

In Memoriam

James Orville Bailey, an unstinting champion of the study of Russian folklore, died at the age of 90 on July 20, 2020 in Madison, Wisconsin. He was born in La Junta, Colorado on September 28, 1929 but grew up in California. Jim attended the University of Southern California, after which he served for several years in the U.S. Army, learning Russian at the Army Language School in Monterey. He met his wife Hanna in Frankfurt, Germany during his service as a Russian translator; they married in 1956. Jim earned a Master's Degree in Slavic Studies in 1958 at Indiana University and spent the 1958-1959 academic year at Moscow State University as an exchange student in the first year of the cultural exchange between the U.S. and USSR. Jim went on to receive his Ph.D. from the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Harvard in 1965. He was on the faculty of the Slavic Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1967 to his retirement in 1995. During that time he was Chair of the Slavic Department, Head of the Russian Area Studies Program, as well as Head of the Folklore Program, of which he was a co-founder. Jim was also instrumental in the establishment of SEEFA and served as its first president as well as the editor of the SEEFA newsletter, which later became *Folklorica*.

Jim originally worked in Russian versification and was a recognized scholar in this field. But he soon shifted from the study of literary verse to oral literary poetry as he became fascinated by the intricacies of oral traditional lyric, ritual, and narrative genres. Jim became an established authority on Russian "folk" verse and folklore, publishing widely in this field. His 1998 *Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, an informative and beautifully translated volume co-edited with Tatyana Ivanova, is a classic of folklore scholarship. It is by far the best annotated English-language anthology of *byliny* and is widely used by students and specialists alike. Jim's many articles and several books all reflect his meticulous scholarship, informed by a deep understanding of the mechanics and meanings within poetry.

Jim was a wonderful teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend. I was lucky to overlap with him in the Slavic Department and Folklore Program at the University of Wisconsin during his last six years there as professor. Jim, who taught for decades, delighted in sharing his knowledge and passion for oral traditions and poetry with his students. Among a variety of courses, he regularly taught Russian folklore. It was such a joy for Jim to introduce students to the world of oral traditional Russian culture—a topic not often in university course offerings. He never took his many years of teaching for granted, however. He knew that teaching well was an ongoing challenge and told me many times what great (but humble) teachers know: there is so much to learn from students. As Jim would tell me, students open our eyes in such untold ways, sometimes leaving us astounded as they come up with amazing questions and subtle readings of "texts" of all sorts. Since Jim's death, echoes of the respect and admiration that he inspired and his devotion to his students—both undergraduate and graduate—have resounded and been a moving tribute not only to the depth and influence of his scholarship and mentorship

but also to his integrity. Former students, junior scholars, and other colleagues have expressed their academic and personal esteem for Jim as well as their debt to him for turning their attention to, nurturing their love of, and even convincing them to stay with the study of Russian folklore. Jim motivated and encouraged countless students and scholars of Slavic oral poetry—through his teaching, collegueship, publications, and character.

Jim, who travelled frequently to the Soviet Union/Russia, was well-known and deeply respected there, as he engaged in collaborative work and nurtured friendships with Russian scholars of folklore. As a mark of the respect that he garnered among them, much of his work on oral epic, lyric, and ritual poetry has been translated into Russian and published there. Moreover, Jim was extremely generous and supportive as he helped Russian folklorists who came to America (and Madison) settle here.

On a somewhat more personal note, there was always something so genuine about Jim. Jim welcomed me so warmly into the Slavic Department and Folklore Program when I began teaching there in 1989. He impressed me from the moment I first met him in Madison as someone utterly fascinated by, and of course thoroughly knowledgeable about, Russian epic, lyric, and ritual oral poetry. Jim loved oral epic in particular, and he loved to talk about it. Whenever and wherever we met, he would eagerly tell me of some new observation about epic (or even recount some epic plot), with such a happy glint in his eye and a broad, heartfelt smile (usually punctuated by his inimitable laughter)—representing his pure delight in the nuances and meanings of oral poetry. Jim was also, as so many have reminisced, a consummate raconteur. He always had a story and a (sometimes corny) joke—such an endearing part of Jim as a person. Jim delighted in bringing back the latest jokes “collected” on his frequent trips to the Soviet Union/Russia, sharing them among us.

Jim also treasured his family. I and many others were guests in the home where he and beloved wife Hanna lived. Not surprisingly, “evenings” at the Baileys’ were “folklore events”—he would gather us for memorable evenings to meet and talk at length about oral poetry and traditional culture. Jim always spoke so warmly of his sons and grandchildren, and when I “attended” (virtually) Jim’s funeral in August, I was moved by the memories and affection expressed by them in their remarks. They appreciated Jim, of course, in a more personal way—as father and grandfather. But everything they said measured up to the Jim I knew: always there for the people and things that he cherished, always ready with a story to tell, a joke, and always so “genuine”—there was absolutely nothing fake or affected in him.

Jim was instrumental to the establishment and furthering of the study of Slavic and East European folklore. He inspired countless students and scholars, and his publications on epic and oral traditional poetry have contributed substantially to the field. Jim was a person of deep integrity whom we all sorely miss. May his memory continue to inspire us.

Margaret Beissinger
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey
mhbeissi@princeton.edu

