

Museum Education and Public Folklore: Connecting with Heritage Studies

A Report to the American Folklore Society

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Arkansas State University supports numerous folklore and oral history programs. A folklore minor is offered by ASU's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the university also features a doctoral program in Heritage Studies. ASU also supports public presentations derived from ethnographic, oral history, and folklife research through its Arkansas Heritage Sites. These include Lakeport Plantation, Southern Tenant Farmers Museum, Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center, Rohwer: Japanese American Relocation Center, and Historic Dyess Colony: Boyhood Home of Johnny Cash. To varying degrees, the majority of these sites are museums that serve to interpret regional history and culture. Folklife study is incorporated into various activities at the heritage sites as the university's heritage centers have sponsored quilt shows, narrative events in their interpretive programs, and workshops on preserving cultural traditions associated with cemeteries and material culture. Students who are completing doctoral studies in the Heritage Studies program and the folklore minor also have completed or assisted with public presentations of folklife by conducting research into the traditional expressive culture of the Delta and presenting their findings through exhibitions, musical performances, and in documentary video and radio productions. Students, faculty, and staff in each of programs are engaged with folk arts and folklife in differing degrees, and numerous programs involve the use of fieldwork.

The university also has coordinated its annual *Delta Symposium* for the past 22 years. This academic conference includes panel sessions, keynote speakers, presentations by guest authors, concerts, and other activities to showcase scholarship on the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas. The symposium is sponsored by the university's Department of English, Philosophy, and Global Languages, and it is coordinated on campus when classes are in session. The event also is an "open conference" in that all of its events are free and open to the public. Students are frequently assigned writing and research projects in the humanities that they complete during the Delta Symposium, and the event includes concerts, poetry readings, a film and media festival, and the Arkansas Roots Music Festival that all draw an audience from the wider community. It also features a strong emphasis on studies of the regional culture.

Most of the symposium's content is focused on the region's history and culture, and many of the presenters have conducted extensive research in the Delta. By coupling the regional focus with the idea of an open conference, the university uses the event to foster a culturally responsive approach. As the symposium and the film festival continue to be developed, the coordinators strive to further involve members of the community in various events and to create workshops and other educational activities that address the needs and interests of the wider community. This event also serves as an example of ways to merge public folklore with academic discourse. The open quality of the academic conference is complicit with public folklore programs and practice. At times, the dichotomy between working as an academic folklorist and a public folklorist dissolves as the symposium develops an atmosphere that is resonant with a multimedia folklife festival. In this respect, the Delta

Symposium provides a comfortable and highly adaptable forum for teaching the wider public about the work of public folklorists.

The theme for the 2016 Delta Symposium was “Representing Cultural Heritage,” which allowed symposium coordinators to integrate the work of academic folklorists and public folklorists into the activities and presentations. In particular, the university used grant support from the American Folklore Society to bring to the Delta Symposium the following three consulting public folklorists from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in Washington, D.C.:

1. Dr. Betty Belanus, who has curated Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs on *Massachusetts* (1988), *Family Farms* (1991), *Working at the Smithsonian* (1996), *African Immigrants* (1997), *New Hampshire* (1999), *Water Ways* (2004), *The Roots of Virginia Culture* (2007), *Wales Smithsonian Cymru* (2009), *Smithsonian Inside-Out* (2010), and *Campus and Community* (2012). Other past work includes the Folklore Summer Institute for Community Scholars (1989, 1990), teacher seminars during the Festival, education kits such as *Borders and Identity* and *Discovering Our Delta*, an on-line Water Ways exhibition, educational features for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, and supervision of the Junior Folklorist Challenge in partnership with ePals/Cricket Media. She is currently conducting research on traditional medicine and occupations of the film industry.
2. Dr. James Deutsch, who has curated Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs on the *U.S. Forest Service* (2005), *Mekong River* (2007), *National Aeronautics and Space Administration* (2008), *Peace Corps Volunteers* (2011), *Hungarian Heritage* (2013), *China* (2014), and *Sounds of California* (2016), as well as special Festival programs

on veterans of World War II (2004) and Disability Culture (2015). In addition, he serves as an adjunct professor teaching courses on folklore and film history in the American Studies Department at George Washington University; and has also taught American Studies classes (including courses on folklore and cultural heritage) at universities in Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Norway, Poland, and Turkey.

3. Dr. Marjorie Hunt, who has curated numerous Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs, including *The Grand Generation* (1984), *White House Workers* (1992), *Masters of Traditional Arts* (1994), *Working at the Smithsonian* (1996), *Masters of the Building Arts* (2001), *Living Native Basket Traditions* (2006), and *Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage* (2013). Her publications include *The Grand Generation: Memory, Mastery Legacy* (1987) and *The Stone Carvers: Masters Craftsmen of Washington National Cathedral* (1999), and *The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* (rev. ed., 2016). Hunt is the co-producer and director of the documentary films *The Stone Carvers*, *The Grand Generation*, and *Workers at the White House*. She is currently working on a new documentary film, *Masters of the Building Arts*.

Over the course of three days, April 14, 15, and 16, these three public folklorists completed a range of activities at Arkansas State University, including participating in a forum titled “Museums and Cultural Heritage, screening films, and conducting a two-day workshop on ways to use folklife and oral history in museum education. This report focuses mainly on the content and methodology of the workshops, and the value of integrating folklife education workshops into similar regional conferences.

The workshops were offered to museum educators, graduate students, professors in Heritage Studies, and other interested personnel to enhance Arkansas State University's Heritage initiatives. Based on the attendance sheet that was circulated, workshop participants represented four of the Arkansas State University Heritage Sites: the Arkansas State University Museum in Jonesboro, Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center in Piggott, Historic Dyess Colony: Johnny Cash Boyhood Home in Dyess, Lakeport Plantation in Lake Village, and Southern Tenant Farmers Museum in Tyronza. Workshop participants also came from the Black River Technical College in Pocahontas, Delta Gateway Museum in Blytheville, Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis, Eddie Mae Herron Center/Museum in Pocahontas, and Parkin Archaeological State Park in Parkin.

The first workshop was held on Friday afternoon, April 15, and was titled “Effective Methods for Documenting and Presenting Cultural Heritage.” The primary purpose of the workshop was to discuss some of the Smithsonian’s proven techniques for conducting, documenting, and archiving oral histories and cultural heritage. Following introductions of the workshop participants, Belanus, Deutsch, and Hunt provided an overview of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival—which is one of the best-known examples of public-folklore programming in the United States—through a 12-minute video (available online at <http://www.festival.si.edu/about-us/mission-and-history/Smithsonian>) and a PowerPoint presentation. In the process, they discussed various methods of presentation at the Festival, particularly crafts demonstrations, musical/theatrical performances, hands-on family activities, and interactive discussions (also known as narrative sessions).

To demonstrate both the efficacy and potential modes of presentation for narrative sessions at the Smithsonian Festival, Arkansas State University had arranged for Vince

Pearcy, a sign artist based in Jonesboro, to join the workshop. Belanus, Deutsch, and Hunt had spoken by phone with Percy on March 29, 2016, in order to learn more about his experiences and skills, particularly his work at restoring historic signs that have faded over time. Accordingly, on April 15, Percy was interviewed “live” by Deutsch, following the style and format typically used in narrative-stage settings at the Festival, and to demonstrate some of the techniques for conducting oral history interviews. Workshop participants were also encouraged to ask questions in order to make the interview more interactive. Many of the examples and experiences with folk artists and tradition bearers that had been previously discussed at the workshop were brought to life for the participants through this “live” interaction, notably a sincere respect for the skills, experiences, and knowledge of the tradition bearer; creating a “cultural conversation” between the tradition bearer and the presenter/audience/visitors; and the importance of careful listening and follow-up questions. Workshop participants were encouraged to identify similar folk artists who may be part of their own local communities, and furthermore to use this format for enhancing ways of presenting some of their own local artistry within their own museum programs. The Smithsonian folklorists emphasized that this type of presentation is a very effective means not only for supplementing what may be static museum exhibitions, but also (and perhaps even more importantly) to build and enhance community resources, community partners, and community audiences.

The second workshop was held on the following morning, April 16, and was titled “Using Media Effectively in Cultural Heritage Programming.” The primary purpose of this workshop was to share some of the most effective ways for integrating folklife and oral history into museum education and programming through the use of a wide range of media

resources—from traditional media (such as newspapers, radio, books, films, and broadcast television) to new social media, online story maps, and other dynamic forms of digital storytelling/outreach, such as podcasts. Belanus, Deutsch, and Hunt divided their presentation into three parts, or three steps, for using media effectively at public folklore events:

1. Belanus presented Step 1, i.e., what to do before the program takes place. She shared tips on how to build anticipation for each event by using blogs, previews, videos, and behind-the-scenes glimpses to publicize the event and attract visitors.
2. Deutsch presented Step 2, i.e., what to do while the program is taking place. He shared tips on how to send “live reports” from the event and (perhaps most importantly) how to document the event for maximum benefit and subsequent effectiveness.
3. Hunt presented Step 3, i.e., what to do after the program has taken place. She shared includes tips on how to keep a past event “alive” by updating information, advertising new events with reference to past events, building partners strategically, and sustaining organizational capacity.

Examples for each of these three steps came primarily from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, with the understanding that these same steps might also serve as models for the heritage work that workshop participants are doing themselves. Workshop participants also shared many of their own tips for steps 1, 2, and 3, based on their own experiences. One of main points was that no one form of reaching audiences and potential visitors is best. Although the Internet and smartphones have made it easier for producers to add and share media content, reach (potentially) large audiences with information, and interact via social media, there is still

much value in outreach to smaller, more focused audiences such as the diaspora communities of a featured country, or the hometown news outlets of people from a particular state or region of the United States.

One of the highlights of the morning workshop on media was a “sneak peak” at a segment of Hunt’s forthcoming film, *Good Work: Masters of the Building Arts* (scheduled to premiere in September 2016). The consensus was that this film is a superb example of what can be done to extend the life of the 10-day Smithsonian Folklife Festival; the film demonstrates a deep and highly respectful—even awe-inspiring—glimpse at the work of skilled tradition bearers in the building arts who were featured at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2001.

Two days earlier, on Thursday evening, April 14, as part of the Delta Flix Film & Media Festival, Hunt had presented one of her earlier documentary films, *The Grand Generation* (1993). Without any voice-over narration, the film portrays six older Americans, each with their roots in a unique cultural heritage and a powerful perspective on the nature of aging. The six interviewees were Alex Kellam, Chesapeake Bay waterman, from Crisfield, Maryland; Ethel Mohamed, storekeeper and crewel embroiderer, from Belzoni, Mississippi; Moishe Sacks, Jewish baker, from the Bronx, New York; Rosina Tucker, civil rights activist, from Washington, D.C.; Cleofes Vigil, Hispanic farmer, musician, singer, and storyteller, from San Cristobal, New Mexico; and Nimrod Workman, coal miner, union activist, and ballad singer, from Mascot, Tennessee. Leading the discussion following the film, Hunt reinforced many of the same themes that were presented at the workshops on April 15 and 16. *The Grand Generation* illustrated the importance of careful listening and follow-up questions, as well as modeling sincere respect for the skills, experiences, and knowledge of tradition

bearers. It was also tangible evidence of not only how one might conduct research into the traditional expressive cultures, but also how to present those findings through media productions—which have become much more accessible in the 21st century, thanks to new digital technologies.

Just before the film screening on April 14, Belanus, Deutsch, and Hunt were interviewed by Arkansas State University Professor Gregory Hansen in a Delta Symposium forum on “Museums and Cultural Heritage.” Some of the questions raised were how training in folklore had prepared the Smithsonian folklorists for their present positions; what skills undergraduate and graduate students might wish to gain as part of their education in order to become competitive candidates for jobs in cultural heritage research and presentation; and what have been some of the highlights in their careers at the Smithsonian.

In addition to all of their presentations, Belanus, Deutsch, and Hunt also had the opportunity to learn a great deal themselves. For instance, on their way from the Memphis Airport to Jonesboro on April 14, they stopped at the Historic Dyess Colony: Johnny Cash Boyhood Home in Dyess. Thanks to advance arrangements made by Prof. Hansen, they were given a tour by Larry Sims, former mayor of Dyess, who proved to be an excellent interpreter of the site’s three components: the museum (located in the renovated administration building for the Dyess Colony), which contained helpful labeling, artifacts, and media explaining the history of Dyess and the Cash family; the newly restored theater, which promises to be a good venue for films, performances, small festivals and other events; and the boyhood home itself, which poignantly illustrates what life was like for the Cash family, thanks to its authentic period furnishings and its location in the countryside.

Belanus, Deutsch, and Hunt also attended several of the other presentations at the Delta Symposium, including a session on “Folk Arts and Folklife as Cultural Heritage,” featuring presentations by Teri Klassen (Indiana University) on improvisational quiltmaking, Jan Rosenberg (Historical Education Resources) on diversity in the African American gospel tradition, and Terri Van Orman (Folklore Village) on the role of outsiders in the preservation, creation, and perpetuation of traditional craft and music in Stone County, Arkansas. Another highlight was the keynote address by Stephen A. King (Eastern Illinois University) on Mississippi blues and civil rights.

The Smithsonian visit to Arkansas concluded with attendance at the Arkansas Roots Music Festival for a few hours of excellent music on Saturday afternoon, further enhanced by excellent local barbecue on site in the City Water and Light Park. Performers included the following Arkansas acts: Zyndall Rainey Band, Runaway Planet, Salty Dogs, and the Lucious Spiller Blues Band. Acts from outside of the state consisted of the Last Chance Jug Band, Wilkinson-James, and Grace Pettis. The Smithsonian folklorists followed their time at the festival with a visit to the Crowley’s Ridge Nature Center. This is a well-interpreted area, both indoors (explaining local flora and fauna) and outdoors (for a self-guided walk to provide additional information on the area’s natural history).

For three days, the three consulting folklorists from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage engaged directly with many people in and around Jonesboro—not only those who participated in their two days of workshops, but also those who attended the symposium, the roots music festival, and the film and media festival. We believe that their experiences have helped to demonstrate ways in which public folklore practices may support the representation and interpretation of cultural heritage in institutions—similar to

Arkansas State University—that are designed for regional studies. We further believe that their experiences have suggested new methods and formats for expanding on ways to teach the wider public about the work of public folklorists and the relevance of this approach in multidisciplinary settings. Although integrating workshops, documentary films, and sessions on public folklore into a conference has been a part of folklore programming for decades, the use of these types of activities within a regionally based conference offers new potential for public folklorists. The model of an open-conference worked with the film festival, roots music festival, and other activities. This approach can further connect scholars, students, community scholars, folk artists, and public folklorists as they develop new models for integrating academic and public folklore within various communities. The approaches used at Arkansas State University's Delta Symposium – with its ensuing cultural conversations -- are especially relevant to the Heritage Studies movement. We would encourage more integration of public folklore projects into Heritage Studies events, especially when the focus is the history and culture of a region such as the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas.