

LANDLADY AT LA GRANGE: THE FOLKLORE OF A TEXAS MADAM¹

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This article was originally published in the Journal of American Folklore 86(41):212-224, July-September 1973. This version has been revised and updated for publication on this website, as an important piece of Texana, and to preserve a record of the very woman-centered way in which Miss Edna ran her establishment, the Chicken Ranch in La Grange.

Abstract: This article analyzes the strategic and tactical use of folklore by the madam of a longstanding Texas whorehouse. (Known as the "Chicken Ranch," it was immortalized in the movie The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.) Goffman's explication of "facework" is used to illustrate how the madam maintains both "face" and full control of both her customers and her "girls" through verbal means. Transcripts of several joke-telling sessions are presented and analyzed for what they reveal about the dynamics of the madam/customer and the madam/"girl" relationship. This study was originally carried out in 1971, at a time when women had not been recognized as powerful users and manipulators of many genres of folklore, and was an early step in their recognition as such. This updated version contains new information that could not be printed before, when the whorehouse was still in illegal operation, about its internal dynamics and the relationship of the madam and the girls with the townspeople. It concludes with a feminist retrospective on the original study, in which I identify the Chicken Ranch as a mini-matriarchy and a relatively nurturing environment which has implications for the cultural placement and treatment of prostitutes today.

The central Texas town of La Grange was established by an act of the Second Congress, Republic of Texas, on December 13, 1837. Its people were largely Bohemian and Slovakian in origin. In 1839 the first school in the town was organized, in 1840 the first chartered college was established nearby--and in 1845 the first whorehouse in the county opened its doors to the public. This institution floated from place to place until 1915 when it settled in a permanent location. Until its demise in 1975, it was the oldest continuously operating non-floating whorehouse in Texas.

According to the madam, whom I interviewed at length, the establishment was christened the "Chicken Ranch" during the Depression, when the "girls" who worked there began accepting chickens as payment, in lieu of money. It lay within a half-mile of the highway outside of town--a rambling one-story white clapboard building with green trim and numerous windows covered by heavy louvers. The house itself was built in Early American Haphazard, that is, one room at a time, the prior madam expanding it as business required. In 1971, when I began this study, it contained two front waiting rooms, a dining room and kitchen, and eleven bedrooms, one for each girl.

The madam, Miss Edna Milton,² worked as a prostitute for sixteen years of her life (she was 43 at the time of this study), nine of them at the Chicken Ranch. In 1962 the old madam died and Edna bought the House from her estate. She remained madam for 19 years. Her term for herself was not madam but "landlady," partly because for income-tax purposes she was landlady of "Edna's Ranch-Boarding House"--the girls who lived there were not her employees but her boarders; they simply paid her for meals and for the use of their rooms.

The situation I was investigating in 1971 was Miss Edna's strategic and tactical use of folklore in social interaction--her role as a verbal performer. I interviewed her at the Chicken Ranch on three separate occasions for approximately four hours each time. I did not go alone, but with another graduate student, Rita O'Brien, who concentrated her study on the "girls" (the label used by the

madam, the customers, and the prostitutes themselves--just as "Miss Edna" was most frequently used to reference the madam). I will occasionally bring in data from O'Brien's study to illustrate my points. My analysis will be organized around the interrelationship between Miss Edna's role as a social controller and her strong presentation of herself as a woman. The remainder of this paper will be written in the ethnographic present.

In his 1967 essay, "On Facework: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," sociologist Erving Goffman provides a framework for the analysis of conversational interaction that I find most useful for interpreting the interactional dynamics between the madam and the girls, and the madam and the customers. In Goffman's terms, the "face" that Miss Edna constantly presents and maintains is that of a woman who, in general, is mentally stronger than men. I cannot emphasize too much the importance of words in her life. Both she and her girls told us that the prostitute's art is much more mental and verbal than sexual. Men are physically stronger; therefore, to maintain constant control a prostitute must use words effectively. The girls respect Edna tremendously because, as one of them said, "Miss Edna could walk out on this floor right now, take any man to the bedroom, and talk him out of even the deed to his house. She really knows how to handle men." Edna controls her environment through verbal manipulation. I hope to show that her folklore is a key tool in this control, providing her with many opportunities to express herself as unopposed leader of her subculture, while constantly reinforcing and validating that leadership.

From the first interview I conducted with Miss Edna, I realized that she is in complete command of her environment. All the girls obey her rules and regard her wishes, partly from real respect for her wisdom-of-experience, and partly from fear. When I asked her what she did when a girl disobeyed the rules, she answered, "I crown 'em, but I hardly ever have to." The rules comprise a code of conduct all the girls must follow--for example, always be nice to the customers whether or not they are nice to you, don't bad mouth the customers to outsiders, don't talk about the workings of the money system at the Ranch, get a health card from the local clinic each week, be dressed for the evening around seven, be on time for meals, and so on. The rules are the verbal framework with which the madam controls her world.

EDNA: Barbara! [*Barbara comes over to us.*] Go on and tell 'em one silly joke of some kind so they can get one--it's just gonna be for some kids in a dormitory--it's not gonna be no damn class thing.

[N.B. We had told Edna our study was for class--this is an attempt on her part to put Barbara at ease and to elicit jokes from her.]

RITA: [*To Barbara*] Do you know any jokes about fraternity boys that come here?

BARBARA: [*Starts to laugh, is about to tell us one.*]

EDNA: Uh, there's some things, uh, we don't put down the bad stories on the boys.

RITA: Oh?

EDNA: No, we don't.

RITA: But I mean just that kind of guy.

EDNA: Some of 'em are real sweet, kind, timid, and in-between.

ROBBIE: Well, just any jokes at all...

EDNA: Some [...indecipherable] the hair on their head, some'll let loose, some had some bringing up.

ROBBIE: Yeah. [*To Barbara*] Do you know just any jokes? Everybody knows some. I mean....

EDNA: [*Interrupting*] Some are gentlemen, some are assholes.

[*Robbie and Rita laugh.*]

EDNA: Lot of in-between.

ROBBIE AND RITA: Yeah.

EDNA: And that's what you'd just call human.

BARBARA: Yeah, I know one. Old Amos McGee, down in New Orleans...

In this sequence, Edna adroitly manages to generalize harmlessly about boys in order to say everything on the subject herself and thus quell any further discussion of it. She does not allow me to change the subject until she feels she has completely covered it and achieved closure with that last line. Barbara of course picks up her cue and whisks us safely off to New Orleans. Such control is just as strong in Edna's absence as in her presence:

ROBBIE: [*To Carol while Edna is not present*] How much do you keep of the money you make?

CAROL: That's--I'd rather not say. You'll have to ask Miss Edna.

Edna's control also extends to her own folklore performance. In our interviews with Edna and the girls, she consistently performed more jokes, toasts, rhymes, and proverbs than anyone else. When she was not present, the girls performed freely and frequently. But when she was present, they were somewhat inhibited, especially in the spontaneity of their performances. The fact of her control, I found, allows her to perform folklore spontaneously: whenever she is reminded of an item, she is free to express it. Her unconscious assumption of the privileges of her leading role lets her constantly interrupt the girls without the slightest hint of apology from her or even of irritation from them.

In his book, The Rationale of the Dirty Joke, Gershon Legman states that

one fact strikingly evident in any collection of modern sexual folklore...is that this material has all been created by men, and that there is no place in it for women except as the butt...the situations presented almost completely lack a protagonist position in which a woman can identify herself, *as a woman*, with any human gratification or pride...[Women such as prostitutes who themselves tell dirty jokes exhibit an] unconscious and hostile attitude to parody or impersonate men--as they imagine themselves to be--by such verbal means. [1968:217]

I am not qualified to argue with Legman as to who creates the dirty jokes, although I do feel he is wrong to say that women don't generate any at all. However, I will show that the sexual folklore of Miss Edna and even some of her girls contrasts strongly with the rest of Legman's statement. In nearly all the jokes Miss Edna tells, the male is the butt. The male is made to appear ridiculous and is

outsmarted by a woman, usually a whore. For example, she told us this one: "This guy has his head down between this girl's legs, and he says, 'Honey, you've got the roughest pussy!' She says, 'Well why don't you move up a few inches? You've been lickin' the carpet!'" Clearly in this joke the man is in a subordinate position and is made to appear ridiculous by the prostitute. The joke most deprecating of males that Edna told us was about an old hermit who lived in a cave and kept a dead whore there. When asked how he could stand all the stink, "He says, 'Yeah, but look at all that money I save!'"

My point is made clearest in an interaction between Miss Edna and a customer named Buddy. He came over to where we were sitting, ostensibly to join our joke-telling session (but really to try to be my first customer³) and ended up becoming engaged in a verbal duel with Miss Edna. In Goffman's terms, the lines each had adopted were mutually incompatible. (A "line" is defined as "a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which [the actor] expresses his view of the situation and thus his evaluation of the participants, especially himself (Goffman 1967:5). Buddy presented the face that Edna most disapproves of in men--he was a boaster. (Goffman (1967:5) defines "face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken.") To maintain her in-control face, Edna felt obliged to shatter the face Buddy was presenting--that of the dominating male. The two faces cannot co-exist in an extended interaction because they are in direct conflict. The line each has taken requires him or her to be superior to the other, to control the situation; and so one or the other must eventually lose face. A person may be said to "lose face," to be "in wrong face," when something arises about his social worth that

cannot be integrated, even with effort, into the line that is being sustained for him. Should he sense that he is in wrong face...he is likely to feel ashamed...because of what may happen to his reputation as a participant. Further, he may feel bad because he has relied upon the encounter to support an image of self to which he has become emotionally attached and which he now finds threatened...His manner and bearing may falter, collapse, and crumble...he may become shamefaced..."facework" [designates] the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Facework serves to counteract "incidents"--that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face. Thus, poise is one important type of facework, for through poise a person controls his embarrassment. [Goffman 1967:12-13]

A basic structural feature of interaction is "mutual acceptance"--everyone temporarily accepts everyone else's line and tries to maintain his own and everyone else's face. Since Rita and I have already established the interaction context as a joke-telling session, both Edna and Buddy can try to reinforce their lines and maintain face through the jokes they tell. However, the expressive order (an order that regulates the control of events) cannot flow smoothly because there is no mutual acceptance; since their lines conflict so drastically, they have no protective orientation toward saving each other's face. Thus, their conversation is a series of challenges, a situation that is very clear in their jokes. Several times when Buddy tells one in which the female is the butt, Edna caps it with one of the same type in which the *male* is the butt. For example, Buddy tells a Dagwood-Blondie joke in which Blondie tries to trick Dagwood into thinking she is a virgin when she marries him and fails, making a fool of herself in the process. Edna replies with another joke on the same subject of simulating virginity, in which the male is the fool and the woman's trick is entirely successful:

Well, you heard about his ol' country couple that got married? She'd fucked everything that had a prick hung on 'em, so she decides that she's gonna bullshit him that she's a virgin too, so hell, all she done was just stuff herself with meat to where, hell, there was no way he could possibly have gotten it in. So she finally told him, 'Well go in there and git some vaseline and maybe that will help.' And while he's gone gittin' his vaseline she removes all this damn stuff and he comes back and he practically falls into that son-of-a-bitch. So the next day he's out choppin' cotton, just as happy swingin' that hoe handle as he can be, but these little piss ants keep pesterin' him, so he says to 'em, "Goddamn you little sonafabitches, if I had me some vaseline I'd shove this hoe handle right up your ass!"

Buddy immediately says, "She'd removed a little bit too much!" but Edna refuses to let him make the woman the butt of the joke. She replies, "Yeah, but he was still happy about the situation. He couldn't get in at all at first--he thought the vaseline made all the difference!" Thus, she refuses to let Buddy change the joke from one of female manipulation, as she told it, to one of female subordination, as he wanted it.

In normal facework, Goffman says, a corrective interchange would take place (or several!): a challenge would be followed by the ritual of offering-acceptance-thanks. This interchange never happens here, since neither participant wishes to acknowledge the situation as an actual incident. The challenges, especially in the jokes, are very subtle and thus fit into Goffman's "avoidance process"--one type of facework. When Edna comes close to forcing Buddy to acknowledge his loss of face, he follows the avoidance process by changing the topic of conversation and acting as if an event that contained a threatening expression has not occurred at all. For example, Edna's most telling put-down of Buddy is a proverb that she makes directly insulting to his manhood. Buddy says, "Edna, do y'all know the difference between a mad dog and a little pussy? A mad dog'll bite you and hurt you, but a little pussy never hurt anybody!" Edna replies, "That's right! Would you like to have a little bit of pussy, honey?" Buddy is flustered because she has taken away his male initiative, which causes him to lose face, and says weakly (since that's obviously why he's there), "Yeah, yeah I would." Edna laughs and says, "Just a little bit instead of a great big one, huh? Well it's better to be tickled to death than it is to be choked to death!" Buddy promptly changes the subject. The saying, of course, refers to a small penis. In this case, Edna manipulated the saying to insult Buddy. Later she told me that she usually uses it to comfort a man worried about the size of his penis, emphasizing that she thinks it absurd for people to think penises are inferior because they are small. Here we have an excellent example of the importance of the situation in folklore use. It illustrates the necessity of not separating text from context, and of looking for the clues to the meaning of a folklore event in (1) how the performer uses it, and (2) what she or he says about it.

Edna and Buddy are both constantly playing the game Goffman calls "making points--the aggressive use of facework":

When a person treats facework not as something he need be prepared to perform, but rather as something that others can be counted on to perform or accept, then an encounter...becomes...an arena in which a contest or match is held. The purpose of the game is to preserve everyone's line from an inexcusable contradiction, while scoring as many points as possible against one's adversaries and making as many gains as possible for oneself. An audience to the struggle is almost always a necessity. The general method is for the person to introduce favorable facts about himself and unfavorable facts about others in such a way that the only reply the others will be able to think up will be one that terminates the interchange in a grumble, a meager excuse, a face-saving I-can-take-a-joke laugh...the losers will have to cut their losses, tacitly grant the loss of a point, and try to do better...The winner...demonstrates that as interactant he can handle himself better than his adversaries...theoretically it would be possible for a squelch to be squelched...but this third level of successful action seems rare. [Goffman 1967:24-26]

While talking with Rita and me, Edna's voice was sweet and she was pleasantly polite; with Buddy she is hard, foul-mouthed, opinionated, and domineering, becoming progressively more so as the interaction continues. As is evident in the following transcription, she constantly interrupts Buddy. She always makes sure she has the last word and so gets all the points.

EDNA: With inflation goin' on as it's been for the last, uh, hell, ever since I've been on the face of the earth, and uh...

BUDDY: That hasn't been but 32 years, has it?

EDNA: 43, darlin' and in January that's 44.

BUDDY: Damn, I was tryin' to be nice. I--

EDNA: I am too. I'm just tellin' it like it is. And I hope to hell I'm around in another 43 or 44 years.

BUDDY: You will be.

EDNA: I don't know if I will or not. That's for the old man upstairs to say, unless you believe in all that Darwin theory 'n' this 'n' that 'n' the other, but who in hell was Darwin? Where did they come from even from his point of view, even? Where'd they start out of, huh? Cause I feel like this--if you came out of the goddam sea, why in hell can't you go back into the sea and live? And you don't--you die--but then when they say we all came from God, well, who in the hell was God? Where did he come from? So I mean there's a lot of things that can be asked and there's no answers.

ROBBIE: Do you--do you go to church or anything?

EDNA: No, I don't go anywhere. Like they tell you Adam--and Eve was the mother of all. They were the only man and the only woman. They had two sons and they didn't have any daughters. They went into the land of Nod. Where's the land of Nod? Sleep? Night? And he took him a wife--what did he get hold of? His mother? Is that who he fucked? Well, that makes him a motherfucker, then, doesn't it?

BUDDY: [*Laughs*] I was waitin' for that. I knew goddam well that was gonna come.

ROBBIE: [*Laughing*] Couldn't resist it, just couldn't.

BUDDY: I knew she--I was waitin' for the buildup. She--

EDNA: What else, then? Did he go out and fuck a monkey then? Was there a female monkey around he fucked? You mean we're half ape? Huh? [*Laughs*] It either has to be incest or half monkey, one!

[*Everyone talks at once.*]

EDNA: One time I mentioned that to a doctor about the missing link. Well, how does he know that wasn't the missing link?

BUDDY: If you can get up a debate on that, I'd like to come over and--

EDNA: [*Talking over him*] He said that was impossible, that you couldn't breed with any type of animal...

When Buddy tries to strengthen his male line by guessing deliberately low on Edna's age, ostensibly to compliment her, she refuses the compliment because accepting it would give Buddy a point. When Buddy ruefully predicts long life for her, she squelches him again with "That's for the old man upstairs to say" (said in a cutting tone). The only wildly metaphysical flights Edna takes in all my interviews with her are triggered by Buddy, as above. She uses her pronouncements on religion and science as part of her game strategy, to overwhelm Buddy with their sheer force and shock value. She speaks even

louder and more positively, which adds to the effect and forestalls any potential challenges, reducing Buddy to trying to recoup his losses and save face by poking fun at some of Edna's statements. (His other alternative, to argue back, would, as mentioned above, redefine the situation as an actual incident. He wishes to avoid this at all costs and remain within game frame.)

Even when Edna lets Buddy get a word in edgewise, she refuses to let him win points by making her laugh or be laughed at. For example, as can be seen below, Buddy intends to put her down with "Now you're getting back to Adam and Eve again!" The usual response would be embarrassment and loss of face, but Edna brazenly squelches his squelch with a very positive and loud "That's right!" In the following transcription, which represents the last stage of their interaction, Edna becomes extremely loud and domineering. She will not let Buddy even agree with her, and seems to imply by her argumentative tone that he is somehow in league with whatever group her polemic is against. She makes it so impossible for him to maintain any kind of line that Buddy is forced to relinquish the male-dominance face he began with, although he manages to maintain his poise by never actually acknowledging his loss:

BUDDY: As long as the people of any country--

EDNA: [*Cutting in*] As long as the United States or the--

BUDDY: [Still trying] As long as the people--

EDNA: Then, we live by the laws--it's all right.

BUDDY: As long as the people of any country--

EDNA: Morals are not dictated by the law. The church dictates morals. And the morals of the church and the laws of our land are two entirely different things, and I don't like the two mixed, and they can look back in the Constitution of the United States, the Preamble of the United States, and a few other goddam things, y'know, we all call sacred--God, flag, country and what have you? *Fuck 'em!*

[*Buddy cracks up.*]

EDNA: We do run things as a people. That's why we have polls to vote at. And if we can't have that, then--if we're gonna live under Gestapo rule, then let's go at least where we know what the Gestapo demand. Let's don't have people that make their own laws. That's dictatorship--we don't live under a dictatorship.

BUDDY: Not yet.

EDNA: We're not goin' to, dear. There's still enough red-blooded Americans that will turn these motherfuckers upside down that think they will become dictators.

BUDDY: Now you're gettin' back to Adam and Eve again!

EDNA: [Refusing to be put down] That's right!

[*Buddy laughs.*]

EDNA: That is correct! Just like, me, I've never volunteered for any kind of military service, but if they ever come in here and start attacking, I tell you one thing--I will be. I'll be out there on the first front lines tryin' to help defend my homeland--just like they're tryin' to talk about these different ones takin' over--different places--our public offices, our public institutions--I *don't go* along with it, 'cause just like in private property, different ones'll try to take over. You know you read the deed to property 'n' everything--but [*indecipherable*] a life isn't in it--then they're going to say you can't take a life--a life is more valuable than property? Can't be replaced? Well then, why in the hell didn't that cocksucker think so before he started tryin' to take over--'cause, when I have sweat and my blood and my labors and my American dollars and paid taxes on and bought property, why in the hell shouldn't I protect it from some goddamn scrounger that wants to take over? *Fuck 'em.*

BUDDY: [Laughs] Edna, I gotta say--

EDNA: Either on their own two feet or in a fuckin' pine box!

BUDDY: I gotta say, Edna--

EDNA: It doesn't make much difference which way they go!

BUDDY: Edna, I gotta say one thing--there can't be nobody say "fuck 'em" like you can!

EDNA: Well I know one thing--just like they're gonna say they're gonna come in here and take over--say, "Yeah, over my goddamn dead body you take over!"

ROBBIE: Who said they'd do that?

EDNA: Oh, every now and then--there are some [*indecipherable*] in the world.

ROBBIE: You mean customers, or--?

EDNA: Yeah, every now and then something similar to that comes along.

RITA: Some preacher did that once. Didn't he try to get rid of it?

EDNA: I don't know 'bout that, but I know what I'd tell a preacher real goddamn fast. Motherfucker, you want to run my whorehouse? Then you buy this goddamn property and you run it however you want it--run it in the ground, break it up, close it off. I don't go down there and tell you how to run your goddamn church. If I wanted to run your church I'd go and study to become a minister, then I would apply for the position at this particular church if I wanted to run it. Then hell you keep your goddamn nose out of my business and get off my property. And that's exactly would be my statement to one of 'em if they ever, should ever try anything like that.

[*Buddy laughs uncomfortably and leaves.*]

Buddy's laughter at Edna's vehement "Fuck 'em" is, I believe, Goffman's face-saving "I-can-take-a-joke" laugh, by which he hopes to terminate the interchange or at least change the subject. Failing that he laughs again, with less conviction, and leaves. His reappearance a few moments later with the prostitute he is about to screw seems to me to be facework intended to reestablish his male dominance in the eyes of the audience, Rita and me. Without an audience they would never have

played out the interaction for so long. Buddy even asks me in a mocking tone if I would like to tape-record them in the bedroom. Edna replies sarcastically that there won't be much to hear; Buddy wordlessly beats a final retreat, his line destroyed and his face lost in the eyes of the audience. (He'll restore it for himself in the bedroom, perhaps not realizing that his partner is expertly manipulating him too!) Miss Edna is the victor, having successfully presented her line and maintained the face she originally claimed for herself.

I do not mean to imply by Edna's put-down of Buddy that she puts down all men. Contrary to popular belief (a la Legman), the madam and girls at the Chicken Ranch do not hate men. Edna's attitude toward men seems to be to place them on a continuum. Toward shy boys, men with small penises, and old men she is gentle and very motherly. She refuses to tolerate men (like Buddy) at the opposite end of the scale, when they try to play the dominance game with her. "They sometimes get drunk and want to assert what men they are," she says, "but they can be put down." She likes and has as friends men who accept her for herself and do not try to dominate her. As far as I can tell, and again contrary to Legman's ideas, Edna has no neurotic castration complex and no subconscious wish to be a man. When I asked her if she thought men were superior to women, she replied that physically they were, but "I think you're supposed to judge a person from their eyebrows up, not from what's below the belt."

As previously stated, Edna and the girls feel their most important work is mental and verbal--to remain in control of themselves and their interactions with the customers. Edna must and does remain in control of all the customers and all the girls. She is, in a sense, super-woman, controlling the women who control the men. She is above all a woman: her folklore shows that she does not place men in a superior position, whores in a inferior position, and unconsciously try to impersonate men while downgrading the whores, the men's sexual objects. (When I asked her what she thought of sex in general, she replied, "It's as normal as eatin', goin' to the bathroom, and sleepin'--that's part of the natural function of life.") Several times during our interviews, Edna called her dog Trixie over to the group, saying, "Trixie! Show 'em what the good girls do to make money!" Trixie obligingly rolls over on her back and waves her legs in the air, which never fails to delight her mistress. To me this is another indication of Edna's full acceptance of herself as a woman and as a whore. She is very aware of the power of both the woman and the whore over the male, whom she sees as biologically dependent on both, and sometimes financially dependent, as in her jingle, "Put on your old gray bustle/ and get out and hustle/ 'Cause the mortgage on the farm is comin' due!"

Edna identifies strongly with other women, but only with those who fit her concept of womanhood. She has great sympathy for what she terms "the tired housewife, tendin' a hot stove, and carin' for the kids." One of her strictest rules is that her girls must never take unfair advantage of the fact that they've been "sittin' on their can all day and have time to be powdered and perfumed" and try to take a married man away from his wife. Edna expresses, in turn, great contempt for "sexless women," that is, women who refuse to acknowledge their sexuality. In her opinion, they are inferior to men because they deny the sexuality that is their birthright and their key to the mastery of the male world. Far from wanting to be a man, Edna has strong pride in her womanhood (constantly expressed in her folklore and in interview conversations), which enables her to control both men and other women who lack the same strong pride.

I now come to some revealing differences between the madam and the girls, which I will mention only briefly. Away from her, some of them demonstrate the same tendencies as Miss Edna, which apparently they suppress when she is present in order to avoid threatening her dominant role. For example, when she was there nearly all the jokes the girls told followed Legman's dirty humor pattern--the female was the butt of the joke. But when Miss Edna wasn't there, nearly every joke they

told followed her pattern--the female was the protagonist. The following interchange reflects the first pattern:

GLORIA: Y'know, when somebody asks me for a joke, I can't think of one.

EDNA: That's the whole thing, right there. [*To Gloria*] I bet you can think of a joke. Here. [*Extends microphone.*]

GLORIA: Uh--does it have to be a clean one?

EDNA, RITA, ROBBIE: Naw--

EDNA: An old lady, she lived on a hill. If she don't do it, her daughter will!

GLORIA: There were three nuns and they were goin' to confession, and the first nun went in, and she says, "Father, I have to confess--I, uh, jacked a man off." And he says, "I'm ashamed of you sister--go put your hand in the holy water." And the next nun went in, and she says, "Father, I have to confess--I had intercourse with a man," and he says, "I am *really* ashamed of you." He says, "Go *sit* in the holy water." And the third nun says, "Be sure you don't 'go' in it, because I'm gonna hafta gargle!" [*Everyone laughs but Edna.*]

EDNA: Well you know a few years ago they had all these beatniks 'n' everything? Well anyway one of these nuns, y'know, she was gettin' ready to cross the street 'n' everything, she had all these packages and she dropped a bunch of 'em, so this beatnik boy stopped and helped her pick 'em up, and she ways, "Well, thank you. I really didn't expect anything from a person of your type,"--'n' everything, and "It's all right," he says, "Any friend of Zorro's is a friend of mine!" Zorro, of all things--what a dumb guy!

In Gloria's religious joke the female is the butt, while in Edna's religious joke the male is the one who is made fun of. But later, when Edna was out of the house altogether, the girls told the following jokes to Rita:

GLORIA: Well, um--"Everybody get together now," the preacher said. "We're gonna raise some money for the collection." So he asked them for \$10 and they all threw it to him. This went on and on, so the preacher finally decided he was gonna get \$100 from 'em that night. So he went out there up on the pulpit and he's just a-swingin' his rosary, and it breaks. So he says, "Shit!" and it took him a month to clean up the church.

APRIL: You know in Jesus Christ's day they used to stone whores.

RITA: Oh yes, I remember.

APRIL: And so they had a--

BONNIE AND GLORIA: Throw stones at 'em?

APRIL: Yeah. So....there's this multitude of people around. She's in the middle of the arena, this whore is, and they're going to stone her. So, ah, here He comes on His jackass--

[All begin to giggle.]

APRIL: Yeah, that's right, you know, and He says, "Ye who is without sin cast the first stone." And so this old, *old* lady comes forward. This old, old woman throws this stone and kills this whore. Hits her in the temple and kills her. So He goes over there and puts his hand on her shoulder and says, "Mother, sometimes you piss me off!"

[Everyone laughs.]

APRIL: [Laughing] The Virgin Mary, you know--I think that's groovy, man.

Gloria: Now *how* can she be a virgin?

[All laugh]

There are other jokes the girls tell when Edna is not present that follow the same two patterns of anti-male and anti-religious expression. Miss Edna's attitude toward those who practice religion is fairly tolerant if they sincerely believe in it, and she never tells any jokes in which sincere believers are the butts. Thus, it seems doubly plausible that the girls avoid telling this type of joke in Edna's presence, because they feel this would be an indirect threat to her dominant line.

Another important difference between the landlady and the girls has to do with age. The folklore of the girls reveals fear of old age and insecurity about the future. Everything Edna says in interview conversations demonstrates a calm acceptance of age and the future. For example, compare the following jokes of the girls and the madam:

EDNA: You know you heard about this--these young girls were going to a resort town, 'n' everything, and hell, nobody was payin' much attention to them, and, hell, they were nice, lovely lookin' young ladies. They seen this old bag sittin' at a table and, hell, she had a bunch of young men around her--surrounded--some of 'em were fabulous lookin', y' know. And, uh, so finally they happened to catch her off by herself once and they asked her what the score was. Here they were so young 'n' everything and they couldn't get any of these men to pay any attention to 'em--but she was...an old bag...and all. She said, "Well girls, I want to tell ya how it is"--says, "When I was young I sold it and made me some money. Now that I'm old, I'm buyin' it back!"

.....

CAROL: Do y'all know the difference between an old prostitute and a young one? A young prostitute uses Vaseline and an old one uses Poly-Grip!

.....

BONNIE: Well this service boy had been out on the ocean for two years and he hadn't even seen a woman. And they were all real horny, and there were about five of 'em around talkin', and he said, "Well I tell you what. When we dock, I'm havin' the first girl I see, regardless of age, looks, or color. I don't care. I'm horny. I'm takin' her." Well this one guy, he says, "Well I'll bet you \$100 it'll be

somehin' you don't want. She'll be colored, or she'll be too old or somehin', and you won't take it." And he said, "No man, that's a bet. The first one I see when I step off--that's *it!*" He was that horny. Well they docked and these other guys were gonna follow him to make sure that was what he did, 'n' everything. He was walkin' down the street and here comes the first old lady. She was 90, 98 years old [*laughter*]--man, she was about ready to die. She had a cane and was all hunch-backed 'n' everything. And he was thinkin' "Oh my God." But \$100 is a lot of money to a service boy. So he goes up to her and puts this story on her, the old lady, and he's shocked as hell--she's rarin' to go--"Yeah Sonny!" So he takes her to this motel room, and they're followin' him to make sure--it's funny to them 'cause she's so old and everything. So they get in the room and they get undressed and get in bed, and he's gettin' it on, and after a while--here's the punchline, are you ready?--he smells this awful odor and he says, "My God, what is that smell?" She says, "Well I'm too old to come, so I shit to show my appreciation!" [*Much laughter.*] I wonder if it really gets that way when you're 98.

APRIL: Well I hope not!

BONNIE: I hope not too!

GLORIA: I hope not too!

BONNIE: I can see fartin' maybe...

In sharp contrast to these and other jokes of the girls, none of Edna's jokes reveal any fear or ambivalence about old age. She performed the "buyin' it back" joke for us three times in different interviews--it seems to be her favorite. It is significant that the first telling was inspired by Buddy's "Do you know what an old whore does on her vacation? She just fucks it off!" In this instance, Edna's joke can be seen as a defense of the old whore against Buddy's derogatory joke. When I asked Edna about the woman in the joke, she said she was probably an ex-landlady who liked to party a lot, and now that she was old and ugly, she just bought it back, and didn't mind having to do so--"that's just the way things are."

A further illustration of Miss Edna's acceptance of old age occurred in the course of her dueling with Buddy. He performs part of a degrading rhyme about the "Two Old Whores of Singapore," supposedly "the dirtiest thing I ever heard." True to pattern, Edna's counter-rhyme does not degrade the whores at all:

Two old whores, walkin' down the street
 No hat on their heads, no shoes on their feet
 Too old to fuck, and too proud to suck
 Just two old whores, shit outta luck.

True, they are "shit outta luck," but they are also "too proud to suck," and they're just walkin' down the street, not bothering of betting from anyone, calmly accepting their fate. Edna performed this rhyme three more times in later interviews. In my opinion, she empathizes with the pride of the two old whores. They made their living by manipulating men, and now, though destitute, they will not stoop to be manipulated--nor would she! (I am aware that these two examples could be just coping mechanisms she uses to deal with the fear she really does have of old age, but she said many times in interview conversations that she is not afraid of whatever may come.⁴ These statements fit in well with her overall attitude of self-sufficiency and security.)

Another area of interest is the situational generation of jokes. Obviously, many of Edna's profemale jokes were triggered by Buddy's anti-female ones. In this case, the joke-telling is a function of the differential identities of the interactants and is a mechanism for conflict (Bauman 1972). Edna herself is very aware of some elements of the joke-telling process. She frequently tries to elicit folklore performances from the girls, usually by performing a bit herself to trigger their memories:

EDNA: Any of you girls want to come in here and tell these girls a bunch of jokes--parlor jokes, dirty jokes, or whatever kind? [*Raises voice*] They've got a little tape-recorder in here and they want to record a few jokes. Well some of 'em will be parlor jokes, some be nice, some be funny--and if everybody just starts in and everything if they wanted to they could just pick up a bunch of 'em--and that's--all they're going to do with 'em is just play 'em in their dormitory for kicks.

ROBBIE: [laughs] Nobody knows any?

EDNA: Aw, come on!

[Girls in other room are saying indecipherably that they don't know any.]

EDNA: Aw sure, just like that old one [*loud voice*]:

Here's to the girls of the Golden West
They've got tits like a hornet's nest
The skin on their bellies is tight as a drum
They've got a puss that'll make a dead man come!

[*Trudy the maid cracks up loudly, as do the girls.*]

ROBBIE: Anybody know anything like that?

[*There is a brief three-second silence.*]

EDNA: And that's just like--somebody was talkin' about me giving a donation to a...good cause...but they didn't want to put my name on it because they said they wanted to put it down as anonymous. I said anonymous hell! I'm not a god-damned Greek! My name's not Anonymous!

[N.B. Miss Edna donated \$10,000 to the local hospital for a new wing, a fact which is widely known in the community.]

RITA: Oh God!

EDNA: "Oh God" is right!

ROBBIE: Now somebody in there knows some good jokes, now really!

BETSY: I can't remember 'em. I've heard some good ones, and I can't remember jokes.

EDNA: You can't?! Oh sure you can! Off your ass and on your feet, or get off your feet and on your ass--one of the two--and then...

SUSAN: What is it they say--off your ass 'n' on your feet--

TRUDY: Go on in, go on in, Kelly!

KELLY: Listen, I don't know any, really. Now if I did, I would be happy to, but I don't really know any.

EDNA: Just like, some guy comes in and he said, "You promise me a real good time," 'n' this 'n' that 'n' the other, and "I'll come back 'n' see you." [She] says, "Honey, I'm not lookin' for comebacks--I'm lookin' for greenbacks!"

KELLY: That's right!

[*Girls go in for lunch laughing.*]

This type of joke reflects the shared identities (Ben-Amos 1972) of Edna and the girls, and works for greater group cohesion (Abrahams 1972) and for Edna's control of the group, especially since these jokes are strongly female in orientation, and it is Edna who is performing them (and at the same time trying to manipulate the girls into performing).

I suggest that the key to understanding Miss Edna's use of folklore in strategic and tactical interaction lies in this concept of manipulation. There are three rhetorical dimensions present in her use of folklore. First, she manipulates herself: that is, her folklore performs a self-reinforcing function. Its very performance is an adjustive mechanism in its own right, reinforcing what she says her feelings are. Second, she manipulates the girls: that is, her folklore strengthens and validates her dominant role. Third, she (and the girls) manipulate men without letting them know that they are being manipulated. The "Golden West" toast, among others, clearly shows that she is aware of this manipulation. All this demonstrates a phenomenon that, at the time this study was originally conducted in 1971, had received very little scholarly attention--the sex-specific verbal abilities and power of women as users of folklore.

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Postscript 1994

Since the 1970s, of course, feminist scholars have made major advances in redressing this imbalance (see, among many examples, Farrer 1975; Green 1977; Jordan and Kalcik 1985; Turner 1990; Radner 1993; Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993; and this present volume.) This study, then, may be seen as an early step along that road. Its inclusion in Defining Women: Images of Women in Folklore, Ritual, and Popular Culture allows it to speak as a voice from the past--a past in which the voices of powerful female performers of folklore like Miss Edna resounded but all too often went unheard and unacknowledged by the text- and male-oriented scholarly biases of the day.

When I originally conducted this study, in my own still-nascent feminism I was most impressed by the verbal power and dominance of Miss Edna and the girls, but there was much about their situation that I did not see. In the ensuing twenty years, as I have matured in my feminist perspectives, I have come to realize that the Chicken Ranch in fact was constituted as a mini-matriarchy--a place in which the women, quite literally, had all the power. Not only was Miss Edna clearly in charge of the whole establishment, but also each girl had her own room--a place of her own, her space, which she

decorated as she pleased and in which she exercised her individual power even as she served her customer.

The parts of the house that I was allowed to see were clearly demarcated into public and private: the private spaces in the back of the house consisted of the bedrooms and a large kitchen/dining room/den area where customers were never allowed, and the public space in front, which consisted of two waiting rooms--one large, one small--across the hall from each other. The hall wall of each was a half-wall, so one could clearly see into each waiting area from the other. (Miss Edna wouldn't allow me into the large room where the girls waited--one of the ways in which she protected me--but the half-wall enabled me to see in, and be seen--although Buddy was the only customer who took note.) Both waiting rooms were ringed by black vinyl chairs with tall floor-standing ashtrays in between. Their pink-and-green flowered carpet was matched by the flowered curtains, which sparkled with pink and green sequins. Against the far wall of the large room, breaking the row of chairs, was an old-fashioned juke box, and against one of the side walls was a coke machine.

As a customer entered the house, a bell would ring in the den in the back to let the girls know they must come out to be on display. They would file in and sit down in the large waiting room. The customer would enter and sit down too. The girls would introduce themselves, they would all chat and joke; sometimes he would ask one or two of them to dance. When he had made up his mind, he and his chosen prostitute would disappear through the curtain that demarcated the public from the private spaces. There was a money window just there, as they went through the curtain, and the man was asked to state his intentions for the tryst and then to pay the set fees in advance. Only after the money was handled would they go back to the prostitute's bedroom, her place of power, where she would satisfy his fantasies and earn her money. With this required format, the madam protected her girls from financial exploitation by "fuck and run" wannabes.

As I recall, customers rarely showed up in the mornings, and the girls usually slept late. (There was one old farmer of Slovakian descent in his 80s who usually showed up at 10:00 a.m., but he always wanted the same girl, and she knew to expect him.) The afternoons, when most of our visits took place, were slow, with an occasional customer, like Buddy, popping in. So the girls mostly stayed in the den, enjoying each other's company, or reading, perhaps, wearing comfortable and normal clothes, usually pantsuits. At six the girls would eat dinner in the den, and at seven they would appear in the public waiting rooms, dressed for the evening in very fancy and very scanty attire. Miss Edna usually made Rita O' Brien and me leave before it got dark--her way of protecting us--but once she let us stay to see the girls emerge in their evening clothes.

Trudy, the black maid, sat at the screen door, which had no latch or handle on the outside. She opened it when she was convinced of the legitimacy of the customer. There was a large black man around every now and then who I believe served the function of both handyman and bouncer, in case Miss Edna's verbal abilities proved insufficient, which, apparently, they seldom did. The only story I recall in which his services were called upon was when a prostitute arrived looking for a job at the Ranch accompanied by a man whom she presented as her boyfriend, but whom Miss Edna interpreted as her pimp. Edna had no tolerance at all for pimps, whom she regarded as shameful exploiters and extorters of women's rightful wages. She made sure he was off the premises and long gone before the girl made a decision. Edna said that she wanted the girl to decide for herself, and to be able to keep her own money, or send it to her family, not give it to "that man."

The girls worked three weeks out of every month, staying at the Ranch continuously during this time. The week of their period would be their vacation week. Most of them would leave town, heading for Dallas or Houston, returning at the week's end. Basically, they were on 21 days and off seven each

month. At Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, festive and bountiful meals were served to all house residents, and at Christmas, there was always a tree and decorations in the private den, and everyone drew lots to give one other person a present, which waited, wrapped and glistening, in the pile under the tree until Christmas Day.

I did not realize it at the time, but the mini-matriarchy that these women constituted at the Ranch now seems to me to be a far safer and more viable form of prostitution than the on-the-street life of most prostitutes in cities. This environment was protected and secure, and felt to many of them very much like family, very much like home.

The Chicken Ranch was also protected by the townspeople for many years. My initial interest in this place was sparked when Professor Alan Sager assigned his Law and Society students, of whom I was one, to ferret out some illegal phenomenon which existed despite its illegality, and figure out why and how it could do so. I went to La Grange and interviewed a number of townspeople, including the sheriff, about why the Chicken Ranch was allowed to exist. I do feel the need to report that, just as Miss Edna did not resemble Dolly Parton (the star who played the part of the madam in the movie, The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, the sheriff, T.J. Flournoy, did not look remotely like Burt Reynolds (who played the sheriff in the movie--much of the plot revolved around his love for the madam). Sheriff Flournoy was a very tall man, well over six feet, with a white Stetson, a huge bulbous nose, and fingertips that were stained yellow from the unfiltered Camels he chain-smoked. At first most polite, he invited me into his office, asked me to sit down, and said that he had never heard of the Chicken Ranch, and he was sure I must be mistaken, as absolutely nothing illegal existed in his domain. He asked me to show him where this place was supposed to be on a map. When I complied, he got very cold, very mean, and very scary. He took me by the arm, half-pulled me to my car, put me in it, closed the door, and told me to get out of town and never come back. So I surmise that, in spite of his lack of resemblance to Burt Reynolds, Sheriff Flournoy was at least as protective of Miss Edna and the Chicken Ranch as the movie had shown him to be.

Still seeking the reasons for the consensual existence of the Chicken Ranch in the conservative town of La Grange, I interviewed a number of the townspeople in person and by questionnaire. I found that they split along "old-timer"/ "newcomer" lines. Most of the old-timers were of Bohemian or Slovakian descent, and had an Old World tolerance for prostitution. They felt that men had needs that must be satisfied, that the presence of the out-of-town prostitutes for this purpose protected the local girls from exploitation, and that one should live and let live. They appreciated the facts that the girls kept to themselves, frequenting only a few places in town (essential stores and the hair salon), and that the madam made substantial contributions to local charities. The newcomers (a newcomer was anyone who had lived in the town for less than 10 years), in marked contrast, felt that the presence of the Chicken Ranch gave a bad reputation to the entire town and especially to the local girls, who were often the butt of jokes when they attended out-of-town football games and other events. Nevertheless, the newcomers who had tried in the ten years before my 1971 study to raise public alarms about the Chicken Ranch found themselves ostracized by the oldtimers. A newcomer newspaper editor once went so far as to print an article in the local paper, and awoke the next day to find his lawn littered with trash. He, like the others, ceased his protest. In the end, of course, it was not a local but a Houston newscaster who dealt the Chicken Ranch its public death blows (see footnote 2). The madam went on to Broadway, some of the girls found other occupations, and some went back to the streets, where, no doubt, they found it difficult if not impossible to recreate the safe, gynocentric, and even nurturing environment they had enjoyed under Miss Edna's control and protection.

ENDNOTES

1. This article was originally published in the Journal of American Folklore 86(41):212-224, July-September 1973. This version has been revised and updated.

2. Edna Milton is the madam's real name. The original version of this article used a pseudonym for the madam, and did not name the Chicken Ranch or the town of La Grange, because at that time the whorehouse was still in illegal operation. As almost any Texan above the age of 35 or so can attest, the Chicken Ranch long occupied an eminent place in underground Texas folk tradition. It existed quietly, apparently by widespread cultural consensus. Many people all over the state, especially college students, knew about it, but the press simply left it alone. All that changed when a glory-seeking Houston newscaster named Marvin Zindler began public attacks that were picked up by the national news media. The bright lights of public exposure caused the then-governor of Texas, Dolph Briscoe, to feel compelled to close it down, as prostitution is officially illegal in Texas.

The colorful story of its demise is re-enacted in the Broadway musical The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, in which Miss Edna herself appeared as both technical adviser and member of the cast (appearing at the play's beginning in a wheelchair, she played the older madam whom she had originally replaced; at the end, she appeared with the whole cast, singing and dancing during the finale, and wearing a sparkling tiara to set her apart). Before the Chicken Ranch made it to Broadway, the building was moved to Dallas and turned into a restaurant, at which, I am told, Miss Edna officiated as hostess until the restaurant closed after a year or so. Since Miss Edna "went public" so unequivocally, there seems to be no reason not to use her real name in this revised version of the earlier article.

3. He wanted to "try me out" where he was staying--at the Cottonwood Inn down the road. I was 22 at the time, and was torn between feeling offended, flattered, scared to death, and trying to act professional--an early exposure to the hazards of "the field."

4. I do not know for sure what Miss Edna did since the Broadway play ended its run, but folklore has it that she married a wealthy West Texas rancher and lived happily ever after.

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