

From Pineville, Missouri

Vance Randolph—Folklorists of the Ozarks Life and Culture

Introduction

Vance Randolph was a folklorist and professional writer who lived most of his life in the Ozarks region of Missouri and Arkansas. Beginning in the 1920s, Randolph wrote numerous books and articles about Ozark life and culture. He traveled throughout the Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks and observed all aspects of folk culture. Randolph personally recorded and collected ballads, songs, and stories that had been handed down orally from one generation to another in the isolated Ozark region. His published accounts of Ozark culture are of great value to folklorists.

Early Years

Vance Randolph was born in Pittsburg, Kansas, on February 23, 1892. He was the oldest of three sons born to John and Theresa Gould Randolph. Vance's father was an attorney and his mother worked as a schoolteacher and librarian. John Randolph encouraged Vance's fascination with the outdoors. The two took long walks in the woods to study bugs and wildlife. Vance's father even taught him the names of the constellations in the sky at night. Sadly, John Randolph died just before Vance's tenth birthday.

Education

As a boy, Vance recalled that he was "painfully shy" and developed a stammer. Many of his teachers thought he was "stupid and ignorant" which made him want to avoid school. By the time he was ready to go to high school, Vance said that "the idea of high school terrified me." He eventually dropped out of high school and worked in a local pool hall.

Pittsburg State Manual Training Normal School

Vance soon discovered that he missed learning. His mother offered to help him if he would go back to school. In 1911 he enrolled at Pittsburg State Manual Training Normal School (now Pittsburg State University) in Pittsburg, Kansas. He did well in college and graduated with a degree in biology. Vance later obtained a master's degree in psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He worked on a Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Kansas but did not finish his studies.

Discovering the Ozarks

Although Randolph studied biology and psychology, he spent his life collecting, recording, and writing about Ozark life and folklore. As a young man, Randolph read

old collections of ballads and songs. He also read the work of George Borrow, an adventurous English soldier and author who studied languages and the folkways of Gypsies. This sparked his life-long work with folklore and music.

Randolph began writing for *Appeal to Reason*, a Socialist newspaper published by Julius Augustus Wayland in Girard, Kansas. His newspaper career came to an end in 1917 when he was drafted by the U.S. Army during World War I. Constantly ill, he never served overseas and was granted a disability discharge in 1918.

After wandering for a few years, Vance Randolph settled down in Pineville, Missouri. He had first visited nearby Noel, Missouri, in 1899 as a boy while on vacation with his parents. It was then at the age of seven that he came to believe “the Ozark country was the garden spot of all creation.” It was the beginning of Randolph’s life-long love affair with the Ozarks of southwest Missouri and northwest Arkansas. Pineville, Missouri

After buying a house in Pineville in 1919, he began to collect songs and ballads from local residents. He quickly expanded his efforts to include tall tales, folk stories, jokes, superstitions, riddles, and old folkways. While in Pineville Randolph met Marie Wardlaw St. John Wilbur whom he later married in 1930.

In 1931 Randolph’s first book *The Ozarks: An American Survival of a Primitive Society* was published. It was followed the next year by *Ozark Mountain Folks*. These books, as well as the numerous magazine and journal articles that Randolph wrote about the region, helped establish his reputation as an expert on the Ozarks.

Becoming an Ozark Expert

By 1933 Randolph was recognized as one of the leading authorities on the Ozarks region, and was subsequently hired as a scriptwriter by MGM Studios in Hollywood, California. He and another writer wrote a script about the Ozarks. When the producer read the script, he told Randolph and his writing partner that the script “lacked authenticity.” Angry, Randolph left Hollywood and returned to the Ozarks. Instead of returning to Pineville, he settled in Galena, Missouri, in Stone County. Marie Randolph died from cancer in 1937. The couple did not have any children.

Randolph in the Ozarks

Hired during the height of the Great Depression to work as an assistant state supervisor of the Federal Writer’s Project in Missouri, Randolph travelled throughout the Ozarks recording folk songs and collecting stories and folklore with pen and paper. Randolph established lasting relationships with area residents that enabled him to collect large amounts of material.

These relationships were important when he was later hired to collect songs and ballads in the Ozarks for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. This time, however, Randolph was able to purchase recording equipment to make sound recordings of old-time Ozarkers singing hymns and mournful ballads.

Randolph used the material he gathered to produce his most important and impressive work. In 1946 the State Historical Society of Missouri published *Ozark Folk Songs*. A four volume set, *Ozark Folk Songs* contains over 900 ballads and songs that Randolph gathered, including African American spirituals; ballads brought to the United States by British, Irish, and Scottish immigrants; religious hymns; Civil War tunes; and humorous songs.

Vance Randolph admitted his work focused on people he called “hillbillies and ridge-runners” who lived in isolated areas, not individuals who lived in cities or towns, or people he thought were tainted by modernization. He presented a narrow, romanticized view of the Ozarks as he focused on the upper White River Valley of Missouri and Arkansas, and not the entire Ozark region.

Final Years

During the 1940s, Randolph became close friends with the noted illustrator Rose O’Neill. He was impressed with and entertained by O’Neill’s many natural talents. Randolph helped O’Neill write her autobiography, which was finally published in 1997.

It was during this time period that Randolph moved to northwest Arkansas where he spent the rest of his life. In the late 1950s, he was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Arkansas. A few years later in 1962, he married a second time to Mary Celestia Parler, a fellow folklorist and English professor at the University of Arkansas. They did not have any children. He continued to remain active in folklore circles until his health began to decline. In 1978 Randolph was elected a Fellow of the American Folklore Society, an impressive honor for a self-trained folklorist.

Vance Randolph died from old age at the age of 88 on November 1, 1980, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. He is buried in the Fayetteville National Cemetery.

Randolph's Legacy

Although he did not have a Ph.D., Vance Randolph published over sixty articles and books on Ozark folk culture. His books focused on the everyday lives of people who

lived in the Ozarks, preserved the songs, ballads, and folklore of a passing generation, and shaped the way that many people today view the Ozarks.

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Vance Randolph
1892 - 1980

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