

The Folklife Festival: *In Search of Community*

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What binds us together in communities? Food? danger? the scientific method? jobs? songs? stories? age? language? sex? color? love? geography? Why the quest for community and the need for roots and multiple identities? This is an invitation for you to commune with us again—on the Mall and in the halls of the Smithsonian—to find some answers to these fascinating questions which affect all of our personal lives. With the 1978 Festival of American Folklife, the Smithsonian starts a five-year cycle of variations on the theme of “community.” Our scholars and guests will be demonstrating folklore as the artistic expression of community life, and the pleasure and dignity found in that process.

If community means the sharing and passing on of certain cultural and ethnic traditions, the concept provides a nearly inexhaustible source of inspiration for research, symposia and festivals. “Community” gives a focus for examining and enjoying what modern civilization owes to the skills and values of folk not yet engulfed by mainstream media and the symbols of science and city.

The way a person from an oyster community holds a shucking knife or fashions a duck decoy out of wood are intangible skills which produce artifacts that give tangible continuity to communities such as are found on Smith Island in Chesapeake Bay—a unique nearby region celebrated in William Warner’s *Beautiful Swimmers* and James Michener’s *Chesapeake*. Similarly, the grinding of corn in San Juan Pueblo and in the states of Mexico symbolizes the community bonds which cut across international boundaries. Spanish-speaking children right in the nation’s capital, dependent upon corn from boxes in the



supermarket, may tell stories and play games that reflect cultural motifs from south of the border as well as the latest TV commercials. There is no fail-safe antidote to the standardization of mass culture, but festivals such as ours help to maintain our system of cultural pluralism and the delights of diversity. Blue jean culture may now be universal. With it, variety endures beneath the denim.

In the more than a decade already devoted to folk cultures as the source of energy and inspiration for “high art,” the Festival of American Folklife has dealt only implicitly with the idea of community and how traditions are transmitted—through the generations, through occupations, and from the Old World to the New World. Thanks to the reverberating appeal of the Smithsonian’s 1976-1977 education program and symposium, “Kin and Communities: The Peopling of America,” soon to be published as a book, we have discovered that we have only grazed the surface in trying to understand communities, including

families, as the basic units of society.

Communities involve people who are kin to each other and their relationships with people who are not kin, but who—because of their shared food, dance, crafting of musical instruments and utensils, games, songs and stories—have a sense of being kin. Kinship, as all know, does not mean being alike. Relatives, Margaret Mead once observed, are people you might not know—or perhaps even want to know—unless you were kin to them. Families are the first places where we learn about human variety, for mothers and fathers often demonstrate great contrasts of temperament and skills, and children often seem as though they are chips off quite different blocks.

So it is with folk culture generated within the same kinds of linguistic, geographic, or occupational communities. The songs and jokes of oil drillers and roughnecks in Texas and Saudi Arabia may have the same range of variety as the songs and jokes of coal miners in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and the Ruhr. Yet there are some interesting shared responses to these ways of drilling and digging for “energy.” These are essential to understanding the human linkages to the machines exhibited in your National Museum of History and Technology. Technology cannot be well understood without reference to the humans who design or use that technology.

Our First Lady has brought new attention to the need to stop the decline of neighborhoods and communities and the rupturing of the network of personal ties which give both order and freedom to our society. Though some localities have lost part of their identity when their place names no longer appear on postmarks, citizens across the land happily are engaged in historic and cultural preservation, involving architecture and life styles,

The Nation's Festival on the National Mall

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and are seeing to it that we do not ignore our community heritages.

Reflecting earlier symposia and exhibitions, the Smithsonian Festival for the next five years will be devoted to reawakening various senses of community. For communities—whether inherited or joined—serve as a vital buffer between individuals and a world of megastates and megacorporations. They are more manageable units in which all can participate—men and women, young and old—and give some living proof of Schumacher's notion that "small is beautiful." We reaffirm that humans are important, and that we are, like plants and other animals, dependent upon communities for survival.

The Festival of American Folklife has become an important tradition on the National Mall. Thousands of Americans look forward to the opportunity to revisit this exciting program, while as many others find their first visit to be equally rich and meaningful.

The National Park Service is pleased to combine its resources and talent again with the Smithsonian Institution for another presentation. As in previous years, the Festival talks about, sings about, and dramatizes America's unique cultural story. It brings together Americans from almost every walk of life for what has been described as "the great family reunion."

This year's celebration is centered around the theme of community life. Participants reflecting a number of traditions who have made our country a strong national community give us all a more meaningful understanding of our cultural roots. On the Mall you

will find the farmer, the village tradesman, the mill hand, the poet, the artist—to mention a few who have helped to weave a unique national community.

The National Park Service is a people-serving agency. The community concept is reflected in the work of the organization throughout its history. We believe that our national parklands have a major role in providing superlative opportunities for outdoor recreation, experience in conservation education for the young people of the country, and at the same time in reminding us of our country's history and of our debt to the land of our fathers. Our involvement in programs such as the Festival which serves the entire community is typical of this commitment.

The harmony and delight that the Festival of American Folklife produces binds us together as a national community. We are proud of the Festival and what it has come to mean to America.

Welcome and enjoy yourself.



William J. Whelan is the Director of the National Park Service.