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MARK CURRAN was born and raised on a Kansas wheat farm. If not for the facts that he was totally non-mechanical and wanted to see the world, he just might have stayed there. Instead, he parlayed an Irish-Catholic heritage, a Jesuit college education, and a spinster teacher's love of languages into a Ph.D. ❖ Today, Curran is a professor of languages and literatures at Arizona State University. He is a specialist on the Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish languages and their respective cultures. He is also one of the world's foremost authorities on the Brazilian LITERATURA DE CORDEL, a form of grassroots narrative poetry that has chronicled everyday life in Brazil for nearly a century.

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John C. Phillips photo

LEST ONE THINK THAT THE JOURNEY from Great Plains farm boy to full professor and continuous travel to a country nearly half a world away seems somewhat incongruous, consider this: Mark Curran is a man with his roots firmly planted in tradition.

"I am, above all things, the product of a humble farm background," Curran says. That means a farmer's commitment to hard work and simple, no-nonsense values that are rooted in the land; an understanding of how faith and morality shape everyday life; and a commitment to family and mankind.

Despite his Irish-Catholic background, Curran earned much of his education in public schools. He went to school during a time when Latin and other languages were part of the college prep curriculum, as well as a subject in and of themselves. However, Curran's high school Latin and Spanish teacher was one of those old-fashioned school mams who simply lived for languages.

"She provided the structure, discipline, and the desire to learn languages," Curran says. "She planted the seed."

Still, he chose Spanish as a minor rather than a major field at Missouri's Rockhurst College. Majors in language were not available at that time. He chose business management instead and earned an undergraduate degree.

"I saw language as a tool for business," he recalls. "Originally, I really wanted to work for a firm in Latin America."

Two factors eventually combined with that seed planted by Curran's high school teacher to lure him into languages.

"Rockhurst was a small Jesuit college. Like all Jesuit colleges of that era, it attracted large numbers of Latin American students whose usually elite parents wanted them to get both the strong education and serious academic discipline Jesuits were famous for worldwide. Learning English was essential as well. Many became my friends," Curran says. "That was when I began to really learn to speak Spanish."

When Russia's Sputnik satellite rocketed into orbit in 1957, ushering in the Space Race, it also helped create an entirely new view of language education for Americans. The government established the National

Defense Education Act and new doctoral programs. The programs were designed to train people in language and area studies that were deemed critical for national defense.

Young, patriotic Americans with language proficiencies were strongly encouraged to enter such programs. Despite already having a job offer in Guatemala, Curran's roots were too firmly planted in all that was America to overlook the calling. He entered a doctoral language program, and the rest, as they say, is history.

A 30-year member of the ASU faculty, Curran is a full professor of Spanish and Portuguese in the Department of Languages and Literatures. As such, he divides his time fairly equally between three professional passions: teaching introductory language courses, teaching upper division and graduate courses, and studying the Brazilian folk-popular poetry called the *Literatura de Cordel*.

"First and foremost, I consider myself a classroom teacher, then a scholar," Curran says. "I've never aspired to administration, although I've had opportunities. There's just something I like about getting the first crack at a student who is just beginning to learn a language. It's exciting."

One cannot help thinking that Mark Curran is the sum total of his roots: the simple farm boy with a strong appreciation for the common man and a solid Catholic faith. Both seem to permeate his teaching and research.

Curran's scholarship of 30 years has focused on the *Literatura de Cordel*, a type of poor man's poetry with Portuguese and Spanish roots. The writing itself is considered the "newspaper of the poor" from economically disadvantaged northeastern Brazil.

"Cordel" actually translates to string. Traditionally, vendors sold the cordels, or pamphlets, by hanging them from strings, much like laundry hung out to dry in the sun.

Cordel originated in Brazil's northeast interior and became important in such major cities as Recife and Salvador da Bahia. It was written by poor poets and then printed as rough eight- to 32-page booklets by local print shops.

Collectible Cordel

Mark Curran collects Brazilian cordelian broadsides the way he once collected baseball cards. The only difference is that his boyhood baseball collection could have paid his daughter's way through Harvard. His cordel collection has more historic than commercial value.

Cordel is related to the folk art of the woodcut because cordelian booklets of verse use woodcuts as decorative illustrations on their covers. The woodcuts, much like

the poetry they were created to depict, are vanishing.

Brazilian woodcuts in cordel came into vogue during the late 1950s when poets and publishers began commissioning local artists to create specific artwork for key cordels. Those woodcuts were rough, carved from a single block of wood, and fairly unsophisticated. But they did illustrate the content of specific poems, and that was their appeal.

Until that time, cordel poems usually were illustrated with whatever was on hand. Initially, decorative type fonts graced cordel covers.

By the 1920s, poets were using images much like travel postcards.

Later, poets would use the photos of Hollywood stars taken from newspaper ads. For example, a local love story might be illustrated with a *Gone With the Wind* photo of Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh. Gene Autry, John Wayne, and Betty Grable were popular as well.

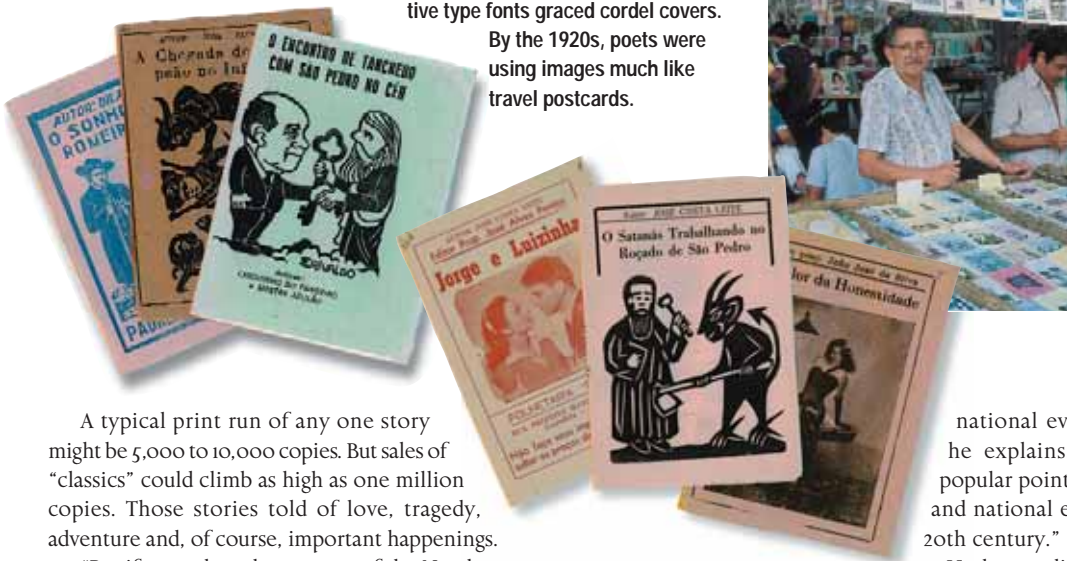
Eventually, however, a few poor poets gained the means to buy a printing press. They commissioned

story-specific artwork for front covers and began using the back covers for editorials. Those pages displayed everything from philosophical statements to political parodies to marketing data. Over time, the woodcuts themselves became popular.

"During the 1960s, art aficionados and historians from throughout the world discovered and began collecting woodcuts for their own value," Curran says. "Those collectors often did not know Portuguese. As a result, they weren't hunting for the cordel stories, but rather for the art itself."

Although Curran's first and primary interest was the poetry, he came to appreciate the woodcuts as well. Each reflects history in its own way. He began his collection more than 30 years ago. Today, Curran owns one of the world's best collections. The woodcuts grace the covers of many of his six books.

—LINDSEY MICHAELS



Courtesy Mark Curran, Ph.D.

A typical print run of any one story might be 5,000 to 10,000 copies. But sales of "classics" could climb as high as one million copies. Those stories told of love, tragedy, adventure and, of course, important happenings.

"Recife was the urban center of the Northeast at that time, one of the poorest areas of Brazil," Curran explains. "Originally, the area was a semi-feudal agricultural region where sugar cane and tobacco were grown primarily using slave labor. Cordel began toward the end of the 19th century. It was the major communication medium for its humble practitioners. They had almost no access to telephones, radios, or other means of mass communication until the 1960s."

Cordel filled the gap. The writing form matured just before the turn of the 20th century. It served both as literary entertainment and as a type of newspaper in verse for the poor.

"I was in Brazil in 1969 when the United States landed men on the moon," Curran recalls. "Within hours there were cordel stories about the landing selling like hotcakes on the streets. The same thing happened during the more recent Gulf War. Every story had a definite moralistic, good-versus-evil, and local point of view."

Curran has studied and collected cordel since 1966. He was the first North American scholar to study and write about it. During his ASU career, Curran has made more than 15 research trips to the region, each lasting from one month to a full year. He says that growing up in Abilene, Kansas, with its folk history of cowboys, cattle drives, and country music, coupled with a farm and Irish-Catholic background, has helped him understand and appreciate the basic artistic, religious, and moral underpinnings of cordel.

The ASU scholar thinks that published cordel booklets are an absolute essential source document for historians.

"Had the local custom been strictly oral rather than oral and written news transmission, much of the humble class' view of regional and

national events would have certainly been lost," he explains. "Instead, cordel provides the folk-popular point of view for nearly every major regional and national event that occurred in Brazil during the 20th century."

Understanding that perspective, he says that cordel must be blended with more traditional "official" documents to truly capture different views on what really happened in Brazil throughout the century.

Curran espoused that view in his most recent book, *Historia do Brasil em Cordel*. The book was widely acclaimed by Brazilian daily newspapers, *Veja*, the national magazine equivalent to *Time*, and by literary critics.

"I think my work got favorable reviews because I related that folk-popular heritage to some of Brazil's most important current and historic events. And to literary and cultural figures who borrowed from cordel to produce their own sophisticated, nationally known works," Curran explains.

"Another reason is that cordel is dying out as Brazil becomes an increasingly modern, industrial leader among third-world nations. Since cordel documents the cultural roots of the Northeast, an area which best represents the colonial foundations of Brazil, there is some fear that the folk-popular heritage could be lost."

All is not bleak. There is good news about cordel, Curran says. Cordel still exists in several major archives. For example, the U.S. Library of Congress has a respectable collection—as does Curran himself. And, in what Curran views as the ultimate irony, a modified version of cordel has begun appearing on the Internet.

Curran is the author of books and many scholarly articles. For more information about *Literatura de Cordel*, contact Mark J. Curran, Ph.D., Languages & Literatures Department, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 480.965.1754. Send E-mail to profmark@asu.edu. Visit his web site at www.public.asu.edu/~atmjc