

A Regional Public Folklore Association in Flux: The Association of Western States Folklorists Plans its Future

The 2015 Association of Western States Folklorists (AWSF) conference in Portland, Oregon, was an opportunity for folklorists from around the West to reconnect and network. The twenty-one attendees included retired folklorists, state folklorists, independent folklorists, students, and professionals from related disciplines. The diversity of perspective was helpful as AWSF looks to the future. The purpose of the 2015 meeting was to reevaluate and redirect the focus of the association. By the end of the meeting, everyone felt as if AWSF is on the right track to becoming a group that will serve the needs of its members while remaining a reason to gather once a year.

AWSF was formed 35 years ago by a group of folklorists working across the West as a way to connect the work being done in those vast states. The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering grew out of a joint project among those folklorists who saw the need to promote the folklife in their region. AWSF as an association grew and changed along with the folklorists and established institutions working in the West. Along with changes in its membership, different funding sources supported the annual meeting and Graze. Support from the Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) began in 1991 and varied throughout the years. For the past few years WESTAF staff have been an integral part of planning the AWSF meeting, and WESTAF has provided the majority of the budget to hold the meeting in various locations around the West. However, earlier this year WESTAF sent an email to folklorists in state arts agencies and others who had been involved in planning the meetings, informing them that WESTAF would no longer support the annual meeting of AWSF.

The planning committee, along with support from all the members on the AWSF listserv, decided to move ahead with planning the 2015 meeting without WESTAF's financial support. After surveying the listserv, the planning committee (Anne Hatch, Tamara Kubacki, Eric Morales, and Lyle Murphy) determined the location and date of the meeting. Anne and Eric approached AFS, WESTAF, and the Charles Redd Center for funding, and Lyle was able to procure the space and other donations. Along with support from AFS, we received a small amount from WESTAF. We did not receive support from the Charles Redd Center.

Before WESTAF became integrated into the planning process and funds shifted to producing the meeting, travel stipends were provided to encourage people from every western state to attend the meeting. In the past two years, travel stipends were awarded through WESTAF for "young professionals" to attend. This support proved important to increasing the diversity of the meeting (mostly by age and professional status, but also by ethnicity and location), so the planning committee decided to reinstate the travel stipend. The stipend was available to anyone who was not receiving support from her or his agency or organization. We had budgeted \$250 per person, but the low cost of travel combined with fewer than expected requests allowed us to increase the award to \$500. Nine folklorists and one student received travel support through either the money from AFS or WESTAF.

Just as many folklorists are struggling to find jobs and grab a toehold in the field, AWSF has been struggling with its purpose. Two of the questions asked at the meeting were "What is the most exciting way for AWSF to move forward?" and "What would a unified vision for AWSF look like?"

The rest of the meeting consisted of three parts: planning the 2016 meeting; revising AWSF for the future; and a modified Graze. Planning the 2016 meeting and revising AWSF were the overarching goals for the meeting. Over the previous two years, AWSF began strategic planning to define its organizational structure, long-term goals, a mission and vision, and new funding mechanisms. We intended to use the work from those two years, but as we approached the problems with new eyes, we discovered that the previous work was not in line with the direction we were headed. While some of the themes remained, such as increasing diversity within membership and visibility outside of folklore circles, the tasks we set to accomplish those goals were greatly reduced in scope.

At the end of two fruitful days, each person declared action items he or she is committed to over the course of the next year. These were all manageable and personal, so there will be greater likelihood of completion. AWSF as a whole will improve its website and, therefore, visibility and accessibility over the course of the year, and members will help accomplish that by contributing press releases for their regular events. A series of hashtags was created that will help link our work in the West together.

We began planning the 2016 AWSF meeting, which will be held April 6-8 in Eugene, OR, and led by a planning committee mainly of Oregon Folklife Network staff, but also including a folklorist outside of Eugene as an ambassador to the rest of the West.

Losing the funding and facilitation support from WESTAF forced us to make hard decisions. We were able to rally the troops to organize a meeting in a short period of time with a very small budget. The majority of the meeting costs were covered by donations and the small registration fee. Exciting changes to future meetings will also be implemented, and favorite parts of past meetings will be included, such as the Graze. The new attendees and attendees who are not folklorists stated that without professional development workshops, there is no incentive to attending AWSF meetings. Professional development workshops give a reason to their organizations to support their travel, as well as making the meeting a more useful event. Professional development workshops will be included in the future. Along those lines, AWSF will try to return to some of its roots by continuing to collaborate on regional projects such as the Rivers and Headwaters project (and the fieldwork that led to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in the 80s). Annual meetings will allow the folklorists working on the same project in different states the face-to-face time that is difficult to achieve in a region so vast. Attendees also expressed a desire to experience the communities in which the meeting is held. While the Graze is intended to be a tasting of the region's culture and a chance to meet the local tradition-bearers, AWSF attendees want to have a more meaningful experience. Plans are underway to work with the McKenzie River project that OFN is currently collaborating on, and much of the 2015 meeting was possible because of local involvement.

The planning committee tried to maintain a positive atmosphere throughout the meeting, in spite of recent changes and loss of funding. We provided an agenda that allowed for some airing of grievances and then moved on to improving and changing the situation for the future. We interspersed social time with serious brainstorming and action planning that was a good balance for keeping people engaged and alert. The results were a manageable set of tasks for those willing to devote some time to AWSF throughout the year. Along with planning the 2016 meeting, AWSF will improve its website and start to become a resource for cultural workers in the West. Lyle is working on creating a logo and condensing the brainstorming ideas into a draft statement of purpose. The Rivers and Headwaters project will have a visible presence on the website to show the regional successes and overall collaboration on the project. AWSF is taking this regrowth slowly so that we can involve as many interested people as possible with the greatest amount of success. The support from AFS helped bring those people to the table in Portland this year.