Once I explained to a new acquaintance that as a folklorist I was researching creative date invitations—the unusual ways that young women and men ask each other out on dates, primarily dates to school dances. In response she told me about a creative date invitation that had been described to her. One of her friends, the mother of a high school age boy, received a call from a girl who wanted to ask her son to a preference dance. The girl asked permission to put the invitation in the boy’s bedroom. The mother said “yes” and soon the young woman arrived, scattered a bag of Hershey Kisses on the floor, and strategically placed a poster proclaiming, “Now that I’ve kissed the ground you walk on, will you go to Preference with me?” In order to find out who had invited him, the boy unwrapped all of the kisses until he found the one with the girl’s name on a slip of paper.

My friend loved the tale of the Hershey Kisses. I did too. I’d never heard it before. Since that time the Hershey Kiss invite has achieved prominence in the creative date invitation tradition. The invitation is so well known that it is included in books on creative dating and has been recounted in newspaper articles and on websites. Variants on the Hershey Kisses invite now exist.

One requires throwing the kisses on the bathroom floor and hanging a dozen roses in the shower. The accompanying sign reads: “Now that I’ve kissed the ground you walk on and showered you with roses, will you go to the dance with me?”

Defining Self

While creative invitations are bound by traditional practices, it is through the individualization of the traditions that young people are able to express themselves outside of teenage stereotypes. This is particularly true for young women who are able to use creative dating as a tool in their creation of self. Folklorist William A. Wilson theorizes that in the late 1970s the opportunities for girls to ask guys on dates was increasing and that creative dating and especially creative invitations provided girls a comfortable way to function in what was traditionally seen as a male role.

Many of these girls—in fact, probably the majority—were raised to believe that a girl should never call a boy. If the thought of initiating a conversation with a boy you couldn’t see was taboo, imagine how horrendous the thought of looking a boy in the eye and extending an invitation for a date was. But a girl who asked a boy creatively didn’t see or hear the boy’s first reaction, so she was protected from a potentially awkward situation. These girls, engrained with strong notions of what a socially acceptable young woman could do lost some of their ability.
to express their true selves. (See Pipher, 37)

Creative invitations empowered many young
women to use their talents and ideas within a
socially acceptable framework.

A Pie in the Face

In October of 1997, Orem High School in
Orem, Utah held a Sadie Hawkins’s dance.

Creative invitations were an expectation, and
for girls there was an unacknowledged, but
very real pressure to come up with an invita-
tion that was different and memorable.

Shannon, a junior at Orem High, thought
long and hard and came up with a solution.

Given that pumpkins were plentiful at the
time, it seemed natural to use one as part of
the invitation. So, Shannon bought a pump-
kin and wrote “Pumpkin, will you go to
Sadie’s with me?” on the outside. Then she
cut off the stem of the pumpkin, bought some
flowers, inserted them into the pumpkin, and
wrote her name on one of the flowers so that
her intended would know who had sent the
invitation.

What might seem to be a mildly clever idea
didn’t stop there. Shannon asked one of the
boy’s teachers if the invite could be delivered
in the teacher’s class. The teacher agreed and
the plot thickened. Of course, Shannon didn’t
actually deliver the pumpkin herself. One of
the beauties of creative invitations lies in the
fact that the asker doesn’t risk face-to-face
rejection. She enlisted two friends, one of

whom handed the pumpkin to the prospec-
tive date while the other expertly planted a
pumpkin pie on his face.

For several days Shannon lived in fear—
tinged with excitement. Friends warned her
to have a change of clothes in her locker.
After all, “one good turn deserves another.”
Finally, the day of retribution came. The
same teacher gave the young man who was
now affectionately known as “Pumpkin Boy”
permission to answer Shannon in her class,
and the young man invited Shannon to
come to the front of the room. Around
150 A Capella singers watched anxiously as
“Pumpkin Boy” told Shannon that the
answer to her question was in a pie tin
full of whipped cream. The
catch was that she
would not be
allowed to use
her hands to
find the answer.

Swiftly, he
attempted to
grab her hands,
but he wasn’t fast
enough. Shannon
grabbed the tin of
cream and smeared
it in his face. Her
date wasn’t going
to allow Shannon
to get away

the Ground You Walk on:
with such a dirty deed, and so he and his friends immediately commenced spraying her with whipped cream. Eventually, Shannon saw the bottom of the pie plate and read the words, “Yes, my little cream pie, I’d love to go to Sadie’s with you.” After several days (and two unnecessary loads of laundry) the date became reality.

Shannon and her pumpkin invite provide a good illustration of Erving Goffman’s assertion in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (13) that our behavior declares our status. Shannon is generally quiet, well-groomed, and part of the group in public. Her facade belies the exuberant girl that close friends and family know. But it was only through the safety of a socially acceptable practice—creative invitations—that she was able to comfortably exert this aspect of her self in a large group.

**Creative Invite Functions**

Creative invitations provide a chance to act in ways that a young woman normally wouldn’t in ordinary life, but in a manner that is acceptable within the framework of creative invitations. Generally viewed as a socially acceptable way to engage in risk taking and unusual behavior, the invitations provide safe venues of individual expression. Teens need to explore boundaries and function in an unfamiliar sphere. Many youth are encouraged to be circumspect and maintain certain standards of prescribed behavior. Creative invitations provide a socially accept-

able way for teens to act out of the ordinary.

Initially, it might seem difficult to explain the popularity of creative date invitations in the area of teen dating. However, folklorists who work with children’s lore provide a rubric that may account for the somewhat rapid appearance of creative invitations in the 1970s and their ability to endure and even thrive over the last three decades. Jay Mechling writes:

> the sudden ‘invention of tradition’ certainly no longer surprises folklorists of children’s lives. The founders of this specialty saw in their work what Gary Alan Fine much later called ‘Newell’s Paradox,’ that is, the paradox that children’s folklore is simultaneously very dynamic and very conservative. That is to say, children cling rather rigidly to the familiar forms of their folklore, but they constantly bring to those conservative forms new content. Long before others, children’s folklorists understood the naturalness of ‘invented traditions,’ of traditions invented not for political purposes of ordering experience, of making meaning, and of managing relationships. (140-41)

While the first young women involved in creative dating and invitations participated to ease a social situation, current high school girls claim that they act creatively because it is a tradition. They watched older siblings do it, and they want to have fun too.

It is certainly more complicated to use creative invitations and responses, but the
Both stories and artifacts arise out of concentration, both are created in time and shaped to cultural pattern, but they differ in apprehension. The story belongs to temporal experience. It moves in one direction, accumulating associations sequentially. The artifact belongs to spatial experience. It unfolds in all directions at once, embracing contradictions in simultaneity, and opening multiple routes to significance. (46-47)

Creative invitations involve the use of material items, but the stories about how the items are used and received often outlast the item. Let me give you some specific examples.

Jenna

I interviewed Jenna Knudsen when she was a sixteen-year-old junior at Springville High in Springville, Utah. Springville, a small town in the southern end of Utah County, is populated by professors and employees of Brigham Young University and Utah Valley State College, computer executives, and other professionals; as well as by personnel of the local Stouffer’s frozen food plant, agricultural workers, and other blue collar employees. Springville High consists of sophomores, juniors, and seniors with each class numbering around three hundred. Jenna’s father commuted to Salt Lake City and was an executive in a computer company and her mother was a graduate student in Utah State University’s American Studies program emphasizing folklore.

Jenna had recently attended her school’s homecoming and was willing to share her experience with creative invitations and responses. Since homecoming is a boy’s choice dance, Jenna received a creative invitation from her date. Actually, she received two invitations. The first boy’s invitation was somewhat simple. Jenna relates that there was a sign that said, “my heart would break into pieces if you didn’t go to homecoming with me.” And he gave me two bags of Reece’s Pieces and then, there were flowers and the note with the flowers said ‘Will you go to homecoming with me?’ And then he just signed his name. And it wasn’t any big search—he just left it on the front porch. My dad came up the stairs and got me ’cause I didn’t hear him knock on the door, and then I went out and got it.” (Interview, 9-30-2000) Because Jenna mentioned searches, I asked her if many creative invitations involved searches, and she told me about her second invitation. It was delivered on a Monday night after she had gone to bed.

So the next morning, me and my mom, were like getting ready to go workout. [Her mother found the invitation on the front
Marriage & Families

porch] And my Mom hands me the piece of paper that came with it and it says, “Hey toots, don’t bail out. Let’s go to Homecoming. Graze through to see who I am.”

And I got it and I’m like “What in the world?” And I went downstairs and I open up the front door and there was all this hay scattered all over the Tootsie Rolls. And so we spent the whole morning trying to find out who it was. And so that one was a search, and we looked all through the hay, and through the Tootsie Rolls and we finally found it in one of the Tootsie Rolls—the [name of the] boy who asked me. (ibid.)

An unwritten rule of the creative invitation tradition is that if you need to say no, you need to do so quickly and kindly. To do otherwise is to risk condemnation from your peers. Jenna reports, “I bought him some Luvs diapers. And I did it right that day, because I didn’t want him to like think that I was going all out to answer him yes, you know? And so, I bought some Luvs diapers and I put a note on it, and I made sure it was closed ’cause I didn’t want his family to see it, and it said, ‘Bummers. I’ve already been asked to Homecoming, but I’d Luv to go on a date with you sometime.’ And I signed it.” (ibid.)

Folklorist Henry Glassie writes that studying material culture, the tangible items of folklore, requires looking for patterns because “patterns imply intentions and carry toward meaning” (47). Teens involved in creative invitations and responses frequently follow the pattern of using everyday items, such as diapers and Tootsie Rolls, in a non-traditional way. By changing the purpose of the item, the young women and men involved create a unique piece of material culture.

When Jenna sent a positive response to the first invitation, she used an idea that she had thought about for a while. She recounts, “I already had my dress. I had bought it just before, just in case I got asked to a dance, and so I went to the mall and I bought him a tie that kind of matched my skirt, and then I had it wrapped up in twine and knots and stuff and made it all kind of hard to get, but not really, but tried to. And then my note said, ‘You’ve got me all tied up in knots’ and then inside, on top of the tie there was another note that said, ‘Of course I’ll go to Homecoming with you.”’ (ibid.)

Although Jenna was responding to an invitation for a date that she wouldn’t plan, she determined, to some extent, the attire of her date for the dance. She used a tangible item to assert her personality. The response was delivered to her date by her next-door neighbor. Her neighbor is close to her family and is in many ways like the little brother she doesn’t have. By involving him and his mother in her response, Jenna strengthened positive relationships.

One positive by-product of creative invitations and responses is interaction with peers, family friends, and family members. To answer one date Jenna had her brother, Tyler, dress up “as goofy looking and really weird looking so if my date was home he’d answer the door and see this goofy looking guy standing there with his answer to the dance.” (Interview, 3-21-03). Parents desire to strengthen bonds between brothers and sisters, and creative dating invitations can provide one venue. While dressing goofy might not seem like a big deal,
sharing the experience and discussing it later develop bonds between brother and sister.

While some youth prefer to pair off in couples during high school, creative dating invitations and the rituals surrounding it generally promote dating a variety of different people. This practice allows teens to experience a wide range of individuals and strengthens interpersonal skills. When I asked Jenna if she would take her homecoming date to the next girl’s choice dance, she replied, “I was thinking about it, but then, I don’t know if I want to, ’cause two dances in a row are too much, like just, I had a lot of fun, and I want to ask him to another dance. But, you know, you need to date different people.” (Interview, 9-30-2000)

And it is okay to date different people. The type of dating that is part of the creative invitation tradition rates a variety of dating partners as more important than having a steady boyfriend. In fact, even teens who are in a steady relationship are fair game when it comes to the dances.

Girls may have started creative dating practices, but now both boys and girls participate. Girls still set the standard to some extent, but it is a standard that boys realize they must maintain. Jenna’s mother, Ronda, sees mothers as being influential in their sons’ participation in creative invitations. Ronda has a friend from Mexico who learned about creative invitations from the girls she taught at church and the women with whom she socializes. Recently, her son asked a girl out to a dance. Just asked—no flowers, no diapers, and no elaborate treasure hunt—just will you go to the dance with me? His mother was horrified. She called Ronda for advice. How could her son save face? She wondered if her son should deliver brownies or perhaps something more romantic like flowers. Surely there must be some way her son could remedy the situation and make the girl feel special. She was very concerned that her son not be out of place in the culture.

Because creative invitations and the material culture that accompanies them is part of teen culture in certain areas, it is important for teens to understand how the custom works and how to use physical items to create a memorable invitation. The tradition is passed through stories and material culture. But the tradition is ever changing. Jenna told me that the week after the dance, she left another message on her date’s doorstep. She “got a whole bunch of ... hot food like fire drink and cinnamon gum and hot tamales. [She left a note that read], ‘Thanks for being my hot date to Homecoming. I had a lot of fun. Thanks again.’ And he liked that, he thought it was cool.” (Interview, 9-30-2000)

And when you’re a teenager, being cool is of utmost importance.

Forging Connections and Self

Deborah Tannen asserts that many women approach the world “as an individual in a
network of connections” (25). Shannon and Jenna’s dating experience demonstrate this principle. As they participated in creative date invitations they strengthened connections with friends and family. This use of a network of connections is demonstrated by young women looking to their peers as they create their sense of self. In *Women’s Ways of Knowing* the authors argue that it is through feeling connected with others in learning situations that women are able to learn new things and see old things in new ways (113).

The sharing of stories is not the only connection creative daters experience. They also involve each other in the actual experience thus sharing ideas and exposing the inner self. Since I began my research in 1977, teen informants have generally embraced creative dating practices wholeheartedly. In item after item lodged in the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives at Brigham Young University, the informants communicate that planning and delivering the invitation is often more fun than the actual date. Perhaps one of the reasons the custom of creative invitations and acceptances is so memorable is because of the narratives that are the result of the custom. Teens often derive the greatest satisfaction and benefits from creative invitations after they are done. As the stories are told by the participants and others who hear them, the experiences are not only internalized by the participants, but they enter into a larger body of traditional lore.

But friends aren’t the only people who teens connect with through creative invitations. Once I had lunch with a woman who had no idea that I was studying creative dating. For some reason she got on the subject of creative invitations and replies and spent almost an hour regaling me with stories about her daughters. Her daughters are all married now and have children of their own. But the custom of creative invitations and replies are now family stories that express family solidarity and ingenuity.

Parents often help their offspring with their creative dating. Several years ago, I welcomed a complete stranger into our home and allowed him to trash my daughter’s bedroom. He arranged toilet paper on the ceiling above her bed to spell the word “yes.” Then I waited anxiously for her to return home. It was fun to see her happy face as she complained about the mess he had made. As I helped her clean up the newspaper, I discussed her first preference dance with her and felt part of an exciting moment of her life.

The Importance of Creative Dating

While creative dating invitations yield great stories, it is essential to not neglect the “why” behind them. Creative invitations and the resulting dates help young people keep their dating relationships casual, fun, and on a teen rather than an adult level. As parents become involved by asking about the dates, offering subtle advice, and encouraging wholesome and imaginative possibilities, bonds with their children are strengthened. In a 1977 interview, Alison Hobbs voiced her opinion that her friends “are trying to have fun in a different way than other kids.” They were looking for “wholesome, ... fun activities” that can be provided by creative dating. Creative dating also allows an acceptable way of “acting out” and testing limits appropriately. Involvement in creative dating can be a great safety valve. Anthropologist Jacob Pandian writes,

*Perhaps it is a truism to state that people who participate in different cultural universes differ in how they represent the self. Human beings acquire their self conceptions by becoming symbols to themselves and others; they exist in a world of symbols,*
which invokes taking the role of the other and organizing thoughts and feelings in a culturally coherent and appropriate manner. Cultural coherence and appropriateness are achieved by learning to deploy the structures of meaning embodied in the public symbols that constitute a culture or way of life” (507).

Creative dating is an application of Pandian’s assertion. The skills that those participating in creative dating acquire help them to express their true selves, participate in their current culture, and prepare them for functioning in future roles by reinforcing the appropriateness of creativity and individuality.

In fact, there is evidence that both young men and women are developing the confidence and social skills that make direct asking and answering a desirable alternative to creative invitations. Many students at Orem High, for example, eliminate creative asking from their dating practice at some point during their senior year as they grow weary of the time and effort involved in creative invitations.

**Conclusion**

Creative date invitations developed into a recognized and popular custom over the last three decades. Whether it will remain a viable custom depends on adolescents’ needs and whether the custom continues to meet those needs. It has always been true that daters in their twenties tend to discontinue creative dating invitations. Although, there are isolated accounts where the custom continues to thrive, most non-teen daters who want to continue being creative tend to focus on creative dating rather than creative invitations. It is inevitable that the custom will comply with folklorist Barre Toelken’s twin laws of folklore and remain both static in that the custom will continue and dynamic in that it will take a different shape. At the moment, I have a sixteen-year-old daughter who can’t imagine a more romantic way to be asked to her first Prom than to find her bedroom floor covered with Hershey Kisses.

**Kristi A. Young**, is the curator of the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives at Brigham Young University. She has documented and published on Mormon folklore, particularly the courtship and wedding customs of Mormon adults. Young co-chaired the planning committee for the American Folklore Society annual meeting in Salt Lake City and also co-directed the American Folklife Center’s annual summer field school, which in 2004 was held in Utah for the first time.

**References**


