

Documentation Sheet
Sample Item: Riddle Joke

Today's date: December 15, 2002

Informant: Mrs. X, age 62 (b. 1941), of Jasper, Indiana

Collector: JD, age 18 (b. 1985), of Bedford, Indiana

Title: Funny Nuns

Genre: Riddle-joke. "The true riddle is essentially a comparison between the unstated answer and something else that is described in the question. . . . A prolific modern form of riddle, usually just termed 'joke' in folk tradition, is the riddle-joke." From Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*. 4th ed. New York: Norton, 1998. Pp. 114-123.

Text: "What goes black, white, black, white? A nun falling down stairs."

Social base: Mrs. X is a German-American of the Roman Catholic faith, a descendant of the German immigrants who settled Jasper. Children in parochial school often tell these kinds of jokes.

Collection/Documentation Context: I recorded this joke on November 3, 2002, in the living room of Mrs. X's home in Jasper. It was mid-afternoon, and others present included her husband, Mr. X, and her daughter (my aunt), Z. Mrs. X is my grandmother.

Typical Performance Context: Mrs. X says that she would not typically relate this item anymore but remembers hearing it from her own children when they were younger. She said she has always remembered the time Y (her son and my uncle) came home from St. Mary's parochial school in Jasper and told the riddle-joke to one of his friends while making a sandwich in the kitchen. He was in the fourth grade. The friend responded with a joke of his own, but Mrs. X cannot remember it.

Related item:

- "What's black and white and red all over? A bleeding nun." See Mary Knapp and Herbert Knapp, *One Potato, Two Potato . . . : The Secret Education of American Children* (New York: Norton, 1976), 108. The Knapps include other riddle jokes told by children, including different versions of the black-white-red joke and other "sick" jokes (pp. 105-111).
- At a school near Doncaster, England (1950s?), "children prick a drawing of an unpopular teacher with pins, threatening, 'Teacher, teacher, I don't like you/If you don't mark my sums right/--I shall spike you.'" See Iona Archibald Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (New York: New York

Review Books, 1959] 2001), 365.

- Collected in March 1969 from a 22-year-old female student from Richmond, Indiana: “Mother Superior’s Guidance”: “There was this Catholic mother superior at a Catholic girls’ school. And one day she called three of her little pupils together to ask them about their future careers. The first little girl said, ‘Oh, Mother Superior, I want to be a nurse so I can help mankind.’ The mother superior was very pleased at this answer. The second little girl replied that she wanted to be a teacher, so she could educate the people of the world. This answer also pleased the mother superior. ‘Oh, I’m so proud of you girls.’ Then she turned to the third student. ‘And what do you want to be, dear?’ The little girl answered, ‘Oh, Mother, I want to be a prostitute, because then I’ll be able to help mankind, too.’ The mother superior was so horrified that she fainted. After she was revived, she again asked the little girl, to make sure she had heard her right. And the little girl again said she wanted to be a prostitute. ‘Oh, thank God,’ the mother superior sighed. ‘I thought you said you wanted to be a Protestant!’” see Ronald L. Baker, *Jokelore: Humorous Folktales from Indiana*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press., 1986), 163. A variant of this narrative joke appears in Phyllis Potter, “St. Peter Jokes,” *Southwest Folklore* 3 (Spring 1979): 47-48.

Commentary: Mrs. X commented, “I told him [Y] it was showing real disrespect for his teachers to tell such a joke and that he should never say it again. But actually I thought it was funny. Back then all the nuns who taught at the school had to wear black and white habits. They were pretty strict, and probably most of the kids wanted to see the nuns get theirs once in a while. But of course, it wasn’t good to think about them falling down stairs. It was just a joke.” She actually repeated the joke to a group of other mothers at the park one day, and they all had a good laugh.

This joke is an example of how children often attempt to respond to figures of authority. Physical harm is sometimes fantasized, as in many song parodies of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” in which teachers are hit, shot, and spit upon (See Knapp and Knapp 1976, 172-79), perhaps in response to old methods of corporal punishment. This example also involves the mocking of a religious authority, so maybe it was even more shocking.