

# The Folklife Festival— A Second Decade

*S. Dillon Ripley*

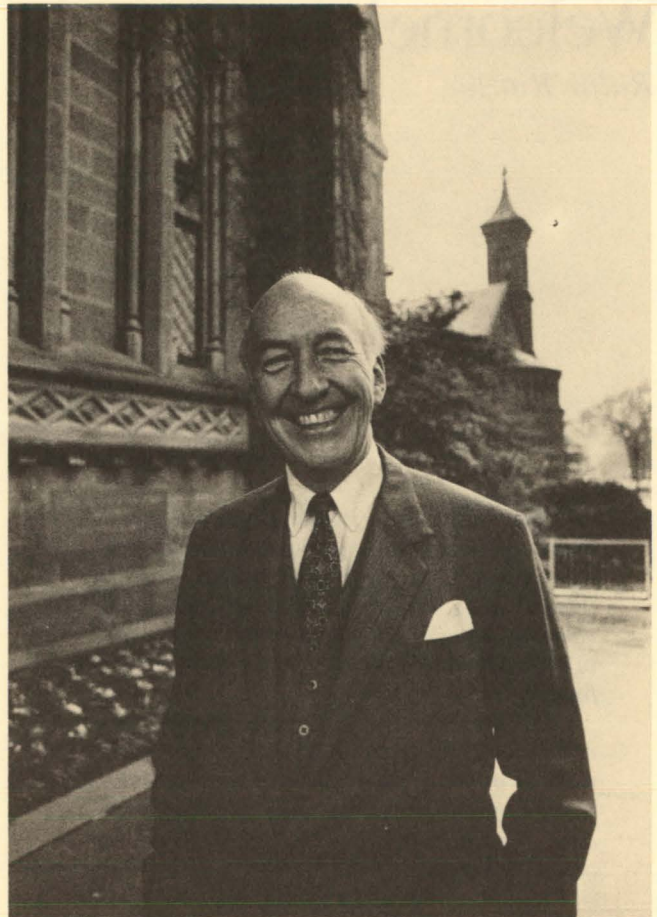
Ten years ago, over the Fourth of July weekend, the Smithsonian somewhat tentatively held its first Festival of American Folklife on the Mall in front of the Museum of History and Technology. Inside, the tools, the craft products, the musical instruments and other folk artifacts reposed in their cases, caught in beautifully petrified isolation. Outdoors, for the space of a few hours, they came alive in the hands of specialists from all over America.

In the summer of the Bicentennial, the festival reached its apogee: in duration, for it went on all summer; in meaning, for the folk arts it celebrated have come to be an accepted part of life; and in understanding, for the lessons learned provide a key to appreciating the creative energies which everywhere inform the human spirit. And it now appears that this folklife festival concept is so important that we must continue with it.

I am against carrying on "instant" traditions merely because they have been started. We wished only to point the way to others. There is now a folklife program at the National Endowment for the Arts. There are folklife observances all over the country, sponsored by state and local organizations, many of them helped by the National Park Service. And there is a legislated American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, which long ago pioneered in the recording of folk music. And so I had been prepared to stop, feeling that our museums had done their part. But no, we have been besieged with many thousands of requests to continue.

It seems there is something special here. In the 1870s Major John Wesley Powell started the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology. In effect, he was a folk culturist, assembling the records of the changing Indian minority, so that their ancient traditions might live on. And that we have kept up, although much of it is "dry, old bones"—collections of cultural artifacts—whose meaning often escapes us because of the lack of an oral tradition to explain them. Yet we *have* the "bones," the magic mementos, in our collections.

What is folklife? First and foremost, the continuity of tradition. The tradition, whatever it is, has been maintained with closely knit groups. The importance of this continuity is that it has been transmitted orally, or by eye and ear, or by rote.



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(Photo by Susanne Anderson)

So the forms of folklife—whether ballads, pottery or weaving—are dependent on oral transmission, which is entirely apart from those skills learned through traditional education, from the mass media, or from tapes and records. Recently one of our curators came across a weaver still practicing a craft long since thought extinct, who could inform the curator of the right way and the wrong way to preserve his ancient craft. Here, from our point of view, is the very reason for the existence of our folk programs—proof of the value of keeping "old bones" and of the Smithsonian curators' zeal.

There is then real meaning to our championing of the Folklife Festival. We are pointing up the meaning of our collections. We are making them live in the best sense. We are engaged in an applied human science of the spirit of mankind.

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