to suggest what some of the ‘rules of riddling’ that people who riddle implicitly know and follow, and is based on fieldwork in Newfoundland at the start of this century.

Keywords

Riddles, riddling, speech play, fieldwork, Newfoundland.

Introduction¹

The Nordic and Baltic countries have long been one of the key areas of the world for the study of folklore and oral literature. In addition to the tale and the ballad, one genre that numerous specialists from this area have addressed is the riddle. Substantial collections of riddles in the Nordic area include those by Árnason (1887), Kristensen (1913), Ström (1937), Olsson (1944), Wessman (1949), and Virtanen, Kaivola-Bregenhøj and Nyman (1977). There have been various substantial collections in the Baltic

¹ This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant Vernacular Interpretations of the Incomprehensible: Folkloristic Perspectives Towards Uncertainty (grant PRG670).

How to cite this book chapter:

Roper, J. (2023). Riddlings: Newfoundland Examples. In: Bédard-Goulet, S. & Premat, C. (eds.), *Nordic and Baltic Perspectives in Canadian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Northern Spaces Narratives*, pp. 223–243. Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bci.h>. License: CC BY-NC.

countries as well, including Ancelāne (1954), Kensminienė (2018), and Krikmann and Saukas (2001–2013). And we can also mention one or two of the various studies produced in this region, for example the pioneering research by Aarne on comparative riddle research (1918–1920), as well as the informative genre study by Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2001). Typically studies of riddles to date have attempted to document riddles as text, to discuss the various sub-genres of riddles (and other enigmatica) and to place them in a comparative and historical context by listing parallels and speculating as to their origins. Early Nordic research on riddles was so substantial that just after mid-century it was felt necessary to produce a volume on the terminology involved in such research (Bødker, 1964).

Nevertheless, while riddles have been given much attention as a genre, riddlings, that is the interactions in which riddles are posed and answered, have not been the focus of research. We might also wish to know how, for example, riddling sessions begin and end, (or how individual riddle-questionings begin and end), what stylistic and semantic links (if any) exist between successive riddles, and what else goes on when people are riddling, as well as being able to read the texts of the riddles themselves. This lack of living data on riddlings is by no means only typical of the Nordic and Baltic area. If we turn to the anglophone world, for example, we find again that there are few studies that focus upon riddling. Distinguished researcher Archer Taylor, who produced a series of valuable articles on the riddle genre (1938a, 1938b, 1939, 1943, 1949, 1953), which though never collected together in book form still constitute a ghost-monograph on the genre, never got beyond what he himself designated as the initial stage of research: ‘The problems in the study of riddles are concerned primarily with the arrangement of texts and the collection of parallels. When these tasks have been completed, we can undertake more fundamental investigations’ (Taylor, 1952, p. 285).

So, while he did manage to produce an admirable catalogue (1951) of anglophone riddles and their analogues with 959 pages covering 1749 riddle types, he never wrote on riddlings. The few exceptions in the scholarly literature that focus on riddlings include the pieces by Evans (1976) in Mississippi and Abrahams (1983)

on St. Vincent, and there is also the notable audio recording made by Alan Jabbour, Fleischauer and Diller (1973) of members of the Harmon family riddling in West Virginia. In this chapter I wish to add to this scholarship by discussing my observation of riddlings in Newfoundland (and indeed, like Jabbour, my participation in the riddlings). Before getting to this, it would be beneficial to say something about Newfoundland's vernacular culture, and the history of its study.

Newfoundland

What is now the Canadian Province of Newfoundland and Labrador has been recognised as one of the most significant areas in the anglophone world for traditional verbal art since at least the time of Patterson (1895). An early work of local scholarship was Kinsella's *Some Superstitions and Traditions of Newfoundland* (1919). At this time Newfoundland was a British Dominion; after Confederation in 1949, it became Canada's tenth and newest Province, and its most easterly. Historically, it has never been a wealthy area (though recent oil discoveries hold out the promise that this may change), and the most important economic activities were fishery and forestry (often the same person would be involved in first one, then the other, according to the season). Outside the local capital, St. John's, much of the population lived in small, often isolated, settlements, locally known as 'outports'. The inhabitants of these outports typically had ancestors from the eastern side of the Atlantic, overwhelmingly from south-western England and south-eastern Ireland. In recent years, these settlements have experienced depopulation, which has gone hand in hand with a loss of their original economic *raison d'être*, most especially following the moratorium on cod fishing that began in 1992.

Within Canada, the Province is well-known for its distinctive and varied local lexis, something which is richly documented in the substantial *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirwin, & Widdowson, 1990). Leading works on folklore genres on the island of Newfoundland include the excellent annotated two-volume collection *The Folktales of Newfoundland*

(Halpert & Widdowson, 1996) and the folksong collections of Greenleaf (1933) and Leach (1965), Peacock (1965), and Lehr and Best (1985). Also worthy of note is a study of its midwinter house-visiting customs (Halpert & Story, 1969). There has also been a significant folklore department at Memorial University Newfoundland in St John's since 1968 (McNeill, 2020), which holds an important archive of local folklore and language known by the acronym MUNFLA. A fuller overview of Newfoundland studies is provided by Webb (2015), but in a word we can say here that in terms of vernacular culture, it is one of the best documented Canadian provinces.

As far as the genre of riddles is concerned, the most important single work for Newfoundland is an article written by Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf (1976 [1938]) based on her experiences gained while living as a volunteer teacher in the settlement of Sally's Cove in the west of the island during the summers of 1920 and 1921, and when visiting in the island of Fogo in 1929. As well as the 80 riddles and eight conundrums that she prints (together with their solutions), Greenleaf also makes some general observations, commenting for instance on her surprise at finding herself 'in a village where everyone knew a great many riddles, and for pastime invented new ones from events of daily life' (Greenleaf, 1976 [1938], p. 131), and she gives the example of local woman Fanny Jane Endicott who 'came in one day from working in the garden' and 'propounded' a riddle about the rhubarb 'she was bringing in with her' (pp. 131–132). She mentions hearing riddles while berrying, and also 'in the long evenings' (p. 132). Although she testifies as to the thriving nature of riddling in her account, there is not so much detail about its practice beyond her highlighting of its to-and-fro dynamic: 'one boy would ask this riddle ... I might come back with this familiar one ...' (p. 131). The use of 'would ask' and 'might come back' show that this to-and-fro was habitual. Unfortunately, since this important article published more than eight decades ago, there has been little attention given to Newfoundland riddles. Research into vernacular culture in the province began with a concentration on the genres grander than riddles, such as long tales and songs, and in more recent times (in line with the general turn in North American folklore studies)

it then moved away from the rural and toward the urban, and also from traditional genres to emergent ones. Neither of these emphases favoured the study of riddles.

As the graduate student of one of the authors of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* and *The Folktales of Newfoundland*, I found myself drawn to the Province. Between 2000 and 2015, I paid 10 visits to eastern Canada, conducting episodic fieldwork mainly in English-derived outports in the west and north of the island of Newfoundland, but also in similar settlements on the south-east coast of Labrador and an adjacent anglophone part of the lower north shore of Quebec. Riddles were one of the many topics that I discussed with the people I met. Typically, asking people if they knew any riddles was like drawing teeth, just as much as it would be if one were to ask someone cold if they knew any jokes, rather than beginning the exchange by first telling them a joke. I learnt to come forearmed with a couple of riddles myself, which sometimes led to modest recognition. Twice, however, things really took on a life of their own. While these two occasions do not represent the ‘natural context’ that eavesdropping on riddling between insiders might, surely this kind of participatory-observational data is also valid. Indeed, the sound recording issued by Jabbour, Fleischauer and Diller (1973) not only has the voices of the Hammons family but also that of Jabbour himself, and Greenleaf too participated in riddling rather than remaining a silent observer – after all, riddling is an unavoidably dialogic activity. Furthermore, given that riddles are only fun if you don’t all know the answer, riddling is likely to remain dormant until fresh riddles emerge. Indeed, a newcomer arriving with fresh riddles amounts to a traditional situation where familiar riddles can be tried out on a fresh set of ears, and where you yourself might learn riddles you could add to your own repertoire. And interaction with a stranger might well allow for a greater run of riddles than usual. I am reminded here of what a member of the Couch family of West Virginia told Leonard Roberts: ‘they was allas good to try on strangers’ (Roberts, 1959, p. 101). And, sure enough, in each of the cases I was a stranger.

To use Kenneth Goldstein’s terms, these events were examples of ‘induced natural context’ (1964, pp. 87–90). Indeed as Finnish-born

folklorist Elli Köngäs-Maranda, herself also a riddle-researcher, has observed: 'the "real" context and the "real" process can never be documented because the observer influences the event in many unavoidable ways even when he is accepted as a stranger' (Köngäs-Maranda, 1976, p. 135). Furthermore, it would seem that my selection of riddles during my participation was not completely alien either. In response to a riddle I posed, I was told by my host 'I heard that one before. I've heard it before. I heard that one before.' And about another riddle, I was told 'I've heard 'e but don't remember'. And on yet another occasion, some of the words of my riddle were corrected by my host: I had said 'deep as a pail', but 'should have' said 'deep as a well'. That she was able to say I got this bit 'wrong' shows the riddle as a whole was familiar to her. (It also perhaps suggests that the notion of variants has more currency amongst folklorists than it does amongst the folk.) And, likewise, just as various of my riddles were recognised by my interlocutors, so I recognised some of the riddles they posed me.

This chapter draws on the sound recordings of these two occasions in Newfoundland, which took place in the summer of 2001 in the north coast community of Wild Cove and the west coast community of St. Paul's. As two cases may seem a small number, I will supplement them by also drawing occasionally on the sound recording of a similar lively riddling encounter in another traditional part of anglophone North America (Beech Mountain, North Carolina) that took place the year before. Even this move, which increases the corpus to draw on by fifty per cent, still leaves a total of just three riddlings, which in many areas of scholarship would seem to be a suspiciously small number of cases to work from. But given the absolute paucity of audio-documented anglophone riddlings it is, nevertheless, a substantial number for this subject.

In a real sense, I was in the right place for riddles in that one of these villages, which was the next place to the south of my chief fieldwork village, was itself neighboured to the south by the settlement of Sandy Cove, where eighty years previously Greenleaf had recorded most of her riddles. Furthermore, both of the Newfoundland main riddlers had connections with the island of Fogo, where Greenleaf collected the remainder of her riddles

(one had been born there, the other, born in St. Paul's, had spent some years in Fogo). All three of these interactions happened in the homes of the hosts. All of them took place during the afternoon, all with people with time to spare during the day to riddle (mainly retired people, one homemaker, several children). All of them were the first meetings between the hosts (who I had been recommended to drop in on, as they might be able to tell me about local traditions) and me. In each case, no riddling began until we had been talking for at least an hour, and a good level of rapport had been established between us.

Sources and old world connections

When asked about where they learnt their riddles, the main riddler at St. Paul's mentioned her father, a man no longer alive, but renowned within the community for his knowledge of traditional tales and songs. The main riddler at Wild Cove mentioned that she learnt some of her riddles from a Mr Small: 'He was a wonderful man for telling these sort of riddles. Well, he was a United [i.e. a member of The United Church of Canada], but he come from England'.

Note that she refers to this man as 'Mr Small', formal nomenclature which suggests vertical transmission across generations rather than horizontal transmission between people of the same age. If we did not know of this personal transatlantic connection, we might still suspect that Old World–New World connections existed from the riddles themselves. For example, the frying pan riddle that this woman posed was also recorded in Herefordshire around 1900, with a minor difference, the pan being black 'as a coal' rather than 'as a crow' (Taylor, 1951, p. 545).

A riddle I was posed in St. Paul's that, as might be expected by its opening, turns up in Old World collections begins 'Flower from England, Fruit from Spain'. And yet the very setting of these words to paper forces a text-maker to disambiguate the riddle's key misdirection: we have to decide whether to write 'flower' or 'flour'. Archer Taylor mentions in his discussion of this riddle (1951, p. 449) that this word when spoken closely followed by 'fruit' is likely to suggest a bloom to the hearer rather than a

foodstuff. This is exactly what happened to me when I heard it in St. Paul's, and this is why I transcribed it here as 'flower' not as 'flour'. The riddle also occurs in Halliwell's *The Nursery Rhymes of England* (1846, p. 82), where he opts to spell the operative word as 'flour', which somewhat gives the game away. But as well as similarities between the Old and New World there are also differences of course. In the case of this riddle, they concern the solution: Halliwell gives 'plum pudding', whereas my informants in Newfoundland suggested a marshberry pudding.

How the riddlings began

Having made clear that my presence was a form of intervention in local social life, it is also worth noting that I did not myself initiate any of the three riddlings. (There may be a fieldwork moral here, relating to the near-impossibility of 'inducing a natural context' out of thin air, but the advisability of being ready to seize the opportunity should one heave into view.) How did these riddlings begin? One occasion seemed to begin with my chief interlocutor and star informant, a skilful storyteller accustomed to being granted extended turns at talk, and who had been the central focus of my visit, attempting to seize back the spotlight, which was temporarily with his wife. She had gained it by relating the words of a verbal charm, something I had clearly found very interesting. Her husband then stepped back in with the words 'Well, did you ever hear our riddle on churning milk?' No. 'Here it is and you ought to get it taped off.'

Another occasion began with the older male host telling my co-fieldworker a riddle off-mike, and then his wife telling him to tell me that same riddle so it could be documented. After he failed to respond to his wife's request at three times of asking, she then took the initiative by adopting the role of riddler with me herself. The third occasion began seemingly apropos of nothing with the words 'I'm going to ask you this one now'. But listening back to the few minutes before this remark on the recording, there was an exchange that seems relevant:

-Are you married?

-No, I'm not married.

-Oh [*wistfully, as if it was a pity a man my age should not be married*]

-Not yet anyway

-[*laughter*] I had to ask coz I didn't know.

-No, no, ask away. I ask you all sort of questions, so it's only fair.

-[*mmm's and laughs*] Yeah.

This exchange had established that face-threatening questions could be asked of me, their guest. And this in turn paved the way for the challenge of riddling, which is more of a face-threatening act than the activity we had been involved in, talking about the old days. But listening yet one time more to the recording, it also seems that the interjection 'I'm going to ask you this one now' by the older female also served to curtail a discussion of illegitimacy that was just beginning to open out. In other words, changing the subject from this worrisome topic to something fresh and all-involving may have been her chief purpose in posing the riddle.

Something can be said about the people in the houses at the time the conversation turned to riddles. The first event involved an old married couple, their slightly younger male friend and me. The second again involved an old married couple, their friend of a similar age (this time a woman) and me and another fieldworker. The third event featured an old woman, her married daughter and two grandchildren, along with one or two more visiting children and me. In each of these cases, two 'sides' always developed in the riddling: (1) the hosts, and, (2) me (and, in one case, another fieldworker as well). In this sense, the riddling somewhat resembled the back and forth of a game of tennis. Speaking of two sides somewhat covers up the fact that there was always one person who was the 'main riddler' and who carried the session. In each of the three cases, this seemed to be the oldest person present. (In two cases I am sure of this, in one case, I'm not sure if it was the oldest, or second oldest, person who was the main riddler). Another thing that needs saying is that in addition to these two sides, there was always a third side, made up of people who just watched and listened without posing riddles or attempting to

answer them. This complements our tennis analogy, in that they might be thought of as the spectators.

There is one way that the context of these three events does differ. In only two of them was riddling something they might still do, according to their own testimony or that of others. In St. Paul's, this was convincingly backed up by a remark one local person made to another: 'What was that one you said the other night?'. In Wild Cove, riddling was more part of memory culture, and the riddles that were given were remembered from childhood, and riddles had most recently been used some time back when the older female was bringing up her own children. This was probably three decades ago, but in the heat of the moment these riddles came to mind. In the other cases, the main riddler is what, in von Sydow's terms (1948), would be termed an 'active tradition-bearer'. But with such a dialogic genre, however, such a clear division between active and passive tradition-bearer is hard to draw.

We can back up the notion of main riddler with some numbers. In the Beech Mountain session, where 8 riddles were posed in 10 minutes, three-quarters of the riddles came from the main riddler. In the Wild Cove session, where 14 riddles were posed over 27 minutes, about two-thirds of the riddles came from the mouth of the main riddler. And in the St. Paul's session, where 12 riddles were posed over 31 minutes, once again three-quarters were asked by the main riddler.

What people say when they riddle

One of the most important things about these riddlings is that more goes on than posing riddles, offering solutions, and giving the correct answers, which is what one might imagine if one's only source of information was published collections of riddles and solutions. Most notably, the riddles cannot simply be spoken, but they need to be *presented* as a question and a challenge. In other words, it needs to be made clear that this odd set of words is not something like a proverb or a lullaby that can simply be listened to, but is rather something requiring a verbal response. Sometimes this presentation of the riddle takes place *within* the riddle itself. This is most especially the case with rhymed riddles. For example,

one riddle I was posed ended with the formula ‘Tell me this riddle/ And I’ll give you a ring’. Other versions of this challenging offer in the scholarly literature include ‘give you a penny’, ‘a pin’, or ‘a ten pound ring’. In another riddle, a series of letters was stated (‘Two O’s, Two N’s, a D, and an L’). What turned this into a riddle was the closing question ‘and what will it spell?’, giving the riddlee the idea they need to compose a word from those letters. At other times, the presentation of what otherwise would be a self-contained statement as a riddle comes at the start of the riddle: ‘Riddle me riddle me this ...’.

If such prompts are not found within the riddle itself, they will often need to be added. Beforehand someone might say: ‘You know what this is then?’ before giving the formulaic language of the riddle. After saying the riddle, the speaker would add a phrase such as ‘What is it?’ or ‘That’s a riddle’. Hearing such utterances after a riddle always felt like a shift in register, down from crafted remembered words to plain everyday ones, or to put it another way, down from the poetic to the prosaic, from the frequently rhymed, metrical riddles to informal ametrical speech. It might also be worth noting here that while people obviously know the word ‘riddle’, when in the midst of riddlings they tend not to use the word when referring to riddles as much as its replacement ‘one’. In one sense, this is only to be expected: at similar events where someone might ask, Do you know that one? rather than, Do you know this joke? or Do you know that song? However, it seems to me that something different is going on here, and that ‘riddle’ is more of a word that would be found *inside* riddles (‘Tell me this riddle’, ‘Riddle me this’) or immediately after them (‘That’s a riddle’ occurred more than once) than it would be used in general reference to them. After all, riddles often contain the word ‘riddle’, whereas jokes do not feature the word ‘joke’ and songs do not often feature the word ‘song’. The occurrence of the word ‘riddle’ within riddles may be an additional reason for avoiding that word in between riddles proper.

To a Martian folklorist, it might seem that the main activity in riddling is the *repeating* of the riddle. This is done both by the riddler and the riddlee(s). The riddle is repeated at the start by the riddler if they misremember it the first time. There is the

piecemeal repetition of it by the riddlee, confirming that they have heard it all correctly. This in turn prompts the riddler to repeat it fluently. To say *something* to fill the silence while they puzzle over it, the riddlee now and again repeats words from the riddle. And finally, the riddle is repeated together with its solution by the riddler *after* it has been correctly solved. The riddler's delight in going over the logic of the riddle is reminiscent of the way that the set-up and punchline of a good joke can be savoured further after its telling by its repetition.

What *else* do people say when riddling? The riddlee(s) suggests answers. Sometimes the riddlee presents what they are sure must be wrong answers ('Well, it's not ...') simply in order to keep the channels of communication open and prevent silence descending. Silence might be taken as the riddlee being irremediably puzzled, and thus mark the end of that particular riddle exchange. Another common type of remark is the riddler (or anyone who already knows the answer) giving clues as to the solution, some of which are more helpful than others, for example the minimally informative 'Everyone got one'. This spinning out of the process, rather than giving the answer straightway is also part of the pleasure taken in riddling. To make sure this process is not short-circuited, onlookers are often warned to keep quiet: 'If you know that one, don't say' or 'Don't tell en. Make him guess at it'. Something else that may be uttered are formulaic reproofs of the riddlee's dull-wittedness. This is also part of the riddler's joy. In one case, it was said of me 'If he'd get any slower, we'd call him an Irishman'. I guess these formulaic words were said as the utterer thought that I, as an Englishman, might enjoy them, in which case the reproof would be taken more as an occasion for laughter than annoyance. Along with such reproofs, we can note expressions of triumph in riddling, such as 'Now we got you!'

After the solution has finally been stated, explanations of why it is the correct answer often follow, especially when this is less than obvious. So after a riddle running 'Round as a hoop, black as a crow,/ A long tail and a buttonhole' was solved (the solution being a frying pan), the 'long tail' and 'buttonhole' were explained by the main riddler with the words 'He's got a long handle'. (The roundness and blackness of the pan were not seen as needing

exegesis.) Similarly a riddle with the grisly-seeming line ‘I took off his head and then let his body still stand’ was revealed to denote an innocuous redberry: ‘When you picked the berry off see, his body was still standing’. This end-stage may also encompass debate about the validity of other possible answers to the riddle: ‘Well an apple would do, but it’s a walnut. Apple’s close, but a walnut’s got a bitter hood.’

Register

Another characteristic of riddlings is that they do not only consist of riddles and riddle-related speech. Somehow the well-formed, figurative language of the riddles calls forth other examples of well-formed, figurative language. For instance, in one session anecdotes about foolish errands were also told, for example being told to search for a ‘skyhook’. It is intriguing that fool’s errands with their deliberate misdirections should be recalled in the context of enigmatica, which also make use of misdirection. Another time a party game in which one person in a ring had a button that had been passed around the people in the circle, which the player then had to find was mentioned. Again this may have been mentioned due to perceived similarities with the guessing game of riddles, similarly involving imperfect knowledge and guessing.

Other genres would crop up. A joke and traditional reproofs were uttered in one of the sessions. A watching boy, who clearly wanted to get in on the fun, took the opportunity to recite a rude rhyme. The rhyme was right in terms of register: it was a short, pre-constructed piece of rhymed traditional language. But it was wrong in terms of genre. And furthermore, it was not delivered correctly, lacking the necessary addressee. Nevertheless, vulgar allusions could certainly be made during the riddlings, if done correctly. As Archer Taylor has explained, there are various kinds of riddle. There are ‘true riddles’, riddles ‘in the strict sense’ that compare an object ‘to an entirely different object’ using metaphor (1943, p. 129). And there are trick questions and conundrums, which often occur in riddlings, but are not true riddles and do not use metaphor. But there is also a sub-class of true riddles known

as 'catch riddles', that deliberately point toward a rude answer, but which have an innocuous solution. In the riddling sessions described here, there were roughly equal numbers of true riddles, catch riddles, and conundrums (13, 9, and 10, respectively). But these three kinds of enigma were not distributed evenly over time. The sessions began with conundrums and true riddles. Catch riddles were only introduced after some riddle-rapport had been established, and with a little apology for the change in tone: 'It's nothing bad', 'It's not bad, it's only just simple', 'It's not blaggard'. These remarks also provided hints for the riddlee on how to respond to dubious sets of words such as 'There was a man upon a bed/ A-doing of a thing/ The more he worked and wiggled his arse/ The more he shoved it in.' Such riddles are great fun in practice, laughter coming from suppression of the rude answer that everyone knows, and perhaps especially from the riddler and the audience enjoying the amused discomfort of the riddlee who has half a mind to say the rude solution, but cannot bring himself to, as well as the riddlee enjoying being put off the track of the acceptable solution by the omnipresence of the obvious response. The laughter and bonhomie that typified the exchange of riddles was perhaps at its height during these moments. (The answer was 'a man setting potatoes'.)

Abrahams, writing about his experience of a riddling session in the Caribbean, noted that 'one riddle will sometimes suggest another': this suggestion can result from a framing element, from a method of description, from a technique of making the answer difficult, or simply from the subject (Abrahams, 1983, p. 275).

This modest observation was restated much more strongly by a later researcher, who said the message from riddlings 'was clear ... [that] performed riddles fall into groups that either belong together thematically or that resemble one another in structure' (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 2001, p. 109). The only trend observable by me in the three sessions was the delay in presenting catch riddles. They did not seem to be any observable links between the riddles semantically or stylistically. No doubt riddles do sometimes suggest one another in the human mind, but it is hard for an observer to say how. And the links we may be able to draw semantically or formally between successive riddles may be nothing more than

what might expected given the relatively limited number of riddle subjects (and riddle formats).

Taylor (1943, p. 145) also lists various other kinds of riddle I did not come across on these occasions (the alternative, the dialogue riddle, the message riddle, the wisdom question), as well as one that I did, the 'neck riddle'. The neck riddle is perhaps the most unusual kind of riddle – it is the riddle that a protagonist in a story sets to save his life (his 'neck'). In other words, unlike other riddles which have everyday objects such as pans, berries, chairs, or handles as their solutions, the answer to neck riddles is unguessable by those who have not heard it before. It serves in practice as the prologue to a narrative which explains the somewhat convoluted solution, bearing out the observation made by Norton: 'in many of the recorded examples the riddle was set to the audience and the story then offered as an explanation' (1942-3, p. 27).

Neck riddles are not the only riddles to have convoluted explanations. For example, I was posed this riddle: 'Bob stood behind the door, in came Sis, and made her piss'. The less-than-obvious solution was: 'A man got a case of rum behind the door, and Sis come in open the jar and pulled it off'. But neck riddles have further unusual characteristics that differentiate them: the 'speaker' of the riddle is identified as is the 'addressee' of the riddle – in the case of the neck riddle I heard ('Love I stand, Love I see, Love I hold in my right hand'), these were a man and his beloved, respectively, while the 'love' mentioned in the riddle turned out, unguessably, to be the remains of a dog. The shift from dialogue to monologue in which the riddler holds forth with the explanatory story makes a natural halting place in interaction, and it is surely not by chance that this relatively long form of riddle was the final one in two of the riddlings I was at.

When asking other Newfoundlanders about riddles on other occasions, it was this particular riddle beginning 'Love I stand' that I heard the most often, albeit now in isolation rather than as a part of a lively to-and-fro. More than one of the people who told me it thought that they might have learnt it at school in one of the old-time elementary school textbooks known as 'Royal Readers'. Here we are reminded once again of the interaction between

literary and oral traditions. But it is not at all certain that the riddlers I met, who had minimal formal schooling, would have come across this riddle in a school textbook themselves. We are reminded once again that the interactions between literate and oral traditions is complex: things can go back and forth, and back again. An oral example may predate a riddle's appearance in print, for example, and some of those who read a riddle (for example at school, though this reading may well have been aloud and something the whole classroom participated in) may then pass it on to other people orally.

How riddlings end

As mentioned, the two cases I was posed a neck riddle came at the end of their two respective riddlings. In the third case, the session was beginning to fizzle out after half an hour, and though both sides tried to sustain it by reaching back in memory for more riddles, they failed to find them readily. And the arrival of two visitors further interrupted things. Its natural conclusion was marked by the main riddler saying: 'What I knows I told him. That's all I could do.'

The other two sessions were shorter, and unlike the St. Paul's session where I'd arrived under my own steam, I reached the homes involved in the Wild Cove and on Beech Mountain sessions by car, driven in one case by a fellow fieldworker, and in another case by a mutual acquaintance. In both cases these sessions were cut short by my drivers at first signalling subtly, and then stating outright, that it was time to get back. In fact, we had been needing to leave for some time, and just after the more elaborate neck-riddles and their exegesis seemed an appropriate point to go. Indeed in one case, our mutual acquaintance who'd brought us together said 'He never runs out! You can stay here two days and he'll still be going.' This remark could be taken both as praise to the main riddler and as a hint to me that there was not going to be any more of a culmination (which we might be able to just hang on for) than what we'd heard.

The riddling began in both these cases after the recording machines had been turned off at least once, something which supposedly marked the end of our interaction. I have suggested that

riddlings can be attempts to divert attention from sensitive topics, to reclaim the centre of attention, and to display virtuosity, but in these two cases it seems right to think of them as leave-taking gifts from our hosts. Rapport had been established, they had gained an idea of what kind of thing I was interested in hearing from them (something which often takes a while), and this was the now-or-never chance to let rip. It was also an exchange of bonhomie, and the opportunity to end on a high note.

Close

Writing in 1983, Abrahams said ‘we have no record of riddling in English, that I know of, that gives the details of how riddles are organized and presented’ (p. 272). He attempted to provide such a record for one Caribbean riddling he took part in in the 1960s. He did this by providing an introduction to the riddling, then a rather full, though still not complete, transcription; I have here attempted to do something similar for a total of three riddlings using more description and fewer transcribed excerpts. So, to close this chapter, we might gather together what characterised the riddlings I witnessed (and indeed took part in) at the beginning of the twenty-first century in rural areas of anglophone eastern North America.

On the basis of this data, we can say that while riddlings are events involving riddles, they often feature other short verbal genres, such as jokes, taunts, reproofs, as well. The words of the riddles themselves were often repeated by both sides. Part of the etiquette of riddling as I saw it seems to be that silence cannot be allowed to descend for too long, so riddlees will think aloud. This might be because being silent could be taken as a sign of being completely baffled or having given up, but it may also be as too much silence would detract from the bonhomie typical of these exchanges. Riddlings, while fun, are also agonistic – they are a to-and-fro involving two sides both attempting to get the better of one another by baffling them and by displaying their own ingenious wit. As time goes on, riddlings also involve the sides trying to trick the others into speaking aloud the obvious, but taboo, answers to catch riddles. It seems that the side that enjoys

the exchanges the most may be the ‘third side’ – the onlookers. Another aspect of the agonistic nature of riddling, is that riddles are not just said, they are posed as challenges. It seemed to me that there was also an unspoken rule about how long riddles could decently take in attempting to provide solutions to a riddle, without the fun dissolving. To be sure about this, and to identify other features of riddlings, further such audio documentation (or even video documentation), would be highly desirable. There is potentially much more work to be done on riddlings, if we can do it. Yet it is far from clear that it will be possible to produce such documentation, given that riddling seems to be a semi-moribund practice in much of the province, remembering that my knowledgeable informant in Wild Cove had not riddled for years. It would be fine to be proven wrong about the currency of riddling, but until such time attending to such audio data as does exist, and squeezing it for what we might learn from it, would seem to be a valuable activity.

To return at the last to the local Newfoundland situation, we can note that while half of the riddles posed by the main riddler in St Paul’s were featured in Greenleaf’s documentation of riddles from the neighbouring village eighty years earlier, only one of the riddles posed by the main riddler in distant Wild Cove had a counterpart in Greenleaf. This observation would seem to have both a geographic and a historical significance. It would seem, in other words, that there may have been some regionality to the distribution of riddles within Newfoundland. It would also seem that there has been resilience in the retention of this repertoire over time.

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