

FIELD WORK AMONG THE IRISH TRAVELERS

Sociologists and anthropologists often use participant observation to gain an inside view of their subjects. Participant observation allows the researcher to share in the daily life and activities of people, often providing a depth of understanding impossible to achieve with other types of research. The author of the following passage describes his fieldwork experience with the Irish Travelers, a mysterious group based in the southern part of the United States. This reading provides an example of sociological research methods discussed in Sociology and You, Chapter 2.

My own Southern gypsy research has placed me in contact with...the Irish Travelers. Field work, so far, has been limited to only one Irish Traveler community numbering approximately twelve hundred people.¹ Entrée into the community was gained through a Catholic Father who served for nearly twenty years as their pastor and priest. It cannot be overemphasized that without his initial endorsement and support I could never have broken through the barrier of suspicion the Irish Travelers have built between themselves and outsiders. With his help I assumed the role of historian, there to write a history of the Irish Travelers. Similar barriers, no doubt, would be encountered by anyone attempting research with any of the so-called Southern “gypsy” groups, although such barriers are by no means insurmountable, as I have shown.

Because of a lack of available quarters in the community I was studying, it was necessary for me to rent quarters about ten miles away and to commute from there to the community. This hampered my research somewhat but did not prove to be a major barrier. My field technique consisted primarily of participant observation and interviewing. I found that many informants were unwilling to record on tape, fearing that I would, perhaps, use the recordings to inflict harm upon them, although the same informants were perfectly willing for

me to write down verbatim everything they said. Most informants even showed concern if it did not seem to them that I was writing fast enough to record all their statements.

According to Traveler tradition, they emigrated from Ireland about 1847, during the Irish Potato Famine, driven to a better life in America by hunger and disease. Upon their arrival in America, so the Travelers say, the immigrants settled first in upstate New York, near Buffalo; near Pittsburgh and Germantown, Pennsylvania; and near Washington, D.C.

In Ireland, the Travelers were commonly known as “tinkers,” although according to Patrick Greene this was somewhat of a misnomer since they performed any number of other itinerant occupations such as chimney sweeping, selling knick-knacks, clothespins, and baskets (usually handmade), swapping livestock, and as the occasion demanded they relied on petty swindling, thievery, and begging (Greene 1933-34:262). They traveled about the countryside with cart and horse living in tents and in the open air (Greene 1933-34: 259-63). It might be said, however, that despite their Irish beginnings, the Travelers today seem to retain little that might be identified as Irish.

About the time of the American Civil War, my informants state, they abandoned all other occupations, moved to the South, and specialized in the mule and horse trade until about 1955 when that business virtually

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ceased. In those days boys learned the trade from their fathers by accompanying them on their trading forays into the countryside, a form of occupational training used by the Travelers today. They camped by the roadside in a friendly farmer's field, living in wagons and tents, and in later years in house trailers. Marriage was only within the group—arranged by the parents—a custom that continues to be practiced today and which shows no signs of changing.

At present, the Travelers live in several permanent and semi-permanent communities in Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Tennessee, numbering about five thousand—a rough estimate. Their way of life has changed somewhat since the mule trading days, which many Travelers look back upon with nostalgia as the “good old days.” As a rule only the men travel today, while the women and children remain at home in modern house trailers. This has been necessitated in part by their living in large mobile homes which are difficult and expensive to move. Also the cost of living on the road and compulsory school attendance laws are major factors in their traveling less.

Since the demise of the mule trade the Travelers have developed two new itinerant occupational specialties: peddling linoleum rugs from door to door and spray-painting barns and houses. The latter originally consisted only of spraying the metal parts of buildings with aluminum paint, although today Travelers are beginning to paint the wooden parts of buildings as well. Both of these specialties are not really new, however, but grew out of a need for summer employment in the mule trading days. Mule trading was a seasonal occupation lasting from the middle of September to the end of April. When the season was over, Travelers took their families to one of the Southern stock centers to camp for the summer. About the time of the appearance of automobiles and trucks, the men began to go out into the countryside near to where they were camped to peddle and paint. As the mule trade breathed its last, many traders found it necessary to adopt as full-time employment what was once only a summer diversion from

the normal routine of the mule trading way of life.

Today the Travelers are a rapidly changing people. They are losing the old ways and are taking up new. Perhaps the two greatest forces for change are education and an increasingly intimate contact with middle class American values through such sources as the mass media. Also, occupations such as mule trading, painting, and linoleum peddling are dying out so that most Travelers feel that these occupations will soon be gone. Some Travelers are finding other things to do. In their own community, for example, there are two stores owned and operated by Travelers. Another Traveler works for a fuel oil company, while others have driven cookie and milk trucks, and every day more Travelers make similar outside contacts.

Education is one of the most potent forces in changing Irish Traveler society. There are probably more Irish Travelers in school today than at any other time in Traveler history. Furthermore, a few high school age boys even aspire to attend college.

So far my research on the Irish Travelers has been primarily linguistic (Harper and Hudson 1971). While conducting field work among the Travelers, I discovered that this group still retains an argot, a mode of disguised linguistic communication which they call “the Cant.” I first learned of the existence of Cant when some Traveler children plied me with the question: “Hey Mister! Do you know the Cant?” and then proceeded to spout a list of strange words, an episode that would be repeated, perhaps, a dozen times while I was in the field.

Cant...is a secret mode of communication, and this secrecy is of primary importance to understanding its function (Harper and Hudson n.d.). Traditionally, Cant was passed from generation to generation serving to isolate the Travelers from non-Travelers economically and socially. One Traveler said, “The word ‘Cant,’ to us means you can’t understand us.” This emphasis upon secrecy was further expressed in statements made by other Traveler informants when asked to give examples of Cant.

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Originally, according to informants, Cant was used by the Travelers to communicate with each other in their business dealings. In fact, when the Travelers were asked how they use it they replied, "Oh, it was a talk we used in tradin' but we don't use it much any more." However, a semantic analysis of sentences and phrases of Traveler origin indicates a much wider and more important usage for Cant than the purely economic one suggested in the Traveler statement.

Cant has one more important function, that of identifying its speakers as members of a particular group. Thus when the boys asked, "Hey Mister! Do you know the Cant?" they in effect were inquiring "Are you one of us—are you a Traveler?" In fact, the Travelers

themselves have described to me situations where Cant was used to identify fellow Travelers.

There are indications...that Cant is being used much less now than in the past. While Travelers thirty-five years of age or older may know from one hundred to one hundred and fifty words, the younger generation retains fewer than seventy-five words. And there are indications that the number of Cant words retained will grow fewer as the years go by. The Travelers state that non-Travelers are suspicious of people who talk differently and that keeping secrets really is not the proper thing to do. Also, the priest discourages the use of Cant as one of those old customs the Travelers ought to forget.

NOTES

¹My field work began in January of 1968, continuing with several interruptions until June of that year. Subsequently I returned for short visits and a ten-day period of field work in August, 1969. I plan to do additional field work and research on the Irish Travelers in the future.

REFERENCES

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Source:

Jared Harper, "'Gypsy' Research in the South," J. Kenneth Morland, ed., *The Not So Solid South*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), pp. 16-24.