

The Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum: The Life and Afterlife of a Public Folklore Organization

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Abstract

Nothing lasts forever. Every organization has a lifespan, and at some point every organization's lifespan reaches its end. Nevertheless, even extinct organizations can achieve useful afterlives and continue to serve as resources, so long as records of their work are maintained in analog or digital archival collections, and so long as the communities they served are still coherent and culturally vibrant. This essay tells the story of an extinct US public folklore non-profit organization, The Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum (GCEM), a small but important organization that was active for just six years—from 1975 to 1981—in the multiethnic midwestern US city of Cleveland, Ohio. During its brief life, the GCEM was typical of US public folklore organizations of the period: small and underfunded, but with an extremely dedicated staff, many strong partnerships with ethnic communities and their leaders throughout the city, and supported by what was at the time a significant investment by government in folklore and traditional culture. Even though the GCEM has been gone for almost 40 years, the archival documentary records of its activities have been preserved through the continued dedication of its leaders and staff and the support of other cultural and educational organizations in the Cleveland area, and are still available as a community and a scholarly resource.

Keywords

community museums; ethnic museums; folk museums; folklife archives; museum archives; public folklore; urban folklore; Ohio; United States. Topical keywords are drawn from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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[Keywords: community museums; ethnic museums; folk museums; folklife archives; museum archives; public folklore; urban folklore; Ohio; United States. Topical keywords are drawn from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

Nothing lasts forever. Every organization has a lifespan, and at some point, every organization's lifespan reaches its end. Nevertheless, even extinct organizations can maintain a useful afterlife and can continue to serve as resources, so long as records of their work are preserved and kept openly available in analog or digital archival collections. This essay tells the story of an extinct US public folklore non-profit organization, the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum (GCEM), a small but important organization that was active for just six years—from 1975 to 1981—in the multiethnic city of Cleveland, Ohio. During its brief life, the GCEM was typical of US public folklore organizations of the time: small and underfunded, but with an extremely dedicated staff, many strong partnerships with ethnic communities and their leaders throughout the city, and supported by what was at the time a significant (though, unfortunately, temporary) investment by national, state, and local government in folklore and traditional culture.

Even though the GCEM has been gone for almost 40 years, the archival documentary record of its activities has been preserved through the continued dedication of its leaders and staff and the support of other cultural and educational organizations in the Cleveland area, and are still available as a community and a scholarly resource. All folklore-studies organizations should make similar efforts to plan for their demise in this way.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I will note that as state folklorist for the Ohio Arts Council from 1977 to 1991, I was active in supporting the Museum's work through several grants, and I coordinated the belated release, six years after the Museum's demise, of an LP of some of the traditional music that Museum staff recorded in Cleveland-area Balkan Slavic communities.

Cleveland, Ohio, sits on the shore of Lake Erie in the northeastern part of the state. Until recently the largest city in Ohio, Cleveland has always been a predominantly industrial city, where some of the country's largest steel and auto factories coexisted (and, to some extent, still do coexist) with hundreds of small manufactories, fabricators, and machine shops.

For most of its history Cleveland has been a multiethnic city. Beginning about 1870, however, economic and political hard times in Europe on the one hand, and the draw of industrial employment among one's countrymen in Cleveland on the other, provided the push and pull that led to soaring rates of immigration to the area from Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe. This surge in immigration was brought to an end initially in 1914 with the coming of World War I, and finally in 1924 by new, highly restrictive immigration laws. This "new immigration," as it was called, transformed the city; by 1920 30% of the residents of Cleveland, then the fifth-largest city in the US, were foreign-born (Grabowski n.d.). In particular, during this period Cleveland became home to sizable communities of Croatians, Czechs, Hungarians, Italians, Poles, Russians, Serbians, Slovenians, and Ukrainians, and although no single immigrant community dominated the entire area, over the half-century following 1920 Slovenians became particularly influential in local politics.

These local nationality communities, like those in other US cities, soon set about founding institutions intended to preserve and strengthen the knowledge and practice of religion, language, culture, and tradition. For example, as folklorist Annette B. Fromm (who served as curator, and then acting director, of the GCEM) has described, "...between 1900 and World War I there were between 100 and 150 foreign-language newspapers and periodicals..." published in greater Cleveland (Fromm 1982, 2). Immigrant communities also supported a large number of language and culture schools, museums and archives, performing ensembles, and athletic activities—to say nothing of the sacred and secular activities of neighborhood churches serving these communities, including picnics and other social events. A number of these institutions, such as the Ukrainian Museum-Archives (which, along with a similar repository at Harvard, are the world's preeminent repositories of information about the Ukrainian diaspora) are still in existence today.¹ These communities also supported many small businesses that served the ethnically specific culinary and other needs of their residents, both in the city's neighborhoods and in central locations such as the New Deal-era West Side Market.

In addition, by the 1970s Cleveland supported a number of non-governmental organizations established to serve nationality communities and their residents generally,

including the Nationalities Service Center, which provided housing and employment aid to new immigrants; the Cleveland Folk Arts Association, an organization that presented performances by local folk dance ensembles; Cleveland State University's Ethnic Heritage Studies Center, a social science research institute that prepared monographic studies of many local nationality communities; and a folk arts support program, mostly focused on traditional dance, at the Cleveland Area Arts Council. But one thing that Cleveland did not have was an ethnographic museum dedicated to researching, collecting, and presenting the oral, material, customary, and performing traditions of all of these nationality communities.

The creation of the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum was the product of several critical factors coming together at the right time. First, over the 1950s and 1960s Cleveland had become home to what had grown to be a critical mass of post-World War II white-collar intellectual refugees from Communist Eastern Europe—a different demographic than the working-class economic immigrants who had made up much of Cleveland's ethnic-group growth between 1880 and 1930 (John J. Grabowski, personal communication, September 18, 2019). Since World War II these intellectual refugees had taken on leading political and cultural roles not just in their own nationality communities but also in pan-nationality and mainstream organizations, including the area's many universities. In these roles they and their institutions became dedicated to supporting and “recognizing the contributions,” to use a phrase of the time, of nationality groups to the city and region.

Second, Cleveland's nationality communities had grown and prospered to the point that the more politically active among their citizens had achieved considerable success and amassed significant influence and power in the community. As mentioned above, in Cleveland this was particularly (but not exclusively) so in the Slovenian-American community, which has produced four mayors of Cleveland since World War II, three of whom (Dennis Kucinich, Frank J. Lausche, and George Voinovich) also served in the US House of Representatives or the US Senate; both Lausche and Voinovich also held the Ohio governor's office.

Many members of Cleveland's ethnic political elite at the time, for example, had important roles in the establishment and operation of the GCEM. Three examples will suffice. Slovenian-American August Pust was the long-time director of multicultural affairs and international exchange for the City of Cleveland, served as the GCEM's first board chairman, and was a noted visual artist who represented Slovenian cultural history in his artwork. (Annette B. Fromm, personal communication, October 24, 2019) Slovenian and Italian Dr. Karl Bonutti founded Cleveland State University's Ethnic Heritage Studies Center and was a consistent supporter of the GCEM. Romanian Lucretia Stoica, who for decades directed the Nationalities Service Center, which provided acculturation services to new immigrants and their families, served on the GCEM board for many years. These three, and others like them, wielded a good deal of political power and influence and knew how to get things done together.

Finally, all of these individuals and organizations were catalyzed toward action by the increased interest in cultural heritage and ethnic identity prompted by the approach of the US Bicentennial in 1976, and particularly by the belief that the history being celebrated at the Bicentennial should not omit serious consideration of the vernacular history of the city's nationality communities. Folklorists know that in a similar way the Bicentennial commemoration was an important motivating occasion for the field of folklore studies, through the creation of the American Folklife Center at the Library

of Congress; the expansion of the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, founded in 1967 and now known as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival; and the development of the initial network of state folklorists through the initiative and support of the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Especially as the country's 250th birthday approaches in 2026, the time is right, I'd say, for a more thorough study of the impact of the US Bicentennial on our field and others.

As the Bicentennial approached, Cleveland, like other cities, organized a Greater Cleveland Bicentennial Commission to plan special programs for the occasion. The minutes of its first meeting in November 1974 note discussion of possible 1976 activities that could highlight the contributions of Cleveland's nationality communities, in part to balance a possible Bicentennial focus just on the mainstream history of Cleveland. On May 7, 1975, the Commission's new Communities/Ethnic Heritage Committee, populated by many of the local figures whom I have described above, held its first meeting. According to the minutes of that meeting Carole Kantor, then the ethnic arts coordinator of the local arts council and the director of the Cleveland Jewish Community Center's traditional dance ensemble, was appointed to serve as the Committee's Secretary (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990, box 9, folder 38).

Between May 1975 and July 1976, the Committee held sixteen formal meetings and other working gatherings. The minutes of these meetings evidence an early consensus that an ethnographic exhibition of the material arts of Cleveland's nationality communities would be the most suitable use of the Committee's time, energy, and budget. Accordingly, Committee members, led by Secretary Carole Kantor—who in the meantime had been granted time off from her local arts council job for this purpose—began work on that project (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990, box 9, folder 38).

Influential in the Committee's discussion were the similar "Arts and Crafts of the Homelands" exhibitions that Allen Eaton had produced in Buffalo and other cities starting in 1919 and reported on in his 1932 book *Immigrant Gifts to American Life* (Eaton 1932). In addition to its influence on the GCEM organizers' plans, Eaton's work has been important to much of folklorists' work to present American folk art, craft, and material culture through museum exhibitions and other presentations (Lloyd 1997, 243-46).

Subsequent discussions focused on plans for the exhibition and on the possibility of creating an ongoing effort to carry forward this work as a permanent product of the Bicentennial impulse. This possibility might be accomplished by a new Cleveland ethnographic museum or by adding an explicitly nationality-focused ethnographic component to an existing museum in the area, such as the museum of the Western Reserve Historical Society, the primary historical organization for Cleveland and northeastern Ohio (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990, box 9, folder 38).

The opening of the exhibition took place at the Western Reserve Historical Society on July 2, 1976, just two days before the US's official 200th birthday. (Figure 1). The event was attended by many of the most significant figures of Cleveland's nationality communities and top-tier local politicians, including the Slovenian-American mayor Ralph Perk and the Slovenian-American US Senator Frank J. Lausche. Lausche's presence and presentation at the opening in particular, according to the minutes of



Figure 1. The program of events from the July 2, 1976 opening of the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Exhibit. Provided by permission of the Western Reserve Historical Society.

the next Committee meeting on July 24, “had an almost mystical effect” (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990, box 9, folder 38). (Figure 2) Clearly, the political power of Cleveland’s nationality communities, multiplied by the marquee value of the Bicentennial, was extremely potent at that moment—as had been intended.

At about the same time Committee Secretary Carole Kantor, who recognized the “value of oral history as an in-depth way to fill out the details of heritage,” successfully



Figure 2. Cleveland Mayor Ralph Perk (front row, right of center, with glasses) cuts the ribbon at the GCEM exhibition opening. US Senator and former Cleveland Mayor Frank J. Lausche, with white hair, is standing just left of center in the second row. Provided by permission of the Western Reserve Historical Society.

applied to the Gund Foundation, a major local philanthropy, for support of an oral history project to supplement the exhibition (Carole Kantor, personal communication, September 20, 2019). This support led the Committee's leaders to move more resolutely toward forming a new institution with Kantor at its head. Through their city government connections, August Pust and Jennie Bochar (Ukrainian), who were to become the GCEM's first two Board chairs, were able to leverage initial local and federal government support for a small museum staff. Other Committee members secured office and small-scale exhibition space for the museum in prime downtown Cleveland real estate—one of the lower, predominantly boutique retail floors in The Arcade, built in 1875 as the US's first indoor shopping center. At its June 5, 1976, meeting, the Communities/Ethnic Heritage Committee reviewed proposed bylaws for the new organization, and the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum, with Carole Kantor as its first Director, was formally incorporated on October 14, 1976 (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum; Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990).

The Museum drew upon a remarkable US government financial resource of the time to support its initial work: the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act or CETA. Enacted in 1973, in force until 1982, and modeled on the Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, CETA provided support to government agencies and private non-profit organizations to hire unemployed and low-income individuals for up to two years, during which time they would acquire marketable skills for later employment.

Luckily for GCEM, its board members and friends in the local nationality-and-politics community were able to leverage CETA funding to support the core of the Museum's work. CETA support could be requested for a category of employee called "community researcher," and CETA funds provided support for five of the Museum's six employees during the time of its greatest activity: folklorist and research supervisor Annette B. Fromm (who has gone on to become a significant museum scholar and educator, serving as a recent President of the International Committee of Museums of Ethnography), Cleveland-born Croatian-American ethnomusicologist and researcher Walter Mahovlich, writer-editor and researcher Patricia Shaw, and two clerical staff members, who did a great deal of work transcribing ethnographic interviews conducted by research staff. (GCEM Director Carole Kantor was paid from other funds.) CETA funding was never intended to be permanent, and in March 1979 the Museum was able to begin paying its research staff from other funds. As far as I know, no other 1970s folklore project or organization in the US drew upon CETA to support its work; it would be worth knowing if this was not the case (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990, box 9, folder 45).

In the course of its five years of operation after its initial exhibition, the GCEM undertook three major activities:

The Immigrant Experience Project involved audio documentation, and a subsequent exhibition, of older Clevelanders' narratives about their immigration to the US in the first 30 years of the 20th century. This was the oral history project conceived by Carole Kantor that created the additional energy (and funds) necessary to start the GCEM in the first place. During the course of this project the staff conducted 108 audiotaped interviews. The Museum produced an exhibition from this project at Cleveland State University in the first half of 1979, as well as a smaller, portable photographic exhibition designed for touring to community locations and to the Hubert H. Humphrey Building, headquarters of the US Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, DC.

A Step in Time is a film on folk dance traditions in Cleveland's Greek, Irish, and Slovenian communities. The particular purpose of this film was to document and present ethnic dance traditions in their everyday social contexts, rather than in the multi-ethnic folk dance festival performing context familiar to Cleveland at large.

In *The Balkan Slavic Music Project*, ethnomusicologist Walter Mahovlich and consultant Richard March carried out audio documentation of traditional music in greater Cleveland Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, and Serbian communities in a variety of informal and semi-formal settings, including kitchens, parties, rehearsals, wedding events, and church services. The Museum completed the field recording, and the selection of material for an LP recording of some of this music and a booklet to accompany the LP but did not produce the recording before it went out of business.

The GCEM also worked on two smaller documentary projects on Cleveland-area Easter traditions and needlework. Museum staff, particularly Annette B. Fromm (who had museum and archival experience), also maintained a program of free advice and consulting help on collections preservation, management, and presentation to smaller museums and groups in Cleveland's nationality communities. In some cases, this work extended to the point of preparing collections manuals with detailed preservation and organization guidelines.

For these activities the Museum received funding from several local private and government sources, the Ohio Arts Council, the Ohio Program in the Humanities (now the Ohio Humanities Council), and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities.

Then in late 1979 the Museum's circumstances began to decline. Fundraising shortfalls, issues with Board engagement, doubled rent for the Arcade space, and other difficulties typical of the non-profit world beset the Museum in rapid succession. Carole Kantor left the Museum in June 1979 to resume her former activities in the local Jewish folk dance community, and Annette B. Fromm, who succeeded her as acting director, left in late spring 1980 to return to folklore graduate school at Indiana University. At that point the archival record of the Museum's work starts to disappear: there is little in the way of reports to indicate much of any activity, and by this point there was essentially no active Museum staff, just a small volunteer board and occasionally a secretary. In late 1981 the Museum, which had been managed largely by the Board for some time, closed up shop (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990, box 9, folder 44).

However, this story has a relatively happy ending. The great majority of the documentary materials created through GCEM fieldwork and programming, as well as a considerable amount of the administrative records of the organization, have been preserved by local archival repositories and continue to be available to community members and researchers.

First, in August 1979, GCEM donated the audio recordings made in its Balkan Slavic music project, which it was not in a position to preserve and maintain, to the special collections division of the Cleveland State University Library (Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990, box 9, folder 33). Cassette copies of the original reel-to-reel recordings (which are themselves held by the CSU Library) are available to researchers at the division's reading room. In addition, in 1987 former Museum ethnomusicologist Walter Mahovlich, folklorist Richard March, and I worked together to produce *Nova Domovina/A New Homeland: Balkan Slavic Music*

from the *Industrial Midwest*, the LP recording from this project that the Museum had hoped to issue in 1980. (Figure 3) The LP's fifteen tracks are all available openly online in the GCEM section of the CSU Library's Cleveland Memory website, and copies of the booklet of interpretive notes that accompanied the LP are available at the division's reading room (Cleveland State University Library Balkan Slavic Music, n.d.).

When the Museum went out of business, its board vice-chairman at the time, Dr. Edward Miggins, community and ethnic studies scholar at Cleveland's Cuyahoga Community College, took possession of most of its documentary and administrative files, including tapes from the Immigrant Experience Project, and maintained them at the College until 2004, when he donated them to the Western Reserve Historical Society (which had hosted the Museum's initial exhibition almost 30 years before). (Figure 4)



Figure 3. Front cover of the *Nova Domovina/A New Homeland: Balkan Slavic Music From the Industrial Midwest* LP recording. Original photo on the cover by Jay Paris, Salem, Ohio.

The Society offers two extensive GCEM collections to researchers in its reading room, one of manuscript materials and immigrant experience oral history audio recordings, and one of photographs (Western Reserve Historical Society, n.d., "Records;" Western Reserve Historical Society, n.d., "Photographs").

Finally, in 2014 former GCEM acting director Annette B. Fromm donated the considerable personal collection she had retained of materials from the Museum to the Cleveland State University Library. (Figure 5) Through its *Cleveland Memory*

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Finding aid for the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records

Repository: Western Reserve Historical Society
Creator: Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum
Title: Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records
Dates: 1971-1990
Extent: 19.42 linear feet (21 containers, 1 oversize folder, and 1 film canister)
Abstract: The Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum was founded in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1975 to prepare exhibits for the American Revolution Bicentennial celebration in Cleveland. The exhibits were to depict contributions from Cleveland's ethnic groups to the multicultural society of the area. Following the 1976 Bicentennial celebration, the museum established a permanent office and exhibit gallery in the Old Arcade in downtown Cleveland. Although the museum closed in 1981, it was able to document the experiences of immigrants through oral histories, photographs, and other collected material. The collection consists of audio recordings, video recordings, interview transcripts, ledgers, financial documents, membership lists, board meeting minutes, correspondence, presentation materials, notes, catalog cards, exhibit materials, and museum holdings.
MS Number: MS 5175
Location: closed stacks
Language: The records are in English, Russian, German, Yiddish and Slovenian.

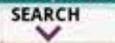
Figure 4. Homepage of the online finding aid for the Western Reserve Historical Society's Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Records, 1971-1990 collection. <http://catalog.wrhs.org/collections/view?docId=ead/MS5175.xml>

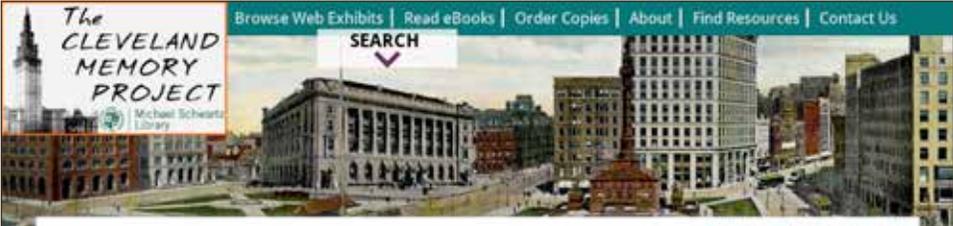
website, the Library's special collections division openly offers extensive records providing information on the GCEM and its work, twenty images from the Museum's documentary collection, the complete *A Step in Time* video, transcripts of five of the Immigrant Experience Project interviews, and the musical tracks from the Balkan Slavic LP recording described above (Cleveland State University Library n.d.).

In sum, almost forty years after the Museum went out of business, the great majority of the documentary and administrative record of this hard-working, short-lived organization is still available to the multiethnic Cleveland community, and to researchers generally, through professionally managed archival and educational organizations that are quite likely to be around for the very long term. The Museum's example makes clear the importance (for all organizations but perhaps for smaller organizations in particular) of building, ideally from the start, alliances with larger partners that can create the possibility of a longer-term afterlife to maintain the ethnographic record of the organization's work and to continue serving the communities they once called home.

There have been many folklore-focused organizations in communities across the US with a similar narrative of growth and decline, but not all of them have been as lucky as the GCEM. Most of this fortunate outcome is due to members of its staff and board. Early on, they had forethought about the long-term safety and accessibility of these materials. Then (with the exception of the Balkan Slavic music project archives, which went to Cleveland State University during the Museum's lifespan), years after the GCEM's demise, they secured these collections' future by building on existing relationships with exceptionally able local archival partner organizations already commit-

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The Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Collection

The Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum was established in 1975 to preserve the traditions and histories of Cleveland ethnic communities. Although the museum closed in 1981, it was able to capture and document the experiences of immigrants by recording and transcribing oral histories, taking pictures of festivals and traditions, recording the music and dances of ethnic communities, and by displaying exhibits at their downtown gallery at The Arcade. The museum grew out of a Bicentennial Heritage Committee which focused on recording individuals' narratives, and collecting and cataloging cultural objects.

This digital collection seeks to highlight the museum as well as some of its artifacts, both created and collected through the efforts of the museum. The following can be accessed on this Web site:

- [Finding Aid for Collection](#)
- [Ethnic Neighborhoods, Traditions & Festivals Images](#)
- [History of the Museum](#)
- [Cleveland Press Articles](#)
- [A Step in Time Video](#)
- [Balkan Slavic Music Project](#)
 - Selected field recordings from *Nova Domovina / A New Homeland*



St. Theodosius, Good Friday 1978

- [Immigrant Experience Project](#)
 - [Project Summary](#)
 - [Project Internship Report - 1978](#)
 - [Memoirs of Cleveland Residents](#)

The images, musical recordings, and documents reproduced here are part of the Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum Collection and the Cleveland Press Archives in [Special Collections](#) at the Michael Schwartz Library, CSU.

Acknowledgements

This collection would not have been possible without the support and generosity of former museum workers, Annette Fromm, Carole Kantor, and Walter Mahovich. Annette Fromm and Carole Kantor loaned their personal collections for digitization and generously granted Cleveland State University Library the permission to share the resulting files online. Walter Mahovich also graciously granted us the permission to digitize the Balkan Slavic music album, *Nova Domovina: A New Homeland*. Kent State University School of Library and Information Science student, Kiffany Francis, digitized and cataloged the materials displayed in this exhibit under the supervision of Bill Barrow, Special Collections Librarian, and Joanne Cornelius, Digital Production Unit Supervisor. Additional research and writing on this collection was done by Caroline Bruno, a Kent State University SUIIS student, in the summer of 2006. The resources and equipment of Cleveland State University Library made this exhibit possible.



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Figure 5. Homepage of the web-based introduction to the Cleveland State University Library's Greater Cleveland Ethnographic Museum materials in its *Cleveland Memory* collection. <http://www.clevelandmemory.org/gcen/>

ted to Cleveland cultural history. Waiting until the eleventh hour to plan and act for sustainability, though it certainly is a standard strategy, is most often not enough. An organization's responsibility to its community calls for a more thoughtful approach to

be taken from the beginning. A folklorist's responsibility to the small organizations in her community is to assist them in this process. ▪

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Note

1. For the Ukrainian Museum-Archives, see <http://www.umacleveland.org/>, accessed August 2, 2020.

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