

Folk Festivals and Community Consciousness:

Categories of the Festival Genre

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Folk festivals have always been an important part of American community life. As such, they have represented a large component of the traditional expression within the community. The popular community festival and the small group festive affair are, and have been, important events made up of a complex of folkloric phenomena. While the individual parts of the complex which makes up the festival have been studied in detail by folklorists, less attention has been paid to the festival itself. The burgeoning development of created festivals has required folklorists to make a more detailed examination of the festival genre. This article discusses the folk festival as a genre and proposes that there are identifiable types of festivals.

Festivals have endured through good and bad times in communities. They are periodic times for people to come together and interact ceremonially and festively in celebration. The celebration may be the change of one season to another, one stage of life to another, or simply a successful accomplishment. Festivals endure good times to celebrate the luck of having been successful; they endure bad times to bolster the spirit in anticipation of better times to come. Traditional expressions of song, dance, food, clothing, and sayings add to the comfort and communality of the event making the occasion or festival more acceptable to the participants.

The traditional folk festival, as defined by Richard Dorson, may be viewed as "a social performing folk art."¹ Taken as a whole, the festival is composed of social folk customs, such as rituals and traditional games, and of various aspects of material culture such as crafts, costume, and cookery. Following the spirit of Dorson's definition, folklorist Robert Smith extends the idea of the festival. "The festival may be considered a major class of folklore, one that may include within itself almost all the others as subclasses. A festival gives a unified context for the description and definition of the genres that occur within it . . ."² Until now, these definitions have been adequate to explain the normal outpouring of sentiment and action related to festive activities in small or large group communities. Traditional festivals, even those which have developed recently, have been community responses to some event or seasonal occurrence. They have provided ample reason for people to get together and celebrate in the ways which came most naturally or in ways prescribed by tradition.

More recently, however, with the tide of mass culture, there has been a tremendous growth in created festivals. Whether for commercial or nostalgic reasons—or both—the emergence of these synthetic festivals has blurred the distinctions between traditional authentic folk festivals and popular festivals conceived as folk. The blurring of this distinction has led to confusion on both the folk and the popular levels of understanding. The following discussion of three conceptual levels of festival occasions will illustrate this fact. It is important to keep in mind that contemporary festivals, both folk and popular, are now reflections of a complex society. The festival that occurs today seldom remains within a precise definition. Only on either extreme may the festival be classified as primarily "folk" or primarily "popular." Because of "context," a folk festival occasion may quickly melt into a popular festive occasion being viewed and interacted with by outsiders to the original event. Even so, this contextual change may only alter the original truly folk experience into a modified, yet not exclusive, folk experience. Traditional craftsmen building a log cabin at a festival, or church women making a quilt where onlookers may participate, are examples of sudden alteration of form and context.

I propose the following three-level general classification of events to descriptively analyze the individual festival. Using the categories of participatory, semi-participatory, and nonparticipatory as levels of audience/participant involvement, folklorists and festival organizers would be able to structurally identify the festival occasion. Further, categories of the festival genre would enable scholars of folklore to develop a classification for small group, non-ritual occasions which are ever present in community folk life.

On the participatory level, the festival is an authentic response to a celebration in a mode recognizable to the participants. The population of the festival is generally homogeneous. The time set aside for this type of festival is either periodic or occasional and generally known to the members of the community. For example, in the cases of harvesting, sheep-shearing, or cow-butchering, the festival is seasonal, depending either on the need or the time of year. Another example is the traditional country auction where the time set is occasional and which usually marks a change in a stage of life.

In the participatory festival, there is a basic population which recognizes the festival genre as a traditional form of interaction. On the farm, haying provides such an occasion; butchering is another good example. Palmer Shepard does much of the butchering for farmers in the Bloomington, Indiana, area and has enough business to schedule sessions well ahead of time. Like the auctioneer, who is the controlling factor and the star of a sale, the butcher is the center of attention. At this level, the festival is an interactive genre in which each person is a potential performer/participant.

Other totally participatory festivals include a range of family events such as marriages, baptisms, funerals, the family quilting bee, Easter egg hunts, Thanksgiving dinners, or Christmas celebrations. Small local festivals, such as annual block parties, also fall into this category. In these traditional rituals and small-group festivals, the population is basically homogeneous and the times set for the occasion are readily understood by the group.

On the second level—the semi-participatory festival—the celebration is still an authentic response in a mode which is recognizable, but the actions of the festival tend to be more exclusive and less participatory to potential performers. At community fairs and local blue grass festivals there is a clear distinction between the observers and the participants, but this distinction is blurred at different points of interaction.

The population at this level of festival is more likely to be heterogeneous than homogeneous, but not drastically so. The time of this festival type is likely to be periodic—as in the annual Boalsburg (Pennsylvania) Festival, the annual Todd's Fork blue grass Festival in Ohio, or the annual Bean Blossom blue grass Festival in Indiana—and is less likely to be known to all members of the community. In each case, while the spirit is pure enough, the occasion for assembling is still mostly a contrived one, based to some degree on the scheduling of the main participants and the availability of a semi-personal site. Because there is a recognized form that the festival takes, there is a sliding relationship between the audience and the performers. Although there is a strong mixture of in-group and out-group people, the communality of the event, as at most public auctions, provides a common basis from which observers may become participants. At this level the festival is only partially an interactive genre, but the form has been inculcated enough into common thought that the observers have a stronger sense of participation than is sometimes warranted. The euphoria of being a potential member of an in-group seduces many—including the folklorist—into believing that they are, in fact, members.

The third level of the festival is the totally non-participatory festival. On this

level, a heterogeneous population of observers arrives on periodic dates to view a contrived situation which is in a mode that is only vaguely recognizable. In this category, events like the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife and the now defunct Ohio Folk Festival create expressions of the less recently defunct "melting pot syndrome." Here we encounter events like "Old Ways in the New World," replete with traditional dress and food. Stressing the idea of "folklore in America," these events are surely festivals, but not necessarily "festivals of the folk."

Festivals have been created to exhibit the multifaceted nation and state. The problem is that instead of an authentic festival, what has been created, at best, is a museum and, at worst, an illusion of a festival. Rather than looking at talented performers and craftspeople in the Japanese sense, as a "living cultural treasure," we view them as relics and artifacts. As a curious counterpoint, events such as the Ohio State Fair stand in marked contrast to the contrived folk festival. At the state fair, which is not altogether spurious, the aspect of participation is revived with a vengeance-witness dumping "Bobo" in the water or shooting "free-throws" for panda bear prizes.

What gives rise to the festival's understanding is the complex maze of interrelated elements to the whole event of the festival. Folklore scholarship must differentiate between the authentic festival, such as the auction or the local festival, and the folk revival festival.

American society, like all societies, sets apart periodic and occasional moments for celebrations and festivals. Folk festivals, community festivals, and various kinds of old-time revivals are popular events in contemporary American culture. These include, for example, state fairs, county fairs, and town fairs. "Old settlers' days," "founders' days," and "frontier days" occur all over the country. Auctions, rallies, reunions, harvest festivals, and local festivals are held all year round. Indeed, in Ohio there are more than sixty local folk festivals each year, ranging from the "Ohio Hills Folk Festival" to the "Toledo International Folk Festival" to the "Pumpkin Festival" in Circleville. In Indiana as well there is a myriad of local folk festivals such as the "Fall Foliage Festival" in Martinsville, the "Bedford Limestone Festival," and the "Strawberry Festival" in Campbellsburg. A wide range of traditional and authentic local festival expressions exists.

Despite the overwhelming number of local festivals, there has been relatively little work done on the topic. The paucity of scholarly work has been due in part to the prevailing attitudes of folklorists with regard to folk festivals in America. Jan Brunvand has argued in his survey, The Study of American Folklore, that "true folk festivals are rare in America except among aboriginal and immigrant groups."³ Brunvand defines the festival as a custom which is associated with a holiday--that is, a calendar custom--which as an event is celebrated annually by the whole community. Brunvand's definition of a folk festival leaves little room for the study of common community folk festivals.

Among the important work done on American folk festivals are John Gutowski's study of the "Turtle Days" festival in Churubusco, Indiana,⁴ and Larry Danielson's study of The Ethnic Festival and Cultural Revivalism in a Small Midwestern Town. In defense of his inquiry into the festival, Danielson argues that if the folklorist "neglects the popular community festival, he neglects an important complex of folkloric phenomena in contemporary life. It is to the detriment of folklore scholarship to do so."⁵

There have been other attempts to correct this situation of neglect. Folklorist William Wiggins, in his extensive research of Afro-American folklore, has uncovered and brought to light a body of participatory celebrations dealing with emancipation days. In his article, "Lift Every Voice: A Study of Afro-American Emancipation

Celebrations," Wiggins outlines a series of community folk festivals that revolve around the themes of emancipation and include the various folk expressions indigenous to the Black community. Pointing out that "from 1965 to 1900 emancipation celebrations served as annual days of thanksgiving for freedom," Wiggins illustrates that the festival of freedom was an event which the community understood to be an essential part of its past and present.⁶

In a totally different area of attention paid to the growing festival phenomenon, the National Council for the Traditional Arts has issued an annual "Calendar of Festivals" which lists a wide assortment of "community-based traditional folk gatherings" and general "folk celebrations" in the United States. Complete with advertisements and admonitions, the list offers a state-by-state listing of 1,250 events. Unfortunately, there is little attempt to classify these events. Joe Wilson, Executive Director, points out in the introduction to the calendar that "if there is a message in this directory, it is that plasticus Americanus is not nearly as plastic as the barons of franchised entertainment would have him be."⁷ However, the problem remains that the public's appreciation of genuine traditionality is being confused by an explosion of folkloric and popular arts, crafts, and music. In fact, if anything, the "Calendar of Festivals" underscores the notion that these festivals have some sort of equal value-like McDonald's. The contribution of folklore as a discipline toward interpreting this phenomenon is to provide more information about the types of festivals and folk revivals that exist.

John Gutowski's development of the idea of the "protofestival" is a good example of the contribution folklorists can make to the study of the categories of the folk festival. In American Folklore and the Modern American Community Festival: A Case Study of Turtle Days in Churubusco, Indiana, Gutowski investigates the development of a community festival that originated with a hoax discovery of a giant turtle in Fulk Lake in 1949. At that time, after the hoax had been perpetrated, "Churubuscoans who were having fun, mingling with crowds, cornering the gossip, renewing old acquaintances, and enjoying new experiences were following, in essence, the behavioral patterns of the festival."⁸ Churubuscoans enjoyed the natural development of a festival about the turtle that community members were quick to adopt. Gutowski points out that "through tale telling, poetry making, boasting, hawking, and hoaxing the community had focused celebrations upon a central theme and placed itself, its sources of interest, accomplishment, and notoriety on display. Through institutionalization and yearly commemoration, this theme became a typically American festival, Turtle Days."⁹ Turtle Days is a participatory festival. Annually a basically homogeneous population gathers to celebrate an event important in the memories of some who recall the beginning, and important to others because it is an expected time for community members to take the opportunity to make and have fun. Gutowski concludes that this type of festival is better understood through an examination of its origins. "Fundamentally, the profestival may be defined as a communal celebration, dramatization, and promulgation of a locally significant event, belief, tale, or legend which through the accretion of hoax and other organized activity engenders broader social and economic involvement with the community."¹⁰

While few festivals are as complicated as Turtle Days, the Churubusco celebration yields certain conclusions. The timing of the festival and the relationship of audience to performers is readily understood by those in the community. While each year there may be new additions, such as hired lakedivers, the overall meaning and dimension of the festival remain the same. This point might be further illustrated by another example. When I asked a small girl in Cory, Indiana, what apples had to do with Cory Apple Festival, she replied, "Oh, you win apples by playing games." When asked to elaborate, she said that there were many games and events at the festival. One of the games was a three-legged race for which the participants could win apples. To this girl, the festival, the time of year when the festival occurred, and the activities of the festival were second nature. There was no hesitation in her reply. Unlike contrived or synthetic festivals, she participated totally in the festival. She not only knew when the festival occurred, but what would happen.

The festival was affective; she didn't expect to learn anything, but the festival would be part of her community experience. The Cory Apple Festival is a social performing art in which the participant and the observer can be the same person. There is a total resolution to the relationship of the audience and the participant. Like other small local festivals, anyone can be in the parade-given some costume or vehicle-or anyone can watch.

Country life and work provide good examples of the resolution of communality in a participatory event or festival. Harvest times are periods of intense work and, in some ways, pleasure. Butchering a cow is usually a small group occasion which may or may not require outside help but which retains the flavor of a festive occasion. "Haying" on the farm during the summer is a time when outside help of labor and machinery is usually required. Although it is a time of intense work to get the haying done; it is also a time for people to come together and interact toward common objectives. There are prescribed rules and orders of activity: the man who owns the bailer and the man who owns the hay will figure out together how the job will be done; there will be large and festive meals during the harvest; and there will be some game playing during periods of inactivity and following the day's work. There will be a task for everyone. Rae McGrady Booth hints at the festival atmosphere of harvest time in her article, "Memories of an Iowa Farm Girl:"

Threshing days were big events for the children. We looked forward to the day when the big steam engine pulled into the barnyard followed by the horse-drawn water tank. All the neighbors pitched in to help each other.¹¹

Clearly, harvest days are occasions that amount to participatory folk festivals. Another example of a participatory festival is the country auction. Although slightly more complicated, the introduction of the auctioneer presents a new dimension to the audience/participant resolution, in country auctions, where the rules of conduct are well known, and where there is an area of complete commonality where the resolution is carried out. A good example of this occurred during an auction in Lawrence County, Indiana, during the spring of 1977. The auctioneer, Bob Allen from Mitchell, Indiana, was offering a bottomless chair for sale. Boring on the risque but realizing it, Allen suggested, "We got a chair without a bottom here, you may not want a bottom. There's been a bad case of diarrhea around the county here." There was much squirming and twittering in the audience, and one lady attempted a resolution by saying, "Oh Bob-he's always like that." Bob offered the final resolution that allowed the festival/auction to continue. "That's just the way it is," he said with a grin.

Participatory festivals are often combinations of two or more events. Sometimes, due to the circumstances, an auction will also serve as a family reunion. This was the case when Mattie Watkins of Newark, Greene County, Indiana, decided to auction off most of her material goods. Although I didn't realize this when I set out in search of cheap riches, it became apparent that this was a festival occasion in which auction and family reunion were combined. After wandering through Monroe County, Owen County, and Greene County, past Hendricksville and Solsberry, I arrived at the auction and Newark, which by the start of the auction were synonymous. I realized after a while that people had not arranged themselves in the usual crowd around the auctioneer in an effort to get the best available view of the goods. Instead there were many small groups, only one of which bothered to bid. The other groups, all of which were composed of like members, were carrying on in a manner most unusual for potential owners of new possessions. They were all talking.

I started a conversation with a man of about my own age and asked him about the auction. The man, Ed Sparks, explained that most of the people attending were relatives of the lady who was selling all of her possessions. The lady, Mattie Watkins, had lost her husband in the fall and had decided that by the springtime she would "give up keeping

house." As a symbolic event in the town's recent history, all the relatives had gathered from various southern Indiana towns to pay homage to the end of an era. Hattie Watkins was the last of the extended family to leave town. Although she was moving only six miles south to Solsberry, to live with another relative, this move was poignantly symbolic for the family members. Bringing their children, they gathered an enormous amount of food to sell and consume. They also brought cameras to take last pictures of the "home place" where many had grown up, and in some cases, old pictures of what the town had been like during more prosperous times.

Sparks explained that this was really more of a family reunion than an auction. Whatever the relatives wanted they had already obtained. There was no haggling over items, no lusting for the goods. He described the arrangement of the people and illustrated that this was normal for their reunions and for other such "country auctions." The older women sat in the house and reminisced. The middle-aged women sat outside and talked, reminisced, and watched over the distribution of food. It was interesting that some of the women who sold the food and took the money were not members of the family and didn't take much part in the conversations. Although they were clearly homogeneous with the total group and clearly in sympathy with the emotions of the auction, they were as invisible as waiters in a restaurant. Another group of middle-aged to older men gathered in small groups around the house and outside the ring of the middle-aged women. These men, like Enoch Crohn and Claude Burch, who live in separate towns around Newark, seldom get together, but obviously maintain relatively close relationships. They jostled each other, laughed, and talked of old times. Even the auctioneer, Colonel Gene Williams, interacted with some of the people, although he was not a member of the family.

Younger men, children, and some of Hattie Watkins' husband's friends followed the auction as it went around the outbuildings and then back to the house. Hattie's husband, Archie Watkins, had worked for fifteen years with Charles Glidden making barrel staves and railroad cross-ties by hand. They had been loggers together twenty years before, and according to Mr. Glidden, had never had "bad words between them." So Charles bought some of Archie's tools to show to friends. Charles' wife, Gail Glidden, brought pictures to show how Newark looked thirty years earlier when the town had had one two-storey building where the Knights of Pythius had held their meetings.

The auction/family reunion had a special symbolic meaning for those attending. For Hattie Watkins it had a deeply personal meaning. For the family, composed of the Watkins, the Sparks, the Dixons, the Arthurs, the Doanes, and the Ellises, the auction/family reunion had individual and collective meanings. For the town of Newark, the auction of Hattie Watkins' house and belongings held a special meaning. There was no "all for one money" spirit among this homogeneous and empathetic group. When the bidding was low on a particular item the auctioneer would berate the crowd and remind the people that Hattie Watkins was not moving out of her home by choice, and that if she didn't have to sell and move out, "you couldn't buy this for any money, it wouldn't be for sale." Granting that the auctioneer is the star and the leader of the auction, the presence of Hattie and her relatives was a somber reminder to the rest of the crowd that this situation was a sober one.

When the auction and the festivities were over, family groups began to leave. The atmosphere was similar to the end of an event like Easter Sunday or Christmas. As each pick-up load of family and goods departed, farewell was bid in a jostling good humor and serious manner. Hattie Watkins' auction had been a small-group, occasional, homogeneous and authentic folk festival.

For Americans, festivals and the occasional accompanying parade are excuses for people to get together. They are moments of special significance in community life. Like the Apple Festival or Fall Foliage Festival, they may be symbolic of the transition of one season to another. Or, as in the case of the Hattie Watkins auction, the

festival may be symbolic of the passing of one stage of life to another. The Bedford Limestone Festival and Strawberry Festival in Campbellsburg are community festivals celebrating a local product. The celebration of limestone is an accolade to the product that is the foundation of the community economy. The accompanying parade includes representatives of most local organizations: high school bands, the VFW, the WCTU, the Shriners, political aspirants, saddle clubs, drill teams, and, of course, representatives of the limestone companies. Traditionally, festivals are a time of feasting or celebration. The celebrations come with entertainment or a series of performances of different kinds. Festivals may be viewed from the perspective of the participants and the observers as a time for merrymaking and the festivity of getting together.

The festival as a social performing folk art is by definition an unusual moment. People acquire things at festivals which they might not otherwise buy. Both the participant and the observer wear costumes to the festival. If the festival is totally contrived and synthetic, the costumes are a way of differentiating the participant from the observer. In some local community festivals, like town fairs, the festival includes competition, such as fire department hose-offs or tugs-of-war, between communities. Festivals are, for some people like Dan Tillet of Mantua, Ohio, who helped build the log cabin at the Black Swamp Folklife Festival, a time for working harder than they ordinarily do, and enjoying it so much that they are eager to do so again. Here, Tillet is both the observer and the participant in traditional terms. In the case of the synthetic festival it is usually the participant who enjoys the benefits and functions of the traditional festival. Participants like the girl at the Apple Festival, the people at Hattie's auction, and Dan Tillet, enjoy the feeling of rejoicing together, developing community identification and promoting social cohesion. The festival provides the occasion and the familiar form for positive interaction.

The emphasis of the festival as a social performing folk art is not a resolution to a problem or a conflict, but rather is the event as an affective and emotive response to the occasion. There is a resolution of sorts. Rather than the tension between the maker and the user at the synthetic occasion, there is in the participatory festival a resolution of communality between the audience and the performer. The relationship of the participant to the occasion defines the festival situation. In the case of the folk festival, in which the relationship varies considerably from situation to situation, the participant's view of the exhibition defines the level of the festival, i.e., whether the participant is doing the exhibit for himself, for someone or a group he knows, or for total strangers.

Examples of each level of festival are profuse in contemporary American society. Two festivals in which I was involved provide examples of how semi- and non-participatory festivals function. The Black Swamp Folklife Festival at Bowling Green, Ohio, in May, 1976, was organized around an operating principle that everything in the festival must represent the Black Swamp cultural region of northern Ohio and Indiana. The festival, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, was successful because the audience/participant relationship was less definite. Not only did many of the observers know many of the participants, most of the audience was familiar with what participants were doing. In some cases they could even exchange roles. On the other hand, the Mid-American Folklife Festival at Wichita in September, 1976, was less successful only because much of the material presented was not indigenous to the region. The audience had less of an opportunity to relate in a personal way to the participants. Almost totally non-participatory, the festival didn't allow a resolution to the audience/participant relationship.

Revivals and folk revival festivals are understandable expressions of interrelated themes in contemporary American culture. They become expressions of that quest by members of the community. Because of a standardization of experience where people and places have become more alike and where mass culture has been substituted for

folk culture, an American mass culture folk revival festival has been substituted for the authentic traditional festival.

There is also a current in contemporary America of uncertainty about one's personal identity. Movement, mobility, and interchangeability in our society have made it difficult for people to identify themselves in fundamental terms. Festival participants, craftspeople, and musicians are selected because they understand and function within their tradition. These people are then exposed to observers who understand little of either the tradition or the function of their craft. Here there is little resolution to the audience/participant relationship. Finally, our society is suffering the pains of social change. In a modern society, the forces hurrying change are intensified while those traditionally acting as a brake on change are weakened--or taken to a folk festival. In our nation's haste to find its roots, "performants" are gathered nation-wide to demonstrate traditionality. The performer/informant "tells" the ideas of song, dance, and craft, creating the illusion of roots, the illusion of the festival experience.

The festival as a social performing folk art offers the folklorist and other students of culture a valuable subject for study. To underscore the thrust of Danielson's argument, the popular community festival is an important complex of folkloric phenomena in contemporary life. This expression of celebration within the community--whether the community is conceived on a national level or a local level--deserves a coherent means of explication. The three categories of festivals outlined in this article represent an attempt to develop an understanding of the festival based both on the characteristics of the performer-audience relationship and the time of the festival.

NOTES

1. Richard M. Dorson, "Oral Literature, Oral History, and the Folklorist," Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 136.
2. Robert Smith, "Festival and Celebrations," in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, edited by Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 168.
3. Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.), 1968, p. 204.
4. "American Folklore and the Modern American Community Festival: A Case Study of Turtle Days in Churubusco, Indiana," (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1977).
5. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1972), p. 10.
6. In Discovering Afro-America, edited by Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed, (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. F. Brill, 1975), p. 54.
7. 1977 Calender of Festivals. Washington, D.C.: The National Council for the Traditional Arts, Inc., 1977. (Unpaginated) For general information on the state of Indiana, see Lawrence Manning and Morri Schiesel-Manning, Indiana Festivals. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976.
8. Gutowski, p. 124.
9. Ibid., pp. 124-125.
10. Ibid., p. 125.
11. David Weitzman, Underfoot: An Everyday Guide to Exploring the American Past (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p. 15.