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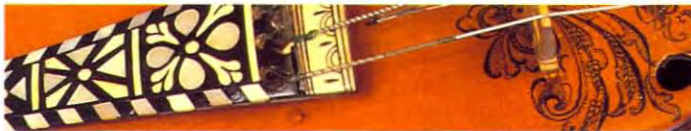
Folklife:



A



Commonwealth

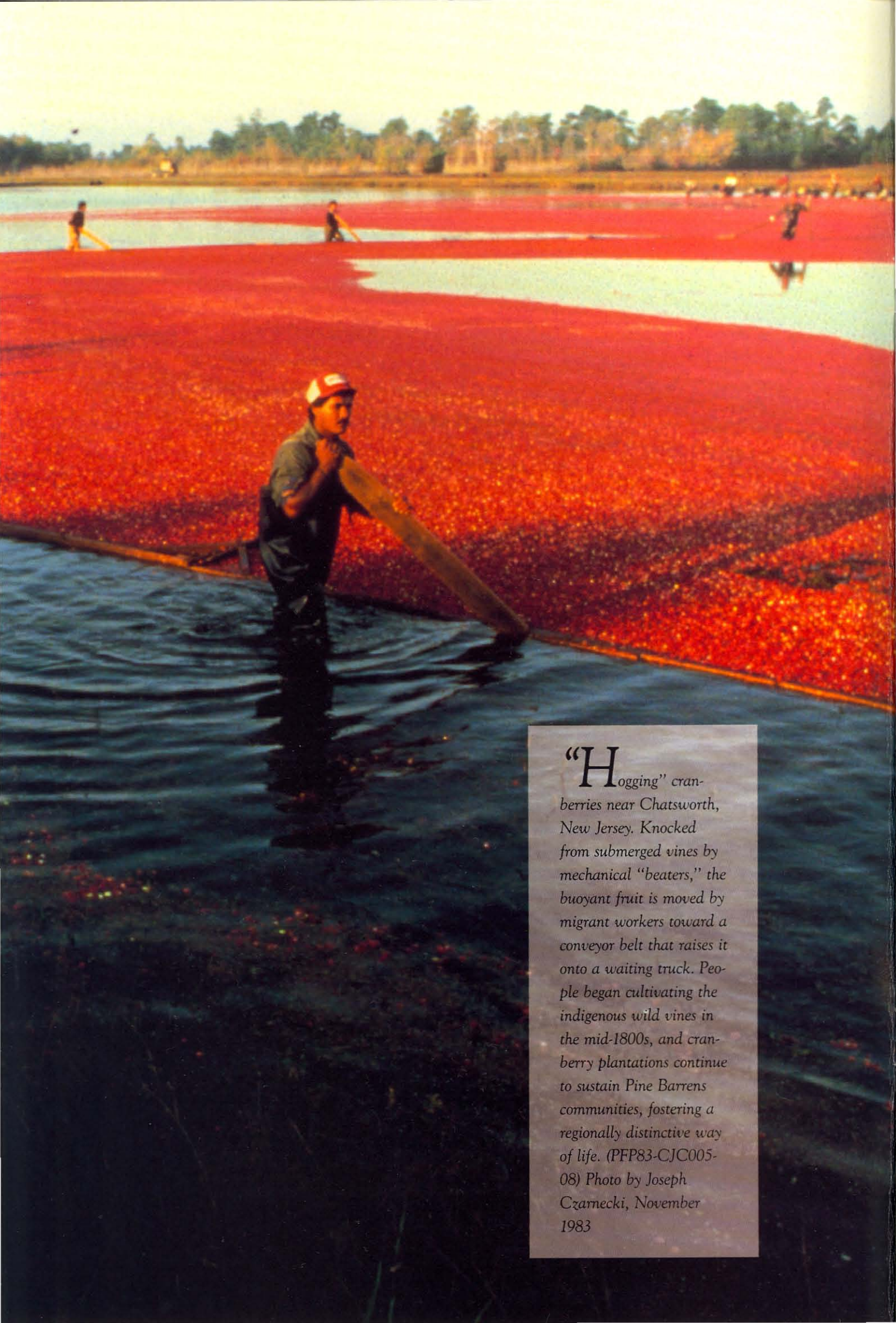


of



Cultures





*“Hogging” cranberries near Chatsworth, New Jersey. Knocked from submerged vines by mechanical “beaters,” the buoyant fruit is moved by migrant workers toward a conveyor belt that raises it onto a waiting truck. People began cultivating the indigenous wild vines in the mid-1800s, and cranberry plantations continue to sustain Pine Barrens communities, fostering a regionally distinctive way of life. (PFP83-CJC005-08) Photo by Joseph Czamecki, November 1983*

*American Folklife:*

*A Commonwealth*

*of Cultures*

by  
Mary Hufford



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Cover Photos:


1. Crazy quilt made by Zenna Todd of Ennice, North Carolina. Pieced from children's old clothing, the quilt documents family life with scraps and images that recall family secrets and jokes, including the outline of Mrs. Todd's own hand. (BR8-GJ43-14) Photo by Geraldine Johnson, 1978
2. Farmers and buyers occupy a "liar's bench" before an auction at the Galax Livestock Market, Galax, Carroll County, Virginia, 1978. (BR-8-LE48-10) Photo by Lyntha Eiler
3. Home-made preserves prepared by Mae Willey, Baywood, Virginia. (BR8-TE-121-2) Photo by Terry Eiler, 1978
4. Hardanger fiddle belonging to Jørgen Hyland of Evanston, Illinois. (Ch77-73-10) Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, June 1977
5. Mural in Jazz Alley, 50th and Langley Streets, Chicago, Illinois, July 1977. (Ch77-99-2) Photo by Jonas Dovydėnas

### What is Folklife?

**L**ike Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, folklife is often hidden in full view, lodged in the various ways we have of discovering and expressing who we are and how we fit into the world. Folklife is reflected in the names we bear from birth, invoking affinities with saints, ancestors, or cultural heroes. Folklife is the secret languages of children, the codenames of CB operators, and the working slang of watermen and doctors. It is the shaping of everyday experiences in stories swapped around kitchen tables or parables told from pulpits. It is the African-American rhythms embedded in gospel hymns, bluegrass music, and hip hop, and the Lakota flutist rendering anew his people's ancient courtship songs.

Folklife is the sung parodies of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and the variety of ways there are to skin a muskrat, preserve string beans, or join two pieces of wood. Folklife is society welcoming new members at *bris* and christening, and keeping the dead incorporated on All Saints Day. It is the marking of the Jewish New Year at Rosh Hashanah and the Persian New Year at Noruz. It is the evolution of *vaqueros* into buckaroos, and the riderless horse, its stirrups backward, in the funeral processions of high military commanders.

Folklife is the thundering of foxhunters across the rolling Rappahannock countryside and the listening of hilltoppers to hounds crying fox in the Tennessee mountains. It is the twirling of lariats at western rodeos, and the spinning of double-dutch jumpropes in West Philadelphia. It is scattered across the landscape in Finnish saunas and Italian vineyards; engraved in the split rail boundaries of Appalachian "hollers" and the stone fences around Catskill "cloves"; scrawled on urban streetscapes by graffiti artists; and projected onto skylines by the tapering steeples of churches, mosques, and temples.

Folklife is community life and values, artfully expressed in myriad forms and interactions. Universal, diverse, and enduring, it enriches the nation and makes us a commonwealth of cultures. 



Farmhands and members of the Slate family break for dinner at the Slate farm in Patrick County, Virginia. (BR8-14-20302-8) Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, August 30, 1978

*Folklore, Folklife, and the  
American Folklife Preservation Act*

The study of folklore and folklife stands at the confluence of several European academic traditions. The concepts of *folklore* and *folklife* emerged in a climate of romantic nationalism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when scholars saw that the industrial and agricultural revolutions were outmoding the older ways of life, making many customs and technologies paradoxically more conspicuous as they disappeared. In 1846 Englishman William J. Thoms gathered up the profusion of “manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time” under the single term *folklore*. In so doing he provided his colleagues interested in “popular antiquities” with a framework for their endeavor and modern folklorists with a name for their profession.

However, even as Thoms and his colleagues combed the British hinterlands for “stumps and stubs” of disappearing traditions, geographers and philologists in continental Europe were studying folk culture in its entirety. The German term *Volkskunde*, which appeared in 1806, designated not only oral traditions and customs but also material culture, including traditional foodways, costume, architecture, craft, and settlement patterns. Today the study of folklife encompasses all of the traditional expressions that shape and are shaped by various communities. While *folklore* and *folklife* may be used to distinguish oral tradition from material culture, the terms often are used interchangeably as well.

Over the past century the study of folklore has developed beyond the romantic quest for remnants of bygone days to the study of how community life and values are expressed through a wide variety of living traditions. To most people, however, the term *folklore* continues to suggest aspects of culture that are out-of-date or on the fringe—the province of old people, ethnic groups, and the rural poor. The term may even be used to characterize something as trivial or



Boy Chief, of the Pawnee tribe, making a cylinder recording for Addison E. Sheldon in 1905. Thousands of wax cylinders were made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by ethnologists, many working for federal agencies. Over the past decade, through the American Folklife Center's Federal Cylinder Project, the contents of many of these wax cylinders have been transferred to magnetic tape and disseminated back to American Indian communities. (10378) Courtesy of Archives and Manuscripts Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society

untrue, as in “that’s just folklore.” Modern folklorists believe that no aspect of culture is trivial, and that the impulse to make culture, to *traditionalize* shared experiences, imbuing them with form and meaning, is universal among humans. Reflecting on their hardships and triumphs in song, story, ritual, and object, people everywhere shape cultural legacies meant to outlast each generation.

In 1976, as the United States celebrated its Bicentennial, the U.S. Congress passed the American Folklife Preservation Act (P.L. 94-201). In writing the legislation, Congress had to define *folklife*. Here is what the law says:

*“American folklife” means the traditional expressive culture shared within the various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, regional; expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, handicraft; these expressions are mainly learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are generally maintained without benefit of formal instruction or institutional direction.*

Created after more than a century of legislation designed to protect physical aspects of heritage—natural species, tracts of wilderness, landscapes, historic buildings, artifacts, and monuments—the law reflects a growing awareness among the American people that cultural diversity, which distinguishes and strengthens us as a nation, is also a resource worthy of protection.

In the United States, awareness of folklife has been heightened both by the presence of many cultural groups from all over the world and by the accelerated pace of change in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, the effort to conserve folklife should not be seen simply as an attempt to preserve vanishing ways of life. Rather, the American Folklife Preservation Act recognizes the vitality of folklife today.

From its inception the United States has been deemed remarkable for its cultural pluralism, a nation made up of many cultures and nationalities, transformed by their experiences here into “Americans.” For much of the pres-



Assembled for a portrait, members of an Italian-American family in Pueblo, Colorado, express their continuing sense of community with their ancestors, producing a single image that metaphorically unites them. (IAW-KL-C086-17) Photo by Ken Light, July 8, 1990



Evening dance at the volunteer fireman's barbecue, Paradise Valley, Nevada. Forming around shared concerns (in this case, the need to protect the community from fire), voluntary associations can be rich centers of cultural production. (NV8-CF114-14) Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, June 18, 1978

ent century the metaphor of the melting pot has been used to symbolize this transformative process. However, the metaphor suggests that it is the immigrants, not those already here, who must change in order to blend in with American life, and that these changes occur automatically. It suggests that cultural difference is an impurity to be refined away in the crucible of American experience. We no longer view cultural difference as a problem to be

solved, but as a tremendous opportunity, a rich resource for all Americans, who constantly shape and transform their many cultures.

Sharing with others the experience of family life, ethnic origin, occupation, religious belief, stage of life, recreation, and geographic proximity, most individuals belong to more than one community. Some groups have existed for thousands of years, while others come together temporarily around a variety of shared concerns—particularly in America, where democratic principles have long sustained what Alexis de Tocqueville called the distinctly American “art of associating together.”

Taken as a whole, the thousands of grassroots associations in the United States form a fairly comprehensive index to our nation's cultural affairs. Some, like ethnic organizations and churches, have explicitly cultural aims, while others spring up around common environmental, recreational, or occupational concerns. Some affiliations may be less official: family members at a reunion, coworkers in a factory, or friends gathered to make back-porch (or kitchen, or garage) music. Others may be more official: San Sostine Societies, chapters of Ducks Unlimited, the Mount Pleasant Basketmakers Association, volunteer fire companies, and senior citizens clubs. Sorting and re-sorting themselves into an array of separate or interrelated groups, Americans continually create culture out of their shared experiences.





*E*dd and Carrie Severt prepare lunch in their farmhouse kitchen, Alleghany County, North Carolina. Folklife is community life and values, artfully expressed in the recurring moments and settings of everyday life. Ways of doing things, whether of slicing cucumbers or apportioning the day, can become ways of holding together people, past, and place. (BR8-LE23-15) Photo by Lyntha Scott Eiler, August 1978

The traditional knowledge and skills required to make a pie crust, plant a garden, arrange a birthday party, or turn a lathe are exchanged in the course of daily living and learned by imitation. It is not simply skills that are transferred in such interactions, but notions about the proper ways to be human at a particular time and place. Whether sung or told, enacted or crafted, traditions are the outcroppings of deep lodes of worldview, knowledge, and wisdom, navigational aids in an ever-fluctuating social world. Conferring on community members a vital sense of identity, belonging, and purpose, folklife defends against social disorders like delinquency, indigence, and drug abuse, which may be symptoms of deep cultural crises.



A wall mural on 26th Street in "Little Village," a predominantly Mexican section of Chicago. Nostalgia for an absent homeland may inspire immigrants to render distant landscapes more immediate through artful representations. (CH77-171-3) Photo by Jonas Dovydenas, August 13, 1977

As communities evolve, they invest their surroundings with memory and meaning. For American Indian people, the landscape is redolent of origin



Railbird "pusher" Kenneth Camp propels folklorist Gerald Parsons in a railbird skiff through meadows along the Maurice River in Southern New Jersey, where Parsons (with tape recorder) and photographer Dennis McDonald are documenting a railbird shoot. Hunting traditions like railbirding work to conserve both nature and culture. Licensing fees collected from waterfowlers help to preserve marsh habitat, and the patronage of local guides by gunners from out-of-town fosters the intimate knowledge of the environment handed down within local families. (PFP84-CDM033-03) Photo by Dennis McDonald, 1984

myths and cautionary tales, which come alive as grandmothers decipher ancient place names to their descendants. Similarly, though far from their native countries, immigrant groups may keep alive mythologies and histories tied to landscapes in the old country, evoking them through architecture, music, dance, ritual, and craft. Thus Russian immigrants flank their homes with birch trees reminiscent of Eastern Europe. The call-and-response pattern of West African music is preserved in the gospel music of African-Americans. Puerto Rican women dancing *La Plena* mime their Jibaro forebears who washed their clothes in the island's mountain streams. The passion of Christ is annually mapped onto urban landscapes in the Good


Friday processions of Hispanic-Americans, and Ukranian-Americans, inscribing Easter eggs, overlay pre-Christian emblems of life and fertility with Christian significance.

Traditional ways of doing things are often deemed unremarkable by their practitioners, until cast into relief by abrupt change, confrontation with alternative ways of doing things, or the fresh perspective of an outsider (such as a folklorist). The diversity of American cultures has been catalytic in this regard, prompting people to recognize and reflect upon their own cultural differences. Once grasped as distinctive, ways of doing things may become emblems of participation. Ways of greeting one another, of seasoning foods, or ornamenting homes and landscapes may be deliberately used to hold together people, past, and place. Ways to wrap proteins in starches come to distinguish those who make pierogis, dumplings, pupusas, knishes, or dim sum. The weave of a blanket or basket can bespeak African-American, Native American, East European or Middle Eastern identity and values. Distinctive rhythms, whether danced, strummed, sung, or drummed, may synchronize Americans born in the same decade, or who share common ancestry or beliefs.



A Hmong "story cloth," embroidered by Mrs. Youa Vang of Thailand in the mid-1980s, depicts Hmong refugees fleeing from Laos to Thailand, with all of their possessions in baskets on their backs. Collection of Mrs. Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk. Photograph 1988, courtesy of Sally Peterson

Traditions do not simply pass along unchanged. In the hands of those who practice them they may be vigorously remodelled, woven into the present, and laden with new meanings. Folklife, often seen as a casualty of change, may actually survive because it is reformulated to resolve cultural, social, and biological crises. Older traditions may be pressed into service for mending the ruptures between past and present, and between old and new worlds. Thus Hmong immigrants use the textile tradition of *paj ntaub* to record the violent events that hurled them from their traditional world in Vietnam into a profoundly different life in the United States. South Carolina sweetgrass basketmakers use their baskets to



*P*aiute Indian “buckaroo” Myron Smart saddles a horse for work at the Black Ridge line camp of the 96 Ranch, Paradise Valley, Nevada. Responding to the challenges of life in the same locale, different ethnic groups may cast their lot together under regional identities as “buckaroos,” “stumpjumpers,” or “watermen,” without losing their ethnic identity. (NV9-CF6-2) Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, 1978





William Clark (known as "Robot Man" in his Newtonville, New Jersey community) recycles automotive scraps from his auto repair shop into "junkyard robots." He began making the sculptures when the loss of his license in 1980 forced him into temporary retirement. Transforming the tools and skills of his trade into the mechanic's equivalent of whittler's fancies, he was thus able to remain involved in the processes that he loved in his work. (PFP83-CJC015-13) Photo by Joseph Czarnecki, 1983

sift back through two centuries of life in America to Africa, where their craft originated. And a Puerto Rican street theater troupe dramatizes culture conflict on the mainland in a bilingual farce about foodways.

Retirement or the onset of old age can occasion a return to traditional crafts learned early in life. For the woman making a memory quilt or the machinist making models of tools no longer in use, traditional forms become a way of reconstituting the past in the present. The craft, the recipe, the photo album, or the ceremony serve as thresholds to a vanishing world in which an elderly person's values and identity are rooted. This is especially significant to younger witnesses for whom the past is thus made tangible and animated through stories inspired by the forms.

Cultural lineages do not always follow genealogical ones. Often a tradition's "rightful" heirs are not very interested in inheriting it. Facing indifference among the young from their own groups, and pained by the possibility that their traditions might die out, masters of traditional arts and skills may deliberately rewrite the cultural will, taking on students from many different backgrounds in order to bequeath their traditions. Modern life has broadened the pool of potential heirs, making it possible for a basketmaker from New England to turn to the craft revival for apprentices, or a master of the Chinese Opera in New York to find eager students among European Americans.

The United States is not a melting pot, but neither is it a fixed mosaic of ethnic enclaves. From the beginning, our nation has been a meeting ground of many cultures, whose interactions have produced a unique array of cultural groups and forms. Responding to the challenges of life in the same locale, different ethnic groups may cast their lot together under regional identities as "buckaroos," "Pineys," "watermen,"



Cambodian musicians Sokhm Bun on the banjo, Chorb Chan on tree ou, and Nhak Chann on the takae, playing in the home of Sorn Veuk in Lowell, Massachusetts, September 1987. The American banjo has been adopted by this traditional Cambodian ensemble. (LFP-DD-B320-30) Photo by Doug DeNatale

or "Hoosiers," without surrendering ethnicity in other settings. Distinctive ways of speaking, fiddling, dancing, making chili, and designing boats can evolve into resources for expressing and celebrating regional identity. Thus ways of shucking oysters or lassoing cattle can become touchstones of identity for itinerant workers, distinguishing Virginians from Marylanders or Texans from Californians. And in a Washington, D.C., neighborhood, Hispanic-Americans from various South and Central American countries explore an emerging Latino identity, which they express through an annual festival and parade that would not occur in their countries of origin.

Over the past two centuries, the intercultural transactions that are so distinctly American have produced uniquely New World blends whose origins we no longer recognize. We tend to forget that the banjo, now played almost exclusively by white musicians, was a cultural idea introduced here by African-Americans, and that the tradition of lining out hymns that today flourishes mainly in African-American churches is a legacy from England. Without this early nineteenth-century interchange, perhaps these distinct traditions would have disappeared. And out of the same cultural encounters in the upper South that produced these transfers, there grew distinctly American styles of music suffused with African-American ideas of syncopation.

Other forgotten legacies of early cultural encounters spangle the landscape. Early American watermen freely combined ideas from English punts, Swedish flatboats, and French bateaus to create small wooden boats that now register subtleties of wind, tide, temperature, and contours of earth beneath far-flung waters of the United States. Thus have Jersey garveys, Ozark john boats, and Mackenzie River skiffs become vessels conveying regional identity. The martin birdhouse complexes commonly found in yards east of the Mississippi River hail from gourd dwellings that American Indians devised centuries ago to entice



Martin houses on Barnegat Bay in Tuckerton, New Jersey. (P3P68-B/L210421-08-04) Photo by Jens Lund, 1983







**F**ourth graders in Blue Ridge Elementary School perform a hand-clapping routine, one item in a large repertoire of such expressions shared among children, and largely forgotten by adults. Gradually mastering a wide variety of expressive routines taught to them by peers, children acquire physical, verbal, cognitive, and social skills. This particular routine, entitled "My Left, My Left," came into the mountain community from New York, via a cousin of the girl on the right. (BR8-PM29-4)  
Photo by Patrick Mullen, September 12, 1978

the insect-eating birds into cohabitation. Descendants of those American Indians now live beyond the territory of martins, while the descendants of seventeenth-century martins live in houses modelled on Euro-American architectural forms.


The early colonists' adoption of an ingenious form of mosquito control exemplifies a strong pattern throughout our history, the pattern of one group freely borrowing and transforming the cultural ideas of another. We witness the continuance of this pattern in the appropriation of the Greek bouzouki by Irish-



In a Portuguese neighborhood in Lowell, Massachusetts, Robert Koch entertains his grandchildren. (LFP-JB-C015-15) Photo by John Lueders-Booth, September 8, 1987

American musicians, in the influence of Cajun, Yiddish, and African styles on popular music, in the co-opting of Cornish pasties by Finnish Minnesotans, and in the embracing of ancient Japanese techniques of joinery by American woodworkers.

American folklife simmers in many pots of gumbo, burgoo, chili, goulash, and booya. And the American people are the chefs, concocting culture from the resources and ideas in the American folklife repertory. Folklife flourishes when children gather to play, when artisans attract students and clientele, when parents and grandparents pass along their traditions and values to the younger generations,

whether in the kitchen or in an ethnic or parochial school. Defining and celebrating themselves in a constantly changing world, Americans enliven the landscape with parades, sukkos, and powwows, seasonally inscribing their world-views on doorways and graveyards, valiantly keeping indeterminacy at bay. Our common wealth circulates in a free flowing exchange of cultural ideas, which on reflection appear to merge and diverge, surface and submerge throughout our history like contra dancers advancing and retiring, like stitches dropped and retrieved in the hands of a lacemaker, like strands of bread ritually braided, like the reciprocating bow of a master fiddler. 

ample, folklorists may be found helping health care professionals to accommodate their practice to patients whose traditional beliefs about illness and health are at odds with contemporary medical views. Folklorists may speak to natural resource managers on behalf of traditional craftspeople denied access to necessary natural materials, or may help traditional artists gain access to a broader clientele in order to market their wares. Folklorists may also advise planners regarding traditional patterns of land use, or alert city council members to the impact of particular laws upon cultural cornerstones such as ethnic social clubs



Mme. Yvonne Lagasse, on August 11, 1987, describing her memories of "Little Canada" to folklorist Doug DeNatale, field coordinator for the American Folklife Center's survey in Lowell, Massachusetts. (LFP-CF-B006-08) Photo by Carl Fleischhauer, August 11, 1987

and marketplaces. Folklorists join with historic preservationists to identify traditional histories lodged not only in objects but in a broad array of expressive forms. Folklorists also work with professional educators in museums, parks, and classrooms to devise settings in which respected bearers of tradition may impart their wealth of knowledge and skills to the younger generations.

Although the American Folklife Preservation Act suggests that folklife can be "preserved," in truth, something as fluid and dynamic as folklife does not lend itself to preservation in the sense that buildings and material artifacts do. We can record folklife on paper, film, and tape, which we in turn preserve in archives, libraries, and museums. Such preservation does not directly protect a living culture from the outside forces that disrupt the dynamics governing cultural change from within: the department of transportation that divides an urban village with a freeway; the development of traditional hunting and gathering grounds into condominiums or wilderness preserves; or a governmental regulation that discourages languages on which cultures depend for their survival. However, the documentation of folklife may come in time to be the only record a community has of a way of life so disrupted. Ultimately, particular traditions endure because someone chooses to keep them alive, adapting them to fit changing circumstances, continually crafting new settings for their survival. Working to inform the public about folklife and its significance, folklorists can assist this process.

### *The American Folklife Center*

In passing the American Folklife Preservation Act in 1976, Congress bolstered its call to "preserve and present American folklife" by establishing the American Folklife Center. The Center, a part of the Library of Congress, fulfills its mandate in a variety of ways. It includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was founded in the Music Division at the Library of Congress in 1928 and has grown to become one of the most significant collections of cultural research materials in the world, including manuscripts, sound and video recordings, still photographs, and related ephemera.

The Center has a staff of professionals who conduct programs under the general guidance of the Librarian of Congress and a Board of Trustees. It serves federal and state agencies; national, international, regional, and local organizations; scholars, researchers, and students; and the general public. The Center's programs and services include field projects, conferences, exhibitions, workshops, concerts, publications, archival preservation, reference service, and advisory assistance.

Unless otherwise noted, photographic illustrations for *American Folklife: A Commonwealth of Cultures* were taken from the collections of the American Folklife Center.

For a list of publications, including a free quarterly newsletter, *Folklife Center News*, and more information about the programs and activities of the Center, write to: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.



Mary Hufford is a folklife specialist at the American Folklife Center and has served on the executive board of the American Folklore Society. She is the author of *One Space, Many Places: Folklife and Land Use in New Jersey's Pinelands National Reserve* (1986), *Chaseworld: Foxhunting and Storytelling in New Jersey's Pine Barrens* (forthcoming), and many articles on American traditional culture.

Back Photos:

1. Audience at a Puerto Rican festival in Lowell, Massachusetts. Such public events enable groups to define and celebrate their shared identities through music, dance, and foodways, while at the same time sharing their traditions with others in a multicultural setting. (LFP-MM-C007) Photo by Mario Montaña, August 22, 1987
2. Crocheted item at a needlework display in St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, Oak Lawn, Illinois, 1977. (Ch77-19-17) Photo by Jonas Dovydenas
3. Strings of braided garlic hanging from the wall of LJB Farms, a farm stand in San Martin, Santa Clara Valley, California, run by Louie and Judy Bonino. (IAW-KL-C040-3) Photo by Ken Light
4. Fourth of July parade near Pueblo, Colorado, 1990. (IAW-KL-C066-3) Photo by Ken Light
5. Lithuanian patterns woven by Kazys Bartasius on a homemade loom in his basement in Chicago. Inspired by patterns found in traditional Lithuanian textile arts, Kazys Bartasius created sashes, table-runners, neckties, bookmarks, and other items emblematic of his homeland for patrons nationwide. (Ch77-198-10) Photo by Jonas Dovydenas

*P*arishioners of Nueva Esperanza Church in Lowell, Massachusetts, stage their annual enactment of the Passion of Christ on Good Friday. Mapping a sacred route, the via dolorosa of ancient Jerusalem, onto the secular cityscape, their public liturgy transforms the twentieth-century milltown into a reflection of their Catholic faith. (LFP-JB-C062-5) Photo by John Lueders-Booth, April 1, 1988



