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Stories and Storytellers (from Tar Heel Junior Historian) [1]

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North Carolina Stories and Storytellers

By Ron Jones
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Tar Heel Junior Historian Association, NC Museum of History

Storytelling is deeply rooted in the history and people of North Carolina. The Jack tales [2] and Grandfather tales of the Appalachian Mountains are recounted versions of folktales and fairy tales that the early settlers brought from Europe. Pirate stories, tales of shipwrecks, and mysteries of the sea paint a vivid, and sometimes hostile, picture of life along the coast of early North Carolina. African Americans [3] kept alive the trickster stories and folktales of their homeland through Brer Rabbit and the Anansi tales. And the Keepers of the Flame passed on the American Indian [4] myths and legends of the Cherokee and other tribes of the Carolinas.

People have used storytelling to teach, to inspire, and to entertain children, as well as adults. In the early years of our state's history, individuals had no television or radio, and no videos, DVDs, or CDs. Children could not search the Web to find news of the day or stories about local citizens. Instead, people told stories as they worked, and families gathered around their fires to listen to stories. Storytelling was an oral tradition, meaning the stories were not written down but told again and again, and often changed with each telling. It wasn't until the late 1800s that people called *folklorists* began to collect and write down the stories told by people across the state. It is through these folktales, stories, and legends that have been passed down that we can get some idea of the language, the people, and the events of our state's past.

Many people have been responsible for collecting and writing down the early stories. In North Carolina, one of the best-known and most important folklorists who collected stories was Richard Chase. In the early 1930s, Mr. Chase spent a lot of time interviewing and listening to people in the Mountains of North Carolina. For generations, these families had been handing down the stories and songs their ancestors had brought with them from England, Scotland, and Germany. Two of Mr. Chase's most popular collections of these stories are the *Grandfather Tales* and *The Jack Tales*.

Schools and libraries have always played an important part in keeping storytelling alive. As television, radio, and movies became popular forms of entertainment and information, teachers and librarians continued to use storytelling to teach, to spark children's imaginations, and to introduce youth to the world of books and reading.

To a great degree, the storytelling revival of the 1970s resulted from teachers' and librarians' interest in and use of storytelling. In October 1973, Jimmy Neil Smith, a high school teacher from Tennessee, gathered a small group of storytellers in Jonesborough, Tennessee, to hold the first National Storytelling Festival. The event continues today. Many of the storytellers participating in the national festivals during the early years came from North Carolina. They have gone on to become some of the most recognized names in the world of storytelling. Ray Hicks, from Beech Mountain, Jackie Torrence, from Salisbury, and Donald Davis, of Ocracoke, have risen to international fame as storytelling treasures not just of North Carolina but of the United States.

Ray Hicks has lived for more than eighty years on Beech Mountain, near Banner Elk, in the house built by his grandfather. He is described by many as the King of Storytellers and has received national awards and honors. Ray has traveled throughout the South to schools, libraries, and storytelling festivals telling his family's versions of the Jack tales in a strong Appalachian dialect. In 2000 the first collection of *The Jack Tales* by Ray Hicks (as told to Lynn Salsi) was published.

Jackie Torrence, the Story Lady, is one of America's most beloved storytellers. She has told stories in all fifty states and in England and Scotland. In 1998 Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks studio flew her to California to tell stories. Jackie grew up in Salisbury and lived for a while with her grandparents. They told and taught her a lot of stories. While working at the public library in Salisbury, she began to tell the Brer Rabbit stories her grandfather had told her and discovered her true talent and love for storytelling.

Donald Davis is known not only as a master storyteller but also as a master teacher of storytellers. He was born in Haywood County [5] in the southern Appalachian Mountains, in a world rich with stories. For more than twenty years, Donald was a Methodist minister, but in the early 1980s, he became a full-time storyteller. He now lives on Ocracoke Island with his wife, Merle, but he usually travels more than 250 days a year telling stories at schools, libraries, and festivals around the world. Donald has told stories in all fifty states and in Europe, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. He also teaches workshops for storytellers, especially for those who want to tell their own family stories. *Jack and the Animals* and *Jack Always Seeks His Fortune* are just two of the numerous books that Donald Davis has published.

Apart from these three internationally known storytellers, North Carolina is home to other professional storytellers. Milbre Burch, in Chapel Hill, has won numerous awards for her recordings of original stories and folktales from around the world. Terry Rollins and Ron Jones live in Durham and, along with Markey Duckworth in Oxford, are examples of the many children's librarians who have become professional storytellers. All three credit their beginnings as storytellers to their work with children and families in libraries. A well-known storytelling family from Winston-Salem consists of Joseph and Gail Anderson and their daughter Sonji and son Karim. Known as The Healing Force, they travel throughout the country, often involving the audiences as they share African folktales, music, and dance. Joyce Greer and John Golden, both from Wilmington, share stories of North Carolina's history and its people. Joyce tells very moving and inspirational African American tales. John tells and sings pirate stories and songs of the North Carolina coast.

Over the past twenty-five years, a storytelling revival has taken place throughout the country, and North Carolina and its storytellers have played an important part in that revival. Libraries and arts councils across the state continue to sponsor storytelling festivals that bring storytellers to schools and communities. What began as a handful of part-time storytellers in the early 1970s has now grown to hundreds of part-time and fulltime storytellers in our state.

As the popularity of and demand for storytelling have grown, so have organizations to help storytellers and those interested in the art form to learn more about storytelling. The North Carolina Storytelling Guild [6] works to coordinate and distribute information on storytelling throughout North Carolina. The guild sponsors an annual storytelling festival and two storytelling workshops each year. The National Storytelling Network [7] is a national organization that sponsors an annual festival and various workshops around the country. The National Storytelling Youth Olympics [7] is sponsored by East Tennessee State University's Master's in Storytelling program and provides the opportunity for youth throughout the country to participate in a storytelling competition.

Numerous local storytelling organizations and events exist throughout the state. Your public library or local arts council is a great place to go to find out about storytelling in your community. But if you talk to storytellers and ask how to become one of them, the answer will likely be, "If you want to be a storyteller, then just start telling stories!"

At the time of this article's publication, Ron Jones, a native North Carolinian, had been a professional storyteller for twenty years. He founded the Wake County Storytelling Festival and coordinated it for fourteen years. Jones serves as the North Carolina liaison for the National Storytelling Network and is a founding board member of the North Carolina Storytelling Guild.

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Additional Resources:

North Carolina Storytelling Guild Website. Accessed November 6, 2023. www.ncstoryguild.org [6].

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