

The Folklore in Us All

Steven Zeitlin and Amy Kotkin

For the Washington bartender life is an endless round of stories. Each night he listens to the hard-luck tales of his customers. Travelling the length of the bar, he tells them stories of famous customers and infamous drinks. At home, storytelling is a ritual too. His children beg him for the fairy tales he spins off the top of his head. Then his wife repeats the saga of her grandmother's journey from the old country. Each year, the family settles on a log at the Festival of American Folklife and listens, simply listens to an Appalachian fiddler play.

In the past few years, the Smithsonian has begun to reassess the role of folk festivals in our society. By bringing the Appalachian fiddler to the Mall, the Folklife Festival educates the public and helps to keep the folk arts alive in America. But the bartender too has his folklore, and his endless round of stories is worth celebrating. By featuring the storytelling traditions of persons like the bartender and his family, the Festival sensitizes visitors to the artistic expression in their own lives—in their families, their jobs and their local communities. This year, three formats celebrate the unsung folklore in our lives.

First, interviews. The exhibition, *A Nation of Nations* in the National Museum of History and Technology was so named because it celebrates the creation of America from her immigrant peoples. During the Festival week, Smithsonian staff members invite visitors to participate by recording their stories and reminiscences evoked by objects in the exhibit. The World War II barracks, the family Bibles, the Ellis Island bench and the tintype photographs have touched us all. Before you leave the hall please join us and share some of your experiences in this nation of nations.

Second, workshops on how to collect family folklore. Does your refrigerator have a nickname? Does your grandfather delight in unravelling escapades of his youth? If so, what you have is folklore. In a series of workshops in the Reception Suite of the Museum of History and Technology,

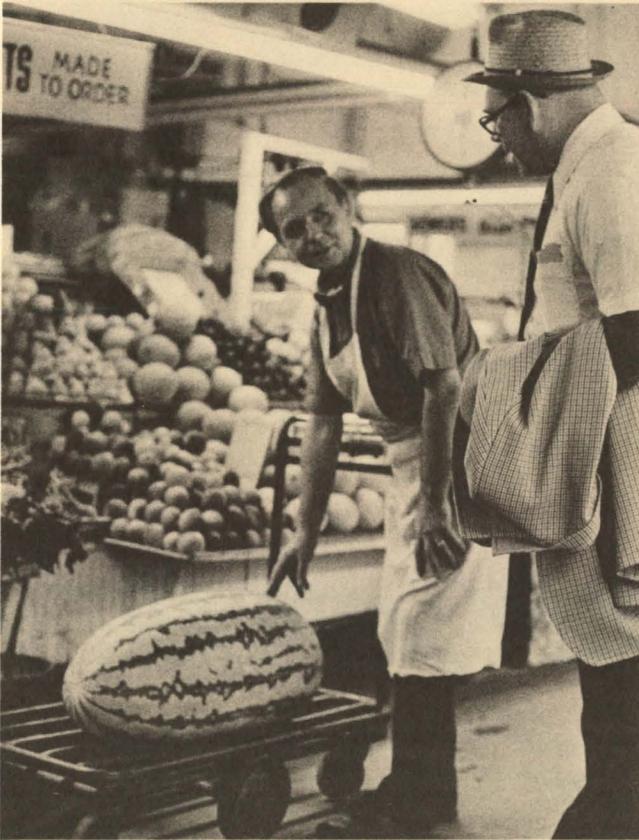
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Washington cab drivers are featured in workshops on local folklore.



'Baseball' Bill Holdforth is a bartender at the Hawk and Dove tavern.



In workshops with festival visitors, merchants from open markets in Washington talk about their occupations.

members of the Family Folklore Project will explore the different forms of family folklore—the stories, photos and food customs that decorate family life and create the ties that bind. Some techniques for collecting the folklore of your family are discussed and a free guide is distributed; and you may wish to describe the stories and traditions in your own family.

Third, small-scale presentations on the folklore in your community. After closing time at the swank Georgetown clubs or during recess on Capitol Hill; and long before the realtors, diplomats and trinket-vendors flourished, there is and long has been a living, breathing city here at the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers. It is comprised of persons who have lived here all their lives and to whom many of us are simply tourists even if we do stay a few years. Under a canopy on the south lawn of the Museum of History and Technology, workshops will be held daily with Washington cab drivers, bartenders, open market merchants and workers in the Capitol building. They'll tell us how we look to them and answer our questions about their lives and experiences.

And so the bartender leaves his work for a few hours to tell stories to a more sober audience. His children learn how to collect family folklore, and recount some of the tales their father spun for them. His wife, interviewed at *A Nation of Nations*, compares her grandmother's home to the recreated houses on display. And from a stage the Appalachian fiddler plays.

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A Nation of Nations celebrates the contributions that generations of immigrants have made to America. No matter when your family came to this country, portions of this exhibition are likely to reflect their part in America's growth and development. During the Festival week, visitors are invited to participate by sharing stories or memories that might be brought to mind by the objects in the exhibition.
(Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution)

