These Keys . . . Written Personal Narrative as Family Lore and Folk Object

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These keys won't unlock any door or lock.
—Ellen Colgan Sloan
Inscription on Envelope

ABSTRACT
This article explores the idea that written family stories—although not strictly a part of the oral storytelling tradition—are akin to folk objects. These stories convey information about a specific family but, in a sense, might be considered more universal. Such stories may have the power to “deliver” information that they do not actually contain by triggering personal memories in the reader. An analysis of these stories also suggests that folklore is a powerful medium for transmitting information and should be incorporated more fully into the curricula of schools of library and information science.

INTRODUCTION
This discussion posits the suggestion that written/published family stories could be categorized as folk objects. Folk objects, upon being viewed or touched, have the power to produce memories or images beyond their range of “experience”—a quality my mother’s stories have as well. These stories would seem to be more closely related to the concept of folk object than to the oral tradition. There are many similarities between my mother’s written narratives and the oral tradition, but there are also some fundamental differences. These differences suggest that such written narrative falls outside the more commonly discussed oral tradition of family stories.
In one context, these stories do neatly fit into the role of folk object—i.e., the physical object of the printed newspaper column was distributed widely. Readers clipped the columns and affixed them to refrigerators and bulletin boards and mailed them to friends and relatives who didn’t subscribe to the paper. But it wasn’t the physical form of the newspaper column that made the impact. Rather it was the power of the ideas expressed in the columns. While I will raise the concept of “written-story-as-folk-object” and present preliminary evidence supporting this contention, further research is required to flesh out this concept more fully.

The stories analyzed for this article were written by my mother, Peg Sloan, and published as newspaper columns in the Kankakee (Illinois) Daily Journal from 1975 through 1986. My mother’s stories, while perhaps not all “family history” in a strict sense, are stories about family and help to establish and reinforce a sense of family identity and context and a sense of place. Her stories have also established a family “tradition,” with a number of my siblings also having published family-based stories in newspapers.

In this article, I suggest that my mother’s stories fit more into the category of folk object than the oral tradition. I also categorize the stories I have selected for analysis, interview the storyteller, and focus on analyzing stories that feature my paternal grandmother as a recurring theme.

Finally, there is one interesting sidelight. In the course of interviewing my mother, some additional family history has been created. I’m not sure if anyone in the family, up to this point, knew the full story of how my mother became involved in writing these stories. The interview with her, while interesting to me on a personal level, is also more broadly interesting in a context of folkloristic analysis.

The Power of Folk Objects

Before starting on the central topic of this article, I want to recount two recent experiences regarding a family gathering in June 1998 and relating to the power of folk objects. Both of the folk objects concerned deal with the primary people treated in my mother’s stories: my maternal grandfather and paternal grandmother. What’s the purpose of telling the following two stories? For one thing, they highlight the power of folk objects, especially to the immediate folk group. Another aspect is that I wanted to try to get a feel for what my mother might go through when writing her family stories. Finally, I wanted to explore the concept of the folk object, as I have started to think that my mother’s stories are more folk object than oral tradition. While I suggest that this is the case, I do not attempt to prove it. For the purposes of my investigation, it was sufficient to explore whether formal (i.e., published) original stories might be considered folk objects.

One Saturday, I walked into my father’s study as he went through his
genealogy resource materials—old newspaper clippings, family photographs, old yearbooks, genealogy charts, etc. From this collection he extracted an object and handed it to me—a plain white sealed envelope with the following inscription: "These keys won’t unlock any door or lock." It was written in my paternal grandmother’s handwriting and, even though it had been over twenty years since she died, the envelope had not yellowed, and the bold strokes of the fountain pen remained a vivid blue. In a sense, it was as if she’d just entrusted the envelope to my father for safekeeping.

Holding the envelope, feeling the weight of the useless keys sealed inside, I glimpsed my grandmother’s character one more time: a no-nonsense waste-not organized woman. Gram Sloan had lived a hard fruitful life on the farm. Dropping out of school in the seventh grade, she had lived to see her three children graduate from college and go on to very successful careers. But one of my strongest impressions of her was as an organized woman who could not stand to waste anything, not even keys that fit no locks. I do not even recall her having garbage pickups.

As part of her “recycling” system, if it was paper, it went in the rusty oil drum down the lane for burning. I’m no pyromaniac, but I clearly remember the first time I was old enough to be sent down the lane alone with a box of Ohio Blue Tip kitchen matches and a bag of combustible items. This felt like I had taken a giant step toward adulthood. I carefully crumpled and arranged some of the old newspapers so that they’d get the proper oxygen mix for a good clean fire. I had remembered my grandmother instructing me that you did not want to make any more smoke than you had to, and that a clean fire produced less smoke. I slid the Blue Tip across the sandpaper on the side of the box and carefully ignited the papers in several different spots. I was pleased to see that my fire produced only a plume of thin white smoke. It wasn’t the act of starting a fire that pleased me; rather it was that I had been allowed to take part in a family ritual and that I had performed the ritual well. Even today, as I prepare my charcoal grill for a cookout, I sometimes think about that ritual. I arrange the charcoal so the fire will get a good supply of oxygen and light it in several different spots. And, as I work, the dark inside of the grill, with its slight patina of rust, bears an uncanny resemblance to the inside of that old rusty oil drum.

If Gram considered that what was to be thrown out was organic, it went into the “slop bucket” to be put out for the chickens. As a young child, the slop bucket both intrigued and repelled me at the same time. It was a pretty disgusting thing from one perspective—a galvanized bucket to the left of the kitchen stove, half filled with water, into which my grandmother deposited just about everything that could be considered to be organic: egg shells, coffee grounds, bones, banana peels, vegetable scraps, apple cores, etc. Looking into it, you would halfway expect some mutant
creature to come crawling out. But, while I thought the gunk in the slop bucket was pretty gross (and while I thought that the term “slop bucket” was about as apt a description as I’ve ever seen applied to something), the chickens thought it was pretty special. I’d walk out the side gate with my grandmother, and she would grip the bucket firmly and toss the slop in the general direction of the chicken houses. In not much time, there would be a big commotion as the chickens started to fight each other for choice morsels of, well, slop. As I got older, I’d help carry the bucket and eventually get the opportunity to take it out and toss it myself. It’s been a long, long time since I’ve performed this ritual, but it still somehow has meaning for me.

If it wasn’t combustible and wasn’t organic, it was usually glass or metal—basically jars or cans. The jars were often re-used to hold buttons, small miscellaneous objects, and loose change. The cans were another story. My grandmother would rinse them out, remove the lids, and then step on the cans with her blocky black shoes to flatten them out. The cans were carried out the back door, straight to a small wooden shed at the west end of the small back yard. Then the flattened cans were stacked carefully, joining the hundreds or thousands of other flattened cans that already lived there. As a child, I could never figure this out. Now I can imagine that, at one time, maybe an itinerant junk man came by infrequently and bought the cans for scrap. But, in my childhood, I never remember seeing that shed empty. I just remember it getting fuller and fuller. I think about this occasionally as I toss bottles and cans into the recycling containers in my garage, and I find myself wondering if my grandmother ever contributed even one item to a landfill anywhere.

Now, back to the keys with no locks to unlock. I think these indicate a big aspect of my grandmother’s personality. She was very organized and would not waste anything. The keys could not be burned or used as chicken feed. Unlike the cans, they still had a purpose, however unfulfilled. So she categorized them and labeled them, perhaps so that future generations would not have to repeat the process of trying to locate their locks. Standing in my father’s study that afternoon holding the envelope, I could see my grandmother clearly again, and I was reminded how much her strong no-nonsense personality had influenced me and continues to influence me to this day. And I was struck by the thought that, while a picture might be worth a thousand words, an object, especially an object that is grounded in family history, might easily be worth a thousand pictures.

In June 1998, I attended a gathering of my mother’s extended family in the Chicago suburbs. The occasion for this gathering was my Uncle Jack Dalton’s celebration of the fortieth anniversary of his ordination as a priest. There were about 150-200 people in attendance (at one point my mother said: “You know, you’re related to at least 90 percent of these people”) and the invitations had been limited to “close relatives” to keep
the group to a manageable size! The reunion occasioned many examples of material and customary or ritual lore: my uncle had been given a book of family photos, contributed by relatives in the United States and Ireland, as a memento. There was a display of photos and newspaper articles chronicling my uncle’s adult life—photos of him during World War II, in the seminary, and as a priest. The celebration was capped off by cousins performing traditional Irish dancing routines, followed by a pilgrimage to a cousin’s house to watch the Chicago Bulls win another playoff game (there were scores of rabid Bulls fans in the group, along with one Utah Jazz fan—my brother Chris from Salt Lake City).

As people stood around the church hall visiting after an early meal, my Aunt Mary drew everyone’s attention to make an announcement. She held a gift-wrapped box. She began talking about a project she had coordinated where she had gathered reminiscences about her parents from her children, nieces, and nephews. She talked about how one of her nephews, in particular, recalled how much her father had enjoyed music, singing, and dancing. Then she announced that the gift-wrapped box held her father’s concertina. As people’s attention focused on what she was saying, she announced that she was giving the concertina to my cousin Dave. It was a very appropriate choice, as Dave has been a major figure in a popular Chicago Irish/rock band for years. The concertina would not “just” be a prominently displayed treasured memento but would once more be used as our grandfather used it—by someone who enjoyed making music, and music with Irish roots. Dave was surprised, and moved, and literally speechless—he could barely say anything, although he did manage to say that he had a friend who actually gave concertina lessons. Dave is used to standing up on a stage, talking and performing. He has been interviewed in newspapers and by the broadcast media. But he was so emotionally moved by the gift that he didn’t know what to say.

This concertina is a powerful folk object. As Dave opened the box and took it out, the memories it evoked in those watching were palpable—you could almost sense my grandfather’s presence. I had a flashback to the times when I would lie on the floor next to my grandfather as we looked over the Sunday papers, each of us with our cup of tea (mine was actually milk and sugar laced with a touch of tea). It also evoked memories of his telling stories about Ireland, including the occasional ghost story that would leave me a little pleasantly uncomfortable as a younger child. It reminded me of hearing how my grandfather so obviously disliked a guy named “Cromwell,” who must have been some boyhood rival (it was only later, in high school, that I learned who Cromwell was and how deeply his actions have touched the Irish psyche). I remembered my grandfather, in his eighties, dancing to a Creedence Clearwater Revival tune at a wedding reception. And I recalled him, at a family gathering, playing the spoons—and that concertina.
It also brought back memories of my maternal grandmother. I can remember her house on Christmas Eve. I can especially remember her Christmas tree. I don’t know if I had ever been close to a tree like that before—silver aluminum, illuminated by a floodlight with a rotating multicolored lens. The smell of cigarette smoke permeated everything, as both my grandfather and visiting friends and relatives smoked. For many people, when they walk into a room where someone has been smoking, the first word that comes to their minds might be “stink.” For me, to this day, the smell of cigarette smoke brings pleasant memories of visiting my grandparents on Christmas Eve with their amazing Christmas tree.

I can also see my maternal grandmother sitting at the end of a Wisconsin dock at 6:30 A.M., fishing. She would catch more fish than we could, and then scale, gut, clean, and cook them for dinner. She would even bait our hooks and take off the fish we’d catch. When we were younger, and watched freshly caught fish prepared, the blood and guts and smell could be overwhelming. At the same time, it was inexplicably fascinating to see something go full cycle from living creature to the dinner plate in one continuous sequence. I remember one time thinking that I was absorbing some sort of lesson but was unsure what that lesson was. In a way, it was very similar to watching my paternal grandmother run down a fleeing chicken, kill it, hang it from a fence post to bleed it, soak it in hot water to remove the feathers (a smell I can’t forget), and finish preparing it for dinner. I know it might sound odd to file such memories away under “treasured,” but I think there was an elemental lesson to be learned from observing the full process from start to finished product on the table—something that just cannot be learned by going to the local mega-supermarket and buying a shrink-wrapped package of boneless skinless chicken breasts.

Why do I relate these stories? There is the previously stated and obvious use of the stories to demonstrate the power of folk objects, especially the power of such objects within the folk groups where they have the most significance. There is also the idea that these stories parallel my mother’s stories of family, in that the focal point of my stories (my grandparents) also serve as the focal point for many of the more significant stories that my mother tells. Beyond this, it could be posited that there is a strong interrelationship between folk objects and written lore, that perhaps written lore can be more closely related to folk object than to any oral folk tradition.

**Written Personal Narrative as Folk Object**

As I began reviewing the literature on family lore, I was bothered by a fundamental schism. In part, the subtitle of this article is “Written Personal Narrative as Family Lore.” Are my mother’s stories “personal narrative” and do they qualify as folklore? What bothers me is the arbitrary
distinction between orality and literacy. My mother's stories were never, for the most part, oral stories, or at least not to my recollection. They were delivered as written stories.

Most of the folkloristic theory of verbal lore focuses on orality, as these definitions of personal narrative attest: "The personal narrative is a prose narrative relating a personal experience; it is usually told in the first person, and its content is nontraditional" (Stahl, 1989, p. 12). Is written narrative folklore? "[F]olk narratives are generally conceptualized to be those narratives which circulate primarily in oral tradition and are communicated face-to-face" (Oring, 1986, pp. 122-23). What is family lore?

Almost any bit of lore about a family member, living or dead, qualifies as a family story... These stories last not because they're entertaining, though they may be; they last because in ways large and small they matter... The family is our first culture, and, like all cultures, it wants to make known its norms and mores... "Folklorists have long recognized [family stories] as a genre, part of the oral tradition...". (Stone, 1988, pp. 5, 7, 9)

Barre Toelken(1996), however, suggests that medium of expression may vary:

Because most informal expressions among human beings have been embodied in lingual, musical, and kinesic modes (since these are most direct, and the average person is easily capable of reproducing them), it is likely that the study of folklore will always be heaviest in these areas. However, this situation should not obscure the fact that the same kind of informality, expressiveness, and traditional dynamism may also occur when some visual or material mode is used that represents the same level of communication in the same cultural context of traditional exchange. While the written word is often a solidifier, a freezer of dynamism, it may sometimes be a vehicle for tradition when... the conditions of informality, community exchange and taste, and anonymous tradition are present. (p. 44)

While oral lore may be predominant, then, written material is not automatically excluded from the realm of folklore. But the last phrase, with its emphasis on "conditions of informality, community exchange and taste, and anonymous tradition" still raises questions. The concept of informality may apply, as my mother's stories generally were reproduced as she wrote them, without being subjected to any rigorous editing process. But "community exchange" and "anonymous tradition" do not seem to apply. These stories, once they are written, are my mother's stories. There is no component of community exchange, at least in the sense of the sort of give-and-take that would eventually modify the stories. While readers are free to make sense of, retell, and interpret them as they see fit, the original stories remain unchanged and fixed forever in their initial state. And these stories are by no means anonymous. It's obvious who is
telling the stories, and it's obvious (sometimes more than others) who the stories are about.

**Stories As Objects**

At the beginning of this project, I had equated my mother's stories with oral family history. But recently I have started to think of the stories along the lines of folk object, much like a photograph, or envelope with homeless keys, or a concertina. Each has the power to evoke feelings or memories for members of the folk group, memories or feelings that work themselves out in different ways for different members. These objects remain what they are, unchanged, but have impact beyond their shape, form, and original function. People react to the objects in personal ways, but people seem to interact with oral family stories, changing them as they go along in little ways. In a sense, written stories as objects create oral family stories, as people recount the memories and emotions produced by exposure to these objects.

In a sense, my mother's stories are more folk objects, like the information found in a family Bible, or the impressions and reminiscences recorded in family diaries and journals, than they are a part of the oral tradition. Her columns were clipped from the newspaper, affixed to bulletin boards and refrigerators, and even mailed to out-of-town friends and relatives. They are there, recorded, immutable. Yes, they do say something to the members of the folk group (and often to those beyond the group), but her stories do not neatly fit into the framework of the oral tradition. Yet, these stories do fit into the overall folk framework, although not where I originally thought.

**Categorizing the Stories**

I selected 65 of the approximately 100 "family" stories for analysis. These sixty-five stories were selected because they dealt specifically with my extended family rather than generic family stories that are not directly linked to this family. Most of the stories emphasize several common themes. I selected fourteen of the sixty-five stories as being illustrative of the common themes repeated within this group of stories as a whole. One of the fourteen stories won an award from United Press International (UPI) in 1978. I have also isolated seven basic themes in my mother's stories, which are identified here. Of course, many columns contain more than one basic theme.

**Immigrants' Child Syndrome**

This is a term that my mother used, and it is a recurring theme in her stories. My mother was first-generation American. Her parents came to this country from Ireland at a young age. While her father told stories of Ireland, she did not really have much regular contact with any relatives
back in time beyond her father and mother and their siblings and cousins. My mother didn’t make her first trip to Ireland until well beyond her formative years. She married and moved away from the Chicago area when she was twenty-one. She didn’t move back to the area until she was in her forties, so she didn’t have the same day-to-day extended family interactions that her siblings did during this time.

To a certain extent, my mother lacked the kind of sense of extended family history that one gets from being directly and regularly exposed to older generations. Contact with extended family (history) is an important element in establishing/reinforcing identity. My mother talks about the importance of “a sense of family.” This particular issue is a main underlying theme of all of her columns dealing with family issues/stories. Growing up without the benefit of many generations of family history made it important to establish and reinforce family identity and sense of place. It is not that my mother’s family had no sense of its history or no sense of place; rather, that it is more difficult to maintain these qualities growing up in a place far from the family’s historic roots.

Beyond establishing/reinforcing this family history and sense of place for herself, my mother’s stories were also a means of establishing or continuing family history and tradition for future generations. All too often, one talks to members of immigrant families, several generations in this country, who are not sure of exactly where (e.g., town or region) their families originated. They may know the countries where their families came from, but no more than that. While my mother says she wasn’t consciously aware that her columns might be family history and might help future generations find links to the past, she subconsciously may have been inspired, at least partially, by a drive to establish family history and sense of place for those in following generations.

**Sense of Place**

My mother grew up without much direct sense of place, except for her neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago, and that place was new to the entire family, including her parents. Quite a few of her columns deal with establishing a sense of place. One of the columns I analyzed deals with a family vacation spot in Wisconsin, sadly no longer accessible by the family. Another discusses rivers and a sense of place, an example of how bodies of water can serve as a point of reference. And another deals with my father’s family farm (and my grandmother). There is a fair amount of irony in a city kid from the West Side of Chicago finding a sense of place in rural Iroquois County. But her parents’ generation came from rural backgrounds in Ireland. Perhaps the tales of rural and farm life in Ireland gave my mother a subconscious longing for a rural retreat. But my mother will always be a city kid, and some of her stories discuss the urban/rural dichotomy.
FAMILY Outsider

"Outsider" is probably too harsh a term but, even from childhood, my mother felt "different" to a certain extent, largely because she lacked a strong resemblance to anyone in the family. Coupled with the fact that she was geographically removed from her immediate family for quite a while, this may have made her feel temporarily "outside" of the family. It is interesting to note that these stories were all written after she returned to the Chicago area and had once again become more actively involved with her family—perhaps they were a way to help re-establish a family identity to a degree. Her stories most definitely were a way of celebrating family.

RITUAL/TRADITION/HOLIDAY

One way of establishing family identity and continuity with the past is by telling stories about family ritual/tradition. Most of my mother's stories of this nature center around Christmas, but she also told stories about other holidays—e.g., St. Patrick's Day. Some stories also dealt with my father's side of the family and the ritual of farm life with its comforting cycle of seasons.

TRANSITION

A fair number of stories deal with family transitions—the aging of her father, the death of her mother-in-law, children growing up and leaving home, becoming a grandparent, etc. The irony of many of these transition stories is that—like folktales—the impact changes as one's perspective changes. Stories of her grandchildren (my children) struck me as cute and touching at initial publication. Re-reading them now, they take on a poignancy that they didn't have back then. Stories about children growing up and leaving home really didn't register but now hit close to home, as I have a son living far away in Utah. And stories about the aging of her father now hit close to home, as my parents are both past seventy years of age.

SPECIFIC PEOPLE/CHARACTERS

The most predominant characters in my mother's stories are my maternal grandfather and paternal grandmother. Beyond my grandparents, quite a few of my mother's stories are about my two sons, as they were the first two grandchildren. My son, Sam, was her only grandchild for four years, until, to paraphrase Sam: "The floodgates opened up and those seventeen other grandkids ruined a good thing."

FAMILY Folklore

There are references to more traditionally obvious folklore, such as my personal experience with a schoolyard bully and the "sticks and stones"
folk saying (i.e., when I followed my mother’s instruction to recite the “sticks and stones” saying, the bully actually started throwing sticks and stones at me). There’s also a reference to my grandfather passing along the legend and lore of the Shannon River in Ireland. And there’s another reference to my paternal grandmother’s stories about such things as having an ancestor who was imprisoned in the infamous Andersonville prison during the Civil War and an ancestor who was among the signers of the Declaration of Independence. The latter story is rather interesting in that a genealogist acquaintance of my grandmother told her about this contention but later died along with the evidence that supported it. My father (the family genealogy expert) later could find no evidence to back it up. This is made even more interesting by the fact that when we once visited Washington, DC, and stood admiring a mural of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, my father said “Okay, which one is Charles Carroll?” Without hesitation, we chimed in: “That guy there, he looks just like Gram Sloan!” The legend accompanying the mural indicated that the man was indeed Charles Carroll. Recently, my father showed me a portrait of Charles Carroll that he had photocopied from an old biography. There was an uncanny resemblance to my grandmother.

These stories dealing with retellings of family folklore are significant and play an important role, as they, more than many of the other stories, serve to establish/maintain a sense of family history, a sense of place, and a sense of continuity across multiple generations.

**INTERVIEW WITH THE STORYTELLER**

During my analysis of my mother’s stories, I formulated a number of basic questions about the creative process, the potential impact of the stories, etc. In keeping with the basic theme of written, rather than purely oral, narrative, the questions were presented in written form, and the answers were provided in like manner. I met with my mother, gave an overview of what I was trying to do with the project, went over the questions, and provided clarifications and explanations where required. Then I left the questions with my mother for her to answer as time allowed. I tried to formulate questions that shed as much light on the storyteller as on the stories.

Reading and re-reading the text of the interview has given me a new perspective on my mother by putting her in a context of her times. For one thing, while it is trendy now to talk of retooling and beginning new careers later in life, my mother actually did this at a time when it was rare. Even today, I hear many colleagues, not much older than my mother was then, talk about how they are “too young to retire and too old to start another career.” I can’t underplay the significance of starting a professional career after twenty-seven years of doing something different, nor can I underestimate the courage it takes to do so.
Another aspect of the interviews that I found enlightening was the feminist perspective. Like a lot of other Baby Boomers, I tend to think that our generation must have invented many of the things that went on in the 1960s and 1970s. Reading my mother's comments, makes it seem that feminist leanings predated the "women's movement." And she suggests that it was the women of her generation, thwarted by earlier sexist mentalities, who made sure that their daughters (the bulk of those involved in the women's movement) had opportunities that were previously unavailable to women. These opportunities may well have provided the spark that fueled the feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s. I never explicitly thought of my mother as a feminist. It wasn't that she didn't have a strong personality, it was just that most kids probably don't tend to think of their mothers as having feminist leanings. But, as she relates her experiences, it all makes sense and seems to fall into place. This is a very important piece of family history to pass along.

Finally, in the process of conducting this interview, I feel that, while writing about family history, I have also helped create another bit of family history. As I mentioned, my mother started her career as a professional writer at the age of forty-eight. It was a second career, following up on her first career of raising six children. I don't think that many of us in the family were quite sure how this shift developed. To us, her columns and articles just seemed to start appearing in the paper. The following interview gives a sense of how all of this happened.

The interview itself follows:

**Interviewer:** Why did you/do you write stories? What got you interested in writing stories?

**Mother:** I was born into a large Irish clan in which storytelling was a way of life. My father was born in Ireland where his clan was known for its ballad-makers.

There never was a time when a story wasn't brewing somewhere in my subconscious, thanks in large part to the Irish tradition of remaining around the dining room table after dinner, moving unhurriedly from one timely subject to another until someone (often my father) would be reminded of a story, which would trigger another, and another—often into the wee hours of the morning. Children were not rushed off to bed at 8 or 9 o'clock. Only when we were beginning to nod were we made aware (by a subtle glance from my mother) that it was time to slip away.

I entered many competitions during my high school years, urged on by supportive nuns who taught us. Higher education was not a given for children of working class parents until the G.I. Bill was passed after WWII, making it available to veterans who, of course, were mostly men. My own parents were aghast when I suggested that I wanted to be a journalist, which was tantamount (for our Victorian-bred elders) to being a streetwalker in those days. Careers as nurses and teachers were considered the only respectable routes for young women.
Working-class immigrant parents saw the obvious advantages of a college diploma for their sons who would eventually become the "bread winners" of their own families. However, they saw sending daughters to college as a waste of badly needed dollars, since their role in life was as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Even those who could afford to, and did, send their daughters to college saw it as a way for them to meet (and marry) promising young men who would provide well for them and their future children.

It was the frustrated females of my generation that saw to it that their daughters received an education commensurate with their talents and goals, without having to struggle uphill to gain the college degree that eluded many of their mothers who, once married, had to set the dream aside. All of which played an important part in moving us forward to the Women's Liberation movement of the 60s and 70s—but that's another story.

Interviewer: Why written storytelling rather than oral?
Mother: It was never a matter of either/or. In the years I was immersed in raising my children, I enjoyed telling stories and listening, in turn, to their own imaginative offerings. I took pride and pleasure in their expanding way with words, their writings, and their inherent love of language, so much a part of my own childhood. When time allowed, I corresponded with family and friends. Most of my letters were written in essay form.

Interviewer: How did you get started writing your columns?
Mother: I owe my emergence as a professional writer to the Women's Movement. In the 70s, I belonged to a literary women's group in Kankakee, whose members were called on once a year to submit a paper on a certain theme. We were into consciousness-raising then, when I became conscious of a growing divide between the women of my generation and the next. Increasingly, I was aware of the thinly veiled contempt in which we were held by the younger generation.

And so my paper had a two-fold purpose: to reassure our own badly-shaken generation of our worth and, by describing the experiences that had shaped us, to provide our children's generation with some understanding of the women who came before them.

It was a serendipitous choice. One of the members of our group, Jean Alice Small, was the wife of the publisher of the Daily Journal and only recently had assumed the position of associate publisher and editor, thanks to her own consciousness-raising.

She had listened to several of my papers in previous years, but it was the theme of this paper that hit the mark. I was forty-eight years old at that time, had not worked outside my home since my marriage at twenty-one, and my youngest child would soon be leaving the nest. In February 1976, she offered me a full-time job as a reporter. Six weeks later, I became editor of "Accent," the women's section. In retrospect, I would like to have done more writing as a reporter on a deadline which tends to hone one's talents to a fine edge and, of necessity, curbs the tendency to rework and rethink one's efforts.

In the Fall, I returned from a trip to England and Ireland and wrote a humorous article about my husband and his lost luggage, for which I received several complimentary letters from readers. My duties as editor impinged upon my desire to write more. With three reporters in my section, most of my time was spent assigning story
ideas, laying out pages, proofreading, etc. So the first year or so, I wrote my columns long-hand on weekends at home.

If I had to guess (and I'm certainly not about to count!), I'd say that I wrote approximately 500 columns in the ten years I worked at the Journal.

Interviewer: What role/impact, if any, did editors have on the final versions of your stories?

Mother: I was fortunate that I was able to choose my column editor. Since writing a column was not part of my job description, I began by varying the days on which my "articles" would appear. That way, I could get my style worked out without pressure from the front office.

I decided to ask the county editor, whose work I respected, if she would edit my articles. She was uncommonly generous with her time and diplomatic with her suggestions. In a few months, my style evolved, and I felt confident enough to anchor my column at the top of Friday's page, where it remained during my tenure there.

I won many in-house awards in competitions between the Journal's six sister newspapers in Illinois and California. My first state award came from United Press International for a column about my aging father that appeared just before Father's Day. Several awards followed, including some for editing, but the one I was proudest of was the award for best column from the Women's National Press Association.

Interviewer: How do you select topics?

Mother: I think it's more a matter of the topics selecting me. I'd have to say that many of my "inspirations" came while sitting in an airport or on a plane. Human interest stories abound there if one takes the time to listen and observe.

The best stories crop up when you least expect them. Often, they tug at your heart: like the small vivacious girl who kissed her equally vivacious mother goodbye in San Francisco, bounced down the aisle and settled herself in the main cabin like a veteran. In Chicago, I watched as she raced toward her father, bubbling over with excitement, and received a lukewarm acknowledgment of her presence. On the passenger-mover, they stood ahead of me, the little one trying vainly to get her father's attention and, finally, giving up and standing mute beside him.

Interviewer: Who is your target audience?

Mother: We were told, in a newspaper seminar in 1979, that Dear Abby became successful by writing to the sixth-grade level—e.g., simple words, short paragraphs. That was back in 1980.

However, I don't think that a single "target audience" ever entered my mind. I was never pressured to aim at a certain target reader; I was free to write about whatever caught my fancy (this "hands-off" attitude might have resulted in part because I won the best-in-state from UPI during my first year).

In the story of the little girl above, I wrote it as a compassionate observer, with emphasis on her attempt to reach her father and his rejection (subconscious, perhaps) of her. Readers were free to condemn or commiserate with him. My hope in writing it was that it might give pause to fathers among our readers who might then examine their own relationships with their children. As a result of my
varying targets, letters from readers came from a broad spectrum of subscribers.

My columns received considerable feedback. I was often invited to speak before disparate groups: hospital employees' awards banquets, women's church groups, PTAs, local NEA groups, etc. Yes, I still hear from people who enjoyed my columns, many of them strangers, at the Jewel, at Barnes & Noble, at the mall. It's nice to be remembered.

I wish readers knew how much a note, especially one with a copy to the editor, encourages a columnist to continue. During those lean times when you begin to think that nobody is reading you, a thoughtful letter or remark from a reader can do wonders for your morale.

**Interviewer:** What about family stories?

**Mother:** Most of my columns touched on relationships. Though they were often about "family," I like to think that the common thread among them was the unspoken plea for communication and understanding, not only among those joined by blood but among those to whom we are joined by business and community ties.

That, I think, was what I wanted to accomplish. The accolades, the awards, the community recognition were nice but not crucial to my self-image. By my late forties, when I started writing professionally, I was already very comfortable in my own skin.

I did have one important advantage in writing family related columns: none of the family lived in our reading area. I could never have done it otherwise.

**Interviewer:** What might you have written about had you started writing columns sooner?

**Mother:** I have never wasted time wondering about how much I'd have accomplished or how far I might have gone if I had started twenty years earlier. At 71, I know I've been lucky to have had the full life I've had. Receiving recognition as a writer has been great, but it's only one piece of the pie.

**Interviewer:** What might you be writing about now if you were still writing columns?

**Mother:** I'm sure it would still be about relationships.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever think of what you did as "family history," as a way of passing family information along from generation to generation?

**Mother:** Not as I wrote it, but in recent years it has become apparent that columns about Nelle Sloan (my mother-in-law) and my father, in particular, will bring their goodness to life for many of their descendants. I am compiling some for my grandchildren.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever think about telling family stories to people outside of the family folk group?

**Mother:** If I read this question correctly, it concerns the issue of invading the family's privacy. First, none of my family lives in the *Journal* circulation area, though most have read and enjoyed my stories; and second, my stories were born of the love and respect I have for the people who live on in my fondest memories.

**Interviewer:** What might you say about your stories from the feminist perspective?
Mother: Many of my columns reflect my feminist leanings. I think I was a feminist long before the phrase was coined. I came by it through the natural progression of life experiences. I was ever aware of slights and oversights in the business and social world. Younger women tend to think of our generation as out of the loop—that's what comes of generalizing.

When I started at the *Journal*, it was at the behest of a woman born in 1912 who saw the opportunity to bring middle-aged homemakers “into the mainstream” (1960s catchword) and used her position and power to do so. I was only one of the women whose lives she changed or enhanced.

When her husband was killed in an auto accident, she took over his position as publisher. She effected remarkable changes, moving women up in management, equalizing pay scales, etc. Today she is eighty-five, three women are company directors, and she is still in control of the top job.

Although my young reporters at first were skeptical about me, they learned that my Irish sensitivity to unfairness and bias and my innate aversion to being pushed, served them admirably. Our biggest challenge back in the 70s was the sports department, which would send women’s golf news and girls’ sports results to me because they were “social” news. We fought back and loved the fight because we knew their bias was unjustifiable.

There were many subtle put-downs: from the camera department which felt that our photo requests were far less important than other departments, to the men in the composing room who were still living in the dark ages. As one reporter noted: “They supported ‘women’s new role’ until they realized that it was not a new baking powder biscuit.”

I had wonderful role models: my mother whose strength and purpose kept her family going during the Depression, and my mother-in-law whose son’s respect for her hard-scrabble struggle through years of drought on the farm plus her own unfailing sense of her own worth made him a “liberated” man long before the word was coined, for which I am eternally grateful.

When her husband died, she continued to manage the farm from her wheelchair until her death at eighty-eight.

**Analyzing the Stories**

I have analyzed my mother’s stories throughout the text of this discussion by constructing such stories myself, by categorizing the approximately seventy-five “family” stories chosen for review out of the approximately 500 columns and stories she has written, by selecting fourteen stories which I think are representative of these general recurring themes that crop up in her writings, and by interviewing the storyteller in an attempt to establish a personal context from which the stories had been written.

As a final exploration, I have selected two stories for further analysis. I believe these two stories are representative of the major recurring themes in all of my mother’s “family” stories: (1) sense of family history, (2) sense of place, and (3) sense of a strong central character. As mentioned ear-
lier, these sorts of stories focus on two people: my paternal grandmother and maternal grandfather. I have selected two stories about my maternal grandmother.

My grandmother was a very strong person. She lived with many hardships—losing two children to a post World War I influenza epidemic, losing her husband, the hard work of the farm, and living out her last years by herself on the farm while confined to a wheelchair. She was a no nonsense person. All in all, she exhibited a very strong personality without saying much and without being overbearing. She obviously felt a strong sense of self worth, and it is that, more than anything else, which seemed to contribute to the impression of a strong personality. She was an equal partner on the farm and, after her husband died, she ran the farm. As my mother mentions in the interview, my grandmother’s strength had a strong impact on my father. He grew up seeing women differently than many men in his generation did and, as my mother notes, was influenced by this to the point where my mother referred to him as being a “liberated” man before that term had been coined. In looking back, one could say to a certain extent that my grandmother’s influence during my father’s formative years is one reason why my parents have had a successful marriage. My father wasn’t loaded down with a lot of the negative baggage that other men in his generation carried.

From the analysis that I’ve done to this point, it is easy to understand why my mother would write these two columns in tribute to my grandmother. My grandmother was a rock solid person with roots in the distant past. She had ancestors that came to central Illinois in 1839, and the family farm that my father grew up on has been in the family for more than 125 years. She was a hard worker, a woman with a strong sense of self, and a strong sense of family. She embraced my mother, even though my mother was an immigrant’s child and a city kid who knew nothing about things rural or agricultural. I think that she tacitly understood that she had raised her children right. Anyone that her children loved was deserving of her unconditional love, too.

My mother was a person with shallow roots in this country. The roots she had here were strong but did not extend far back chronologically. She grew up in a place that was distant from the land on which the generations before her had grown up. She instinctively felt that a sense of place was important for her and for her children. My grandmother, and the farm, offered all of this, but it also offered more: it offered a strong role model in my grandmother. While my mother and my grandmother were very different people, from very different backgrounds, with different personalities, it was obvious that there was strong mutual respect and affection. As my mother notes in one of her columns, “the bounty of her labor is indeed finished and done with. But the greater bounty—her love and goodness—will be a part of my life always.”
Another thing became clear to me while analyzing these stories. The stories convey information about family. Specifically, they convey information about my parents’ extended families, but they go beyond that. Somehow, the power of these stories can convey information beyond that information literally represented in the words of the story. My mother frequently talks about readers who tell her that the stories in her columns remind them of their families. To these readers, my mother somehow is writing about their families and their family experiences. Her stories become their stories. I had the same experience with the two stories at the beginning of this discussion after sharing them with a colleague. He noted: “In a strange way, I found myself ‘remembering’ things about my grandparents as I read your essay.” In further describing his reaction to the stories, he commented: “For me it was positive (remembering family, events, happy times); for others it could trigger negative memories of objects that represent sad or troubling times.”

**Conclusion**

Much of this discussion has been devoted to the “written-story-as-folk-object” concept. But there is another side to the study of my mother’s stories: how folklore serves as an information transfer mechanism. If one accepts the “written-story-as-folk-object” premise, one then also accepts the premise that folk objects transmit information and perhaps should be studied in more depth in schools of library and information science. This article had its origins in a research paper that I did for a doctoral seminar on folklore offered at the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science. When I signed up for the seminar, a number of people I talked with wondered what the connection was between folklore and LIS. I have to admit to wondering about that myself at the time. But, after analyzing my mother’s stories, it became clear that folklore can be a powerful medium for transmitting information. This medium is deserving of more study, and a higher profile, within the LIS academic community.

Finally, on one obvious level, my mother’s stories convey family information to my mother’s and father’s families, transferring this information from generation to generation and even within the same generation. This transfer of information is very valuable, helping family members establish a sense of place and family history. Her stories are not “history” in a formal sense; they are more like slices of time. But there is another level beyond this obvious one. My mother’s stories also convey family information about other people’s families and experiences. My mother has indicated that “analyzing subtext, I believe, requires third party objectivity.” And, as my colleague noted, the information that is transmitted through these stories can be either positive or negative, depending on the background of the reader. This suggests the intriguing notion that written family narrative transmits information that is not consciously transmitted...
by the sender (the author) and that literally does not exist in the text. In a sense, one could say that this "nonexistent" information is merely subtext, but such information seems to be more than the implied meaning or theme of the text itself. The same story can transmit very different information to different people. One person may be reminded of happy times, another may recall a sad or traumatic experience, while yet another may be serendipitously reminded of an event with little or no resemblance to the original story. The concept of an information medium transmitting nonexistent (yet still very real) information certainly warrants further study.

ABOUT THIS STUDY
The objective of this article was to gather and analyze family stories written by my mother, Peg Sloan, and published as columns in the Kankakee (Illinois) Daily Journal. My mother wrote these columns from 1975 through 1986, publishing about 500. While not all of the columns touch on family issues, a substantial number (at least 100) do seem to qualify as "family stories." At least one of the family stories won an award from United Press International in 1978. Another column won the award for best column from the Women's National Press Association.

The stories were gathered from my mother's archive of her approximately 500 columns. While many of her stories deal with family issues in a very general sense—i.e., with no real identification of specific family—a good number deal specifically with her family and are identified as such. For my project, the stories selected were any family-based story that was about actual family members. Additionally, my mother annotated some of the stories to emphasize certain points.

The interview with my mother was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, we met and briefly went over the questions to ensure there were no questions about the interview or about the questions themselves. In the second phase, my mother prepared written responses to the questions, partly in keeping with the general issue of written lore. My mother's responses are reproduced exactly as I received them.

REFERENCES