

## NOTES AND QUERIES

State Folklorists and Folklife Programs: A Second Look. By Charles Camp. Maryland Arts Council. Baltimore, Maryland.

In a recent issue of Folklore Forum, former Maryland state folklorist George Carey discussed the nature of his brief term as a state folklorist and offered some general observations on the potential of such positions for folklore research.<sup>1</sup> Considering how new the idea of state folklorists actually is, and the relatively insignificant precedent for state-sponsored or directed folklife research within either public or academic sectors of our discipline, Carey's remarks serve the important function of opening discussion of key issues involving public programs and folklore research. I will not attempt in these brief remarks to summarize Carey's position or to explain the circumstances of my accepting the appointment as his successor in Maryland. Rather, I would like to widen the current discussion with a substantially different perspective regarding state folklorists and applied folklore.

There is something about the term "state folklorist" which does not coincide with the work state folklorists do or the public responsibilities they serve. The term conjures images of the honorary or official designation more properly applied to a poet laureate than to a working folklorist. In order to be completely comfortable with this job title, I suppose I would have to consider my vocation to be that of a "Mr. Maryland Folklore"--a goodwill ambassador and walking encyclopedia of Maryland stories, songs, and curious place names, suitable for any television talk show. I recognize these roles to be part of the public stereotype of the folklorist, and while I am not willing to disappoint my constituents, I cannot be convinced that the public exercise of the folklorist's profession need be so trivial. As a result, although I carry the job title, I have forsaken it in practice for the grander phrase "state folklife program." Thus, when people ask me what I do, I say that I administer a statewide program of research and presentation about Maryland folk culture.

One of the things that has made this shift from personality to program so easy for me is that I am not from Maryland and have lived in the state only a short time. I am still in the process of learning about the state and what needs to be done there--involving more Maryland residents in the study of their own culture, opening the resources of our new archives to the public, and determining what kinds of audio-visual materials would be of most use to grade school and high school teachers who use folklore as part of Maryland culture courses. People who know the state well or who have developed projects of their own involving folklore research have been willing to share their experiences with me because they believe, as I do, that a good state folklife program must take advantage of human resources of all sorts, and not simply reflect the research interests of a single individual. Consequently, I become an instrument by which the ideas and experiences of these people can achieve wider circulation. I rely heavily upon the other folklorists who work and live in the state--as colleagues, as fellow members of the Maryland Folklore Society, and as administrative partners in the new de-centralized archives system. Several of these folklorists participated in a panel arranged by Polly Stewart Deemer, about Maryland folklife research at this year's American Folklore Society meeting. I consider them as one of the many constituencies in the state my office is meant to serve, and as a base of support and guidance for the program as a whole.

I must concur with my predecessor that state folklorist positions offer unique and exciting opportunities for the folklorist accustomed to standard academic patterns of employment and research. Many of these opportunities stem from the newness of the positions themselves; initial work has a way of defining both the shape of the folklorist's province and his or her relationship to political and scholarly constituencies within a particular state. State folklorists are consequently able to define the nature of their job by the tasks they perform. The freedom which results from this definition may enable the state folklorist to work in areas normally inaccessible to the academic folklorist and to open channels between educational and political institutions without disturbing their bureaucracies. The state folklorist may create a new and unique coalition including politicians, students of local history, university and high school teachers, traditional performers, and the respective communities of each group. But the state folklorist is also free to pick and choose among these groups, deal exclusively with one or two of them, or simply do nothing at all. Without a clear notion of what folklorists do and what (if any) responsibilities they have toward the general public which pays their salaries, neither legislatures, arts councils, nor historical societies are likely to demand the same sort of adherence to tailored job descriptions and evaluation procedures they might expect of other public servants.

In this vacuum of defined responsibilities, the folklorist must begin by determining how his or her training and experience would be of greatest value to the people of the state, and by designing a program based on needs and resources which will make best use of professional skills. It was plain to me, as I considered accepting the position in Maryland last January, that state folklorists must bring to their work a more innovative approach to educational and presentational programs than that of academic folklorists working within a college or university--if only because state folklife programs really offer greater opportunity for innovation. It does not surprise me that many folklorists, including Carey, define the tasks of a state folklorist as more or less an extension of standard academic functions. The academic folklorist who takes on public responsibilities is likely to seek ways of executing these responsibilities which resemble the tasks of academic employment--lecturing, fieldwork, archiving. But state folklorists must have the perspective to see that these duties, no matter how well performed, may not meet the needs or take full advantage of the human resources of the state. The people who pay state folklorists' salaries have a right to expect of them a more original and more comprehensive program of folk culture study than that which is offered at state universities where their taxes are similarly spent.

In short, if state folklorists are to become part of the cultural research and support structure of any state government, and if they are to build their work upon a strong and well-defined sense of public responsibility, they must be willing to take on the whole of what needs to be done--to create a genuine coalition including those individuals and organizations similarly interested or employed, and put together a program of research and presentation which is more than an academic spin-off. Here lies the real challenge, because the folklorist is forced to put aside personal areas of specialization and preferences for working among only certain classes or groups of people. A good college folklore course impresses upon its students their individual and collective participation in a number of traditions. Students who learn to recognize the place of tradition within their own lives and those of their families and communities can begin to develop an understanding and appreciation of their culture. The college teacher who is able to set this process in motion has done a wonderful thing. But while the teacher is ultimately responsible for only those students with whom he or she has professional contact, state folklorists must find ways of performing the same kind of community cultural validation in all sectors of a state's population. The scope of this job alone--and it is only one among many--demands a creative and

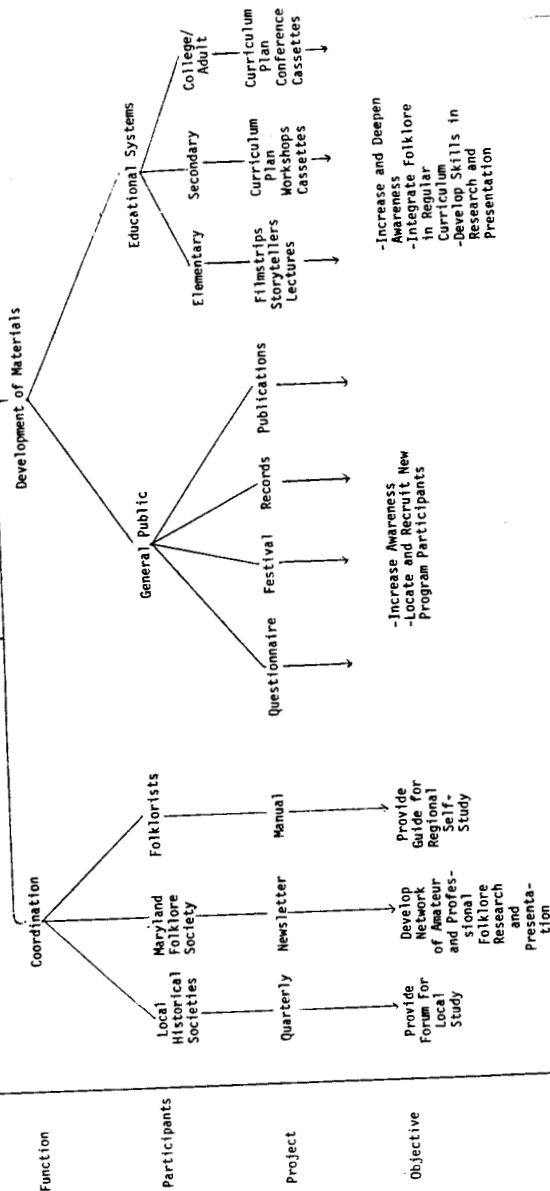
multi-directional plan of action. The job requires a pragmatic response--coalitions, programs, materials, and contacts--but most of all it requires a commitment to a democratic notion of culture and to the importance of community at all levels of society. This commitment cannot be fulfilled with an occasional lecture or solo fieldwork or an archives. In fact, it cannot be met by any group of projects which is not integrated within a comprehensive research and presentation program.

The following chart represents my initial attempt to correlate specific projects (seven of which have moved past planning stage), and the constituencies these projects are intended to serve. Other projects, including a film series, a concert program, and the preparation of special collections for the archives, have been inspired by suggestions from Maryland scholars and private citizens. The chart is based upon the principle that materials developed by one group of program participants should be of use to other groups, and that the overall program should possess an organic unity. An effort is made to distinguish between the constituencies the program is intended to involve and the specific projects to be undertaken for their (or others') benefit. The chart does not represent the actual flow of information within the program and the importance of feedback from participants in shaping the final form of specific projects.

Although I can sympathize with Carey's concern for "rip-offs" of "the folk," I do not view the Maryland program as the means by which the wrongdoings of other folklorists may be expiated. There is simply no reason why folklore research, conscientiously performed, must lead to such violations of confidence. Also, once the spirit of trust between the folklorist and the people with whom he works has been broken, no amount of money--slipped under the table or conferred in a grant--can clear the offending folklorist's slate. In a real sense, ongoing folklife programs offer a valuable safeguard against such abuses, since they, like the tradition bearer, establish roots within a state and become known by their deeds. For example, when the 1976 Maryland Folklife Festival offered an entirely new program of participants, repeating none from the 1975 festival, many of the previous participants felt they had been passed over for "better" performers and craftspeople. The place of the festival as only one of many projects within the folklife program allowed me to explain this policy as part of the program's commitment to ongoing research and the need for the identification and presentation of new performers and craftspeople each year. The continued existence and growth of the folklife program demonstrates that festival participation is not a one-time affair, and that participating tradition bearers can expect an ongoing relationship with the program after a festival has ended.

I have no strong feelings about the advantages of housing folklife programs within a state arts council, a state historical association, or any other organization or institution. The availability of funding and political support may determine the institutional setting of a particular program but not its overall objectives. There is no question in my mind that state folklife programs can serve a valuable function in each state; but whether the coalition we have developed in Maryland and our place within the Maryland Arts Council provide a real model for other states remains to be seen. It would be just as unfortunate for new state folklife programs to pattern their work upon a single model as to blindly follow the sort of academic spin-off previously discussed. Any state folklife program must begin with a commitment to all of the state's people and the communities they comprise--a commitment to study and support the state's traditional culture through whatever means are available and appropriate. As long as state folklorists place themselves neither above nor below these communities, but approach their work as a partnership representing many parties and interests, their work is likely to benefit not only the folk communities and educational institutions they directly serve, but the state of the folklife discipline as well.

## STATE FOLK LIFE PROGRAM



## Notes

1. George Carey, "State Folklorists and State Arts Councils: The Maryland Pilot," Folklore Forum 9:1 (April 1976): 1-8.