

An Interview with Sara W. Hodgkins



Michael Matros

Sara Wilson Hodgkins, 51, was appointed secretary of the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources in 1977, by newly elected Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr. Born and reared in Granite Falls in Caldwell County, Mrs. Hodgkins earned a B.S. in music education from Appalachian State University. She taught music in the Moore County public schools and eventually became active in state cultural organizations. Before accepting her current post, she served as vice chairman of the N.C. Arts Council (1971-73) and as president of the N.C. Symphony Society (1972-74). In 1975, she became the first woman elected to the Southern Pines Town Council. Mrs. Hodgkins, married and with three daughters, maintains her permanent residence in Southern Pines.

Sara Hodgkins is only the third secretary in the history of this department, which was formed in 1971 as the country's first comprehensive state cultural agency of cabinet rank, according to *Arts and the States*, a report of the Arts Task Force of the National Conference of State Legislatures. The department has grown significantly during her tenure and has more than 500 employees and an annual budget of over \$20 million. Michael Matros and Lyman Collins conducted this interview with Mrs. Hodgkins on November 9, 1982.

Who makes arts policy in North Carolina?

Our policies stem from a combination of things. We work with citizens directly and try to reflect what they want. The people serving on boards and commissions—and the constituent-

cies these persons represent—have input into policy decisions. Many private support groups are often directly in partnership with us.

What the legislature funds determines some of the policy too. We could have thought the "grassroots arts" approach was the greatest thing since apple pie and motherhood. But unless we had the money from the legislature, we couldn't have funded the Grassroots Arts Program.

My attitude and the Governor's feelings affect policies a great deal. I am a political appointee, appointed by Gov. Hunt. Before I ever agreed to do this job, I knew how he felt about the arts and he knew how I felt. We feel like the arts deal with the hearts and spirits. The arts are uplifting, inspiring—important. They should be accessible to all the people.

What do you view as your major successes as Secretary?

First, we have pushed the completion of the art museum building. While we have not had responsibility for the building, we have been getting ready for the move to the new museum by going to the legislature and asking for the positions we need for showing the collection. We have maintained the excellence of that institution but we have equipped it to reach out better to the people of the state who own this collection.

Another success is our state Symphony reaching its 50th anniversary celebration. It has gone through a number of difficult times regarding management, artistic and professional

leadership, and financial hardships, but it is on its feet again. I have heard the Symphony several times this year and I think it is professionally as fine as I have ever heard it. This orchestra has also become a cultural ambassador for the Governor. It has gone out of state with the Governor on some trade missions. The Symphony has made a statement about the arts in North Carolina to the rest of the country.

I am also very proud of the Grassroots Arts Program, which began in 1977 under the leadership of the Governor, the Arts Council, and the General Assembly. Under this program, every county receives funds based upon the number of people in that county. The decision about how that money is spent is made at the local level. The program started in 1977 at four cents per person. It has been so popular that it is now at 15 cents per person. (See article on N.C. Arts Council, page 72.) Those funds have generated a lot of arts activity at the local level. That is my goal. *I want every citizen of this state to have a cultural experience.* And I believe that you have to offer the opportunity in the communities where people live. I believe if you have a good experience in your own community, beginning where you are, then you want something else. Or you may move up to a larger place close by, and then you will be able to grow in your cultural experiences, and can reach out to the larger institutions with even finer experiences.

Finally, Cultural Resources has been accepted as basic to life in North Carolina. The Governor has always accepted us as an equal partner along with the other parts of state government. For instance, he was the first governor to take a secretary of Cultural Resources with him on a trip abroad, or on a trade mission. We are not left out; we are an equal partner. This accomplishment is difficult to measure, but I feel it.

What do you view as your major failures?

I can't zero in on a specific one. I have made some mistakes. But I feel really good about the way things are now. We are not perfect but I think you can overcome those mistakes and learn from them.

Let's talk about the major arts agencies under your department, starting with the art museum. How does the museum's board of trustees function?

I view the board of trustees as the single governing body for the N.C. Museum of Art. The expertise of the board members helps us run the business of the art museum. The institution represented by this board is older than the department. The art museum itself started because private citizens cared enough, because the members of the Art Society (see description

of this group on page 30) thought it was important to have a museum. But the art museum today is an agency of this department. The art museum board and I share the responsibility of hiring the director, and we work in a cooperative way. The operating budget comes through the department. They raise private funds too, but they are very much an agency of Cultural Resources.

Would you like to see folk art exhibited in the museum?

I think that is something that we need to explore. We show some of our folk art in the Museum of History. When we get to a place where we can, we need to get our art museum director together with our folklife people and say, "Where are we?" And with our Museum of History director and say, "What are we doing now? What could we do to improve what we are doing?" It's a decision for the professionals.

What about the new building? Does it work?

It is too soon to say. The collection is not hanging yet. We have been given permission [by the Art Museum Building Commission] to move in works of art. We have moved in the offices. The verdict is still out, though, on the building. We will know better in April 1983 when we all go in and see the works of art in place.

Has the building commission outlived its usefulness? What are they doing now?

The building commission by law is in charge of hiring an architect and building a building. The commission is still in charge of the building until it is complete. The commission awarded the landscape contract in August or September. They demanded a report from the architect on the roof—repairs to the roof.¹ They gave permission for us to begin to move in the works of art. You should address this question to the chairman of the building commission [former state Sen. Thomas J. White of Kinston]. I don't know all the things he does.

What other thoughts do you have on the art museum?

The future for the art museum is to get our young people in there—our children, so they can learn about the program and their lives can be enriched. Then as adults, they will bring their children. I think the educational program is the program that we need to really work on, as far as I am concerned, at the art museum. (See article on page 22 for more on the art museum.)

What is the relationship of the North Carolina Symphony to your department?

The North Carolina Symphony is not an agency of the department. We do go to the legislature for them. The North Carolina Symphony Society receives a grant-in-aid from

the General Assembly. The grant passes through this department. So you see, this department gives them about half their budget. In addition to accepting that grant-in-aid, the Symphony Society raises that much money again. But they run the business of the orchestra.

There are five persons on the payroll of this department who work for the Symphony. We have the responsibility to monitor how the grant-in-aid is spent. That is our connection there. I don't think a bureaucrat in state government ought to be making decisions about what the orchestra plays. I think that should be determined by the artistic director of the orchestra. So I don't get into those details, because I think they ought to be free to play what they think is right professionally for the orchestra, for the audiences, or whatever they decide is the right mix to use. That is why I am glad that their board runs the Symphony instead of the Department of Cultural Resources.

Is there a rivalry between the state Symphony and the local symphonies like Charlotte and Winston-Salem, in terms of their audience?

There is a good, healthy rivalry there. And, of course, they play for the same audience because the state Symphony belongs to all the people of the state, and that includes the people of Charlotte and Winston-Salem and Greensboro who have their own symphonies, to mention a few. The North Carolina Symphony has been very instrumental in helping to build audiences for city symphonies in this state.

What is the function of the N.C. Arts Council, a division in your department?

The arts council movement has been very important in making the arts visible and accessible to people. This movement was born in Winston-Salem. That was the first local arts council in the country (formed in 1949; see "Landmark Dates" on pages 6-7). The Winston-Salem Arts Council continues to set a fine example for all of us. They, for instance, have spearheaded a downtown revitalization campaign, where old buildings have been renovated and preserved for the performing arts, for example, the new Stevens Center. Using the arts and historic preservation to bring back the core of one of our major cities is an example of what a local arts council can do.

The N.C. Arts Council reaches out to local communities through the arts councils across the state and helps areas without an arts council to form one. I served on the N.C. Arts Council Board under Gov. Scott. At that time, we had 10 or 12 local arts councils. That number has grown to 93 now. I can see how these local arts councils have affected their communities. This growth has come with the assistance and leadership of a state arts council. The Council staff gather

information about needs across the state and recommend to the Arts Council board how the Council's funds should be distributed.

Would you like to see more artists on the Arts Council board?

What do we have now, one or two? I can't remember. (There are three; see chart on page 9.) We have a good board; I know that. I think artists have a lot to add to any board, but I am not so concerned about what the occupations of the members of the board are. I am concerned about getting the best people we can to advise the Arts Council and to advise me in my leadership role.

What else does the Council do?

The Council assists individual artists and arts groups. For example, we have developed a fellowship program through the Arts Council where four artists receive enough funds to have time to be more productive as artists. That is the first time we have directly assisted artists through the state Arts Council.

The Council also provides arts organizations with technical assistance and offers a funding channel for some groups. For example, several times during the past year, we met with the managers and the chairmen of the boards of the groups that participate in the Statewide Arts Resources Program, which is part of the Arts Council. We talked about their needs and tried to help them talk to each other and find ways that they can help each other. These organizations are an interesting group.² They represent together about \$9 million in [arts expenditures] and their boards are made up of the top leaders in their community. These are home-grown organizations, serving their areas of the state and also traveling outside the state. For instance, the Frank Holder Dance Company [of Greensboro] tours regularly, using money they raise themselves. They represent us well outside the state. The North Carolina Dance Theater was in Europe last summer. They played to full houses and got excellent reviews.

Do you think the groups in the statewide arts program will hold together and continue to seek most of their state funds through your department rather than going directly to the legislature?

It may be too early to call at this point. We have worked with those groups and urged them to find ways to assist each other. We'd like for them to stay together because we think there is great strength in working that way. We are all working for the same goals. And we hope the legislature will see that. If the legislators give us some funds that we can distribute based upon need, we think that is a good way to manage funding for these groups. If the legislature

chooses not to do that, then I think each of those groups should go with their own special bills and get what they can. We can try the united approach and if it works, fine. If it doesn't work, I don't think they should be penalized. I think they should go in for themselves and get what they can.

Special bills is sort of a short term approach though. It might work one year, but might not another. But the legislature is the determining factor. I have discussed this issue with the legislative leadership. They have to make the decision; I don't know how they feel. It is my responsibility to give them the best information that I can. Then we'll see how it goes.

Cultural activities are popular things for legislators to take home to help their local groups. And I think it is wonderful. I welcome money from anywhere we can get it because we have great needs. I am really proud when legislators feel strongly about their local groups and want to appropriate funds to help them. It is something I have learned to accept. (See page 8 for special bills passed, with funding levels, since 1977.)

How do you approach the General Assembly in general now?

First, we'll have to work very hard to keep everything that we have, items funded through what the legislature calls the "continuation budget." Second, we have prepared a budget for expansion, which would be in addition to what we are already getting. I have made several requests for the expansion budget that the Governor and the Advisory Budget Commission will submit to the 1983 session of the legislature. [None of her requests was included.] In the arts area, I requested more aid for the Statewide Arts Resources Program and for professional theater. Both these programs have been held at the same levels since 1979. (See Arts Council article, page 72.) I also asked for funds to help our educational program at the art museum. We have a fine new director of education there, and we have a development officer who is trying to raise public funds. But we need some operating money so that we can reach out more with our educational program.

Outside the arts, I requested additional aid for public libraries across the state. And with our historic sites, I sought a small amount of funds to continue several programs we have begun—the Andy Jackson research, for example. You know, we gave him to the nation. He is one of our presidents. We started some research in Union and Cabarrus counties, that area. We want to interpret his life properly.

Are you going to ask the 1983 legislature to set aside some funds for arts in public buildings—

the "percent-for-arts" proposal?

Let me give you a little history on that issue. In the 1977 session, we tried to get such a bill through but the General Assembly didn't like the percentage-of-construction-costs approach.³ So that bill did not pass. In 1979, we came back with a request for a lump sum for art in public buildings.⁴ That was not funded. Then in the '81 session, Rep. Mary Seymour (D-Guilford County) introduced a bill that stated it is the policy of North Carolina to put art in the public buildings.⁵ The General Assembly held that bill over and brought it up again during the budget session in 1982. Finally, Mary Seymour was able to get the bill through, with \$5,000 to begin the program.

What we now have is a statement of policy and a committee appointed by various people to decide where that \$5,000 will be spent. They will make a recommendation. Now that we have got that policy statement and a little money, I have been trying to raise some money to match it. Once we get this thing started, I think it will grow.

Does the department have any plan to counteract federal budget cuts, particularly from the National Endowment for the Arts?

No, we don't have a plan or strategy other than the one that we have had all along. We always try to assist our arts organizations throughout the state. We know that the [state] revenues are down, and so I have been very selective about my budget requests. I am asking for some increased funds for our Statewide Arts Resources Program, which benefits the groups that have been mainly affected by the cutbacks at the federal level. I guess you could say that that would be one way of addressing the situation.

How do you view North Carolina in a national context regarding the arts?

I work with Rep. Seymour and Sen. Helen Marvin (D-Gaston) on the arts committee of the National Conference of State Legislatures. This group asked us for assistance because they heard of some of our programs. I was in a meeting yesterday in New York City with David Rockefeller, Jr., who heads Arts, Education and Americans [an arts education advocacy group]. He always turns to me and says, "What is happening in North Carolina?" He knew Phil Hanes had gotten a North Carolina Award.⁶ And his Rockefeller Brothers Fund gave \$10,000 to the Swain County Schools last year for an exemplary arts program. Only 10 groups in the country were so honored.

I have phone calls all the time from various states asking me about the department, how it got started, all that. Other states turn to me because North Carolina is a trend-setter. Groups like the American Dance Festival wouldn't have

come to North Carolina if they hadn't felt that it was a good place for nationally known dance companies to come and perform. We have a national reputation and I am very proud of that.

Do public relations efforts help to establish such a reputation?

All of us in North Carolina go around touting ourselves—it's a matter of pride. I like calling North Carolina home. I don't care where the reputation comes from. I like it.

How about Governor Hunt touting the arts in his economic development efforts?

I'm glad that he uses the arts as a tool for economic development because I think that's important as a part of making the arts basic. You have to show the value of it and you have to justify the expenditures. For instance, I told the Advisory Budget Commission the other day that increasing aid to professional theater means more theater tickets are purchased in our summer theater efforts. And these dollars multiply in the cost of housing the actors, food, babysitting—there are a lot of related costs. The Brevard Music Festival generates a couple of a million dollars in business. It's important to say that. That's the way the Governor uses the arts, to say that we have an extra dimension to offer if you want to put some money into our state or to invest in some jobs in it.

Overall, how do you approach your job? Do you try to improve the quality of the state's arts programs or to make the arts more available to more people?

When I assumed this job, I promised Gov. Hunt that we would try to maintain excellence in the arts. If you don't have excellence, there is no credibility. At the same time, we have tried to make the arts more accessible. I believe you can have both. Everybody is entitled to a cultural experience. But everybody doesn't begin at the same place.

Is the dichotomy of excellence and accessibility the same as elitism and populism?

I don't know whether it is the same or not. There's tension, of course, between the two. Cultural experiences are different for different people. What appeals to you might not appeal to me. We all make choices. What affects you emotionally and mentally and physically is determined by so many things that have happened before. There is elitism in everything. We choose based on our own experience.

As a child in Granite Falls, North Carolina, my cultural experiences consisted of a music program at the school—mainly band and chorus—and some musical experiences at my church. When my parents took me to Hickory to hear the North Carolina Symphony, it nearly

blew my mind. I knew that I had experienced something that I had never experienced before. Then going to art museums, which were not available on the local level—each experience added something else.

There are some people who have a closed mind to art museums. There are some people who have closed minds to classical music. But that doesn't mean they can't enjoy other music. The same with art museums. I think when you walk into a shopping center, you have some sort of artistic experiences, because you will see color, you will see shapes, you will be affected in some way. We all have to make choices. If we are choosing what suits us, we are being elite, aren't we?

North Carolina has something to offer to everybody: the Grassroots Arts Program which distributes funds throughout the state on a per-capita basis; our art museum, which is 25 or 30 years old; the Symphony, which is 50 years old; and now our new folklife section, which nurtures the rich heritage of folklife here. There is something here for everybody if we make it a normal, natural, easy experience. □

FOOTNOTES

¹When the Art Museum Building Commission met on December 7, 1982, Gordon Hanes, chairman of the art museum's board of trustees, expressed a sharply worded complaint about the lack of progress in fixing the leaky roof. As of this writing, the roof has not been repaired; consequently some of the museum galleries will not be open in April.

²The organizations are: *Dance*—American Dance Festival, Durham; Frank Holder Dance Company, Greensboro; North Carolina Dance Theater, Winston-Salem. *Music*—Brevard Music Festival, Brevard; Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, Charlotte; Eastern Music Festival, Greensboro; National Opera Company, Raleigh; North Carolina Opera, Charlotte. *Visual Arts*—John C. Campbell Folk School, Brasstown; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; Penland School of Crafts, Penland; Piedmont Craftsmen, Winston-Salem; Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem; Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, Asheville.

³House Bill 1141, as introduced in the 1977 Session, would have appropriated not less than one percent of new building costs and some renovation costs for the purchase of art for state buildings.

⁴Senate Bill 333, as introduced in the 1979 Session, was in fact very similar to House Bill 1141 (above), but the percent-of-construction figure was one and one-half percent. Legislation appropriating a lump sum for art was not introduced.

⁵Chapter 1384 of 1981 Session Laws (1982 Session), House Bill 453. House Bill 454, which was postponed indefinitely in the Appropriations Committee, would have also appropriated \$100,000 for 1981-83 to purchase art works for state buildings.

⁶Hanes received the 1982 North Carolina Award—considered the most prestigious award the state can give—in the category of the fine arts.