

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF WOODCRAFT FOLK

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What's in a name?

The curious custom
of alternative language
in Woodcraft Folk

Annebella Pollen

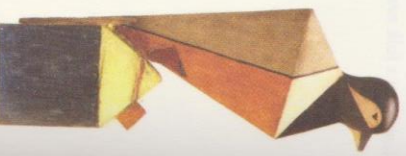
Distinctive terminology for Woodcraft Folk practices and so-called 'folk names' for members has been a long-standing aspect of the organisation's culture. Membership has been collectively known as 'Kinsfolk'. Local groupings were named 'Things', and individual members were restyled with names of plants, animals or characters from literature. Reading back through historical documents, pseudonyms such as 'Swift Canoe' or 'White Webfoot' seem archaic for members of a progressive organisation devoted to important, on-the-ground campaigns to educate for social change. Why was such language used, and why – in some cases – does it endure today? As with many early woodcraft practices, the origins can be found in the ideas of



Lady's needlepoint belt,
in, featuring a folk name

Ernest Thompson Seton, or in the group that immediately preceded Woodcraft Folk, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift (page 14). Kibbo Kift played with language, mingling colloquialisms from antiquarian dictionaries with Anglo-Saxon terms and, like many internationally-minded groups, were enthusiasts of the new world language of Esperanto. Seton's training scheme for young people borrowed many elements from his reading of Native American culture, including terminology, and he discussed the process of 'winning a name' for members of his groups in his 1912 publication, *The Book of Woodcraft*. He described woodcraft names as 'honourable nicknames given in recognition of some exploit or personal gift'. Seton was himself known as 'Black Wolf' and suggested that members might be awarded names

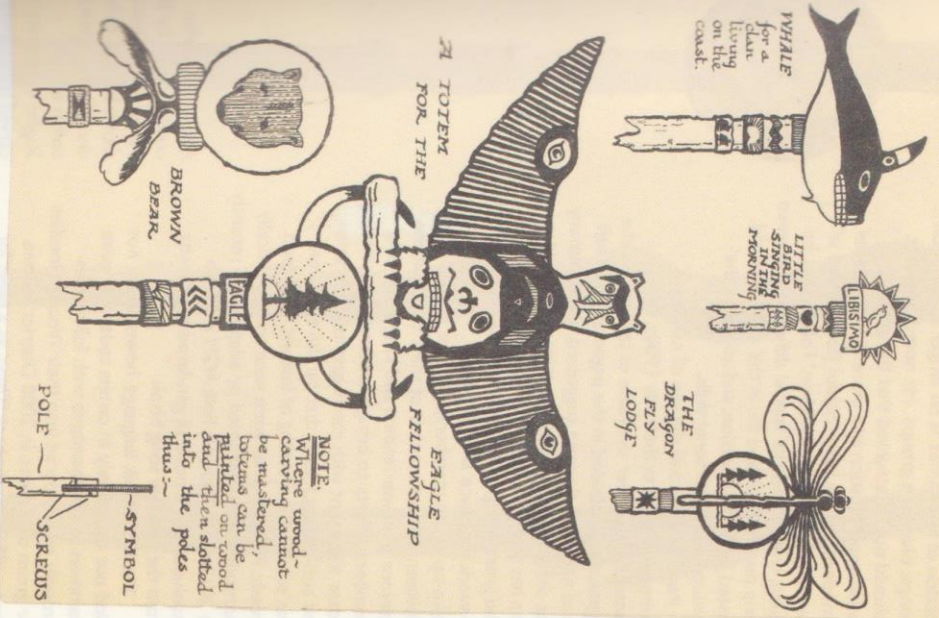
Kibbo Kift 'Chickadee' totem, c.1928



that signalled positive attributes (Eagle-Eye, for example). When a new name was to be taken, the person's given name should be written on a piece of birch bark and ceremonially burned in a fire. These practices continued into Kibbo Kift, accompanied by elaborate initiation ceremonies. Members tended to choose their own names, although recommendations were also given to avoid sentimentality and duplication (too many members, it seems, fancied themselves as wolves). These names were explicitly understood as 'totem' names, where the animal or plant or mythological figure chosen would be honoured as a personal guide. The practice of taking a name was usually accompanied by the carving of a symbolic totem which would be carried on processions and treated with some sanctity. These would have been the conditions under which Leslie 'Little Otter' Paul (page 22) and other founding members of the later Woodcraft Folk received their folk names. In Paul's 1931 manual for young people, *The Green Company*, he explains, 'I was called "Little Otter" because I could swim, just as somebody with ginger hair was called "Red Spear"'. Alternative names for members continued enthusiastically in the early years of Woodcraft Folk, where they were especially valued for the way they negated ageist formalities of the day such as calling adults 'Miss' and 'Sir', creating instead a sense of equality between adult and child.

As Woodcraft Folk grew and modernised, particularly after WWII, some elements of the traditional language were dropped (the annual Althing meeting, for example, became the Annual Delegate Conference while the the Head Man became General Secretary). An article in the internal magazine, *The Helper* (page 78) from 1951 nonetheless defended the use of ceremonies as a means of non-military organisation and a way of creating a sense of belonging. Folk names continued throughout these years, although the sources from which those names might be drawn became more diverse now including characters from fairy tales and even comic strips.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FOLK TOTEMS.

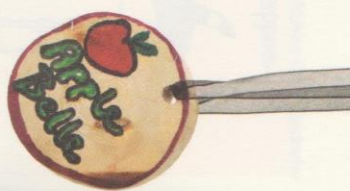


Early Woodcraft Folk carvings drew on various sources including First Nation and European folk traditions

Writing in the 1960s, Woodcraft Folk leader Basil Brown Eagle Rawson acknowledged that the adoption of folk names 'is no longer as common ... amongst older age groups'. He noted, however, 'it should not be assumed that the growing pseudo-sophistication and more biased attitudes of modern society have robbed [folk] names of their value to younger children'. Folk names, he argued, emphasised the special difference between group membership and life in the outside world, created bonds of affection, and added to the development of personal skills.

Rawson defended the use of naming ceremonies again in the early 1980s, when a heated dispute over the value of tradition in the organisation unfolded in the pages of *Woodcraft Focus* magazine. Rawson suggested, 'the ceremony was designed to impress the child with the idea that has no longer a slave of "Mammon" or "the great god grind" but a rebel and one pledged to work for peace and friendship'. The changing make-up of the membership in the 1980s, however, led to a number of shifts that split the opinions of newer leaders and longer-standing members. Efforts to bring Woodcraft Folk into closer alignment with campaigns for anti-racism and anti-sexism meant that careful attention was paid to the wording of historic songs and creeds. Practices that were seen to be politically outmoded were uprooted or adapted. As recently as 2013 the Woodcraft Folk AGM passed a resolution to remove all gendered references from the national song book.

The use of folk language, however, has not died out completely. In camps today it is quite common to see members with folk names proudly embroidered into their Woody Hoodies or green drill shirts. In 2008 District Fellows (page 188) brought back 'Thing' as a term for their governance events alongside 'Althing', which they were already using to refer to their AGM. At the start of the 21st century a booklet of revised ceremonies was produced. In this updated version, the naming ceremony can be overseen by a 'Totemistress' as much as a 'Totemaster'.



Above: A wooden necklace made by Isabel 'Apple Belle' Cleveland shows her folk name on one side and given name on the reverse.

Right: 21st century staffs carved by Banbury members Phineas Harper and Christina Newman. These are not totems but show the continuing tradition of staff carving.