



Mock wedding ceremony at pre-wedding shower in Faulk County, South Dakota, in 1948.

— Photo courtesy of Linda Ebretb, Mandan, North Dakota

Folk Drama on the Great Plains: The Mock Wedding in Canada and the United States

by Michael Taft

Remarkably similar climates, landscapes, and occupations mark an area of North America that stretches from northern Texas to southern Saskatchewan. Immigrant ethnic groups and Indian tribes contribute a complex mix of the world's traditions to these North American plains and prairies, traditions able to blend and flow among the region's peoples with relative ease. The resultant folklore of the Great Plains is distinctive, vigorous, and dynamic.

The study of plains folklore — particularly in the Canadian prairie provinces and the Dakotas — offers much potential. In fact, much of the region's folklore remains to be explored by scholars. Folk drama — whether a simple, costumed house-visit, a more elaborate costume party or ball, a locally produced skit, or a more ambitious staged and scripted production — flourishes on the plains. In particular, the "mock wedding," a common form of the traditional costume drama offers interesting insights into the nature of this region. It is the mock wedding, a folk drama characterized by cross-dressing, bawdy behavior, ad-libbing, and general carousing, that this paper will address.

My description of the tradition is a preliminary one, based upon limited fieldwork and research in Saskatchewan as well as some investigation in the plains states.¹ The only form of North American folk drama that has received extensive scholarly attention is Christmas mumming in Newfoundland — a traditional sword-drama performed by house-visitors during the twelve days of Christmas. This mumming tradition, however, is far removed from the plains, and is not even a cur-

rent tradition in Newfoundland; the sword-play is performed now only by professional theater groups and revivalists.² By comparison, the mock wedding and certain other forms of folk drama on the plains, though mostly unstudied, remain vital.

The mock wedding is a parody in which members of a community dress as a wedding entourage and stage a marriage ceremony. Players have specific roles and there is a written script in which several of the players have lines. The mock wedding is a ritual within a ritual, for it most often occurs as part of the larger celebration of a couple's marriage or their wedding anniversary. In Saskatchewan, the drama usually takes place during the celebration of a couple's milestone anniversary, especially the twenty-fifth anniversary. In Nebraska, the drama seems to occur more often at the actual wedding reception of the couple,³ but other occasions — such as wedding and baby showers, birthdays and community benefit concerts — may also serve as excuses for performing this drama. As I am most familiar with the Saskatchewan wedding anniversary performance, I will describe that particular context.

Saskatchewan's small communities — sometimes consisting of less than one hundred families — may seem sleepy to the outsider, but the people in these communities busy themselves with many local functions: wild fowl and wild game suppers, benefit concerts, festivals and parades, dances and communal breakfasts; as well as the more personal rituals of wedding and baby showers, christenings, birthday parties, going-away parties (for those leaving the community), and funerals. Local hockey, softball, curling, rodeos and other sports involve not only the participants, but also onlookers and supporters from the community. In addition, there is the daily round of coffee klatsches, as well as get-togethers at the cafe, pub, grain elevator and church.

The wedding anniversary is one such occasion for the community to come together. At a couple's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the community holds a celebration in their honor, usually in the community hall or church basement. The honored couple, surrounded by friends, relatives and neighbors, is regaled with speeches (sometimes of the "roast" variety), poems composed in their honor by a local poet, their favorite songs sung by members of the community, and gifts. Food and drink are essential elements of this celebration, and there is usually dancing, either to the music of a local band or to pre-recorded music.

Unannounced and supposedly unexpected, a mock

¹ To date, I have conducted about ten hours of taped interviews with members of five communities in Saskatchewan; collected scripts, photographs, videotapes and other documents from various places in the prairie provinces (as well as from Nebraska and North Dakota); have given public talks on the subject at least eight times (and consequently have received much information from members of these audiences); and have alerted a number of folklorists to my ongoing investigation.

² There have been many studies of Newfoundland mumming. The most definitive is Herbert Halpert and George Story, eds., *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

³ Personal communication from Roger Welsch, May 5 and 6, 1989. A wedding-reception performance was recently reported from Minnesota: "No Mock Laughter at Mock Wedding," *Entertainment Bits* (Magazine of the Minnesota Ballroom Operators Association) (June/July 1988), p. 32. My thanks to Janet Gilmore and Jim Leary for showing me this article.

wedding procession enters the hall and takes over "center stage." Amidst laughter, jeers and expressions of dismay, this procession arranges itself in a tableau: a minister standing before a bride and groom, surrounded by bridesmaids, parents of the mock couple, a best man or ring bearer, and sometimes accompanied by a flower girl, a musician, or other dramatis personae. Whoever makes up the entourage, the most striking feature of the actors is that all female parts are played by men and all male parts are played by women. Often the bride is an especially big, burly man, while the groom is petite. The audience becomes quite excited, commenting on the dresses, hats, shoes and general appearance of the actors, laughing at the men "in drag," hooting at the women who have painted mustaches and beards on their faces. Children are often struck dumb, not just at the sight of these cross-dressed adults, but also at their clownish and bawdy antics (especially the men "redistributing" or revealing their movable breasts).

The minister begins with a "Dearly Beloved" speech, a parody of the actual wedding liturgy:

Dearly beloved we are gathered here
With many a qualm and many a fear



Mock wedding ensemble in Brainerd, Nebraska in the 1930s.
— Photo courtesy of Michael Taft, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

To join in wedlock this youthful pair
Before they are exposed to the wear and tear
Of wedded bliss and domestic wars.
With dishpan hands and scrubbing of floors
With the squawking of kids and grocery bills
With burned potatoes and other ills
With bullet-like biscuits and washday dinners
And flaring tempers as hubby grows thinner
With the mental cruelty and talk of divorce
And the final annulment in Reno of course.
But why should I add to their mental
confusion
By saying it's naught but a vain delusion?
Their dream-filled souls are happy today
So why should I steal their bliss away?
The guests are assembled, the gifts are many
So let's get on with the ceremony.⁴

Holding a telephone book, an old catalog or perhaps a *Playboy* magazine, the minister then reads the vows to the couple before pronouncing them "man and wife." The finale usually involves a post-nuptial kiss (sometimes devolving into a wrestling match) and the presentation of the bridal bouquet — composed of local, noxious weeds — to the honored couple.

The drama is usually limited to the parody of a wedding ceremony, but it can also include further scenes or acts. For example, in one particular performance, because it was known that the honored couple had eloped, there was a preliminary scene in which the elopement was depicted and parodied. In another instance, the true story of the newly-married wife rubbing liniment on her husband's sore groin — with disastrous results — was graphically reproduced on stage, complete with high hysterics, moaning and groaning, and thrashing about on the floor.

While the above secondary scenes relate to actual events in the life of the honored couple, there is also a stock scene that sometimes interrupts the mock ceremony. At the point when the minister asks if anyone can show reason why the couple should not be wed ("or forever hold thy peace [piece]"), a character playing the girl friend — either pregnant or carrying a babe in swaddling clothes — rushes forward and causes a scene within the scene.

Like the girl friend, most of the roles in the drama are stereotypes. Such stock characters include a weeping mother who carries a roll of toilet paper with which she wipes her eyes; a father of the bride who usually carries a shotgun to prod the groom; and a ring-bearer who either embodies a visual pun — such as wearing a suit covered with jar-sealer rings — or who responds to the minister's call for a ring by ringing a bell or by producing a teething ring, cigar band, washer or other gag ring.

The bride and groom, however, are not stereotypes but rather caricatures of the honored couple. In their dress, mannerisms and stage actions, they parody

⁴ Part of a mock wedding script from southwest Saskatchewan. I have decided to keep all of the Saskatchewan material anonymous.

known characteristics of the honored couple. At the same time, the minister reveals further characteristics and humorous or embarrassing events in the lives of the anniversary couple by means of a series of vows put to the mock couple. For example, in one drama the minister asked the groom if he promised to buy his chickens from the market rather than steal them from the Hutterites, while in another drama the minister asked the bride if she promised to shoot the deer when she was the only one with a loaded rifle — both vows relating to funny stories known within the community about the people being honored.

The minister is the only character who may be played by a man or woman, but in either case, this part is also a stereotype, complete with funny cloak and hat, the aforementioned liturgical “text,” and often a jug of hooch hanging from his or her sash. This character has most of the lines and is, in fact, the prime mover on-stage, directing the action of the others. In most cases, the minister is also the prime mover off-stage, being the producer-director of this traditional drama.

The producer-director is an essential part of this tradition; without this creative person in the community, no mock wedding is possible. All communities include talented people — local poets, raconteurs, woodworkers, musicians, historians, cake-decorators, photographers and videotapers, dressmakers, singers and practical jokers, to name a few. The producer-director (who is often the local poet) is one of these talented people, but she — and in most cases the talent and responsibility falls to a woman — is more than a producer and director of the drama. She writes the script or refashions her script to fit the particulars of the couple to be honored; she keeps a box full of props and costumes, usually including wigs made out of binder twine, handmade or store-bought masks, old-fashioned and large-sized women’s clothing (and underclothing); and she selects those who are to be part of the cast. In short, she is in charge of all aspects of the production.

Some weeks before the couple’s anniversary, friends or relatives of the couple will approach the producer-director and ask her to prepare a mock wedding. In order to properly refashion her script, the producer-director may ask for interesting and funny stories about the couple, or for specific quirks or traits that make the couple distinctive in the community. In many cases, of course, the producer-director will already be aware of the couple’s characteristics, since she is their neighbor and most likely their friend. It is difficult to keep secrets in such small communities, and “open secrets” are grist for the producer-director’s mill.

The most touchy task for the producer-director is finding men who are willing to dress in women’s clothes. Yet, as one woman told me, “once you get one man to dress up, they all want to.” Although Saskatchewan society is quite typical of North America, with its share of machismo and the traditions of manhood, the fact remains that many local men are willing to sacrifice their manly dignity by cross-dressing. The trick is in the way they approach this role-playing: through a kind of reverse-machismo, the men manage to maintain their dignity despite dressing in such an outlandish manner.

Only a “real man” can bear public humiliation



Bride and father of the bride (sporting mask of Rene Levesque, leader of the Parti Quebecois [Quebec Separatist Party]), from mock wedding ceremony in southwestern Saskatchewan, no date.

— Photo courtesy of Michael Taft, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

gracefully and with good humor; only a man entirely in control of himself (and entirely confident in his manliness) can make the sacrifice. There are some men, in fact, who insist on being part of the production and who take pride in their roles.

Counterbalancing any sense these men feel about their loss of manly dignity is their behavior during the performance. Much more than the women-dressed-as-men, the female impersonators engage in considerable mugging: exaggerating their “femininity” through mincing, blushing and falsetto speech; asserting their masculinity (despite the costume) in an exaggerated fashion by making muscles bulge in their arms or swaggering and strutting in an overly manly way; or behaving in a bawdy manner by lifting their skirts, scratching themselves or, as mentioned earlier, revealing their breasts. In addition, the men-dressed-as-women, unlike their female counterparts, often distort or exaggerate their newly acquired feminine physique: grossly oversized breasts and backsides being the most common motifs.

This exaggerated mugging and clowning makes for the kind of bawdy humor that the audience expects from a mock wedding, but it also alerts the onlookers that these men are quite consciously playing with their sex-reversed status and that, ultimately, they are in control of their dignity. The men are not so much playing a role as playing *with* a role; if a man were perceived to be taking his role seriously, his manliness might well be called into question.

The women actors, however, feel no need to reassure either themselves or the audience of their real-life status,



"Dearly beloved," spoofed by mock wedding ceremony in Gull Lake, Saskatchewan, no date .

— Photo courtesy of Michael Taft, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

and thus they tend to play their male roles, not in a clownish fashion, but in a more straightforward style. In real life, of course, women often wear men's clothes, or clothes fashioned after men's styles, whereas men never dress as women in their everyday lives.

The women, however, face other risks, for in almost all cases, it is the women who are in charge of the mock wedding drama. As I stated earlier, most of the producer-directors are women. As one woman told me, "If we left this up to the men, it would never be put on." The risk for women, then, lies in how the mock wedding will be received by the community. Since the mock wedding is a kind of gossip-drama — relying as it does on stories and character traits of the honored couple — the producer-director must know how far she can go in revealing this couple to their community. What to put in the script and what to leave out are matters of great concern, since there is a fine line between good clean fun and malicious gossip.

Standards of propriety vary from one community to another. For example, in one drama the minister asked the bride to promise to scratch her husband's psoriasis whenever necessary — an allusion deemed within the bounds of good taste in that particular situation. On another occasion, however, the father-of-the-bride's shotgun was dispensed with, since it was known that the woman being honored was actually pregnant at the time of her marriage. In a further instance, the producer-director stepped over the line. As part of the ring ceremony, the groom filled the bride's fingers with ring after ring — an allusion to the ostentatious display of jewelry for which the woman being honored was known. The woman, however, had no idea that the community saw her in this light and was shocked; in turn, the producer-director was sorry that she had included this gag in the script. The whole question of propriety and sensitivity, of risking bad feelings when good feelings are intended, deserves much more investigation within the context of the mock wedding drama.

Where did mock weddings come from and how did they find their way to the plains? The greater answer is unknowable, since the traditions of parody, disguise and cross-dressing that characterize this drama are as old as civilization itself. But the more immediate answer seems to lie in similar but older traditions found in other parts of North America. I have already mentioned Newfoundland mumming as a parallel folk dramatic tradition on the continent, but there are other dramatic forms that parody the wedding ceremony in much the same way as mock weddings do.

Perhaps the oldest and most widespread of these traditions is the Tom Thumb wedding. Going back at least to Victorian times, this was a wedding composed entirely of children, and was performed throughout North America, most especially on the East Coast. In most cases, however, the Tom Thumb wedding was not so much a lampoon as it was a portrayal of the ideal wedding, in which children attempted to present, in miniature, the perfect and innocently pure marriage. Bawdiness was out of the question here. Another parallel to the mock wedding is the "womenless wedding," which, as its name implies, is a drama acted exclusively by men. In some communities this parody is called a mock wedding, and it certainly makes use of the same kind of bawdy and outrageous humor as the plains mock wedding, but its unisexual dimension gives it a different flavor (and a different function) from the mock wedding under discussion here.⁵

It is probable, however, that the mock wedding has its roots in these older wedding parodies, that someone who witnessed or participated in these dramas reshaped them into the plains mock wedding. In fact, Tom

⁵ For a discussion of both the Tom Thumb wedding and the womenless wedding, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 117-125.

Thumb weddings were available in printed form as mail-order plays; it is likely that one or more producer-directors sent away for these plays and used the printed scripts as sources for their mock wedding dramas.⁶ Note the following vows from one Tom Thumb script:

I, Tom Thumb, take thee, Jennie June, to be my lawful partner from this day forward, for better, but not worse, for richer, but not poorer, so long as your cooking does not give me dyspepsia, and my mother-in-law does not visit oftener than once in a quarter, and then not to remain all night; so long as all bills for millinery shall be paid out of spending money furnished by your beloved father, out of gratitude for not having you left upon his hands in the deplorable station of helpless spinster. And thereto I give thee my word of honor. Sure enough.⁷

These vows echo through more recent scripts, such as the following from Saskatchewan:

⁶ As quoted two examples of published wedding parodies are *The Tom Thumb Wedding and the Brounie's Flirtation: Two Entertainments for Children* (Boston: W.H. Baker and Company, 1898), and Donald V. Hock, *Tom Thumb's First Wedding Anniversary: A Comedy for Lower Grade Children* (Dayton, Ohio: Paine Publishing Company, 1934).

⁷ *The Tom Thumb Wedding*, p. 5, as quoted in Stewart, p. 120.

⁸ The quote is from a script from southwest Saskatchewan.

⁹ In the much smaller and more conservative mock wedding tradition of southern Ontario, Pauline Greenhill has discovered scripts that are almost word-for-word the same as the Tom Thumb script quoted above; see her "Mock Weddings in Ontario: Traditional and Non-Traditional Secular Ritual," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, Winnipeg, 1986.

"Rubbing linament on a sore groin," scene in progress of mock wedding scenario in Carmichael, Saskatchewan, no date.

— Photo courtesy of Michael Taft, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



I [name of bride] did take thee, [name of groom] (and an aspirin) to be my lawful wedded husband to have and to hold (those sippers forever) from our wedding day forward and I guess I'll continue to do so (but I got the worst) for richer (but I got the poorer) to love, and to cherish till I think of something and thereto I plight my troth.⁸

Distortions of the liturgy, jokes about bad food and the implied low value of the bride link plains scripts with their nineteenth-century ancestors.⁹

Local producer-directors, however, have mostly incorporated their own talent, much of which is specific to their community and way of life, and is related directly to the couple being honored. Thus the printed origins of this plains tradition remain only as echoes and not as guides to present-day productions.

The localization of the mock wedding is what makes this drama a phenomenon peculiar to the plains states and prairie provinces. To localize a script is to make it meaningful within the context of plains and prairie agrarian society. The following text in a mock wedding script from North Dakota focused on the minister's part, while the other parts were mostly ad-libbed:

Do you, Catherine Cornstubble, take this man, Peter Peabody, to be your awfully wedded husband? Will you promise to

Black his eyes and bloody his nose
And pull his hair and stamp on his toes,
And twist his ears and kick his shins
And hit him with a rolling pin
And drink his beer and spend his dough
And make his life a tale of woe?

Do you, Peter Peabody, take this woman,

Catherine Cornstubble, to be your awfully wedded wife? Will you promise to

Wash the dishes and make the beds
And scrub the floor and diaper the kids
And cook the meals and peel the spuds
And set the table and wash the duds
And take her breakfast to her in bed
And wish to heck that you were dead?

You will, brother, you will.¹⁰

While the Tom Thumb and womenless weddings of the East Coast and the mock weddings of southern Ontario remain standard set-pieces no matter where performed, the plains mock wedding is continually reshaped to fit local circumstances with the drama speaking to local concerns.

That the mock wedding has become largely the preserve of the plains, and exists elsewhere to a much lesser degree if at all, means that the entire tradition has taken on a function of particular importance to this one part of the continent. But why have the people of this region incorporated the tradition into their folk culture? What makes the mock wedding a particularly appropriate medium of expression for plains people?

In the case of Saskatchewan, at least, the answer lies partly in the fact that prairie folk enjoy viewing and participating in costumed events. The Christmas concert Santa in the one-room prairie schools often acted in a jovial, unruly (even slightly bawdy) fashion, while giving gifts to the children — an image not too far removed from the jovial and unruly mock wedding masker.¹¹

Parades, festivals, dances and other public functions often include some costumed characters. Even in some curling bonspiels, players will dress up their brooms. For many, the most important community holiday of the year is Hallowe'en, which is primarily an end-of-harvest blow-out. Like Newfoundland mummers at

Christmas, many people will dress up in strange costumes and house-visit or they might gather at the local pub. Among the many imaginative costumes, cross-dressing is a motif of this masking holiday.¹²

Prairie folks, then, appear to be ready to dress up "at the drop of a hat." The mock wedding, therefore, is a natural extension of the masking traditions of the region. Yet this explanation does not answer the question of how the mock wedding functions within the community. Certainly the mock wedding as an elaborate tradition, taking weeks to prepare and involving such a large group of people, serves other functions beyond entertainment. A tradition rich in symbols and messages, it serves as a form of gossip and perhaps even social legislation, but such a topic needs further investigation.

Yet one function seems to stand out, and is the one many people volunteer to me in interviews: The mock wedding is one way in which women of the community can express their ambivalent and conflicting roles as farm wives. This topic deserves more detailed treatment than I can give it in this article, but let me attempt a short explanation. As stated earlier, women are in charge of the mock wedding in most communities; one question that interests these women is "What does it mean to marry a farmer and become a farm wife?" Through the mock wedding, women explore this question.

¹⁰ The mock wedding script from which this quote was taken was loaned to me by Frances M. Wold of Bismarck, North Dakota. She wrote the script in 1949 for the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of her brother-in-law and husband's sister.

¹¹ For a detailed description of the Christmas Concert, see John C. Charyk, *The Biggest Day of the Year: The Old-Time Christmas School Concert* (Saskatoon: Western Producer, 1985).

¹² Hallowe'en as an adult, dress-up tradition has not been given proper attention by scholars, despite its widespread popularity. The only published study of the Saskatchewan Hallowe'en is Darryl Hunter, "No 'Malice in Wonderland': Conservation and Change in the Three Hallowe'ens of Ann Mesko," *Culture & Tradition* 7 (1983), pp. 37-53.



"And now for the kiss . . .," detail from mock wedding ceremony in Carmichael, Saskatchewan, no date.

— Photo courtesy of Michael Taft, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

The demands of a large, modern, family-run farm or ranch are many, and among these demands is that everyone be prepared to deal with the daily operation of the farm — including the women of the household. This means that women must perform tasks that might ordinarily be thought of as “men’s work,” such as driving grain trucks and combines, cleaning out barns and otherwise maintaining farm outbuildings, slaughtering animals, and keeping the farm accounts. At the same time, women are expected to perform all traditional “women’s work”: housework, cooking, producing and rearing children, and catering to the needs of their husbands.

The mock wedding addresses the question of the conflict between the traditional (or expected) and the actual roles of the farm wife, although it is by no means the only way that women express their concerns over this conflict; elsewhere, I have examined how storytelling allows both men and women to approach this topic.¹³ But the very fact that women dress as men in the mock wedding sends the message that, as farm wives, “we are both women and men at the same time.” Beyond the costuming, the mock wedding script itself addresses this issue. The minister asks the bride, “Do you promise to clean the slaughterhouse mess and not love and honor your husband any less?” and asks the groom, “Do you promise to keep her dressed in the finest of jeans, even if they are beyond your means?” “Wilt thou promise to tend the chickens, milk the cows and churn the butter? Wilt thou promise to paint the granaries?” the minister asks the bride. “The groom has just told me that the ranch is filled with heifers and steers and the barns are loaded with BS in tiers. They must go home as soon as they are wed, for there’s cows to milk out in the shed,” the minister announces to the gathered throng.

The bride’s vows, however, also include all the domestic duties: “Do you promise from harvest to harvest to serve him with coffee and cake?” “Will you take him to the health spa for sexual rejuvenation?” “Will you promise to produce four children, two boys and two girls, in perfect order, boy, girl, boy, girl?” “Wilt thou promise to change the diapers?”

The mock wedding also allows the women to turn the tables on the men — making them feel the ambivalence of living two roles. When men dress as women and act (albeit in a clownish way) as women, while still striving to maintain their manliness, they experience through the drama what their wives experience daily: the conflict of roles faced by women in a modern, agrarian culture. The function of the mock wedding as

¹³ Michael Taft, *Discovering Saskatchewan Folklore: Three Case Studies* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983), pp. 73-78.



The Manly Bride, Brainerd, Nebraska, the 1950s.

— Photo courtesy of Michael Taft,
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

a way of exploring the issue of women’s roles is not lost on the women producer-directors, actors or audience, and the men may also explore this issue, at least viscerally if not intellectually.

The mock wedding is more than this one function. Much more. It is a complex, multi-layered form of folk ritual. One woman told me of her frustration in watching mock weddings — there is more going on than she or any other member of the audience can take in during the few minutes of performance. The rest must be understood over the next few days, months and years, as the mock wedding undergoes its inevitable post mortem (and often videotape replays) within the community. As a folklorist, I share this woman’s frustration, as much as her anticipation of the next mock wedding.

Michael Taft is a freelance folklorist living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He earned his Ph.D. in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland and has taught folklore at five Canadian universities. He is a past president of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada and is head of the Folklore Section of the MLA International Bibliography. Among his books are *Discovering Saskatchewan Folklore*, *Tall Tales of British Columbia*, and *Inside These Greystone Walls: An Anecdotal History of the University of Saskatchewan*.