



Celebrating Beginnings

by S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary,
Smithsonian Institution

This year's Folklife Festival marks three felicitous occasions of international, national and local importance. One hundred years ago, diplomatic relations were first established between Korea and the United States. In the early years of this relationship its framers, particularly Admiral R.W. Shufeldt, who negotiated the "opening" with the aid of the Chinese, may have been somewhat disappointed at its apparent lack of dramatic results. He probably hoped for the kind of acclaim that Commodore Perry received for his forced opening of Japan in 1854. Although few people in the 19th century recognized the importance that the Korea-U.S. relationship would come to have, we are pleased to note that from the very beginning the Smithsonian Institution has had an active interest in the Korean country and its people. Shortly after the opening of diplomatic relations the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Spencer F. Baird, dispatched an ornithologist, Pierre Louis Jouy, to explore and document the species of birds in Korea. Shortly after Jouy's arrival, Secretary Baird dispatched an ethnographer, Jean Baptiste Bernadou, to document the art and culture of what was then the "Hermit Kingdom."

In preparing for the centennial of diplomatic relations, I read some of Bernadou's reports from Korea and was pleased to find that many of the kinds of traditions he found will be represented at this year's Folklife Festival, including musical instrument making, musical performance, pottery making and rituals from the indigenous shamanistic religion of Korea. In addition, we look forward to enjoying other venerable traditions including masked dance drama, hemp-cloth and hat making, and the occupational songs of farmers and women pearl divers. Korean-Americans will also present traditions brought from Korea that have taken root in the American land.

Seventy-five years ago the American nation was also made grander with the addition of the State of Oklahoma. The anniversary of this event – the Diamond Jubilee – is celebrated at the Festival with the presentation of cultural traditions that Oklahomans nourish and support. We are pleased that Oklahomans have invited outsiders to join their celebration by helping us to present it on the National Mall. Traditions associated with ethnic groups in Oklahoma are here as well as those associated with two major Oklahoma institutions – horses and oil. Robust vitality and athletic elegance characterize the traditional work and the play of people involved in oil and horses. And in addition, the performance and crafts of Oklahoma's ethnic peoples bring an aesthetic vitality and stylistic elegance of their own. We welcome the Oklahomans to the National Museum and thank them for sharing with us their cultural patrimony.

On July 3, the Festival will be the site for the ceremony awarding the first annual National Heritage Fellowships. These honors, which have been organized and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, will be given to traditional musicians and craftspersons who have made outstanding contributions to the cultural life of our nation. We are extraordinarily pleased to be able to present a series of tribute concerts on each day of the Festival to demonstrate our respect and esteem for the talent, vision, and application of the recipients. In addition, an exhibition of crafts by Fellowship winners will be shown, appropriately, in the National Museum of American History through August.

Further, the long-time Folklife Festival goers will join in celebrating the Festival's return to its original plot on the National Mall among Smithsonian Museum buildings. We celebrate the return to a quieter, more easily accessible, and larger site, and also to one that makes more clearly visible the strong, complimentary relationship between museum collections and the presenters of living traditions.