SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

RESEARCH GUIDELINES

Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
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Introduction

For two weeks every summer, the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States, produces the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Surrounded by the U.S. Capitol, the Washington Monument, and the museums of the Smithsonian, the Festival is a research-based "museum without walls" devoted to the presentation and celebration of grassroots cultural heritage.

These Guidelines are intended to give researchers who will be working with Smithsonian staff an overview of the Center's history, requirements, and approach to fieldwork. Of course, each program is unique and the levels of experience of the people reading these guidelines will vary widely, but we hope that the following pages will give you a sense of what will be expected of you as a Smithsonian-appointed researcher. Smithsonian staff will be glad to discuss and advise you on specific issues that may arise in the course of your fieldwork, and we look forward to your suggestions about how we might improve our research methods and our communications with future researchers.

Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH)

The Festival is produced by the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH), a research institute of the Smithsonian Institution dedicated to promoting the understanding and continuity of diverse contemporary grassroots cultures in the United States and throughout the world. In addition to the annual Festival, the Center also researches, administers, and produces:

- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (a documentary series of audio, video, CD, and special productions with more than 2,500 titles);
- CFCH Web site featuring the Festival, Folkways, and other initiatives
- museum and traveling exhibitions;
- an extensive collection of research and documentary materials in the Center's Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections;
- educational materials;
- research, fellowship, internship, and training opportunities for academic and lay scholars; and
- symposia and conferences relating to folklife and cultural studies.

The Center joins high-quality scholarship with strong community service and educational outreach. This has led to activities that have affected policies and practices at local, national, and international levels. Programs and products have enjoyed scholarly review, popular acclaim, broad media attention, and professional recognition in forms such as Academy, Emmy, and GRAMMY awards.

The Center's activities are funded by federal appropriations, Smithsonian trust funds, contracts, agreements with national, state, and local governments, foundation grants, gifts from individuals and corporations, and income from the Festival and Folkways sales. The Center's experienced staff is culturally diverse and combines interdisciplinary scholars and technical specialists. The Center has a roster of distinguished advisors and cooperates with numerous international, national, state, local, and professional organizations.

Smithsonian Folklife Festival

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival was established in 1967 to help preserve and celebrate the rich and diverse cultural traditions found in the United States and around the world. The Festival, which is held for two weeks each summer on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., attracts more than one million visitors from across the nation and throughout the world. Each year, the Festival features three or more distinct programs often produced in concert with national, state, and cultural agencies. Each of the featured programs has its own thematic structure, curators, staff, participants, presenters, and site.

Over the years, the Festival has brought more than 20,000 musicians, artists, performers, craftspeople, occupational practitioners, cooks, and others to the National Mall to share the skills, knowledge, personal experiences, and aesthetic forms that embody the creative vitality of their traditions. Since its founding, millions of people have visited the Festival and millions more have learned of the Festival through extensive media coverage. The Festival has become a model for research-based living exhibitions.

The Festival is created in two phases: research and production. The research phase includes the preliminary selection of cultural areas and themes, field research and documentation, evaluation of findings, and follow-up research as necessary. The production phase includes selecting and preparing participants; preparation of the program activities, site, and exhibit materials; and the Festival itself. Festival-related products such as sound recordings, educational materials, and video documentaries may accompany or follow the event.

The Festival's Research Goals

Festival research provides background information for Festival programming and production but also creates an archival record that becomes part of the Smithsonian Institution's permanent collection – data that will inform future generations of researchers. Festival performances result from combining this information with Festival practices that have been developed by CFCH over the years. Festival programming is designed to feature the tradition bearers themselves. Participants interact directly with Festival visitors; demonstrate their traditions; tell their own stories; and essentially speak for themselves. "Presenters" (often the scholars who conducted the field research) and curators are on hand during the Festival to facilitate this process.

Researchers collect data on communities, practices, specific practitioners, and make recommendations about which ones might be included in the Festival and how they could be presented. Criteria to be considered in recommending particular communities and practices for the Festival include: Is it a tradition distinctive or closely identified with the Festival program's theme, or reflective of group/community identity; Does it have artistic content; and does it lend itself to be presented at an outdoor Festival? Criteria for individual practitioners include: the person's role as a tradition bearer, artistic excellence in a traditional repertoire, and strength of presentation -- *e.g.*, is the person a good talker, does he or she enjoy presenting before an unfamiliar audience?

Think about the structure of the presentation itself: What items of repertoire are to be presented at the Festival, for how long, involving whom, in what degree of elaborateness? Presentation

formats are shaped to fit the song and instrumental music, dance, storytelling, craft, cooking, and occupational, social, or ritual traditions that are documented in fieldwork. Some traditions can present problems of time, space, and scale, such as high steel construction work or other lengthy processes, such as smoking fish. Often an element or a part of a process can be presented to indicate and help illustrate the whole.

Some types of cultural expression require considerable care in presentation. For example, consider carefully the advisability of staging a community's rituals: Are practitioners willing to do it or would it be disrespectful to present in a secular setting? Are there restrictions about who is allowed to watch? Will it be an embarrassingly ersatz version? What are the needs in space and time? Are there aspects that will offend public sensibilities or strengthen stereotypes?

Presentations take place in a variety of formats--demonstration, performance, narrative, and workshop sessions. Activities such as musical performances, dance, and craft demonstrations work particularly well in these types of formats.

Key Concepts

Community-based Tradition

Community-based cultural traditions can generally be defined as forms of knowledge, skills, and expressions learned through informal relationships and usually exhibiting intergenerational continuity. Typical genres include oral tradition (i.e., narrative, epic, poetry, storytelling, proverbs, riddles, speech), social custom (i.e., festivals, celebrations, games, rituals, vernacular religion, customary behavioral codes and their practice), material culture and its supportive knowledge (i.e., crafts, architecture, costuming, foodways, agriculture, fishing, medicine), and the arts (i.e., music, dance, murals, drama, puppetry). Forms of culture are traditional to the extent that they maintain standards or values which have continuity with, and are informed by, past practice. They are living traditions to the extent that they are practiced, are socially integrated within community life, and speak to its cognitive, normative, and aesthetic concerns.

Tradition & Change

The Smithsonian does not regard traditions as unchanging nor gauge authenticity solely by conformity with some past (possibly the oldest) practice. While traditions, by definition, are culture conserving, their enactment provides the means through which ongoing change is traditionally negotiated. Traditions may change as a result of social and cultural processes within the community itself. Variation among practitioners, the accumulation of knowledge, the evolution of technique, or the alteration of living conditions may lead to variability in tradition. Alternatively, the material conditions and ordering principles may change, and indigenous practitioners may recognize and articulate a disjuncture between old and new forms.

From the perspective of the Festival, empirical research and analysis of such changes in traditions are important. Past Festival programs have examined and explored these change processes: for example, the 1992 Festival featured a program on the *Changing Soundscape of Indian Country* included rock music; a 1990 program highlighted *Musics of Struggle*. The Festival views changing and emergent traditions from the perspective of the indigenous or local communities where tradition-bearers have retained cognitive, aesthetic, and organizational control.

Tradition-bearers

Festival programs strive to identify and select individuals engaged in an exemplary practice of particular traditions, as indicated by their status and recognition within a community. Individuals are selected for their ability to present themselves, their communities, and their traditions effectively in a public setting. Practitioners selected for the Festival can be thought of as "key" informants, who will enhance program content and convey important information about the cultural community being represented. People considered for the Festival are usually well integrated within their cultural communities and have acquired their tradition knowledge by traditional means. They have a repertoire of traditional items reflective of their community's cultural and aesthetic values.

Repertoire

Any individual practitioner or group calls upon a range of skills to create enactments within a particular tradition. For a musician, repertoire consists of songs, instrumental skills, and performing styles. Craft repertoires include materials, designs, and techniques; cooks have repertoires of food preparation, presentation, and social interaction; workers -- from cowboys to fishermen to the Wall Street traders featured at the 2001 New York City program -- have repertories of stories, slang, and knowledge related to their occupation.

In some cases tradition-bearers may have in their repertoire only items and forms drawn intergenerationally from within their own specific community or occupational group. In such cases, selections from that repertoire are typically directed by community-shared notions of appropriateness. For example, certain songs are sung for birth rituals, certain types of goods are produced for inclusion in dowries, certain foods are prepared for particular holiday celebrations.

In other cases, tradition-bearers may simultaneously participate in several cultural communities in varying degrees. Their repertoires reflect the range of their participation in these multiple communities. Repertoire items selected for a given situation and the style in which an item is presented depend on many factors, among them the performers' perception of their own cultural identity, and of the cultural identity of the audience.

The Festival: Conceptual, Design, and Logistical Development

The Festival occurs in a symbolically important space -- the center of the National Mall surrounded by the Washington Monument, the U.S. Capitol Building, and the Smithsonian Museums. This highly visible space on "America's front lawn" signals national attention for the cultural traditions presented here. Although each of the annual component programs is considered a separate exhibit with its own themes and identity within the larger Festival, consistency in design helps the Festival maintain a unified identity. On the Mall, the Folklife Festival is identified as a unified and integral event through Festival signs and banners, common physical/design features, official badges for staff and participants, and Festival-wide facilities and activities.

The CFCH staff puts considerable thought and production effort into designing presentation formats and physical set-ups that are appropriate to the traditions and practices being featured. The program's physical site strives to meet the needs of participants and to enable them to communicate effectively with Festival visitors. The use of metaphorically meaningful structures

and aesthetic decorative elements assists in contextualizing the presentations. Visual design is consistent with the aesthetic sensibilities of the traditions represented.

There is no formulaic way to conceive -- let alone produce -- a Festival program before research has been carried out and production needs and possibilities have been discussed and evaluated. Nonetheless, the physical design of a program site on the Mall must take into consideration various logistic and budgetary parameters. Site dimensions, the outdoor environment, the locations of trees, restrictions on digging by the National Park Service, limited drainage and electric facilities, crowd flow considerations, fire restrictions, and safety codes all affect what may or may not be possible for a program design. Construction is further complicated by the fact that the Festival must be built to stand the ravages of more than one million visitors and the occasionally inclement Washington weather, and then taken apart within a relatively short time. Finally, as in the case of any exhibition, limitations on budgeted funds dictate choices within the universe of program design possibilities.

Physical settings may include:

- large “neutral settings” in pavilion-sized tents,
- a small tented stage in which a participant creates his or her own context,
- suggestive environments using tools, artifacts, and decorative objects, and
- settings built to suggest workplaces, architectural features, or community structures.

Musical or dance performances are often set in “neutral” settings with a large stage fronted by a dance floor and bleacher seating for a large audience. Other neutral settings, such as a small stage with benches for the audience, are used for more intimate performances, discussions, and demonstrations. Other performance areas are constructed to suit the needs of particular cultural themes or constructed to meet presentational needs of a craft or an occupational demonstration.

Conducting Fieldwork for the Festival

The researcher documents communities, traditions, and practitioners and recommends them for a Festival program under the guidance of the program curator or curators who are responsible for developing a thematic focus and integrating program components. Research facilitates:

- the identification and selection of traditions and their bearers
- the identification and selection of Festival participants who represent those traditions
- the development of presentational formats and interpretive materials for selected traditions and participants
- the development of thematic concepts, aesthetic and functional designs, and staging logistics
- the creation of an archival record that becomes part of the Smithsonian Institution's permanent collection where it will inform future generations of researchers.

Research for a Festival program relies upon the standard techniques of folklorists, cultural anthropologists, and other social scientists. Researchers seek and identify key individuals within their targeted community who are knowledgeable in the selected tradition or theme. In some cases, this is a matter of working with individuals with whom the researcher already has a relationship. In other cases, it is a matter of making new contacts within the community, gaining entry, pursuing leads, discovering community standards of excellence, and identifying individuals who are recognized as embodiments of those standards.

Once such persons are located, researchers approach them for interviews. Many field researchers find a letter of introduction and some other general information such as an informational brochure, which can be left with the interviewee, helpful. Program curators will provide you with such a letter and with copies of Festival brochures for this purpose. Researchers should tell interviewees that they are doing background research on traditions and will be recommending tradition-bearers for participation. ***Do not in any way suggest to interviewee that your recommendations will necessarily result in their participation*.** A number of factors (including funding, logistics, scheduling, balance, and representativeness) will be considered in making the final selections. Many exemplary practitioners who are contacted during field research are not invited to participate in the Festival. This is not a reflection of their competence, artistic ability, or personality. Photographs, interview material, and sound and video recordings of tradition-bearers who are not invited as participants will become a permanent part of the Center's Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections and may be used for Festival signs, in Festival program book articles, or in ancillary products, as well as for future research.

The Festival and the process of gathering information toward organizing the program should not be a mystery to the tradition-bearers being interviewed, and they should feel

free to contact the curator if questions arise about the process.

Researchers are required to obtain signed release forms from all interviewees. This is a basic permission statement signed by the person interviewed, photographed, or recorded. It explains why the research is being conducted and how it will be used.

The Interview

The interview should include an oral biography, anecdotal narratives, responses to open-ended questions, and a detailed description of the relevant tradition. The researcher's role is to document traditions and tradition-bearers and make recommendations for the Festival.

The interview should discuss the specific details or process of the tradition, the interviewee's repertoire, how the tradition was learned, in what contexts it is enacted, how it has changed, the audience for the tradition, the significance of the tradition (personally and to others in the community), and who else practices the tradition. **Other topics to be covered in an interview depend on the thematic focus of a particular Festival program.**

Researchers should use their own judgment in phrasing questions, depending upon the person being interviewed and where it takes place (e.g., in a formal setting, walking through a neighborhood, or while a person demonstrates his/her skill). Look for information concerning the following:

- What is a person's repertoire of skills (e.g., a cab driver may also be a stand-up comic, a cook, a woodcarver, and/or a storyteller; a fisherman may also be a talented poet)?
- What is a person's repertoire range within a tradition (e.g., a bagel maker may also be trained in other types of bread making)?
- What are the styles associated with a tradition and how have they changed over time?
- What are the regular contexts of performance or production (i.e., where is the music played, the bread made, the work done)?
- Did/does the surrounding landscape shape or reshape the tradition?
- Are there criteria for excellence (e.g., what makes a good Harris Tweed weaver or Thai cook)?
- How is their traditional knowledge learned, revitalized, passed on?
- Are particular meanings associated with the tradition (e.g., historical,

religious, ethnic, or other forms of identity); are there any associations to other cultural events or chronological cycles?

- What skills and knowledge are needed to belong and to perform in a particular occupationally defined community?

- How do occupations relate to larger groupings such as community organizations, mutual aid societies, labor unions, nations, ethnic groups, social movements, institutions of national and international trade?

- What is the occupational and community lore that contributes to occupational social organization (e.g., stories, rituals, joking, rites-of-passage, work-related crafts, stories, food traditions)?

Interviewers should also ask for advice about other knowledgeable individuals who might be interviewed. Often, it becomes necessary to have more than one good candidate to represent a tradition, as the first choice may not be willing or able to attend the Festival for some reason.

Program curators will provide more guidance on specific information to gather **in order to tie particular traditions into the chosen theme(s) of the program.** Again, themes should be used as guidelines, but the interview on the whole should not be forced to remain within the confines of a program theme.

With large groups such as musicians, a taped interview with the whole group is not necessary, but an interview with the founder or a principal member is necessary.

Documenting the Interview

The Interview Report Form

You will be provided by the program curator with a copy of a document called the Interview Report Form. This document must be filled out thoroughly and thoughtfully for everyone interviewed. It will provide complete contact information for the interviewee, a summary of the information you have gathered, your assessment of this person as a potential participant for the Festival, and whether you see them fitting into the themes and goals of the program.

Audio and Visual Documentation

Recordings provide an essential record to back up your notes and memory and are required for accuracy, review, and documentation purposes. It is okay to turn off the recorder if an interviewee does not want personal, sacred, or controversial topics recorded.

Good fieldwork also involves keeping precise field notes and reports. Visual documentation should include the traditional activities and/or products (e.g., crafts, foods,

special clothing, occupational accessories, and performances) and the social and physical contexts in which they occur.

Audio, photo, and video documentation of a tradition are crucial for deciding Festival appropriateness and for developing contextual material for Festival presentation and features for the Festival web site. In the course of the interview(s) with a tradition-bearer, it is helpful to ask the person to sing a song, play music, demonstrate the making of bricks, or a meal, or whatever it is that the person is being considered for.

Technical equipment available for documentation continues to change rapidly. The paragraphs below contain general information, but researchers are encouraged to contact the curator or program coordinator to discuss other formats, options, and approaches. CFCH has some equipment that may be borrowed by researchers. Contact the curator for more information.

Audio Recording Tips:
Digital audio recorders are preferred. If an analog tape or video recorder is the only high-quality equipment available, researchers should use standard 60- to 90-minute cassette tape. Digital audio tape (DAT) is not up to archival standards and its use is discouraged.

When using any recording device, we recommend that you:

- familiarize yourself with and test the recorder *before* arriving for the interview
- carry extra batteries or back-up power
- record in a place with as little ambient sound as possible (if a radio or TV is on, request that it be shut off)
- "mark" the beginning of recording with your name, date, identity of the person being interviewed and location of interview; most fieldworkers do this *before* arriving at an interview
- record complete songs and stories, not just portions

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Photographs
Photographs have many uses in Festival production. They can show how the Festival environment needs to be constructed for particular traditional practices and help planners understand and evaluate the work of particular craftspeople. In the Festival program book, they illustrate particular themes and show communities, genres, practitioners, and parts of processes that cannot be presented on the Mall. On Festival signs and on our Festival web site, they introduce visitors to communities, themes, and participants. And in publicity, they convey the drama and significance of tradition-based cultural performance and productions.

The Festival needs pictures that tell a richly textured story. People, their relationships, and their aesthetic and productive activities should be the center of photographic interest. Photographs should include portrait shots as well as action shots of people performing or demonstrating their art form or skill. Some photos should show building interiors and

exteriors and public spaces. Some should feature construction techniques that can be duplicated at the Festival. Others should document the natural contexts of performance and work. If landscapes are socially or culturally significant, they should be photographed.

Photo Documentation Tips:
As with video/audio equipment, photographic equipment is changing rapidly. If you are shooting with a digital camera, use the highest DPI possible for your jpegs or tiffs. The requested size for images that will be enlarged for use on Festival signs is 600 DPI at 8x10 inches. Cameras with at least 6 megapixels are recommended. If your camera is capable of shooting "RAW" format, this is highly recommended. Carry extra memory cards if you are not able to download photos in a timely manner, as the larger the format the more memory it will require. Digital images should be submitted on disks, accompanied by a log describing your images. Also recommended:

- take more than one picture of something important
- take full-body shots of a person or performance, and
- take close-ups showing details of hands at work, (slicing lox, bending neon glass, etc.)
- turn off date and time imprint functions (such shots are generally unusable for our purposes)
- allow some "breathing space" around the edges of the photo (i.e., do not crop photos within the shot) as designers need about 1/4 of an inch around each photo for lay-out purposes; many an otherwise great photo is unusable because of this
- try to avoid shooting with a long telephoto lens as this creates problems with focus and diminishes cropping possibilities (e.g., if designers decide to use only part of a larger image)
- Film Images: return all film undeveloped to the Smithsonian

Video Documentation
Video recordings can help the Festival's technical staff better understand the physical dimensions of an event or performance, as well as spatial requirements and equipment needs. Video recordings are also edited and used on the CFCH web site. Videotape whenever possible if doing so is not overly intrusive. We recommend that you:

- familiarize yourself with your camera's operation *before* arriving on the scene
- taping entire performances, dances, songs, work processes
- providing your own commentary when appropriate
- frame your shots to reveal the most important parts of the action
- use wide, medium, and close-up shots to build the scene
- not recording at extended play
- Video interviews may be submitted on VHS, Mini DV, DV Cam, Beta Cam SP, or HDV formats. We prefer HDV.

NOTE: Video functions on still photo cameras are not generally of a high quality but can be quite useful for reference purposes, such as recording a short sequence of the process of making a net or weaving a basket, or for recording a "360" view of a workshop or the interaction of some tradition with movement (dance, etc.). However, they typically take a great deal of memory and battery power, so should be used at your discretion.

Submission of Research Materials

Researchers are asked to submit all their research documentation to the Smithsonian unless otherwise instructed. In their accompanying fieldwork reports, researchers are asked to assess the appropriateness of particular traditions and interviewees for the Festival. In some cases, fieldwork data will be supplemented through library or archival research. In addition, drawings, diagrams, and maps based on library or field research may be useful in facilitating the assessment process.

If any sensitive material that is harmful or potentially harmful to either the researcher or the interviewee is included in any taped/visual documentation submitted to the Smithsonian, the researcher should make this fact known to the curator. In such cases, archival and research use of the material can be restricted. In such a case, no other use, publication, or broadcast of restricted documentary material will be allowed unless specific permission is granted by the researcher and/or the interviewee.

Researchers hired by the Smithsonian are permitted to make use of their findings for nonprofit educational and public informational purposes. Such use should acknowledge the Smithsonian, as is appropriate. Researchers are encouraged to check with the curator before any questionable use of documentary materials.

Submitted fieldwork must be accompanied by the following:

1. Interviews recorded on digital audio recorder, if possible. See suggested questions and topics to cover. Please fill out an Interview Report Form (Appendix II) for each individual or family.

2. Photographs: Good quality digital images are most useful (see attached photo specs). Fill out Photo Log Forms for each topic photographed.

3. Video, as appropriate or necessary (consult with curators)

4. Written Fieldwork Report

5. "Pull-out quotes" from your interviews that will help tell the story of this tradition.

6. Ideas for physical spaces.

7. Travel log of your research, including where you went, what you saw, and who you interviewed

8. Interview Report Forms for all interviewees

9. Photo/Video/Audio Log giving overview of materials on CD/DVD or audio tapes

10. Release Form for everyone you have interviewed signed by interviewee.