

# OBITUARY

Kenneth S. Goldstein (1927–1995)

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A midrashic proverb observes that “when a man departs this world, he does not have as much as half of his desire in hand.” When Kenny Goldstein died on November 11, 1995, at the age of 68, he left behind manuscripts he did not complete, songs he did not transcribe, and singers he did not record. But the books and articles that he did not write himself he did write through his students and friends: hundreds of them. Always the consummate teacher, he was a rabbi of folklore. The situations he enjoyed most were the long seminar discussions when, surrounded by students, he and they were engulfed in conversation about folklore matters. He deemed a seminar that ended on time a failure. Often these discussions moved from the seminar room to his home, which he and his wife Rochelle opened up for students, or to his private library, which he made accessible to all. The 1967 Lindback Foundation Award for Distinguished Teaching was the professional honor he cherished most.

When he retired in 1992, after being a department chairman off and on (mostly on) for 20 years, he said half-heartedly that now he would write all the books he had in mind but not yet on paper. “I have material for 25 folksong books,” he said. Indeed he had, but he knew—and he knew that we knew—that he was not going to place himself at his desk, or even in front of his computer, and start writing all these books we had been anticipating for many years. Not that Kenny did not love books, but he loved people more. He flourished in company, be it that of friends, neighbors, collectors, or students. Particularly students. He touched their lives, not as a mystic, or a guru—though in the months that passed since his death, some have begun to remember him as such—but in the most pragmatic



*Photo by Robin Hiteshaw © 1993*

way, by guiding them toward folklore as a field, a profession, and even a job. In the days when university positions were still commonly available, his phrase of encouragement to a budding folklorist he liked was “I would like to see you teaching at our department at Penn.” He meant it, believed it was doable, and in a few cases succeeded. Most of us at the Department of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania owe our faculty positions to the weight of his personal influence and practical effort. Kenny did not found the Department of Folklore and Folklife, MacEdward Leach did. But admiring his mentor, he took it upon himself to carry out his teacher’s vision and to build the department, expand it, maintain it, and protect it in a period of mounting odds against nonconventional disciplines such as folklore. Around campus he was known as Mr. Folklore.

Kenny Goldstein was born in Brooklyn on March 17, 1927. He was a Pisces, and later in life he would decorate his house with drawings, paintings, and carvings of fish and fisherman. Perhaps his attraction to

maritime folklore of the fishing communities in Newfoundland and Labrador was also influenced by his own fascination with his zodiac sign. After his military service in 1946, he enrolled in City College of New York, from which he graduated with a degree in business administration in 1949; he received his M.B.A. in 1951. Working as a statistician at Fairchild Publications, he began his lifelong avocation of folksongs and folk music of the British Isles, United States, Canada, and Australia. During the 1950s and early 1960s he produced and edited more than 500 records with the leading labels in the field—such as Stinson, Folkways, Prestige, and Riverside Records—recording such well-known singers as Jean Ritchie, the Reverend Gary Davis, Lightnin' Hopkins, Ewan MacCall, A. L. Lloyd, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and many others. Among these records, the set *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (The Child Ballads)* (Riverside, 1956) has remained an unmatched classic. But others, many of them of field recordings, such as *Banjo Songs of the Southern Mountains* (Riverside, 1957) and *Folksongs and Ballads of the Southern Mountains* (Riverside, 1957) have also become milestones in the folksong records field, setting new standards for the production of folklore records. The notes for these and all the other records were inevitably popular yet fully scholarly. They established Kenny as a leading authority on folksongs in the English language even before he attended a single class on the subject.

Soon, however, he realized that he needed formal academic training in folklore. He enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, at first in the Department of Anthropology. Then when MacEdward Leach founded the Program of Folklore in 1962, Kenny switched to that and graduated in 1963 with the first Ph.D. in folklore ever awarded by the university. Soon after, he joined the faculty. He became cochairman (together with Don Yoder) of the Department of Folklore and Folklife in 1969 and its chairperson in 1971. From then on he served in this role, with a few interruptions, letting us take our turns, until his retirement in 1992.

His dissertation, published as *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore* (1964; translated into Turkish in 1977 and Chinese in 1982) put him at the forefront of the intellectual changes that were brewing in folklore studies at the time. Richard Dorson counted him among the “young turks” that brought new perspectives to folklore. Kenny’s particular contribution was the fieldwork revolution. Until he left for Scotland on a Fulbright Fellowship for 1959–60, folklore fieldwork followed mostly the expedition model. It involved journeys into, rather residence in, the countryside. Weekends—or at best, whole summers—served as the time frame for searching for and recording singers and storytellers. Dorson’s five-month trip into the upper peninsula of Michigan which resulted in his book *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952) was an extension of this very model. Anthropologists who delved into folklore, following the demands of their discipline, lived in a community for a longer duration but often had folklore only as a side interest rather than the main subject of their research. It was Kenny who introduced the methodological shift into folklore fieldwork. After him others followed.

Affiliated with the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Kenny began to study the folklore of Buchan District, Aberdeenshire, establishing residence at the northern Buchan community of Strichen. Lacking any models for long-term folklore research, Kenny literally had to invent his own method. Most of us knew him as a collector of songs, stamps, books, and broadside ballads, and therefore we would have assumed that fieldwork collecting would have suited his personality the best. But Kenny was a scientist at heart. As a folklorist, he regarded collecting as an essential stage but not a goal unto itself. He searched for a method that would have turned the folklore fieldwork into his scientific laboratory. For that purpose he reached out for ideas not to anthropology but rather to psychology and began several projects of folklore experimentation, testing principles of transmission, in-

novation, and decline in the performance of particular folklore forms. His method of "Induced Natural Context" is an outgrowth of this convergence of folklore and psychology.

As a participant observer of folklore performances, Kenny always had an experimental twinkle in his eye. He approached field situations with a design in mind that he carried out the best he could under circumstances that were not always under his control, and he later reported about the conduct of his inquiry, making the research process itself part of his analysis and conclusions. In this way he wrote about riddling in the Scottish tradition, counting out rhymes among some children in Philadelphia, and the narrative traditions within some Scottish families. Quite possibly this search for scientific analytical frameworks—and not just his teaching and administrative duties—inhibited Kenny from publishing the many song texts that he recorded. He was not content with the publication of the text alone and constantly searched for the appropriate scientific angle for the exploration of his vast amount of recordings.

His quest for a scientific method in folklore, however, did not turn Kenny into a detached experimental scholar. Rather, he was a very warm and emotional person, fully committed to ideas and people. He was a great teacher and a great fieldworker in folklore because he projected his deep care for others. With disarming informality he was able to break the ice in many awkward situations. Of course, in administrative contexts, emotions and informality needed restraint. Anticipating his own potential frustration, he would prepare himself for every such meeting, which he viewed as confrontations, with statistical information that he was able to digest and present with the best of the "number people," to use his expression. Whenever the well-being of his students or the department at large was in question, he turned into a combative fellow, relentlessly arguing to right a wrong.

The same emotional commitment to his causes energized Kenny in his work for the American Folklore Society. As AFS Secretary-Treasurer from 1965 to 1972, he identified with the needs and problems of the

society. This was a period of expansion for the AFS. Many students who received their degrees in the 1960s were beginning their professional careers, and suddenly Kenny found them identifying him with the establishment. Hurt, he realized that he could not be—like his mentor MacEdward Leach was—AFS Secretary-Treasurer for an unlimited time, and he transferred the administrative tasks of the American Folklore Society to Richard Bauman. Prudently, he recognized the need not only to encourage his junior colleagues but also to let them have room to grow. His commitment to the society, however, did not diminish, and the recognition of his leadership became clear when he was elected AFS President for 1975–76.

As AFS President and as an experienced department chair, he lent his talent to Memorial University of Newfoundland and served there as Head of the Department of Folklore from 1976 to 1978. Always the avid fieldworker, while in Newfoundland he began a comprehensive folklore research project in the fishing communities of Newfoundland, in which he was still involved when cancer struck.

As much as Kenny was totally immersed in academic and scholarly affairs, he never isolated himself from the community. A founding member of the Philadelphia Folksong Society, he was involved in their annual folksong festival, applying his technical skill, scholarly knowledge, and administrative abilities to its operation. His home was open to young singers, and he nurtured their careers as much as he did those of budding scholars. He felt deeply committed to the folksong revival of the 1950s and 1960s and defended his contribution to its growth against academic criticism. He was one of the few people who could live with dignity and integrity in both the world of analytical scholarship and the world of mass media. He had an amazing ability to combine lofty social and scholarly ideals with an astute grasp of the world of commerce. When he was a student, he began to deal with used books and continued to be a publisher. His company, Folklore Associates, issued original books and reprinted folklore classics that were out of print at the

time. As a fieldworker, he was very concerned about the psychological impact of recording equipment and its placement in the interview or recording session. At the same time he loved to fiddle with it. He had the skills of a recording engineer, able to place the correct microphone at the correct angle for optimal recording quality. He was immersed in life with people, meeting them in the book-trade shows that he frequented, continuously searching for old books and broadside ballads; at folksong festivals and concerts that he attended even when he did not organize them, and at the East Coast flea markets that he loved. He wanted to impart

to his students a sense of integration between community and university, where no walls separated town from gown.

Upon his retirement we prepared, as he had done for Herbert Halpert and Horace Beck, a festschrift in his honor. When *Fields of Folklore: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Goldstein*, edited by Roger Abrahams (1995), finally appeared, Kenny was too weak to withstand the pressure of a ceremonial presentation. He received it in his bed and smiled faintly. When I told a friend from another department about Kenny's sickness, he kept quiet for a moment and then said, "I loved that man." We all did.

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