

Northwest Folklife

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Local Legacies Project

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Introduction

Northwest Folklife is one of the largest organizations in the country focusing on folk, ethnic and traditional arts, with no comparable organizations or programs in the Pacific Northwest. Each year, the Northwest Folklife Festival joins together cultures and communities in a vibrant celebration of music, dance, exhibits, symposia, food, crafts, children's activities, and more. As one of the largest free festivals in the nation and a regional signature event for many of its years, the Northwest Folklife Festival attracts an annual average attendance of 200,000 visitors over four days every Memorial Day weekend.

Northwest Folklife was founded in 1971 to produce a festival of traditional and ethnic arts for the region. Volunteers filled most staff functions during the first decade. In the 1980's, a professional staff assumed responsibility for the festival and refocused Northwest Folklife activities. Organizational activities now include participation with other Northwest festivals, helping traditional and ethnic arts communities with their programming, sponsoring year-round traditional and ethnic arts events, developing an extensive database of artists in the Pacific Northwest and becoming an advocate for traditional and ethnic arts in the region.

In 1991, Northwest Folklife initiated what it called its special Cultural Focuses. These large-scale cultural events rely on community-based advisors to guide content, structure and community outreach. The folklore projects have involved this region's Sephardic Jewish, Native American, African-American, Polynesian, Filipino-American, Chicano and Mexican communities. The Native American project of 1992 led to the publication in 1999 of *Spirit of the First People*, a book and CD tracing the history and legacy of song in Washington State's Native American communities. The Filipino project resulted in an exhibit that traveled regionally for

over two years. *Norte y Sur* brought attention to the region's Mexicano / Chicano community in 1998, and a CD is now in production. In 2001, the arts and culture of Korea will be featured at the annual festival.

A financial crisis at the close of fiscal '98 threatened the future of Northwest Folklife. The staff was restructured; an innovative fundraising campaign on a scale never before attempted was implemented. The result was overwhelming community support. Fundraising events were held, a 'credit holder' program was established to secure a long-term loan for debt consolidation, and visitors to the festival were asked to give via stage presentations and 'donation stations' throughout the grounds. While Folklife's traditional fundraising sources will always include corporate sponsors and grants, its long-term success depends on contributions of time and money from individuals in the community. The organization is now back on stable financial ground and planning future festivals and projects.

Although other organizations in the Pacific Northwest work to sustain the vitality of specific ethnic art traditions, Northwest Folklife advocates for a wide range of cultures, presents programs with a far-reaching scope and attracts a large and diverse audience to bring attention to the traditional and ethnic arts as no other organization can. Northwest Folklife, through the Festival and its year-round educational programs, works to break down stereotypes and bridge cultural barriers.

Northwest Folklife Festival Early History "Where It All Began"

Philip L. Williams, Past President
1991

(Philip L. Williams, a founding member of Northwest Folklife, served on the board of directors from 1972 to 1998, with two terms as board president. Now retired from official work with Northwest Folklife, Phil and his wife Vivian continue to perform at the annual Northwest Folklife Festival and remain active participants within the organization. This article, written in 1991 as part of a 20th anniversary retrospective, is based on Phil's recollection and personal opinions.)

Since 1972, a lot of people in Seattle have spent Memorial Day weekend singing and dancing, picking and fiddling, looking at quilts, eating piroshkies, bidding in an auction, learning to dance, telling lies, shearing sheep and showing off their family traditions to neighbors and strangers. For almost 30 years, the Northwest Folklife Festival has been a celebration of our region's heritage, and it's become a Seattle institution.

Nobody had an institution in mind when Folklife started. It was a case of the right set of people coming together at the right time. Seattle Center, the site of the 1962 World's Fair, was looking for better ways to use the facilities. The Seattle Folklore Society, of which I was then board president, was a six-year-old group of traditional music enthusiasts who organized concerts and operated the Folkstore, a retail outlet and information center in Seattle's University District. The National Park Service wanted to expand its activities into cities and had contracted with the National Folk Festival Association (NFFA; now known as the "National Council for Traditional Arts") to organize urban events.

Late in 1971, I received a call from Andy Wallace, an NFFA staff member, asking if the Seattle Folklore Society might be interested in helping to create a festival here in Seattle. The Folklore Society promised to help. A few days later, Andy arrived on our doorstep, and planning for the first festival was underway.

Since the Park Service was supporting the NFFA project, Andy and I contacted Charles Gebler, Director of the Northwest Region of the National Park Service. He was a weekend musician himself, and he agreed to co-sponsor the festival which would include participants from the area that his office administered - Alaska, Washington, Oregon and Idaho (later we added British Columbia and western Montana). I called a number of traditional arts organizations in the area, discussed the concept of a festival that would present Northwest traditional arts, and received a wide indication of support.

We incorporated the Northwest Regional Folklife Festival Association to organize and operate the Festival. It was set up as a Washington non-profit, non-membership corporation, controlled by a Board of Directors and officers appointed by the board. For about the first decade the Board was composed of representatives from the major sponsoring organizations and individuals involved with the Festival. Each organization designated the persons to serve on the Board as its representatives. The organizations designating board members included the Seattle Folklore Society, National Park Service, Seattle Center, Skandia Folk Dance Club, Washington Old Time Fiddlers, and KRAB

Radio. This organization is now controlled by a Board of dedicated individuals and operated by a professional staff.

With NFFA and the National Park Service behind us, we approached the City of Seattle through Jack Feary, Dave Hughbanks and Dave Lempesis of Seattle Center. The staff liked the idea of a Memorial Day weekend festival and signed on as co-sponsors. With sponsors, a site and a few thousand dollars from the City and the National Park Service, the Festival -- just two months away -- began to take shape.

My wife Vivian and I had played bluegrass and oldtime music in living rooms and Grange halls for many years. The traditional performers we have met over the years were glad to help others learn to play, but most had no regular platform for public presentation. We wanted the Folklife Festival to be that platform and to create opportunities to pass on the history and traditions of their art. Folkloric 'authenticity' was less important than the fact that performers had made a traditional art an important part of their lives and they were willing to share it.

All the musicians donated their performances. We provided hospitality for out-of-town visitors and covered travel expenses, but there were no big-name 'stars'. Everyone got equal billing. When we invited performers and craftspersons to participate at the first Festival, we hoped they shared our commitment to an open, participatory event. We couldn't raise funds to pay everyone and still present the broadest range of

traditional arts possible. The response was overwhelmingly in favor. It was an opportunity to show that traditional arts really mean a lot to the people of the region. And since our expenses were so low, we were able to keep the Festival free. We needed volunteers to help organize the Festival's behind-the-scenes needs. Vivian and I had met Stan Cole at some of the fiddle shows that REACH, Stan's senior citizen outreach program, had sponsored. (This organization has no connection with the group of the same name that organized displays at more recent Folklife Festivals.) Stan jumped at the opportunity to use the Festival to involve more seniors in his organization. REACH volunteers handled almost all of the Festival's work, and Stan's associate Tom Parks became the de facto Festival Director.

We wanted the Folklife Festival to be more than just a series of concerts. We planned crafts demonstrations, public folk dancing and workshops where people could learn traditional tunes and techniques. From the start, our guiding concept has always been to present and celebrate "the things that people do for their own entertainment and make for their own use."

In those early days, craftspersons could not participate and sell their work unless they also demonstrated their craft. Food merchants were prohibited, with the exception of an Indian salmon-bake. An exciting array of food merchants now represent the flavor of Festival programming, from 'down-home cooking' to the enticing spices of Asia,

Africa and the Greek Islands.

Somehow, in just a few weeks, everything came together by Friday, May 26, 1972, when the first Northwest Folk Life Festival (that's how the poster spelled it) began. Many of the stages were wooden platforms on the grass, and people who wanted to listen spread out on the lawns nearby. Each stage presented a different type of music or dance, and each was scheduled by a stage manager with expertise in that area. We included traditional 'folklore' musicians who had learned their art form from their families and neighbors, commercial 'folkmusic' performers who had learned at the foot of their mother's phonograph, and everything in between.

With several simultaneous stages presenting performances, the Folklife Festival offered far more traditional and folk artists in one place than any previous event in the region and more than any other festival in the country at that time. And they were great performances! On Sunday afternoon, the Director of NFFA, Leo Bernach, ran into me at the Oldtime Fiddlers' Stage. He was amazed at the huge number of performances and their high quality, and he wondered how we were able to audition everybody in the short time we had to produce the Festival. My truthful reply was, "We didn't audition anyone. We gave everybody who applied an opportunity to perform."

A few years ago the name was changed to "Northwest Folklife Festival" in recognition of the fact that, while the focus was on Northwest regional participants, the

Festival actually had participants from all over the world.

Twenty years after I received that phone call from Andy Wallace, Folklife is strong, healthy and still committed to our original ideals. Many of the people who first learned about traditional music, or dance, or handcraft at an earlier Folklife Festival have become Festival participants themselves, adding yet another link to the chain. It's likely that some 'visitors' to this year's Festival will return next May as novice 'traditional artists.'

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