Archiving A State Folk Arts Collection

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Archives are wonderful resources for public-sector folklorists. They are central to our success in documenting, presenting, and perpetuating traditional expressive culture in our respective states. They house the photos, recordings, and written materials that are the by-products of our work, ensuring that information is not lost over time. They are the place we go to find the exact image or sound bite that illustrates the beauty of a piece of traditional art or the importance of a story passed down through generations. They allow us to share what we have learned about communities—their traditions and their creativity—with the rest of the world. They are also the source of one of our biggest challenges: accessioning, preserving and displaying the materials that we collect.

Folk arts program archives are generally quite different than archives maintained by university folklore programs. While the core of university-based folklore archives is often the body of student papers containing items of folklore generated through collection assignments, the core of public-sector archives for a folk arts program are the recordings and photographs generated during fieldwork with artists. Besides differences in media, genres most often gathered are also typically different. University archives are more likely to contain materials dealing with the verbal and customary folklore accessible to their student collectors, while arts programs mostly focus on material and performance traditions. As a result, many of the tools developed in university folklore departments for organizing folklore materials are not particularly useful in organizing public folk arts materials.

Recognizing this—and that each state's folk arts constituency is comprised of a different constellation of cultural communities, each with very specifi c, unique traditions—has led many of us to develop our own methods for organizing and retrieving materials. A short history follows of our journey in establishing Utah's folk arts

archives. Our experience in Utah likely parallels that of other public sector folklore programs in the country. We began from scratch, like everyone does, working with a bunch of materials that needed to be organized into a retrievable system that made sense of the traditional expressive culture specific to our state.

Early Days

The earliest materials in our archive were generated as part of a collecting project that was nearly complete before the Utah Folk Arts Program was actually established. In 1975, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Hal Cannon and Tom Carter produced an LP album of historic Utah folk music featuring recordings collected decades before by Austin and Alta Fife and Lester Hubbard, among others. They called it the Beehive Songster. As a follow-up, Cannon traveled the state to record the singers and musicians, or their descendants, who were still performing this early traditional repertoire. His work produced a second LP album, The Beehive Songster II. Among the artists he identified was ballad singer Kenneth Ward Atwood, Jr., whom he subsequently presented on stage in Washington D.C. at the 1976 Bicentennial Folklife Festival—the precursor of today's Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Bess Lomax Hawes, who directed that festival, later headed the Folk Arts Program at the NEA, where her vision and energy provided the impetus for the establishment of folk arts programs in state agencies around the country.

While the Songster projects were still in process, Cannon had approached the Utah Arts Council (UAC), and together they wrote a grant to the NEA to fund a folk arts position. When he returned from the festival, he began working as the Folk Arts Coordinator for the UAC. The recordings he made doing fieldwork for the Songster project and the slides he took of Kenneth Ward Atwood standing in front of the Latter-day Saint temple in Washington D.C. became the first collections in our archives.

Our program slowly grew as we embarked on more field documentation projects, added more staff, and ultimately developed grants programs and annual events. As one of the oldest state folk arts programs, we have acquired a lot of materials. And like many

other programs, we have several ongoing challenges. For years we stored our slides and recordings in a growing pile of shoeboxes. Most items were at least partially labeled, given a number, and stored, more or less, by project. But we never had the staff time needed for archiving. Instead, we continually collected new materials. We had trouble finding time to process these, and we never seemed to have a chance to process the backlog of older materials. Continually adding items to a non-existent system contributed to an ever-growing lack of accessibility. We collected materials in multiple formats, each with different housing needs. The resulting media-based collections are all still at different stages of organization and accessibility. Physically managing the materials was a more pressing daily issue than were abstract ideas about long-term security and preservation. And finally, the technology available to us, as well as best practices for archiving, kept changing.

Technology and Best Practices

It's important to acknowledge the changes in technology that have taken place over the last quarter century—changes that have often been difficult to assimilate but have created the incredible opportunities we have today, not only for preserving, but also for making our collections accessible. We have made periodic efforts to address the changing technologies, at one point even transferring original cassette recordings onto reel-to-reel tape to ensure their survival. When I started working for the UAC in 1979, we were still using carbon paper to make file copies of our letters. The first time I touched a computer was six years later in 1985 when I worked on the Grouse Creek Cultural Survey, a joint project of the American Folklife Center (AFC) and Utah's state history and state arts agencies. I think we used Kaypros with a word processing program called Wordstar, and, as I remember, it took a different two-part keystroke to move the cursor up or down a line, to the end or beginning of a line, or even to the next letter.

Luckily the Grouse Creek Project taught everyone involved the AFC system for labeling tapes and slides, and that was the system we eagerly began using just a few years later when the pile of shoeboxes became entirely too unwieldy. In the early 1990s, about fifteen years

into our program, we finally became serious about organizing our collections. We had done a lot of the basics—assigning a number to each recording, logging the contents of many of them and labeling most of the photographs in some fashion. But unless someone on staff knew specifi cally what was there and where to look, especially when it came to the thousands of slides and black and white photos, it was extremely difficult to find what was needed.

By then we had lived through Wang word processors and were starting to work on personal computers (PCs) that could handle something called databases, like *Filemaker Pro*. All three of us on staff spent a couple of weeks making lists of projects and topics, discussing at length ways to organize the materials, and trying to identify the possible ways we might need to find them. Using the AFC system of assigning numbers to materials by project title, year, medium, and ID#, we began labeling every item and organizing it under either: (1) a specific, finite field project, (2) an ongoing program such as an annual event or grant funded project, or (3) by a folklife genre such as craft, performance, or material culture. Ultimately, we generated a list of database categories tailored to fit the kinds of expressive culture we had documented in Utah that we hoped would make it easy to find specific materials and information. A full description of our collections can be found at the end of this article.

Current Challenges

Nearly a decade later we still struggle to find time to process all of our materials and fit them into our present system. With over twenty-five years of materials and a system that's only been in place for ten years, we have a lot of work to do before someone other than staff can navigate our collections without a lot of help. That is, we still do a good job of labeling items, and we now store them in safe organized systems where they can be located, but we still don't have all of the information entered into our Filemaker database. Too often we still must rely on staff memory to locate more obscure and often vital materials.

In addition to materials typically found in a folk arts archival collection, in Utah we are lucky enough to have art objects to accession

and preserve, and a museum in which to display them! Utah has the oldest state arts agency in the country, established in 1899 by the state legislature for the express purpose of supporting artists by purchasing paintings for a state collection. In the early 1980s the Folk Arts Program began purchasing contemporary folk art from living artists, and to date we have added about 275 pieces of folk art to our 100-year-old state arts collection. About half of the collection is on permanent display at the Chase Home Museum of Utah Folk Arts in the middle of Salt Lake's Liberty Park. A handful of objects are on loan to other museums or on display at the State Capitol, while another dozen are part of a traveling exhibit administered by another Arts Council program. The remainder are stored in a climate-controlled facility, along with the paintings and sculpture that comprise the State Fine Arts Collection. Every medium from textiles, leather, metal, stone, wood, paper, clay, fiber, skin and beads is represented in the collection, contributing complexity to their care and conservation. We follow accepted museum practices, not only for storage and display of the objects, but also in giving items accession numbers, writing and maintaining condition reports, and similar activities.

But let's get back to the basic components of our folk arts collection. Photograph collections, always one of the most difficult media to manage, are becoming even more complex. In addition to working with black and white proof sheets and negatives, black and white prints and both original and duplicate color slides, we must now also manage digital versions of those same images as well as images shot digitally that don't exist in a film format. Digital formats are quickly becoming the medium of choice for publications, for Web sites, and even for audio-visual presentations; establishing a protocol for labeling, storing, and cross-referencing those images is quickly becoming one of our biggest challenges. Ideally, we would like to digitize everything in the archives, but given that there are many thousands of images, digitizing them all is currently beyond our resources. Instead we are systematically digitizing the most useful photos as they are needed for specific projects, knowing that this is an area that will require more energy and attention very soon.

Thankfully our audio collection is currently receiving the kind of attention it needs. With funding from the National Endowment

for the Humanities, we obtained some of the equipment needed to systematically transform our analog reel-to-reel and cassette recordings into digital versions. We have just started the process of electronically changing the signal of each recording from analog to digital, saving them as sound waves on hard drives and then burning them onto several CDs—one for pristine storage in a location physically separate from our facility, and one to provide an accessible, working copy.

In terms of making our collections more accessible, two recent developments provide some real encouragement. First, the availability of relational databases may offer the vehicle for searching collections in all media at once so that one inquiry locates all of the photos, recordings, books, fi lm or art objects related to an artist, an art form or a topic. Second is the current initiative among Western states folk arts programs to create a joint Web-portal where a list of our archival collections can be posted to aid researchers.

Conclusion

Like all archives, our folk arts program archives is and probably always will represent an ongoing challenge. But it is certainly a worthwhile endeavor. The good news is that as we slowly learn to take advantage of the incredible technological tools now available, I know we are going to find more and more ways to effectively share the rich folk culture we care so much about with the rest of the world. As we forge ahead, trying to embrace new strategies as they develop, we must always remember the wonderful people who have entrusted us with sharing their heritage over space and time. That is our biggest challenge—one I know that folk arts programs around the country will continue to pursue.

Appendix

Today the Utah State Folk Arts Program Archives include:

1. Documentation (photographs and recordings) of individual artists, of communities we have surveyed, or of fieldwork projects that resulted in publications or recordings
2. Documentation of apprenticeship and ethnic arts grant program activities
3. Documentation of our annual festival and concert series
4. Documentation of Utah artists involved in regional or national projects
5. Nearly 1000 books and 24 linear feet of journals about Utah and Western folk art, folklife, traditions and communities as well as Folklore as an academic discipline
6. About 100 fi lm or video projects including16mm, 8mm, Super 8, and digital video, comprising original footage, commercial productions, news footage and copies of home videos
7. More than 10,000 slides, plus duplicate slides, and more recently duplicate images that have been digitized and are now on CD
8. More than10,000 black and white negatives, plus hundreds of black and white prints
9. Approximately 1,900 sound recordings in reel-to-reel tape, LP, cassette and dat formats, of which approximately 90 percent are original field recordings, with the remainder being commercial recordings or copies from other collections
10. Six linear feet of paper fi les on individual folk artists
11. 14 linear feet of files with newspaper and magazine clippings on various topics such as cultural communities and their traditions in Utah
12. An uncounted number of documents with fi eld notes, artist bios and other important information tucked away in project and administrative file drawers