



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

A Country Auction: The Paul V. Leitzel Estate Sale by Robert Aibel; Ben Levin; Chris Musello; Jay Ruby

The Ramsey Trade Fair by Scott Faulkner; Elizabeth Barrett; Alan Bennett; Ben Zickatoose
Phyllis A. Harrison

The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 100, No. 395. (Jan. - Mar., 1987), pp. 92-93.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8715%28198701%2F03%29100%3A395%3C92%3AACATPV%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4>

The Journal of American Folklore is currently published by American Folklore Society.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/folk.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

homes and juke joints, both appropriate contexts, and the speakers themselves are inspired with energy and enthusiasm. Yet despite having the ingredients for an important and successful production, the film suffers at the hands of the editors and from the very nature of the tradition-bearers it seeks to document.

First, in presenting such a wide variety of material, including blues performances, "*I Ain't Lying*" loses a sense of cohesion. The individual performances are simply strung together with relatively unsophisticated production values. As one of the viewers at our screening noted, "It looks like a series of out-takes," and we wonder if in fact some scenes were filmed during other projects. The film is difficult to interpret as a whole, and audiences drawn to it by its subtitle may feel betrayed—that is, assuming they can understand the vocals.

The soundtrack of "*I Ain't Lying*" is most kindly described as a viewer's challenge. We have worked with black storytellers and musicians for many years, and rarely do we experience problems in understanding their speech. In this film, however, the vocals—at least to our ears—are often incomprehensible, and one can only imagine the perplexed expressions of viewers who have had little or no contact with the Afro-American syntax of the deep South. Though certainly legitimate, the extraneous noises of the enthusiastic home and juke joint listeners only compound the audio weaknesses. Subtitles or a detailed transcript would offer some assistance, but there are few real solutions in such ethnographic, location filming. Perhaps more attention to audio recording and more sophisticated audio equipment would help, but this dilemma is one to be considered by any filmmaker who seeks a broad audience for his or her work.

Certainly many folklorists would like to see a greater public awareness of and appreciation for oral narrative traditions, but the ability of these three films to further that goal is limited. Unless the audience has a prior understanding of folk narratives, *Fixin' To Tell About Jack* and "*I Ain't Lying*" (particularly the latter) are likely to achieve negative results, though introductory remarks from a knowledgeable teacher/presenter could greatly improve their chances. Taking a much different approach, *Possum, Oh, Possum* stands more successfully, not as an educational documentary but rather as an entertaining quasi-documentary with enough humor to please any audience and just enough information to be useful in the hands of a talented instructor.

Blue Ridge Institute
Ferrum, Virginia

KIP LORNELL
VAUGHAN WEBB

A Country Auction: The Paul V. Leitzel Estate Sale. By Robert Aibel, Ben Levin, Chris Musello and Jay Ruby. 1984. 58 min., 16mm., 3/4" U-Matic, 1/2" Beta and 1/2" VHS video cassette formats, color. 3-page study guide. (PCR: Films & Video in the Behavioral Sciences. Pennsylvania State Univ., Audio Visual Services, Special Services Bldg., University Park, PA 16802)

The Ramsey Trade Fair. By Scott Faulkner with Elizabeth Barrett, Alan Bennett, and Ben Zick-afoose. 1973. 18 min., 16mm., color. 6-page study guide with reading list and transcript of soundtrack. (Appalshop Films, Box 743, Whitesburg, KY 41858)

The two films reviewed here represent almost opposite approaches to the film documentation of folklife. The juxtaposition of the two encapsulates the difficulties inherent in producing a classroom film that provides both a realistic portrayal of a complex event and the ethnographic data that give the event substance and meaning.

A Country Auction offers a detailed and systematic study of one estate sale, beginning with a capsule history of the county, the town, and the family involved. Interviews with family members, the auctioneer, and participants ranging from friends of the deceased to the town antique dealer provide a multitude of perspectives on the one event. The film follows two items from

the sale through the hands of buyers to other parts of the country, suggesting the layering of social and economic functions within the event itself and the ripple effect of this event outside the geographically defined community. Scenes of town, countryside, participants' homes, antique dealers' shops, and preparation for the sale itself give visual reinforcement to the filmmakers' thesis that the auction brings into focus many different parts of the community, while scenes of the sale itself give the viewer a fine sense of the performance, drama, and interaction so integral to the auction. Voice-over narration, the presence of the interviewer in many frames, dissolves, and fades to black clearly structure thematic sections of the film and clarify the filmmakers' analytical stance. Never does the viewer forget that this is an ethnographic study of a country sale, and analysis clearly takes precedence over the visual unity and chronology of the Leitzel estate sale. By venturing outside the sale itself, the film develops the motives, attitudes, and reactions of participants to the auction process and to this particular auction sale.

The Ramsey Trade Fair offers a visually beautiful walkthrough of a rural Appalachian flea market. Voice-overs allow fair participants to talk about the fair and, to a certain extent, their relationship to it, while the camera pans the crowd or settles in on particular transactions or participants. Four brief scenes take the viewer outside the fair to the homes of participants, presumably during an interview. Unfortunately, much of the dialogue upon which the film depends is extremely difficult to understand, and anyone using the film should plan on extensive use of the soundtrack transcript prior to and during viewing. Even with the transcript, the relationships between participants in the fair are, for the most part, unstated. The study guide and transcript provide historical and social context for the town and the event, but the community of participants at the Ramsey Trade Fair is implied rather than described. The study guide mentions senior citizens as traders, and the filmmakers have focused on senior traders, but crowd scenes show a wide variety of ages at the fair. The viewer may wonder about the make-up of the community. Whose voices are we hearing and where do they come from? The film does not really say. Scenes of rural mountain context and interesting sequences of buyers, sellers, merchandise and non-trading participants pull the viewer into the film (though the close-ups of blind singer Bill Denham are perhaps a bit overzealous) and provide a strong emotional feel for the event, although they do not provide a real understanding of it.

The difficulty, clearly, in documenting a slice of traditional life through film lies in translating all of the intangible shared knowledge that the camera cannot capture. Samuel Johnson's 18th-century admonition to London's theater critics is, I think, appropriate here: no one who attends a stage production actually believes himself transported to the banks of the Nile during *Antony and Cleopatra*. No one viewing *A Country Auction* or *The Ramsey Trade Fair* will believe her or himself transported to Pennsylvania or Appalachia. Folklife films must present the intangibles, and if that means the use of an outside narrator and the segmentation of an event with interviews and incidents outside it, so be it. For this reason, *A Country Auction* provides a fine example of the straightforward presentation of field data and analytical information along with the event itself; for the same reason, *The Ramsey Trade Fair* is less successful.

I would hesitate to use *The Ramsey Trade Fair* in a junior high or high school classroom, in part because of the dialogue and in part because the film needs considerable supplementation. With that supplementation, I might use the film on the college level in a course on regional folk culture or perhaps in a discussion of fieldwork and documentation. *A Country Auction* would be appropriate for high school, college, and general adult audiences, and I would recommend its use in folklore courses. It would fit nicely in a course on American folklore, regional folklife, social customs, or field methods.