

# Folk Art in North Carolina

## “Through the Heat of an Afternoon”

by George Holt

In 1982, two blues musicians reared in rural Orange County toured six countries of the Far East under the sponsorship of the U.S. International Communications Agency. Part of a nine-person troupe billed as the American Folk Festival, John Dee Holeman and Quentin Holloway performed the buckdances and blues music which they had learned

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John Dee Holeman performs a buckdance to the hambone accompaniment of Fris Holloway.



Cathy James

as youngsters at house parties and Saturday dances in their communities.

While Holeman and Holloway both lack formal artistic training, they have learned how to charm an audience. “It isn’t often that you hear southern blues played with the authenticity offered by ‘Fris’ Holloway on piano and John Dee Holeman on guitar and vocals,” raved the *South China Post* review of the September 23rd concert in Hong Kong. “After demonstrating some southern dance steps tapped out to the rhythm of handslaps, the two strolled slowly off stage as if walking through the heat of a North Carolina afternoon. The audience loved it.”

The journey of Holeman and Holloway from neighborhood social functions to the *South China Post* review began at a July Fourth weekend celebration in 1976. Called the North Carolina Folklife Festival and sponsored by the Durham Bicentennial Commission, the event drew 75,000 people ranging from blues musicians and Greek-American bouzouki players to local and state political leaders. The success of this festival—together with a commitment within the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources to seek out, document, and encourage the folk art tradition—led to the formation in 1977 of the N.C. Office of Folklife Programs.

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The 1978 N. C. Folklife Festival attracted thousands to the banks of the Eno.

Established as an adjunct to the Office of the Secretary of Cultural Resources, the folklife program had a tentative foothold within an agency accustomed to supporting symphonies, museums, drama, opera, ballet, and poetry. Efforts in the performing and literary arts had been officially supported by a state agency since a 1964 executive order (issued by then Gov. Terry Sanford) established the North Carolina Arts Council.\* Made a statutory agency in 1967, the Arts Council became the central conduit for state funds available to arts groups and individuals in the state. But by 1977, the Arts Council did not include folk art as a part of its grant categories. (See article on page 72 for a description of the Arts Council programs today.)

Since 1977, then, the state through the Office of Folklife Programs has sanctioned an effort to recognize and nurture the heterogeneous folk art tradition in the state—the mountaineers of Scotch-Irish descent and the fishermen of the Outer Banks; the Lumbees and Cherokees and other native Carolinians; Tar Heels with African, middle eastern, and European ancestry who settled here to serve masters against their will, to better their circumstances, and to practice their religious beliefs unhindered. These

\*Executive Order "Establishing the North Carolina State Arts Council," December 3, 1964, in *The Public Papers of Governor Terry Sanford 1961-65*, page 538.

groups transplanted and adapted old world customs to new environments. In the process, they established the unique North Carolina cultural heritage.

In 1978, the Office of Folklife Programs presented a second state festival, also in Durham on the banks of the Eno River. Not only did Holeman, Holloway, and the Greek dance band get another shot at a statewide audience, but music and drama lovers got another shot at these folk artists. Charles Reinhart, the director of the prestigious American Dance Festival which had recently moved to Durham, attended the 1978 festival. Impressed with Holeman, Holloway, and other traditional dancers, Reinhart invited the Office of Folklife Programs to open the 1979 American Dance Festival with a North Carolina program. From the American Dance Festival stage, Holeman and Holloway went to the amphitheater at the Wolf Trap Performing Arts Center outside Washington, D.C. This performance led to their selection for the Far East tour.

John Dee Holeman and "Fris" Holloway, two of dozens of exceptional folk artists "discovered" by the folklife program over the past few years, now share their knowledge and artistry with concert audiences and school-children around the state and at national events such as the Smithsonian Institution's annual Festival of American Folklife. Their entry into the public sphere helps broaden an understanding of, and respect for, the range and beauty of cultural expression of the people of North Carolina. Such accomplishments have generated national attention.

"When people ask me where I think the most interesting state folk art programs are in the country, I say Ohio, North Carolina, and Louisiana," says Bess Hawes, the director of the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. "Those three states have gotten the jump on everyone else in terms of depth and interest, complexity and liveliness." Among the 50 states, only Maryland had a permanent folklife research and programming agency before North Carolina. Today, 30 states have such offices, many of which were formed to take advantage of the folk arts program of the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 1981, as a part of a reorganization within Cultural Resources, the Office of Folklife Programs became an official "section" within the newly organized Division of the Arts Council (see Arts Council article on page 72 and departmental chart on page 4). This shift elevated the state's folklife efforts to a position equal in stature to the other program areas of this division—artists in residence, community development, music/dance, theater arts, and visual/literary arts.

Another feather came into the hat of the folklife office in 1981 when the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation granted it \$30,000 to begin planning, in concert with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, The British American Festival. This festival, scheduled for 1984, commemorates 400 years of British-American relations and represents an ambitious international and interdisciplinary effort. Then in 1982, the folklife program received (for the first time) line-item funding from the legislature for programming.

Despite these accomplishments, which

collectively have put the Office of Folklife Programs on the artistic and cultural map of the state, the office, with a state-funded budget of only \$125,000, faces an overwhelming task. North Carolina's folk culture and history beg to be studied, documented, and recorded in depth.

In the 1930s, the Federal Writers Project and the Farm Security Administration's documentary photography project employed hundreds of artists to capture the American scene. Writers like James Agee collected histories of Americans from all walks of life; photographers like Walker Evans framed farmers, butchers, and blacksmiths

## *Crafts in North Carolina: Traditional and Contemporary*

*by Bill Finger*

The rich North Carolina tradition of crafts—from quilting and weaving to wood-carving and instrument making—has spawned a number of schools, museums, and organizations. Since 1925, for example, the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, a tiny Cherokee County community, has nurtured the crafts tradition, employing traditional craftspeople and training new generations of artisans. In the folk-art revival of the last 30 years, handmade crafts have become more visible and popular to the general public, as everyday utilitarian items and as pieces of art.

The increased demand for crafts has bred an expanding group of contemporary artists who design original patterns, often based on folk traditions. Hence, the crafts tradition in the state has expanded to encompass two related, but distinctive, directions—a “heritage” craft tradition and a contemporary “designer” school of craftspeople. In the greater Asheville area, two handicraft centers illustrate the similarities and the differences in these two directions.

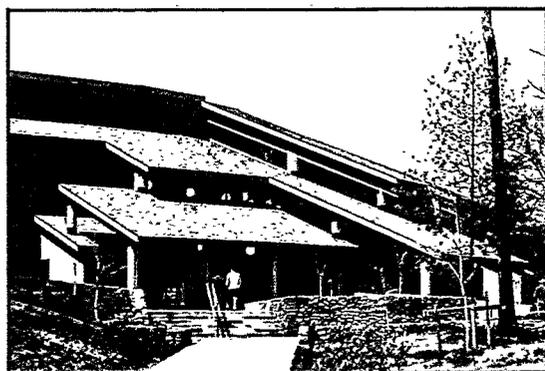
In 1980, the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild opened its new \$2.25 million facility on the Blue Ridge Parkway, just east of Asheville, on land owned and provided by the National

Park Service. Called the Southern Highland Folk Art Center and dedicated by Joan Mondale when her husband Walter was vice-president, the dramatic stone structure on the side of a mountain immediately attracted national attention among craftspeople. The Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, a 53-year-old group founded to conserve and develop mountain handicrafts, has grown into a highly selective membership organization serving contemporary and traditional artisans in a nine-state area. It determines which craftspeople may place their work at the Folk Art Center.

The Guild sells and exhibits crafts of contemporary and traditional designs. “In recent years, we’ve added more contemporary crafts,” says Robert Gray, director emeritus of the Guild. “The mix is about half traditional and half contemporary,” says Gray.

This trend has raised questions among some prominent folklife professionals in the state. “The Guild has not done as well as it could have done in the task of keeping traditional crafts going,” says Nancy Sweezy, for 15 years the director of Jugtown Pottery, a center for traditional North Carolina pottery since 1921. “It takes a lot of outreach to get to traditional craftspeople, to encourage them to stay with their traditions and keep the quality

Southern Highland Folk Art Center



Ann Lawhorne

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in their lenses, along with doctors, lawyers, and the editors of local newspapers. Collectively, these efforts amassed a body of Americana which is an invaluable source of information for today's historians and artists.

The 1982-83 budget of the folklife office of \$125,000 pales next to the challenges of conducting programs in our own state like those of the 1930s. Moreover, federal funds, an important source of folklife efforts in the state, are drying up. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), for example, has funded the office's "Folk Arts in North Carolina Schools" program

(now called "Blues to Bluegrass") since 1978. This program, which reaches about 35,000 students a year, loses its NEA funds in 1983.

Folklorists continue to scramble for resources and for recognition of the state's many cultural traditions. Much work remains to be done to help traditional folk arts survive. The state, through the folklife office, has in place a vehicle for addressing this task—for seeking out and nurturing people like Fris Holloway and John Dee Holeman who are singing and dancing at neighborhood, church, and club gatherings throughout the state. □

up. The Highland Guild has fallen into the much easier track of keeping connected with contemporary craftspersons."

When the Highland Guild opened its new building, several members of the Folk Art Center's Board of Directors—including Nancy Sweezy and most notably Ralph Rinzler, director of the Smithsonian Institution's Office of Folklife Programs—objected to the emphasis on contemporary craftspersons. "The Guild has built a very expensive and gorgeous building which is basically a sales gallery for mostly contemporary craftspersons," says Sweezy. "Appalachian folk crafts are a distinctive regional expression. In contrast, contemporary designer crafts can be found throughout the United States. I hope the Guild through its Folk Art Center will once again focus its major program and marketing efforts on this regional tradition."

Twenty-five miles west of Asheville stands a sharply different style of crafts center, the Museum of North Carolina Handicrafts in Waynesville. The museum, a 100-year old mountain house with two-story columns, emphasizes "heritage crafts," where artists reproduce traditional patterns. The Waynesville museum, which concentrates on works by North Carolinians, "preserves what has happened in crafts," says Mary Cornwell, one of the museum's founders (with her sister Ada) and still its volunteer director.

Kathrin Weber Scott, a weaver, and her husband, woodworker David Scott, serve as the museum's caretakers. Scott conducts weaving demonstrations and sells some of her work at the museum. A member of the Highland Guild, Scott thinks of herself as a traditional North Carolina craftsperson because she weaves functional items like tablemats, tablecloths, and baby blankets. But she does not reproduce traditional patterns. "As a new member of the Southern Highland Guild," says Scott, "I find that most people I know well are designer craftspeople, creating



Nick Lanier

Museum of North Carolina Handicrafts

their own designs and patterns." Gray says that about 10 percent of the Guild members working in textile areas like weaving and quilting are traditional craftspersons. "But overall, it's about 50-50," says Gray.

Scott's weavings—and these two centers—illustrate how the term "folk art" can cause confusion. On the one hand, Scott makes functional items for day-to-day use. She demonstrates her craft and sells her products at a museum committed to preserving "heritage" crafts. On the other hand, she designs her own patterns rather than reproducing the traditional weavings of another era and is happy to sell these at the Southern Highland center.

The North Carolina crafts environment has broadened to include two distinct, yet interrelated groups of crafts and craftspersons—traditional and contemporary. Recognizing that these two groups exist and function in different ways allows for a greater understanding of the role of various craft centers. In the Asheville area, as in other parts of the state, museums and sales galleries exist where both traditional crafts and contemporary work are on display and can be purchased. □