



A TRIBUTE TO S. DILLON R

by Diana Parker

Secretary Ripley came to the Smithsonian in 1964 with strong feelings about what he needed to do.

He had worked at the Smithsonian for a brief stint in his twenties and found it, like most museums, to be staid and stodgy. He said visiting it "...was essentially very dull. You did it on Sunday afternoon after a big lunch."

Ripley believed that learning should, instead, be joyous and engaging. As a child, he played in the Tuileries in Paris, taking special delight in the carousel. At the age of 13, he went on a walking tour of Tibet. He summered on a family estate that included areas of pristine natural preservation. He wanted to instill in the museum visitor that sense of awe and wonder that had enthralled him as he learned. A museum should be an interactive rather

than a passive experience. He said his vision was to "...make the place a living experience...." "We should take the objects out of the cases and make them sing."

He also believed that the National Museum belonged to all people. During the antiwar and civil rights marches of the 1960s, he insisted that the museums stay open so that marchers had access to both exhibitions and facilities. The Institution he wanted to build needed to have a place for everyone, not just in its audiences, but also in the contents of its exhibitions.

In the field of folklore, he felt this particularly keenly. He said, "Although it has the world's largest collection of American folk artifacts, the Smithsonian, like all museums in our nation, fails to present folk culture fully adequately." And so in this climate of exploration and change, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival was created.

The first Festival was held on the Mall in 1967 to much popular, media, and Congressional acclaim, and mixed reviews in the museum world. The idea of living presentations in a museum context was brand new, and

This year the Festival
is dedicated to
S. Dillon Ripley,
the 8th Secretary of the
Smithsonian, and the man
under whose leadership the
Festival originated.

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the concept of giving the interpretive voice to the creators of art forms rather than the curators was threatening to some. But Secretary Ripley felt strongly about this new medium, and it grew and flourished under his protection. Over time, the Secretary began to see the Festival not only as a thoroughly contemporary approach to the increase and diffusion of knowledge, but also as an effective tool in the struggle for cultural preservation. "Traditions and cultures alien to the massive onslaughts of mechanistic technology are fragile indeed. They are being eroded every day just as the forests of the tropics disappear. Cultures drift away like the dust that follows the draft of a lifting jet plane on a far-away runway...." He felt that the Festival with its mass audiences was an innovative way of helping in the preservation effort. Without his foresight and constant support, the Festival would not exist.

He brought to the Smithsonian a style that was all his own and an enthusiasm and determination that would alter the place almost beyond recognition. Under

Opposite page: S. Dillon Ripley, led by Lucille Dawson, participates in an honoring ceremony at the 1975 Festival; Rayna Green and Ralph Rinzler follow. Photo by Reed Et Susan Erskine, Lightworks

his 20-year stewardship the Smithsonian added the Renwick Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Collection of Fine Arts, the Cooper-Hewitt, the Sackler Gallery, the National Museum of African Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the National Air & Space Museum, the Smithsonian Institution Press, The Smithsonian Associates, the Museum Shops, *Smithsonian* magazine, the Tropical Research Institute, the Environmental Resource Center, the Astrophysical Observatory, a carousel on the Mall, and, of course, the Folklife Festival.

On March 12, Secretary Ripley died. Those of us who had the good fortune to know him personally will miss his charm and his freewheeling mind and egalitarian spirit. But he has left an extraordinary legacy. He has left a vital and engaging Institution that at its best will carry the imprint of his wisdom and imagination for generations to come.

Diana Parker joined the Festival staff in 1975 and has directed it since 1983.