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AUTUMN 2018 VOLUME 73, #4 \$10

HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY



Building Capacity *and* Relevance


ENCOUNTERING
Civil Religion

*Human Remains
in Museums Today*

Folkloristic Perspectives
and Public History

TECH LEAFLET:

101 Ideas for New Revenue
at History Organizations



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Photo: Adam Bird, Michigan Humanities Council

ON THE COVER

George Bayard, Executive Director of the Grand Rapids African American Museum and Archives, conducts interviews as part of the "Grandma's Voice" project.

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101 Ideas for New Revenue at History Organizations

By AASLH Members and Staff

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HISTORYNEWS
THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

History News is a publication of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). *History News* connects the people engaged in history work to new questions, ideas, perspectives, and each other. By featuring news, current issues, trends, and best practices from throughout the history community, it informs, inspires, challenges, and links together those who preserve and interpret the past.

EDITOR John Marks | ASSOCIATE EDITOR Aja Bain | ADVERTISING Darah Fogarty
DESIGN Go Design, LLC: Gerri Winchell Findley, Suzanne Pfeil

History News (ISSN0363-7492) is published quarterly by American Association for State and Local History, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212. Periodicals Postage Paid at Nashville, Tennessee. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *History News*, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212.

Article manuscripts dealing with all aspects of public history are welcome, including current trends, timely issues, and best practices for professional development and the overall improvement of the history field, particularly articles that give a fresh perspective to traditional theories, in-depth case studies that reveal applicable and relevant concepts, and subject matter that has the ability to resonate throughout all levels of the field. For information on article submissions and review, see about.aaslh.org/history-news. Single copies are \$10. Postmaster, send form 3579 to *History News*, AASLH, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212. Periodical postage paid in Nashville, Tennessee. Entire contents copyrighted ©2018 by the American Association for State and Local History. Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the American Association for State and Local History.



2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320
Nashville, Tennessee 37212
615-320-3203
Fax 615-327-9013
membership@aaslh.org
advertising@aaslh.org
www.aaslh.org



TRADITIONAL CULTURE, COLLABORATION, AND ETHNOGRAPHY:

Folkloristic Perspectives and Public History

By Anne Rappaport and Susanna Pyatt

Above: Casita Rincón Criollo; The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide cover.

PROFESSIONALS TRAINED IN THE FIELD OF FOLKLORE focus on traditional culture, identified primarily as those aspects of culture that are shared within a group through speech and behavior. Such aspects include narrative, music, dance, material culture, customs, beliefs, and knowledge. The definition of “group” can be wide-ranging. Some have deep historic roots, like Appalachian coal miners, while others are entirely contemporary in origin, like “fandoms” whose primary interaction is digital. Folklore, heritage, and tradition are the strings that connect the people of the past with those of the present. Folklore is at once historic and contemporary.¹

Professional folklorists and history practitioners share central concerns and goals for their fields. Both seek to engage with, research, teach, and conserve or preserve the knowledge and traditions that are important to local and regional communities. Folklorists focus explicitly on the “traditional” or vernacular, often emphasizing contemporary culture but looking too at how this is rooted in the past.



Miss April NYC/CC BY 2.0

Ethnographic interviews and observation are typically the basis of folkloristic study, and the relationship between folklorists and the people they study is reflected in every aspect of their work. The ethics statement of the American Folklore Society, the premier membership organization for folklorists in the United States, says that:

In research, folklorists' primary responsibility is to those they study. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. Folklorists must do everything in their power to protect the physical, social, and psychological welfare of their informants and to honor the dignity and privacy of those studied.²

The form of ethnography practiced by folklorists is mostly indistinguishable from oral history. Both rely on the knowledge possessed not by historians, scholars, or curators, but by community members, who *The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* calls "tradition-bearers." Tradition-bearers are not passive wells of knowledge from which history is to be extracted—they actively shape the way their stories are told.

Many folklorists employ a form of reciprocal ethnography, in which interpretation of a people or culture is not solely determined by the researcher. Instead, the actions, opinions, and behavior of a group shape the focus. While more scientific studies may begin with a question to be answered, folklorists search for a question

or topic to present itself while doing research. Allowing those you are studying to present you with their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs affords the group greater agency to shape the process. Beyond allowing them to shape research, some folklorists will ask informants to read and approve their interpretations before moving forward. This sort of involvement is not specific to academic writing, and can and should be done with any form of representation of the individual or group to the wider public.

Key conversations in the public history field are also occurring among folklorists, particularly those who work in public folklore: how to make what we do relevant (both to the people with whom we work and to larger audiences); and how to effectively collaborate with communities in ways that are meaningful to them; how to increase the diversity within our field as well as address social issues from our positions as cultural workers. Similar questions and debates about advocacy, collaboration, outreach, relevancy, and heritage are at play in both the folklore and public history worlds. The shared values and goals of folklorists and public historians offer us the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with one another.

Historic Preservation

A number of folklorists work in historic preservation, both in positions dedicated to this area and as consultants or other staff on specific projects. A primary concern of these folklorists has been cultural conservation, taking a holistic approach to preservation that encompasses not just physical buildings, but also landscapes, current and past usages, and traditional knowledge regarding both culture and the environment.

The work of Mary Hufford since the 1980s is one example of the "cultural conservation as preservation" model. In particular, her edited volume *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage* (1994) provides case studies of the intersections of historic preservation, heritage tourism, and traditional environmental knowledge and practices. Hufford, along with other contributors to this volume, is concerned with negotiating conflicts that arise when traditional culture and other perspectives on heritage and preservation (widely construed) are in conflict with each other. They advocate for project models that are on-the-ground and collaborative, adaptable to communities' changing needs (distinguishing between "conservation" and "preservation," which has a connotation as static), and sustainable in maintaining not just the physical presence of a place, but also its meaningfulness for associated communities.

Another way folklorists have been active in historic preservation is through the researching and writing of National Register of Historic Places nominations for Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs). In the past, TCP designations have been reserved for Native American sites, but in the last decade some preservationists have worked to apply this designation to non-Indigenous sites as well. For example, folklorists were part of the teams that researched and wrote successful TCP nominations for the Tarpon Springs Greektown Historic District in Florida, the Green River

Interested in what folklorists are doing? Check out this list of suggested reading!

- Robert Baron and Nick Spitzer, eds., *Public Folklore*, 2nd edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007)
- Paddy Bowman and Lynne Hamer, eds., *Through the Schoolhouse Door: Folklore, Community, Curriculum* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011)
- C. Kurt Dewhurst, Patricia Hall, and Charlie Seemann, eds., *Folklife and Museums: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)
- Mary Hufford, ed., *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994)
- Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)
- Laurie Kay Sommers, "Integrating Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy: Toward a Richer Sense of Place," *American Folklore Society*, www.afsnet.org/page/FHPPolicyPaper
- Patricia Atkinson Wells, ed., *Working for and with the Folk: Public Folklore in the Twenty-First Century*, special issue, *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 471 (2006)

Drift cattle trail in Wyoming, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in New York. Folklorists have also been active in efforts to list the Casita Rincón Criollo in New York as a TCP. These sites were nominated as TCPs because their importance lies not just in their histories and physical integrity, but as much, if not more so, in the intangible cultural practices and identities that continue to be a living part of these sites.

Where folklorists primarily contribute to TCP nominations is doing the fieldwork to document the traditional knowledge and ways of use that are connected with these places. Nomination writers work not just as historians and archival researchers, but as ethnographers and collaborators, working among and with communities to craft nominations that accurately document the contemporary relevance of these locations. As with cultural conservation projects, TCP nominations often carry applied goals, such as preserving meaningful sites from development, gentrification, and other processes that could potentially erase these places—and the traditional culture integral to them—from the landscape.

Museums

Many academically trained folklorists hold positions in museums and other public history-related organizations, from history museums and historical societies to anthropology collections, art institutions, and a variety of libraries and archives. While they may not be in jobs labeled specifically for “folklorists,” the folkloristic approaches these staff bring often influence their methodologies and products.

Ethnographic research and collaborative processes are, again, among the tools folklorists bring to the table, working with communities to create exhibits of culture and

history that are grounded in fieldwork that goes outside the institution. The Kentucky Museum’s *A Culture Carried: Bosnians in Bowling Green* exhibit (done in conjunction with the Kentucky Folklife Program), for example, utilized oral history interviews, ethnography, and most importantly, dialogue with and involvement by the community to craft exhibits that share the heritage and stories of relatively newly arrived groups of people in their regions.

A Culture Carried developed out of the Bowling Green Bosnia Oral History Project, a partnership between the Kentucky Folklife Program, Western Kentucky University’s Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology, and the Bosnian American community in Bowling Green. In 2015, staff and faculty from the Kentucky Folklife Program and the WKU folk studies program formed a committee with members of the Bosnian community to guide the project and related activities. The exhibit

represented the committee’s first major product, funded with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Ongoing programming accompanies this exhibit, including music and dance performances, foodways demonstrations, class tours, and more. Key to public folklore methodology, such programming always includes the expertise and first-hand experiences of members of Bowling Green’s Bosnian community. Community members share their stories and demonstrate their traditions, and the project’s most popular events have hinged on food traditions. During foodways demonstrations, folklorists and folk studies graduate students guide the conversation by asking demonstrators questions that illuminate everything from food preparation and ingredient sources to the more intangible aspects of Bosnian culture, such as entertaining guests and making a home. On the surface, these demonstrations teach the audience about



Fatima Delic rolls pita dough at a foodways demonstration where she and her daughter Njera taught the audience about Bosnian pita. The event was sponsored by the WKU Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology, the Kentucky Folklife Program.

WKU Folk Studies

Case Study

An example of the integration of folkloristic and historical research is the work done by Jane C. Beck, the founder of the Vermont Folklife Center. She began interviewing Daisy Turner, a Vermont native and daughter of formerly enslaved people, in 1983, recording Daisy’s family narratives until Daisy’s death in 1988 at age 104. Beck’s book *Daisy Turner’s Kin: An African American Family Saga* (2015) investigates the remarkable saga of the Turner family, which recounts the family history going back to Daisy’s great-grandparents in the early nineteenth century. Beck adds to this her own extensive work finding documentary

evidence of the Turner family, from their West African roots through their enslavement in the American South and migration to New England—a family history that spans multiple continents, states, generations, and races. She has also been involved in efforts to preserve Birch Dale Camp, the last surviving building of the Turner homestead in Vermont. Beck’s research skillfully connects one family’s rich collection of oral narratives to traditional West African storytelling, the experiences of African Americans and mixed-race individuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and efforts to keep knowledge of these legacies alive today. ●

Bosnian food and culture, but often conversations shift to deeper memories and stories of surviving war, immigrating to a new country as a refugee, and the ways identity intersects with tradition. Through approachable topics such as food, audiences (both WKU campus members and members of the wider community) have the opportunity to learn more about the Bosnian experience today from community members themselves. Audiences often reflect that these experiences help them better recognize that historical events such as the Bosnian War have directly affected not just strangers in Bosnia, but their own neighbors, colleagues, and friends living in Bowling Green. This exhibit and its related cultural programming represent a strong example of an institution working to remain relevant to *all* of its possible constituents.³

The discipline of folklore has also created its own approach to material culture, a central component to the collection and preservation missions of many museums. Most recently, folklorists have done integrative studies that move beyond examination of the finished products to document the processes and narratives that attend objects. Documentaries such as Marjorie Hunt and Paul Wagner's *The Stone Carvers* (1999) and *Good Work: Masters of the Building Arts* (2016) examine the skills and processes necessary for creating architectural elements and interview artists to gain insights into such creation. The recent Indiana University Press Material Vernaculars series offers books that highlight the relationship between physical creation and narrative, as well as other cultural elements that are integrally part of material culture traditions. The same can be said for Joseph Sciorra's *Built with Faith: Italian American Imagination and Catholic Material Culture in New York City* (2015). Objects are not merely objects; they serve in rituals, invite storytelling, and have great personal and symbolic meaning. Folklorists try to recognize and explore all of these facets of material culture.

Education and Programming

Heritage programming provides a direct connection between history and public audiences. This connection, in conjunction with maintaining the agency of the community with whom you are working, is a common formula used by folklorists to develop engaging and responsible programs. Consider weddings, bar mitzvahs, quinceañeras, and other rites of passage. Each has its own set of unique adornment traditions. How does one present them and their history without planning a mock ceremony? One suggestion, inspired by the fieldwork completed by one of this article's authors in New York's Hudson Valley, is a rite of passage fashion show. A fashion show brings community members into the spotlight by having them model everything from dresses to tattoos of their own design, allowing them to represent their culture as they, not the folklorist or public historian, see fit. Attendees of the show celebrate the various communities and local businesses receive added publicity. The folklorist puts the pieces in place for communities to be celebrated and understood as they want to be seen.

What do you do when there is not a person for your audience to connect with? How do you make an object that may

seem to be centuries separated from your audience relevant to their lives? Perhaps your museum is presenting an exhibit on the history of medicine. How do you engage a community that expects only to learn the development of Western medicine?

A folklorist might:

- Create a feedback board that invites the audience members to share their own home remedies.
- Create school programs that instruct students how to interview their families about home remedies.
- Include clips or quotes from interviews with health practitioners about the negative or positive connotations of certain forms of medicine.
- Ask visitors: How do these modern connotations stem from historic events and people? Are there other modern products that have similar associations? If so, why?

Intertwined Fields

History and folklore are intertwined fields, at some points becoming almost indistinguishable as they investigate the intersection of the past with contemporary life. A good example of this intersection is folklorist Dorothy Noyes's *Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Festival Politics After Franco* (2003). In this book, Noyes traces the story of the Catalonian city of Berga and its annual festival, the Patum. She explores the ways in which these histories are interconnected, with the meaning of the Patum changing with the socio-political context of the city and region, and she does this by sharing the words of her informants rather than relying primarily on her own imposed impressions. This methodology runs parallel with social history, moving away from the grand narrative. Today, historians are more concerned with the history of the "common man"—the folk—than a towering history of founding fathers.

As both folklorists and history practitioners have these conversations about agency, representation, public engagement, diversity, relevancy, and more, it is important that we share what works and what does not. Many states have a folk and traditional arts coordinator on their arts or humanities council. Folklorists may also be found at museums, local arts councils, and historic houses. We hope that our introduction to what folklorists do and how they do it will encourage more cross-disciplinary communication. ●



Anne Rappaport and Susanna Pyatt are recent M.A.s from the Folk Studies Program at Western Kentucky University. Anne serves as the Library Outreach Specialist at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, NY. Contact Anne at anrappaport17@gmail.com.



Susanna is Curator for the Heritage Center of the Sisters of Loretto in Nerinx, KY. Contact Susanna at susanna.e.pyatt-1@ou.edu.

¹ For a lengthier explanation of the field of folklore, see "What is Folklore?," published on the American Folklore Society website, www.afsnet.org/page/WhatIsFolklore?.

² www.afsnet.org/page/Ethics

³ We would like to thank Brent Bjorkman and Virginia Siegel of the Kentucky Folklore Program for their contribution to this section.