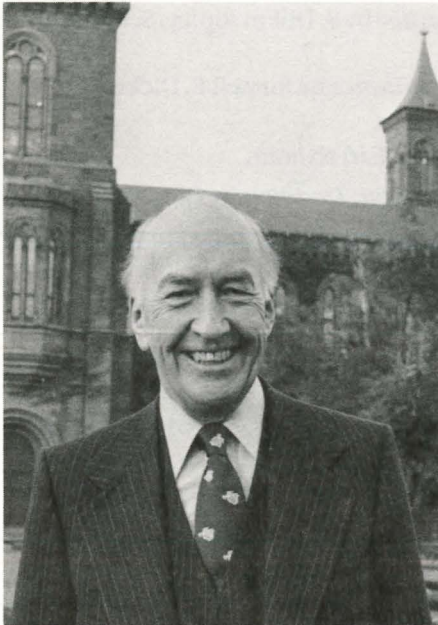


# Our Folklife Festival— A Fifteen Year Perspective

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Fifteen years ago we began our Folklife Festival as a way to further intercultural understanding within our nation. We planned these festive events in the belief that increased knowledge about the creativity of a people leads to a fresh appreciation and admiration. We felt that as we celebrated the differences between groups in the U.S. – regional, occupational, ethnic and racial groups – we were contributing to the unity of our country.

The idea took hold immediately. Letters poured into the Smithsonian after the 1967 Festival. They came from children – one as young as three who after expressing his gratitude for the Festival confessed that as he wrote his older sister guided his hand. Retired military officers, local family groups and visitors from throughout the U.S. who chanced on that first Festival – all wrote to thank the Smithsonian for a gift of unpretentious human artistry. The press spoke passionately and the Congressional Record carried encomiums from both the House and Senate. The message – make the Festival an annual event.

Within a year, shortly after the second Festival, legislation was drafted to establish a national center for the study and encouragement of folklife traditions throughout the U.S. Within a few more years, both Endowments had established programs to carry this work further. Just this past year, I signed an agreement for cooperative endeavors involving the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress Folklife Center and both Endowments.

In the spirit of this agreement, our Renwick Gallery, this year, presented a highly successful exhibition of artifacts from the state of Oregon, *Webfoots and Bunchgrassers – the Folk Arts of the Oregon Country*. This exhibition was sponsored by the State Arts Council with help from the Arts Endowment. In the Museum of American History, we enjoyed the art and artifacts of Nevada ranchers in the *Buckaroo* exhibit which grew out of a joint field project involving the Smithsonian, the Library's Folklife Center and the Arts Endowment in a collaborative endeavor. And at this summer's Festival, we take advantage of a rich collection of field discoveries made by the Folk Arts Program of the Arts Endowment by presenting a series of Festival concerts and demonstrations on the Mall.

For a while, after the massive Bicentennial Festival – twelve weeks long, four million visitors, more than five thousand performers from the U.S. and 37 foreign countries – we questioned whether we need continue with our Festival. Now we realize that the petition with 7,000 names requesting that the Folklife Festival be continued was telling us that this is our perennial responsibility. We are to exhibit folklife in the halls of our museums throughout the year and to celebrate once each year on the National Mall the differences and similarities which enrich and strengthen the American people and, indeed, all peoples with whom we share this planet.